



History and archaeology

Making Public History of the Spanish Civil War: A Theoretical-Didactic Approach to the Case of the Air-Raid Shelters of Barcelona

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Abstract: The public history of difficult pasts and their material legacies poses some dilemmas and challenges in terms of conceptualisation, methodology, practice and even ethics. Specifically, the didactic mediation of knowledge and memory of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) in public settings is the overarching subject of this article. To this end, the case study of the air-raid shelters of the city of Barcelona is discussed in light of different perspectives and academic traditions in the didactics of history. Finally, some conclusions are drawn on the social dissemination strategies and resources used to enhance the social visibility and didacticism of this underground heritage in the service of public history and collective memory.

Keywords: Public History, Didactics of History and Heritage, Digital Mediation of Difficult History, Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), Air-Raid Shelters, Barcelona.

Resumen: La historia pública de los pasados difíciles y sus legados materiales plantea algunos dilemas y retos en términos de conceptualización, metodología, práctica e incluso ética. En concreto, la mediación didáctica del conocimiento y la memoria de la Guerra Civil española (1936-1939) en entornos públicos es el tema central de este artículo. Para ello, se discute el estudio de caso de los refugios antiaéreos de la ciudad de Barcelona a la luz de diferentes perspectivas y tradiciones académicas de la didáctica de la historia. Por último, se extraen algunas conclusiones sobre las estrategias y recursos de difusión social utilizados para potenciar la visibilidad y didacticismo de este patrimonio subterráneo al servicio de la historia pública y la memoria colectiva.

Palabras clave: Historia Pública, Didáctica de la Historia y del Patrimonio, Mediación digital de la historia difícil, Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939), Refugios antiaéreos, Barcelona.

Resum: La història pública dels passats difícils i els seus llegats materials planteja alguns dilemes i reptes en termes de conceptualització, metodologia, pràctica i fins i tot ètica. Concretament, la mediació didàctica del coneixement i la memòria de la Guerra Civil espanyola (1936-1939) en entorns públics és el tema central d'aquest article. Per fer-ho, es discuteix l'estudi de cas dels refugis antiaeris de la ciutat de Barcelona a la llum de diferents perspectives i tradicions acadèmiques de la didàctica de la història. Finalment, s'extrauen algunes conclusions sobre les estratègies i els recursos de difusió social utilitzats

per potenciar la visibilitat i el didactisme d'aquest patrimoni subterrani al servei de la història pública i la memòria col·lectiva.

Paraules clau: Història Pública, Didàctica de la Història i del Patrimoni, Mediació digital de la història difícil, Guerra Civil Espanyola (1936-1939), Refugis antiaeris, Barcelona.

Historical and Social Significance of the Spanish Civil War Material Legacy

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) is a historical episode of both national and international relevance. From a Spanish perspective, the *coup d'état* of 18 July 1936 failed to achieve its military objectives and therefore the country was plunged into a heinous war and a festering social conflict that split it in two. On one side, the insurgents (Fascist Nationalists) and their political, economic and social supporters, including the Catholic Church. On the other side, the Popular Front-led government of the Spanish Second Republic democratically elected on 1 March 1936 and its advocates (Preston, 1984). At the end of the war, the Fascist General Francisco Franco (1892-1975) ruled an authoritarian regime —one of the longest lasting in 20th-century Europe— until his death.

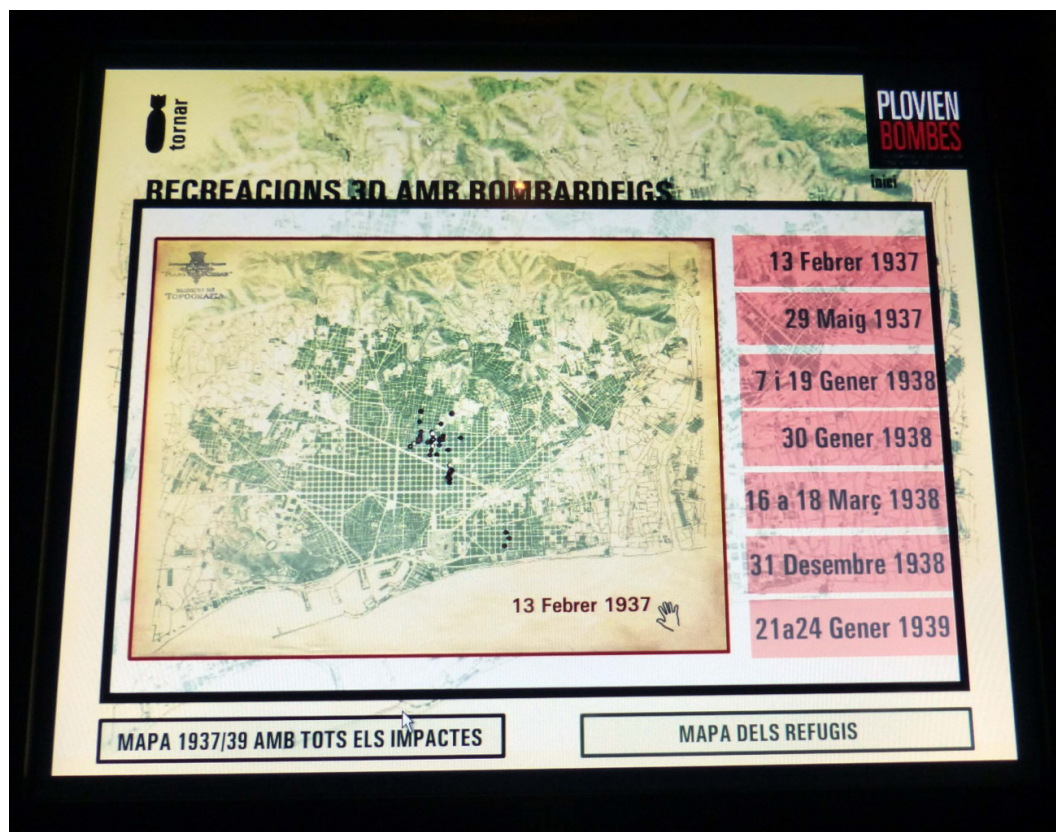
At international level, the Civil War evolved rapidly into a covert global conflict in Spanish soil, a preamble to the imminent Second World War (1939-1945). In this respect, powers such as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy aligned with Franco's cause, and the Soviet Union with the Spanish Republic and, as a result, Spain became the testing ground for new tactics and weaponry under development. One of these was the systematic and indiscriminate air raids over civilian population, which marked a turning point in the view of warfare. Since the 1930s this military strategy has been widely used in contemporary wars around the world, turning innocent citizens into inevitable casualties (Langdon-Davies, 1975; Lindqvist, 2003).

The Spanish Civil War can be categorized as an example of «difficult history», whose definition encompasses the study of violent and traumatic events (Baquero, 2021), often involving controversy and aversion, and potentially confronted visions and narratives of a community's or nation's past (Logan & Reeves, 2009; Ribeiro de Menezes, 2018). When dealing with difficult histories in the public sphere, beyond the academia, heritage can be a very powerful discursive mediator to engage society with knowledge of the past from a didactic perspective. However, the tangible legacy of the Civil War can also carry with it a considerable emotional charge that needs to be carefully analysed and conveyed with the target audience in mind. In this regard, it also could be understood as a case of «dissonant heritage» given the lack of agreement and consistency in the historical remembrance it is able to evoke in the present (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996).

The contested history of the Spanish Civil War is by no means an isolated case within the mediation and didactics of painful pasts and their heritages throughout the world. Public history must negotiate the social interpretation of other cognate troubled cases, such as European totalitarianisms, the Second World War (including Hiroshima and Nagasaki hecatomb) (1939-1945), the Holocaust (1942-1945), the division of Germany and the world during the Cold War (1945-1989), the Apartheid in South Africa (1948-1994), the Northern Ireland conflict (1968-1998), the Cambodia's genocide (1975-1979), or the Argentina's military regime (1976-1983), to mention a few of most contested historical episodes of the 20th century (Logan & Reeves, 2008). The fact that these traumatic events are relatively close in time for the generations directly involved or that have suffered the consequences can shape their collective and even family memory (Green, 2019), as is the case with the Spanish Civil War (Zupančič et al., 2023). In this respect, Mark Salber Phillips (2004, 2015) coined the concept of «historical distance» to discuss how the

evocation and understanding of the past is influenced by the temporal distance — passage of time — and the socio-cultural values prevailing in each generation. Therefore, the way history is perceived, studied and narrated changes over time adopting new emerging paradigms of knowledge, cultural perspectives and political ideologies. And, by analogy, also its material legacy may adopt new socio-economic and symbolic uses (Smith, 2006).

Figure 1. An interactive multimedia display installed at the History Museum of Catalonia provides a detailed insight into the history of the Spanish Civil war air raids over Barcelona and the location of the shelters built to protect the population (Source: own work).



Ultimately, historians produce narratives about the past that reflect their times and therefore, inadvertently or not, can frame historical consciousness and the way traumatic events are remembered, interpreted, mediated and taught in democratic societies (Rüsen, 2006; Seixas, 2016). At present day, one of the key factors both in Public History and Didactics of History is the advances in communication and educational technologies, which are able to offer the audiences more engaging narratives to better understand and learn about the past using methods and approaches different from those of academic history (Cauvin, 2022; Koslow, 2021) (Figure 1).

This article discusses from a theoretical-didactic perspective the social dissemination of the air-raid shelters of Barcelona through strategies and resources of heritage interpretation (Tilden, 1957; ICOMOS, 2008). In conceptual terms, the implications of the two main traditions of didactics of history, Anglo-American and German/Continental, are analysed within the general framework of the public mediation of the Spanish Civil War in recent years (Ribeiro de Menezes, 2018; Cazorla-Sánchez & Shubert, 2018).

Public History and Didactic Mediation of the Air-Raid Shelters of Barcelona

The troubled memory of the Spanish Civil War poses a challenge for Didactics of History and Heritage, both in educational and social settings, and informs a very sensible and distressing subject to deal with in public mediation endeavours (Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998; Grever, 2017; Logan & Reeves, 2009). However, the reasons why this theme has not been negotiated in the past with an objective didactic approach lie not in the social-scientific sphere, but in political practices and views.

Controversial Politics and Policies of Memory

A deep social and ideological divide followed Franco's victory that persisted throughout the military dictatorship (1939-1975). During this long period of time the only vision of the Civil War history that was officially remembered, commemorated and taught was that of the Francoist regime, while politically and academically dissenting positions were persecuted and repressed with impunity. This strongly ideologised and interpretatively biased historical discourse also persisted to a large extent in the Transition to democracy (1975-1982) (Stafford, 2015).

With the Restoration of the Spanish Democracy and the promulgation of the 1978 Constitution, the memory of the Civil War and the Dictatorship was intentionally silenced by virtue of a tacit political agreement informally called *Pacto del Olvido* (Pact of Oblivion) between all the democratic parties. This pact, which expressed the predisposition of the majority of the political class to deliberately ignore this dreadful past and its legacy in favour of the reconciliation of a divided country, has significantly affected public narratives about the Civil War during decades by imposing a guilty social silence (Stafford, 2015).

In this convoluted political and social context over the decades, the writing of rigorous and unbiased narratives has been a challenge for historians (Stafford, 2015; Zupančič et al., 2023). And the dissemination initiatives conducted by public history associations, although methodologically criticised by academics, have been fundamental in raising social awareness and promoting learning about the Civil War for several generations (Belaustegi & Irujo, 2022).

Memory is constructed and shaped in the present, same as written history (Halbwachs, 2011; Philips, 2015). In the case of the Spanish Civil War and its social mediation, decades of intentional neglect by society, politicians and even scholars have informed a fragile and uncomfortable collective memory, very much marked by Spanish nationalist hegemonic culture as opposed to regional cultures cornered within the country (Stafford, 2015). Nevertheless, in the last thirty years the Civil War and its heritage has started to become a theme more widely reclaimed, disseminated and mediated from a democratic education perspective, although with controversy and unevenly application. It is important to highlight in this process the enactment of the *Ley 52/2007 de Memoria Histórica* (Law of Historical Memory, 2007) and the *Ley 20/2022 de Memoria Democrática* (Law of Democratic Memory, 2022), which contributed decisively to turning this traumatic past into a matter of social interest (Figure 2).

Historical Thinking and Historical Consciousness

The Anglo-American tradition of didactics of history adopts a critical perspective of historical thinking analysis in which the context of mediation is as important as the knowledge transmitted itself. In this current of thought, the empirical approach to the

sources of study —including archaeological remains, namely the Spanish Civil War air-raid shelters— is fundamental when mediating history, raising awareness about the past and how it is constructed through the didactic mediation (Shelmilt, 1983). On the other hand, the German/Continental theory is influenced by philosophical and theoretical frameworks and focuses on reflection on historical consciousness when mediating history, assuming that the historical context determines how the past is perceived and narrated in the present (Retz, 2022b; Straub, 2005).

Following both traditions, which are complementary rather than contradictory (Retz, 2022b), the public history of the Spanish Civil War and its heritage should increase self-awareness of the complex memory-making process that said past has undergone in public narratives during more than eighty years. This is a task that must be addressed in the future (Stafford, 2015) and in which the didactics of history and heritage must take a major contribution.

In regard to material culture, it should be noted that the Anglo-American tradition of didactics of history understands museums and cultural visits as a means to deepen the learner's knowledge (Shelmilt, 1983), and this should be a fundamental approach in terms of Public History endeavours around the heritage sites of the Spanish Civil War, and particularly the air-raid shelters of Barcelona and other cities across the country. Shelters are actually heritage elements of informed contemplation, and how the interpretative narrative about them is conceived, designed and delivered on site through text panels, visual sources, audio-visual displays and guided tours is crucial in terms of didactics of history (Cauvin, 2022; González-Ruibal, 2007, 2018).

In addition to historical thinking, critical engagement should be promoted to better contextualise the events which gave rise to the shelters. In this sense, public debates on television, outreach activities, conferences and a programme of regular temporary exhibitions aimed specifically at ordinary citizens —not scholars—, should serve as a social arena for exchanging experiences, insights and discussing preconceived historical views (McCully, 2017). And, as the German/Continental historical consciousness tradition advocates, didactic public mediation initiatives should also critically discuss the narratives that have existed —and may continue to exist— and how these have served political and ideological interests rather than the rigorous dissemination of knowledge about shared collective history.

Figure 2. The History Museum of Catalonia, inaugurated in 1996, showcases a section devoted to the impact of the Spanish Civil War in Catalonia. Among different displays, the recreation of a small shelter invites visitors to relive the tragic memory of the air raids (Source: own work)



Didactics of History and Heritage

Mediating history and its heritage on site also poses a number of challenges. Monuments and memorials erected during the Spanish Civil War and the post-war period served a commemorative intent, both for the Republicans and the Francoist. But air-raid shelters had a different purpose, although they can be accommodated in the present—or the future—in a discourse with different intentions. For instance, these defensive structures commonly are evoked as evidence of the barbarism caused by the insurgents against the defenceless civilian population, therefore as an identity legacy for those who lost the Civil War and suffered the attacks of Franco's aviation and his German and Italian allies. However, for the sake of historical accuracy both sides in conflict conducted air raids over cities and towns, which raises serious ethical reflections on the didactic construction of narratives about this conflict (González-Ruibal, Ayán & Caesar, 2015). In this regard, from an Anglo-American historical thinking perspective, the shelters serve equally well as archaeological evidence to build well-reasoned didactic arguments about the hideous impact of all wars—past, present and future—on society and the efforts of peoples to endure and survive in difficult times (González-Ruibal, 2007) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. View of the interior of Palau de les Heures shelter, one of the shelters preserved but not open to the public on a regular basis in Barcelona. The author conducts regular visits with small groups of students, with prior authorisation, as part of his teaching activity at the University of Barcelona (Source: own work)



Madrid, Valencia, Alicante, Bilbao, Gernika, Jaén, Alcañiz, Lleida, Girona, Tarragona and many other Spanish and Catalan cities and towns were attacked from the air to varying degrees during the course of the conflict. Barcelona, which remained loyal to the Spanish Republic, was the first major European metropolis in history to be systematically bombed from the air in wartime in spite of being in a rearguard position. This led the population to organise a committed civilian movement that managed to build more than 1300 shelters, some of them with the collaboration of government institutions (Pujadó, 1998;

Besolí, 2004; Contel, 2008). Very regrettably, most of these underground legacies are now lost forever and only a few dozen remain, of which less than ten can be visited regularly or sporadically.¹ As a result, this remarkable contemporary subterranean heritage is one of the most relevant material legacy of the Spanish Civil War in Barcelona which, to a large extent, remains unknown to society in a state of dereliction and slow decay beneath the city's soil.

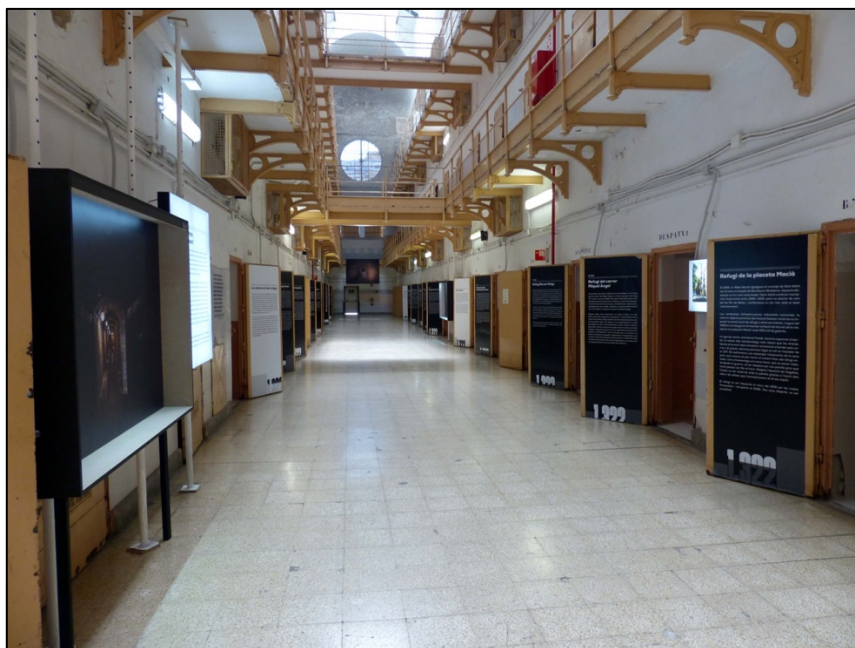
Mediating and educating about the Spanish Civil War history and heritage can be done through both traditions of history transmission, the German/Continental, that emphasizes the importance of historical consciousness, and the Anglo-American, that focuses primarily on empirical research—in the case of air-raid shelters, the function of the architectural structures and their spaces—intended to critically think and mediate the past through practical methodologies (Körber, 2016; Shelmilt, 1983). Both traditions contribute valuable insights to the field of didactics of history, shaping how history narratives are delivered, taught and used in different socio-cultural contexts.

In regard to the case of the Barcelona's air-raid shelters and their didactic value, the German/Continental theory can promote historical consciousness of this troubled past and understanding of the dynamic interpretative process until the present (Retz, 2022b), which in turn is the history of the city of Barcelona during the last more than eight decades. Therefore, historical and empirical thinking in the line of Anglo-American theory about the origin and function of the shelters influence the perception and interpretation of the conflict, its causes and consequences, and how this particular underground legacy has gone through different policies and social perceptions regardless the academic study of primary written and archaeological sources from the Spanish Civil War (González-Ruibal, Ayán & Caesar, 2015; Stafford, 2015).

At present day, Barcelona's air-raid shelters have socially and educationally evolved in their interpretation and didactics. In nearly two decades, they have gone from being an arcane heritage for the citizens (Besolí, 2004) to be publicly valued, disseminated and mediated not only as a testimony of a dreadful past, but as a reconceptualised symbol of peace, and democratic and living together values, which is a fundamental education for citizenship (McCully, 2017) curricular theme throughout different levels of education in Catalonia and Spain, also endorsed by the Spanish Law of Democratic Memory (2022). Therefore, the visit to the few shelters open to the public on a regular basis is a recurrent didactic strategy for many primary, secondary and university teachers, making possible engage in first person with the past, better understand the history in context, critically reflect on the consequences of war, and even empathise emotionally with people of the past (Retz, 2022a). Alternatively, museums (Figure 2) and temporary exhibitions² (Figure 4) can provide valid mediation solutions for those individuals who prefer not to visit shelters, for example because they suffer from claustrophobia or have reduced mobility which poses difficulties in visiting some shelters with steep stairs. In the end, the didactic value lies in the intended didactic strategy, whether through written, visual, audio-visual or computer resources (Figure 1), although it can be argued that physical contact with the historical place encourages empathy (Retz, 2022a), especially if it is accompanied by re-enactment actions as in the case of the Plaça del Diamant shelter, an initiative of the Centre d'Estudis Taller d'Història de Gràcia.³

Ultimately, from a Public History mediation perspective, the air-raid shelters built during the conflict not only recall historical events, but embody the fears, uncertainties and overwhelmed daily life of the population of Barcelona in troubled times. Therefore, fostering historical empathy beyond conventional written narratives, with the support of on-site visits, can be a positive history didactics strategy according both to historical thinking and historical consciousness traditions (Peck, 2019; Retz, 2022a, 2022b). In addition, thanks to Digital History (Crymble, 2021) and Digital Archaeology (Ferdani et al., 2020) methods and tools, public history can also take advantage of digital applications in the internet, and digital storytelling-based approaches in educational settings (Guiliano, 2022; Lanszki, 2022), and in museums and exhibitions (Bonacini, 2022; Palombini, 2017).

Figure 4. In 2023, a photographic exhibition on Barcelona's air-raid shelters was held in the former Modelo prison of Barcelona. The compound is now a historical site where many political prisoners during Franco's dictatorship served their sentences (Source: own work)



Concluding Thoughts

Public History and Public Archaeology have begun to work with difficult pasts and their heritage legacies with some delay compared to other non-controversial pasts although, as in the case of the Spanish Civil War, the first results in the last twenty years are very promising and have been accompanied by new legislation on memory aimed at restoring the didactic value of the most divisive episode in Spain's recent history (González-Ruibal, 2007). In this respect, troublesome heritage related to «difficult history» is gaining regard as a cultural asset that, by acknowledging atrocities in history, may serve a positive purpose of critically endorsing social reflection about contemporary identity, democracy and peace values (Macdonald, 2015).

It can be argued that uneasy material legacies of the Spanish Civil War, and specifically the air-raid shelters, whether in the city of Barcelona or other Catalan and Spanish cities, can contribute to promoting culture, education and economy —cultural tourism— from a sustainable perspective when applying an "adaptive reuse", defined in this case as changing the original use of the shelters from a defensive structure to a space for the interpretation and didactics of the past while retaining their historical significance (Nabas, 2019). Nevertheless, the public display and didactic mediation of difficult pasts can be potentially disturbing to society, which continues to be a main concern both for Public and Didactics of History. In this regard, new methodological approaches in museum settings (González-Ruibal, 2018), digital history (Spence, 2018) and education (Feliu-Torruella, 2018; Sospedra-Roca, Hernández-Cardona & Hernández-Pongiluppi, 2022), are exploring how to convey public knowledge of the Spanish Civil War within an education for citizenship framework (McCully, 2017).

Finally, Catalan and Spanish society still has to undertake a fundamental task that transcends Public History and Didactics of History theory and methodology since it is directly linked to the difficult political and social negotiation on the memory of the conflict. This challenge is the creation of the first national thematic museum on the Spanish Civil War to present air raid hto Spaniards and visitors from all corners of the world not only a didactic vision of this historical episode and its material legacy, but also a complete, rigorous, impartial, critical and depoliticised account about it. At present, advances in the field of didactic museography and digital exhibition technologies allow the design and implementation of compelling and interactive narratives for all audiences with the use of digital storytelling strategies and media (Spence, 2018), also applicable to the interpretation and public mediation of heritage sites (Rahaman, 2018).

Footnotes

1. See: *The City of Shelters*: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/arqueologiabarcelona/refugis/en> (Retrieved: 22 October 2024).
2. See: *Catalunya Bombardejada (Catalonia Bombarded)*, a travelling exhibition on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the bombings over Catalan cities and towns, organised by the body Memorial Democràtic of the Generalitat de Catalunya government: <https://memoria.gen-cat.cat/ca/detalls/publicacio/Catalunya-bombardejada.-75e-aniversari-dels-bombardeigs-a-la-poblacio-catalana-i-a-les-infraestructures-catalanes-00001>; and the photographic exhibition on Barcelona's air-raid shelters titled *1322. Refugis antiaeris de Barcelona. Exposició fotogràfica (30/3/2023-31/7/2023)*: ajuntament.barcelona.cat/exporefugisantiaeris (Retrieved: 13 October 2024).
3. See: *Plaça del Diamant Shelter*: <https://www.tallerhistoriadegracia.cat/thg/refugi-pl-del-diamant> (Retrieved: 22 October 2024).
4. Only three of the underground air-raid shelters preserved in Barcelona can be publicly visited on a regular basis with prior reservation. These guided tours are conducted by the History Museum of Barcelona (Shelter 307) and the Centre d'Estudis Taller d'Història de Gràcia. See: *Shelter 307*: <https://www.barcelona.cat/museuhistoria/es/patrimonios/los-espacios-del-muhba/muhba-refugi-307>; *Plaça del Diamant Shelter*: <https://www.tallerhistoriadegracia.cat/thg/refugi-pl-del-diamant>; and *Plaça de la Revolució Shelter*: <https://www.tallerhistoriadegracia.cat/thg/refugi-pl-revolucio> (Retrieved: 22 October 2024).
5. See: *The City of Shelters*: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/arqueologiabarcelona/refugis/en> (Retrieved: 22 October 2024).

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