THE 'PANIC INDUSTRY' BOOM

By Coralie Kraft
Photographs and Video by Richard Barnes

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Fortifying the American home has become big business, selling escape tunnels, secret arsenals — and even flammable moats.

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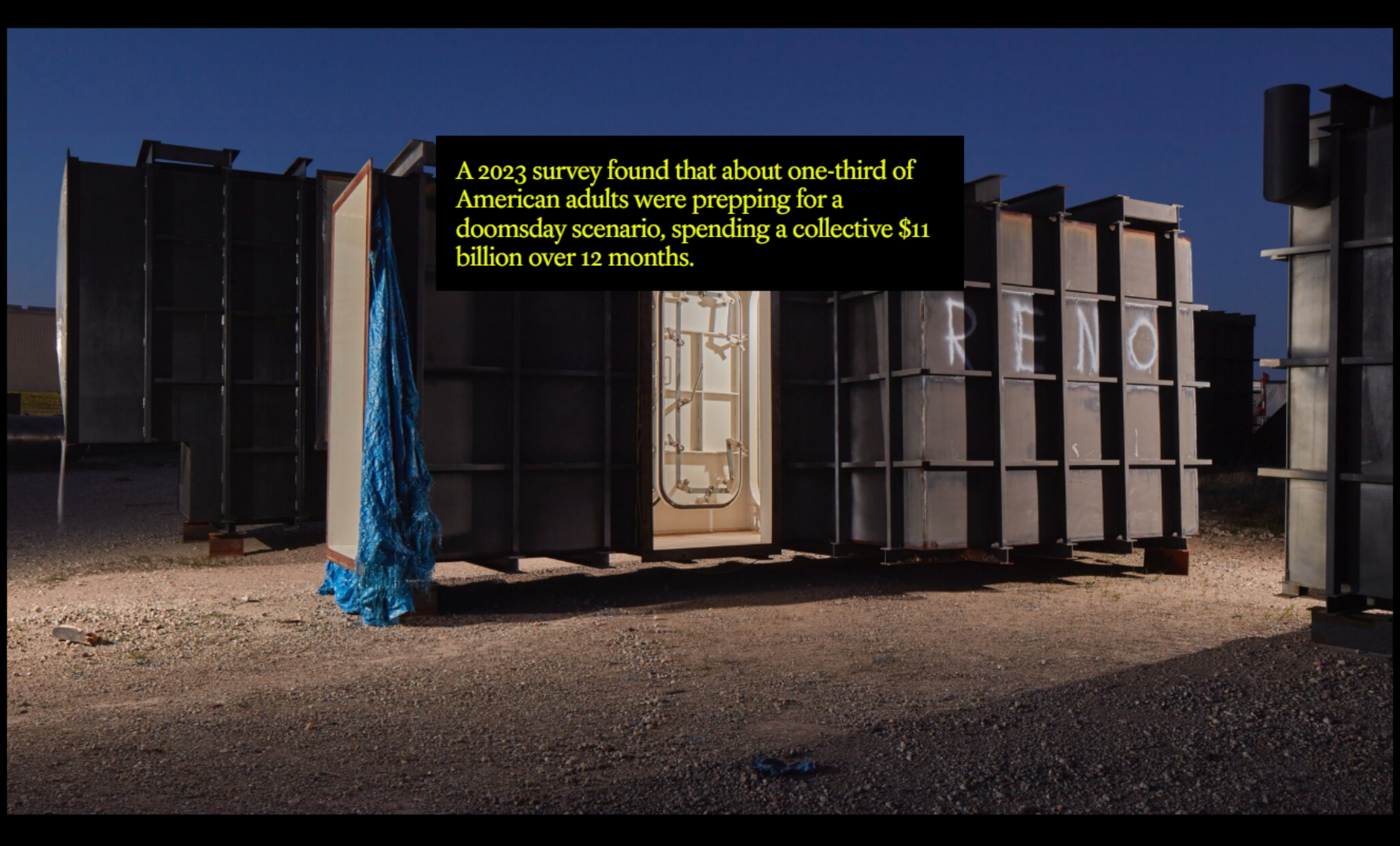
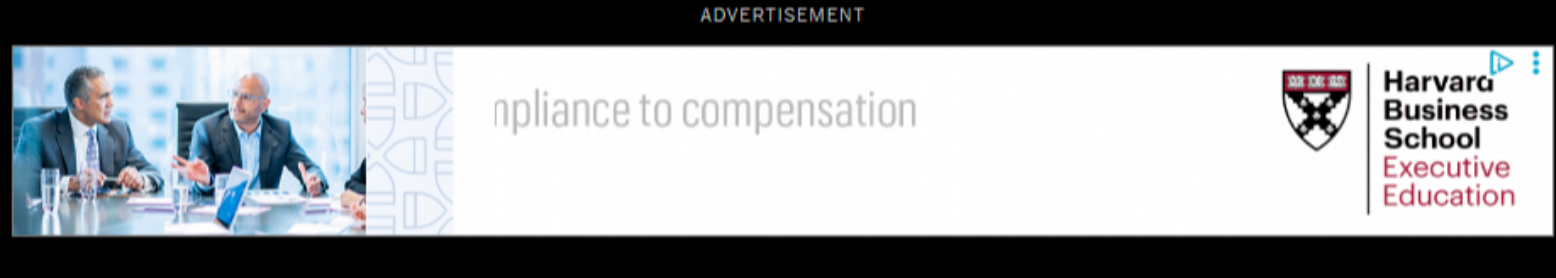
Ron Hubbard, the chief executive of Atlas Survival Shelters, runs one of many companies that designs and builds bunkers for wealthy clients. His business is booming.



A 2023 survey found that about one-third of American adults were prepping for a doomsday scenario, spending a collective $11 billion over 12 months.



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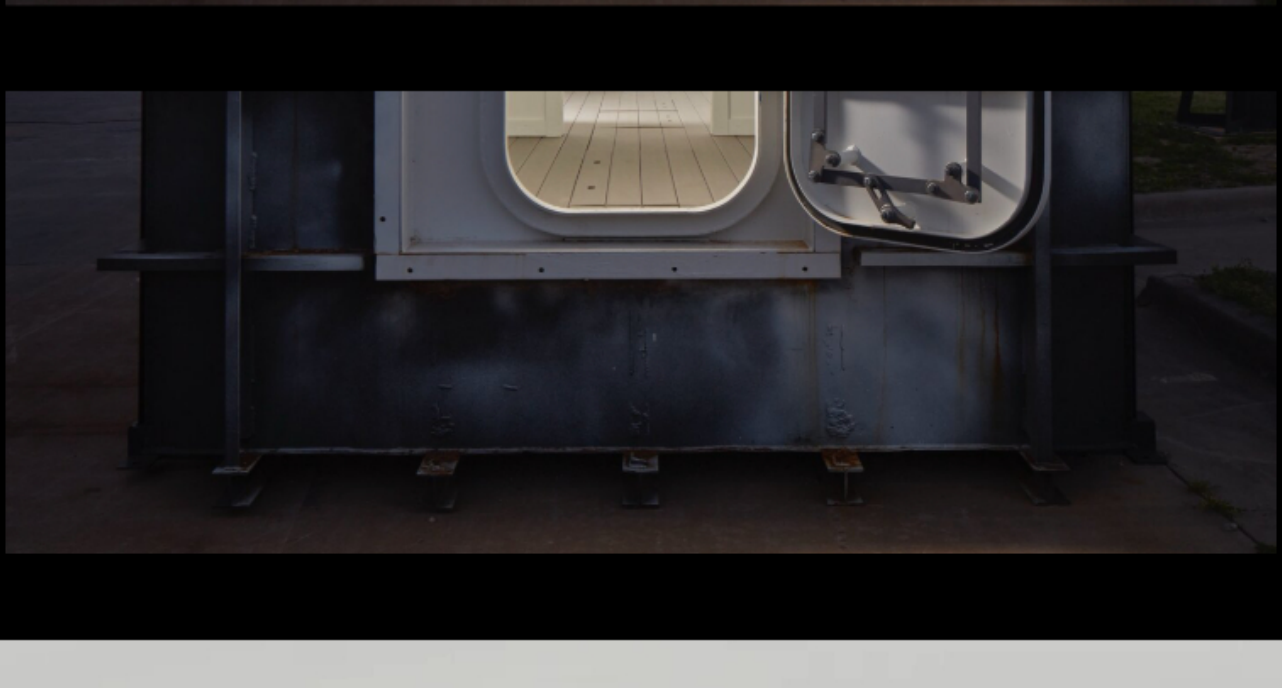
Atlas's bunkers can include parking spaces, gyms and greenhouses. At this site near Dallas, an underground tunnel will connect the bunker to the client's home.

Citing fears of pandemics, nuclear war, financial collapse and civil unrest, Americans of all backgrounds are increasingly concerned with protecting themselves. Hubbard has noticed the change: More working-class people now want to

"Now we sell a bunker that's only $20,000," Hubbard said. "They're for the guys making $60,000 a year. They drive Chevy pickup trucks, not Ferraris."



Hubbard is not the only entrepreneur taking advantage of this trend.

At a former munitions depot in South Dakota, a company called Vivos Group has repurposed 575 storage buildings into leasable bunkers.

Customers pay $55,000 up front for a 99-year lease, plus an annual fee of $1,091.

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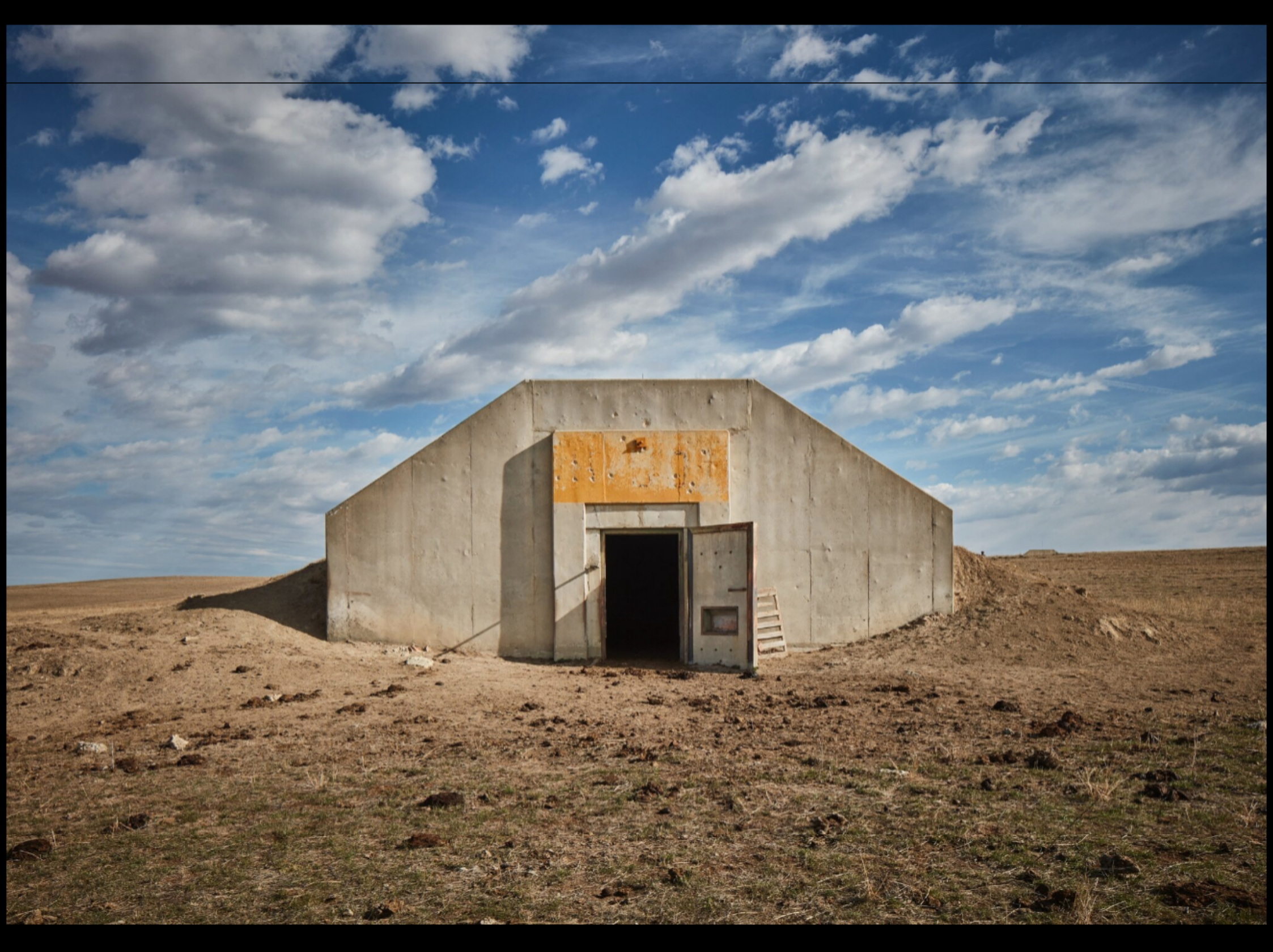
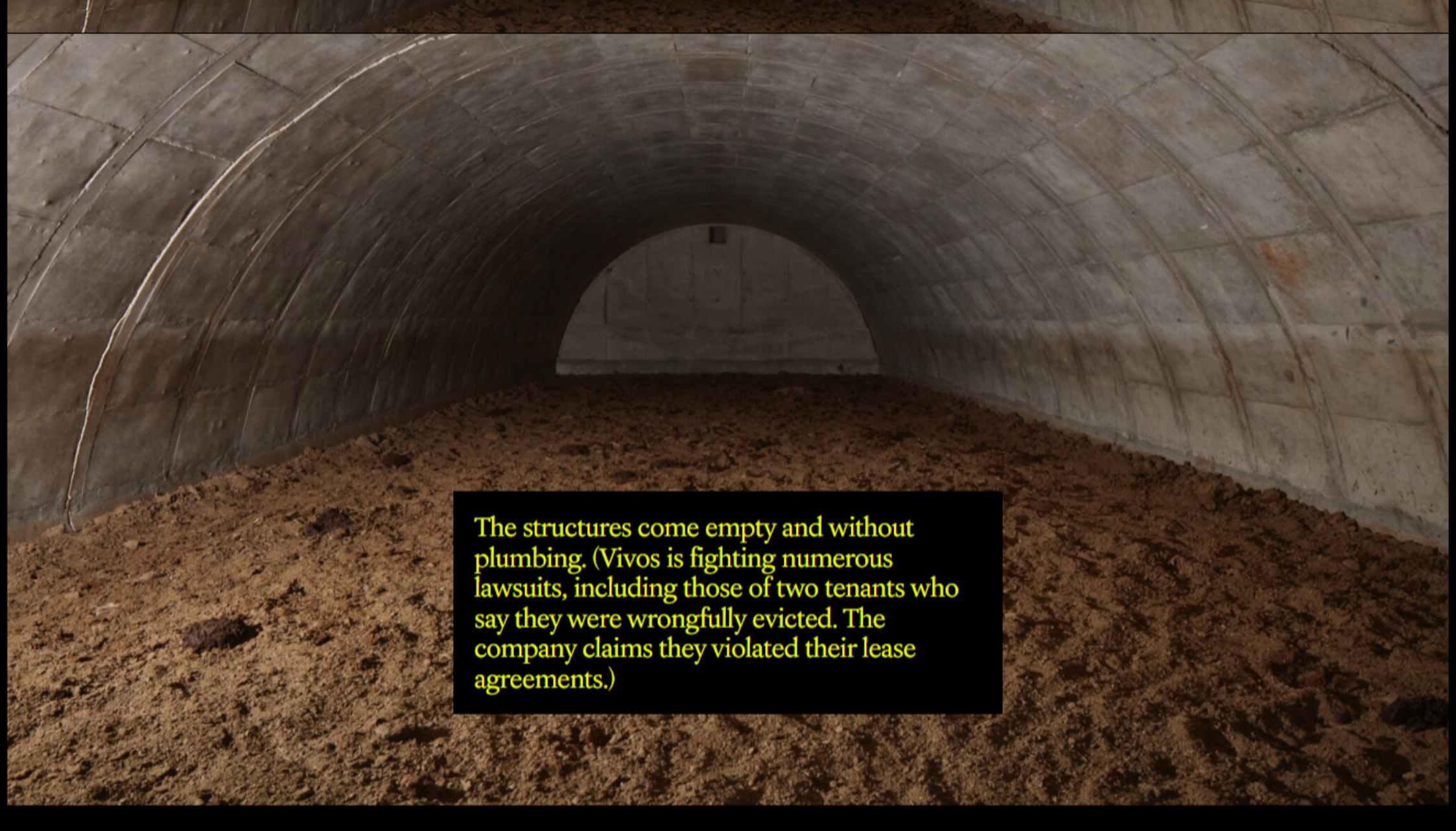
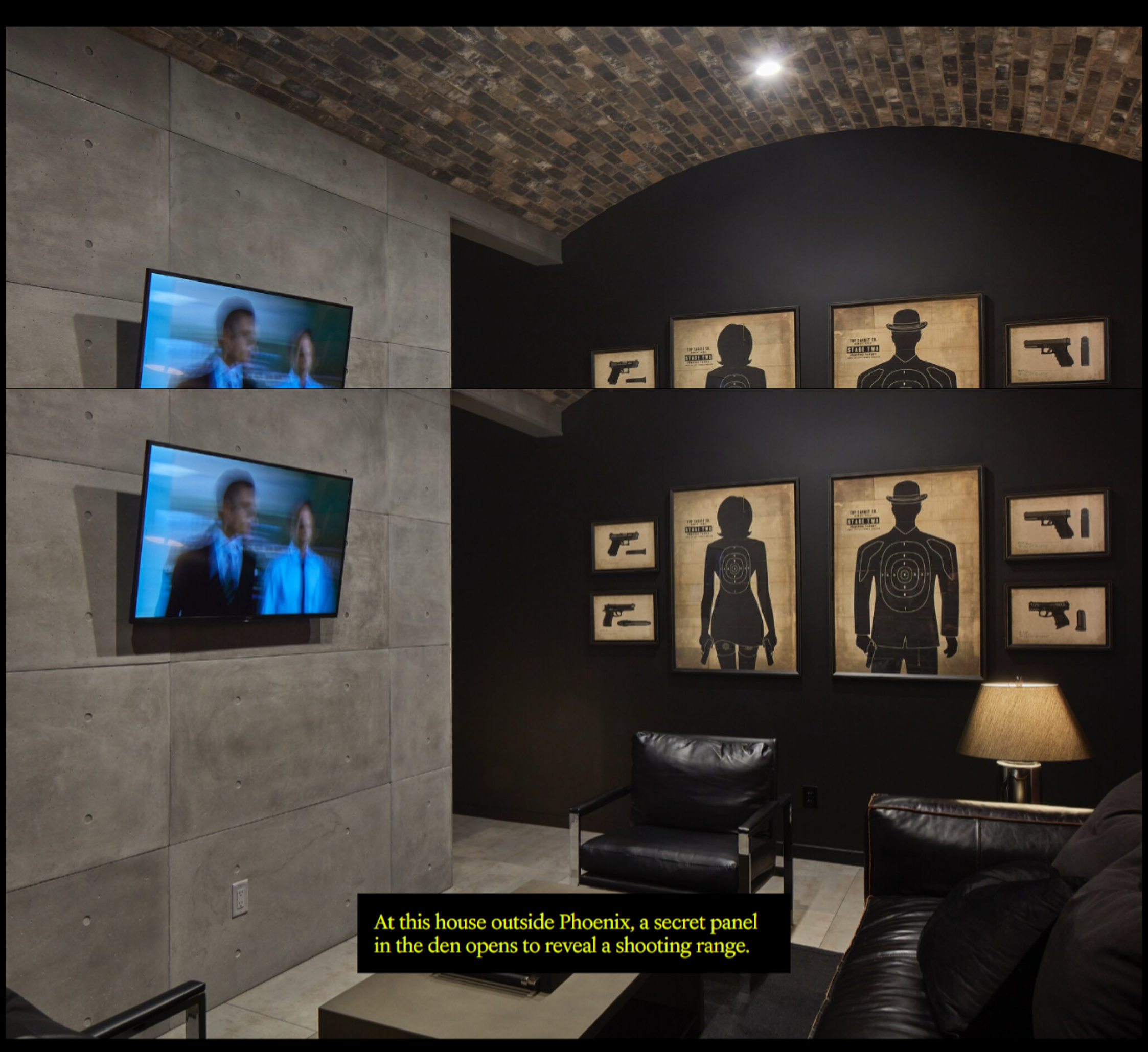


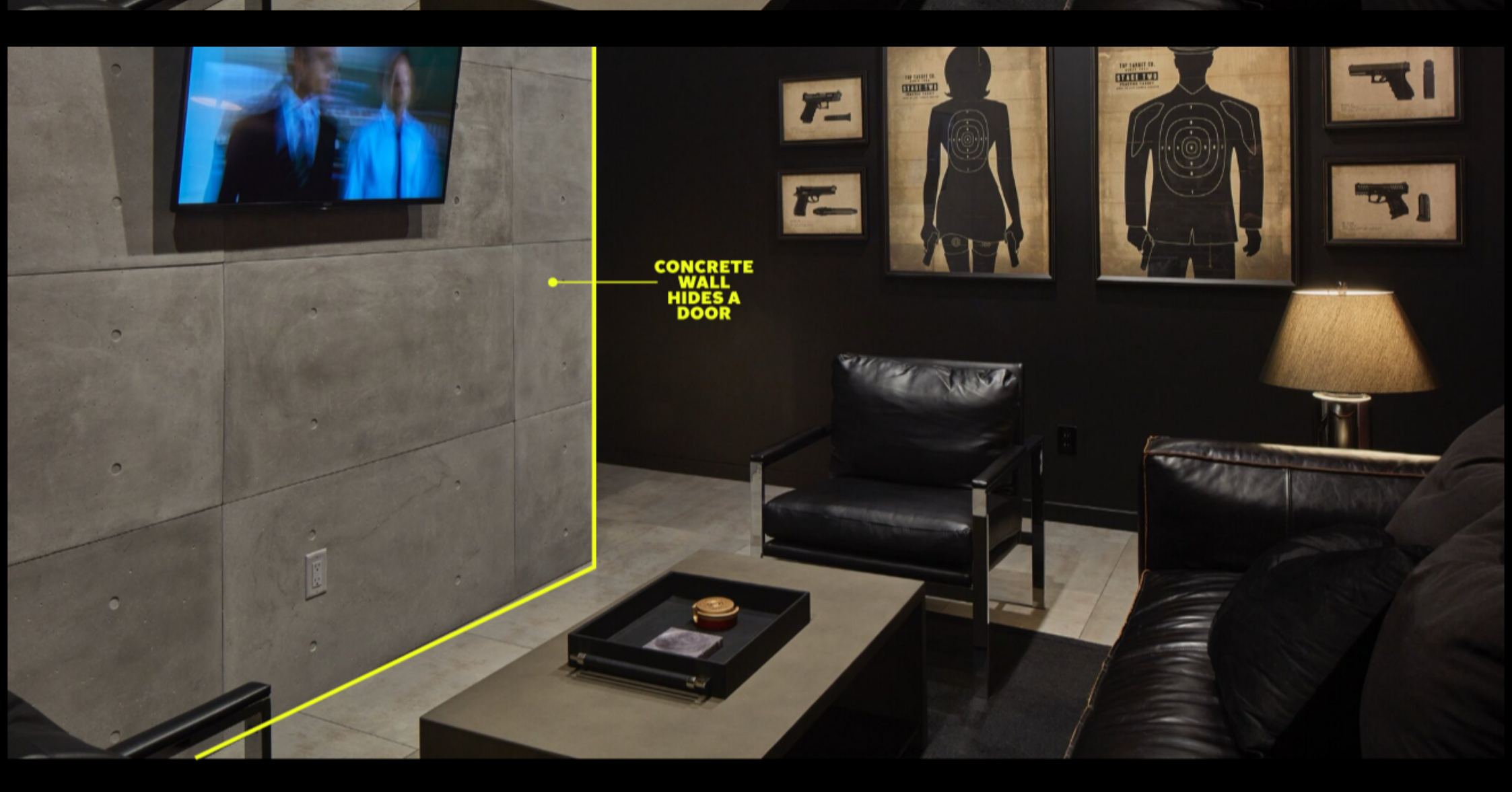


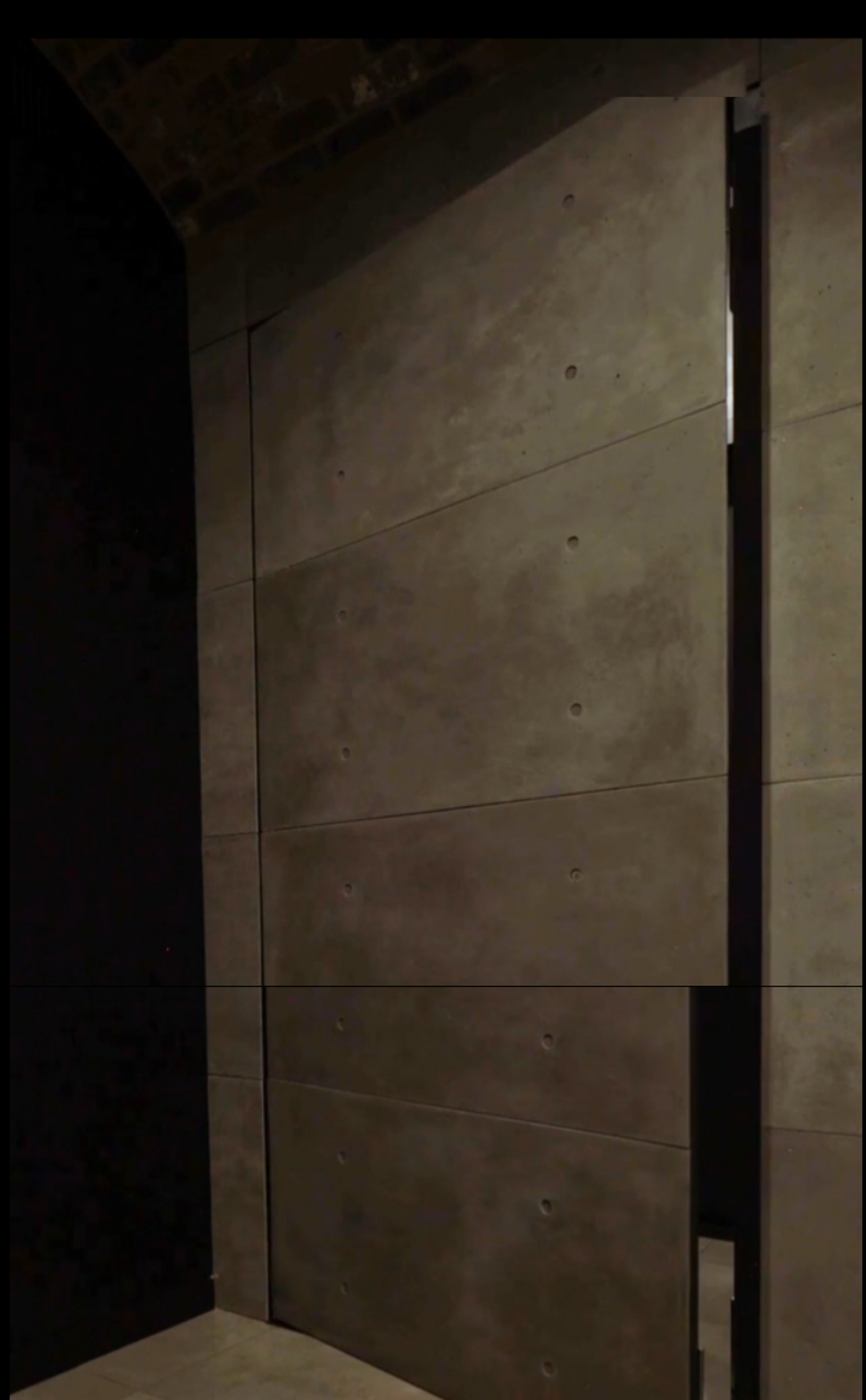
The structures come empty and without plumbing. (Vivos is fighting numerous lawsuits, including those of two tenants who say they were wrongfully evicted. The company claims they violated their lease agreements.)

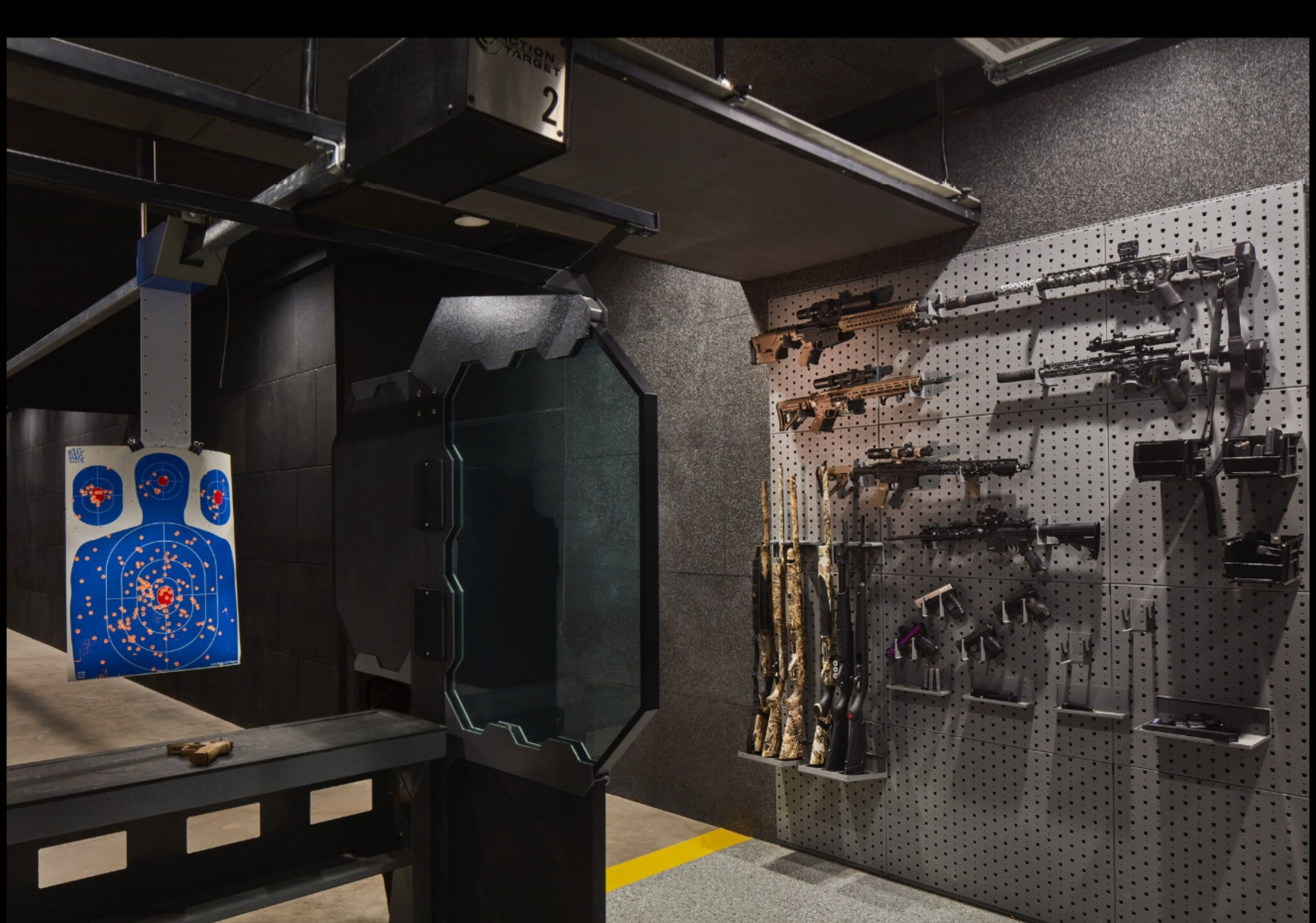
Some Americans are also bolstering their fortifications at home. To capture down-market customers, companies are designing smaller, more affordable installations, like secret gun closets and panic rooms.



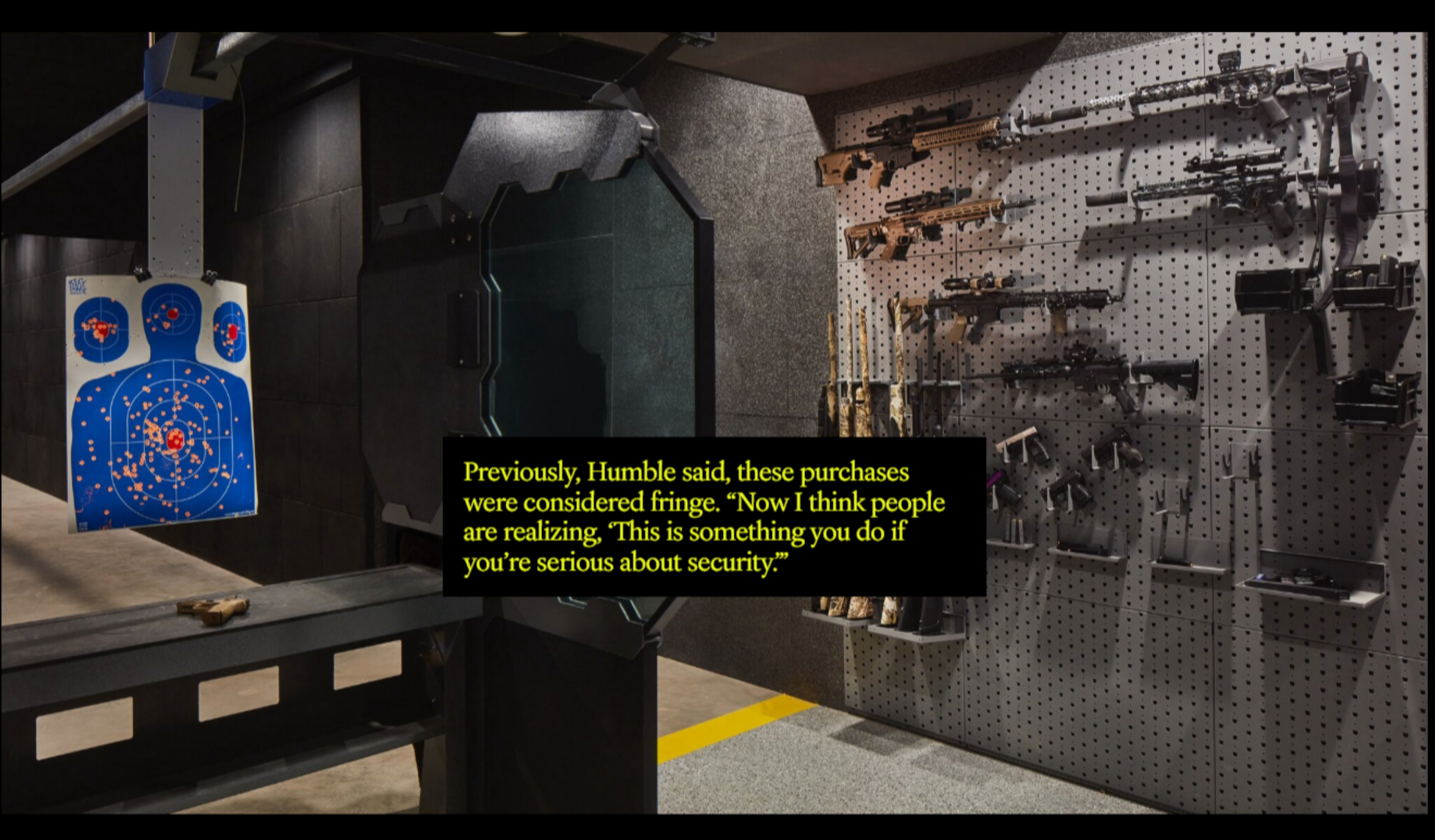
At this house outside Phoenix, a secret panel in the den opens to reveal a shooting range.







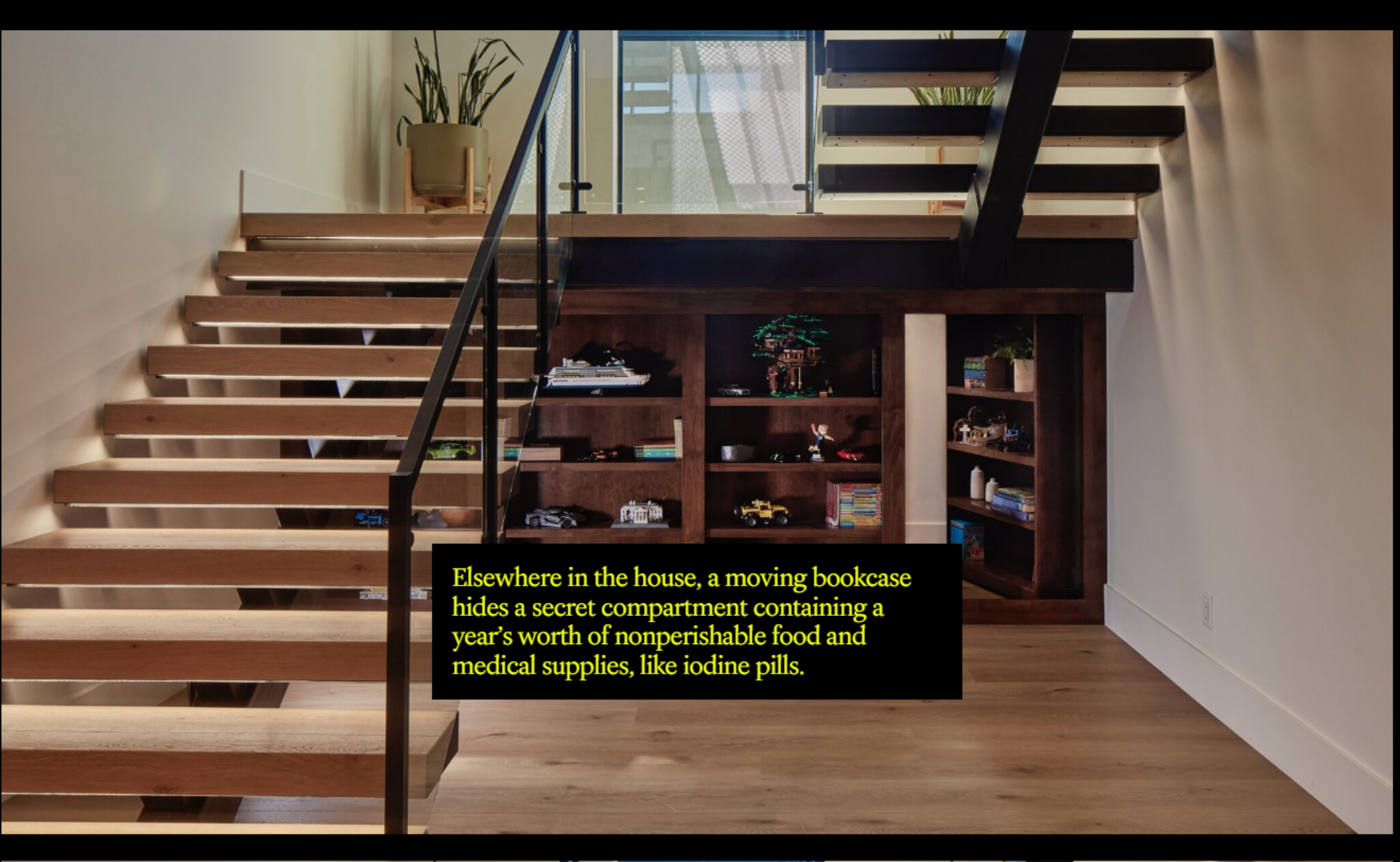
Steve Humble, president of Creative Home Engineering, the company behind this secret room, said that concealed gun ranges are one of his most common installations.



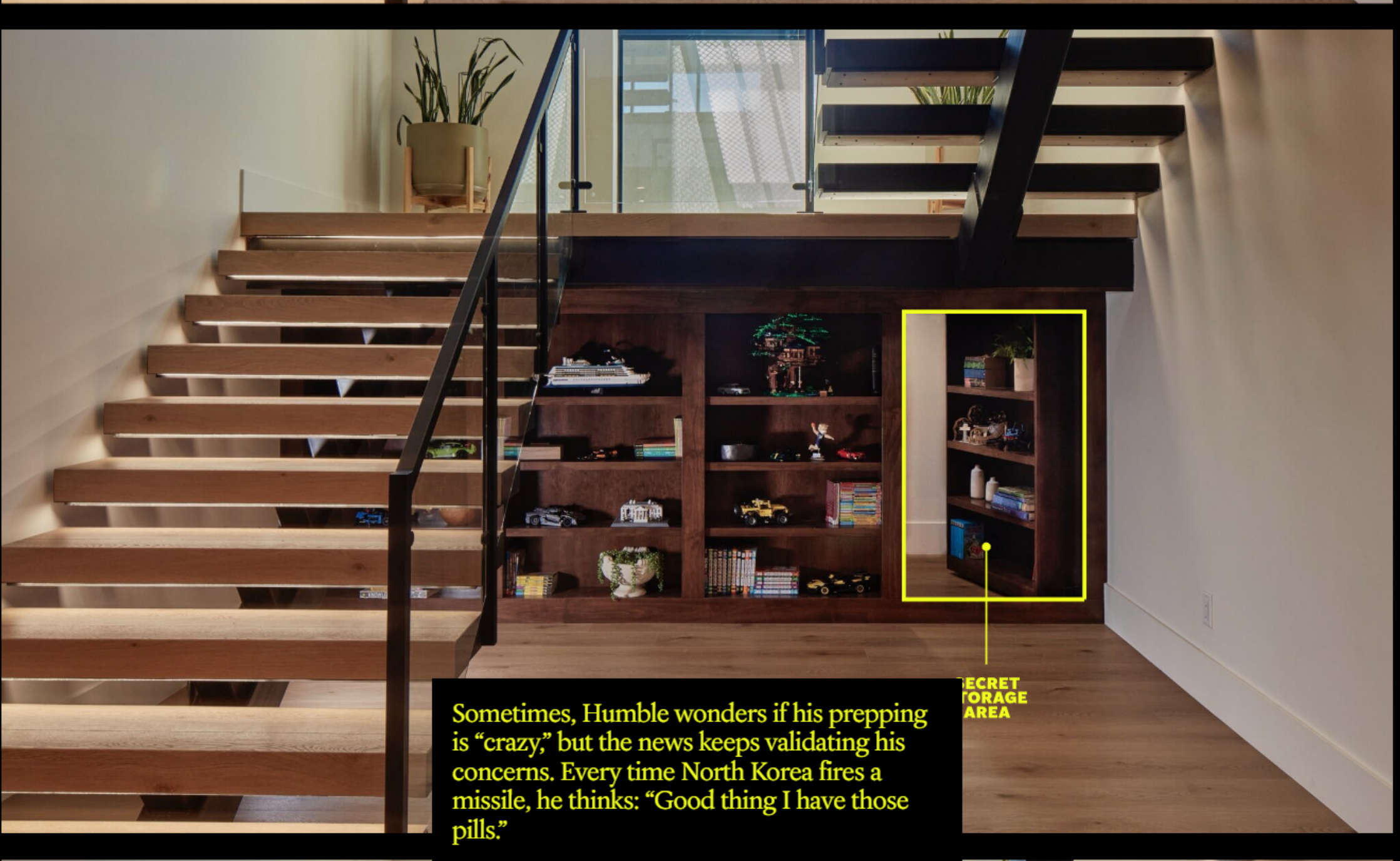
Previously, Humble said, these purchases were considered fringe. "Now I think people are realizing, 'This is something you do if you're serious about security.'"

Creative Home Engineering also builds moving fireplaces that lead to panic rooms or escape tunnels, like something out of a spy movie.

At Humble's own home in Arizona, the fireplace opens when the James Bond theme is played on a nearby piano.

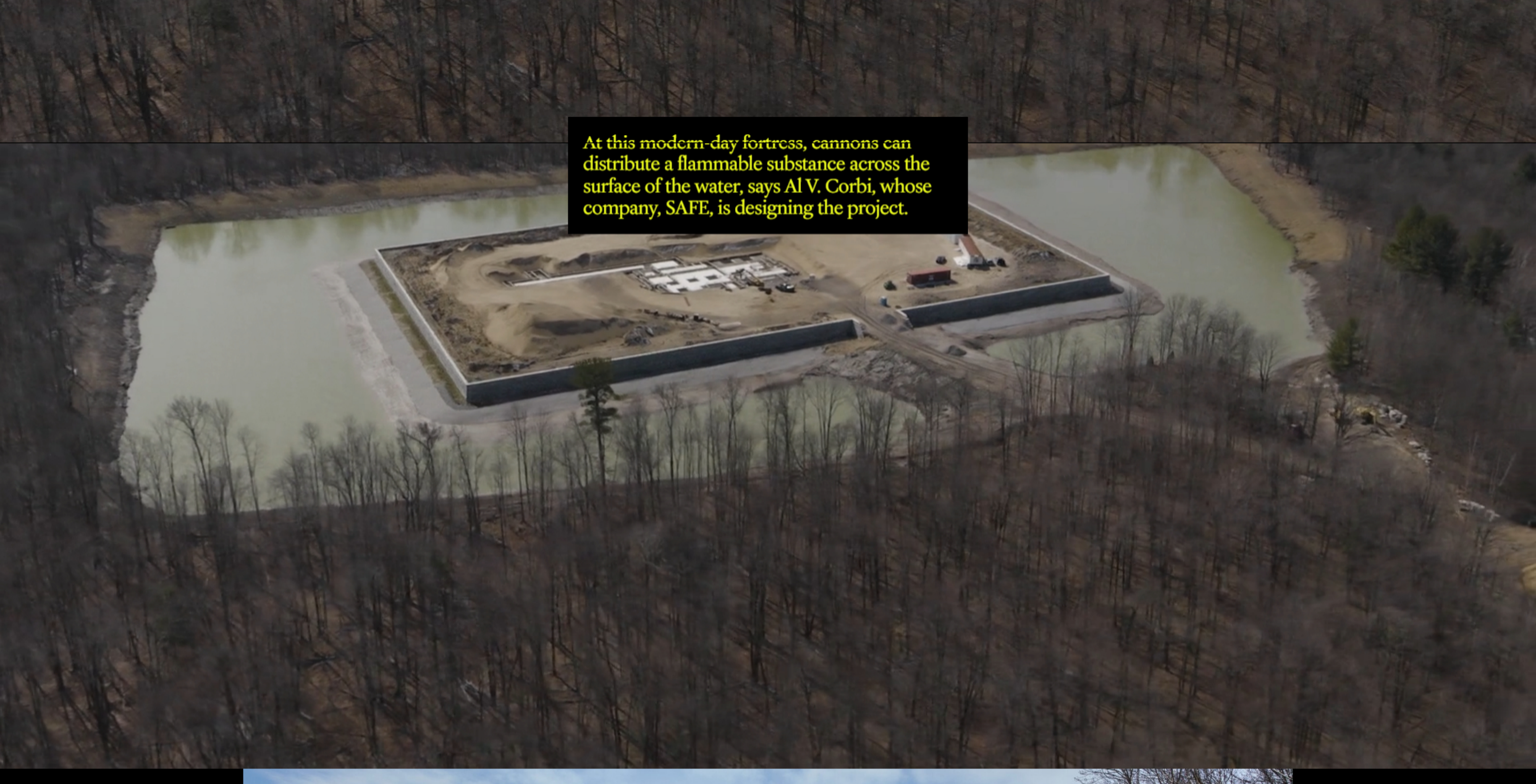


Elsewhere in the house, a moving bookcase hides a secret compartment containing a year's worth of nonperishable food and medical supplies, like iodine pills.



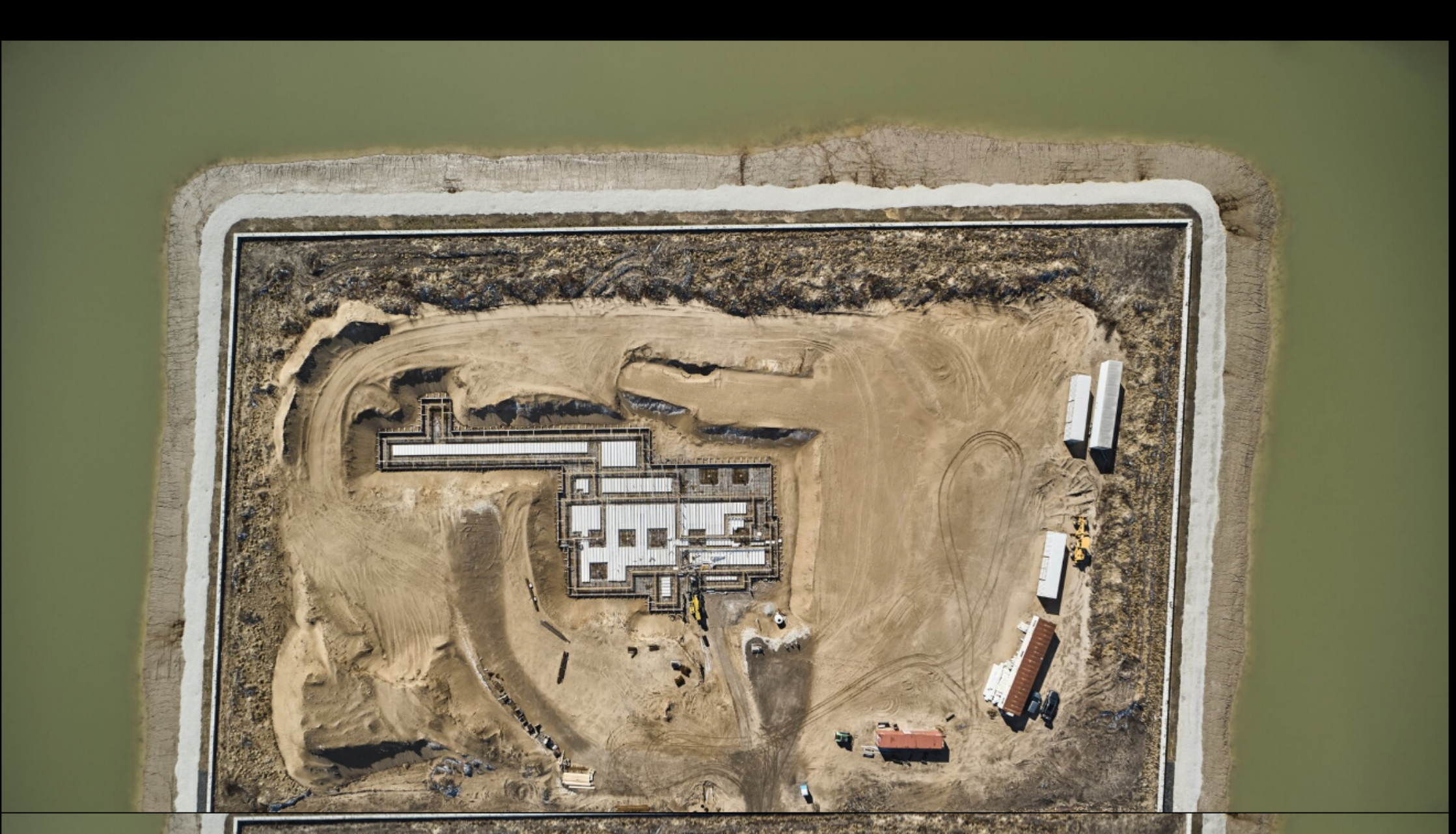
Sometimes, Humble wonders if his prepping is "crazy," but the news keeps validating his concerns. Every time North Korea fires a missile, he thinks: "Good thing I have those pills."

Meanwhile, the very rich continue to spend on extreme new forms of protection. In an undisclosed location in the Upper Midwest, one family is

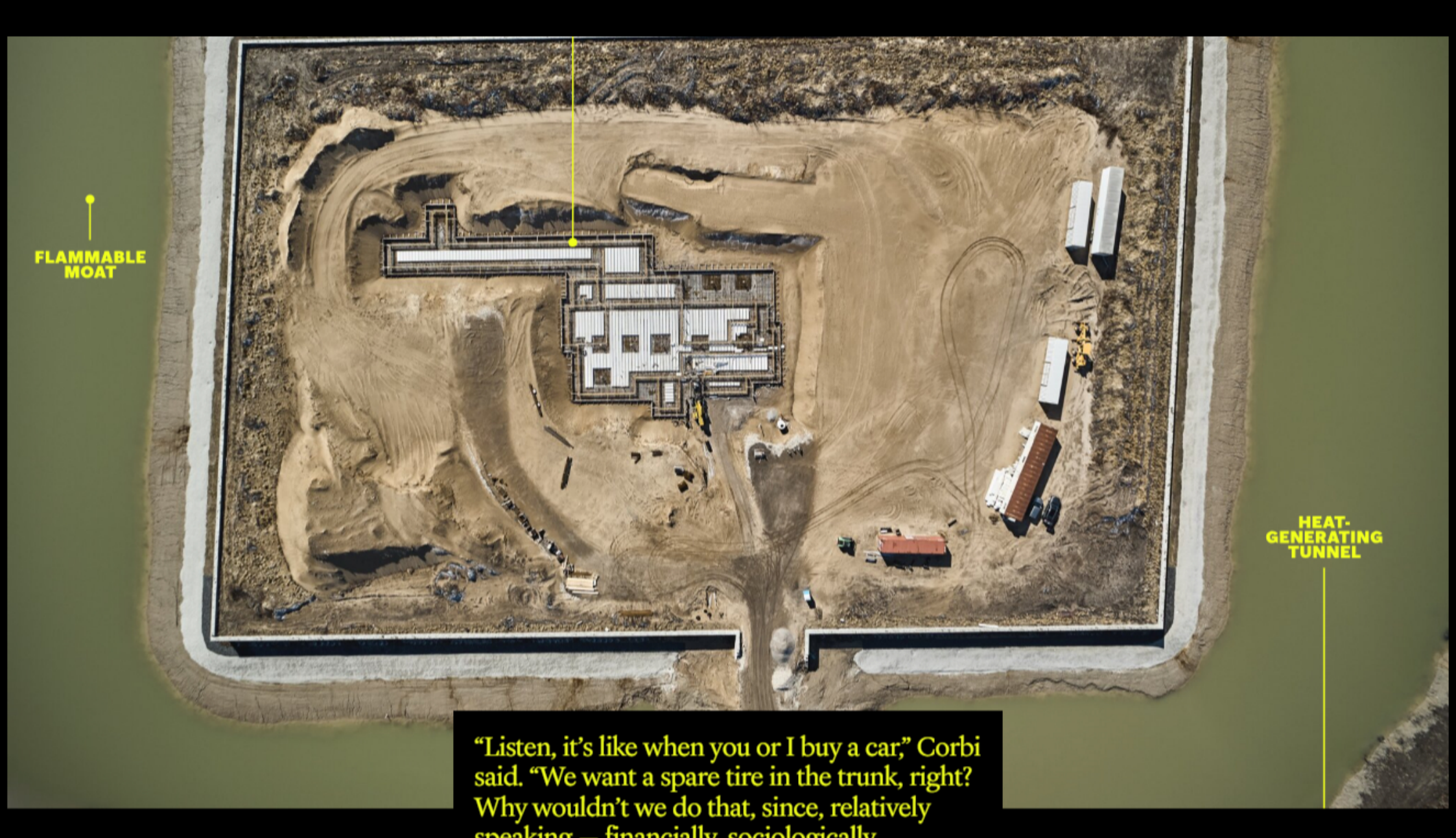


At this modern-day fortress, cannons can distribute a flammable substance across the surface of the water, says Al V. Corbi, whose company, SAFE, is designing the project.

Multiple tunnels lead to the compound, one of which provides another line of defense against intruders: When activated, it can generate heat through molecular friction like a giant microwave.



The cost of the compound is in the upper range of Corbi's projects, which starts at $10 million and can exceed $100 million. For some Americans, apparently, this feels like a sound investment.



> “Listen, it’s like when you or I buy a car,” Corbi said. “We want a spare tire in the trunk, right? Why wouldn’t we do that, since, relatively speaking — financially, sociologically, geopolitically — it doesn’t cost that much?”

Top image: An underground bunker in rural Arizona is up for sale. The asking price is $239,900.

Source for 2023 survey on doomsday prepping: Finder.com.

Coralie Kraft is a frequent contributor for the magazine. Last year she profiled the choreographer Parris Goebel and wrote about A.I.-generated pornography. Her writing has also appeared in The New Yorker and Vanity Fair.

Richard Barnes is a photographer who divides his time between New York and San Francisco. His work is in numerous public and private collections around the world, including New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Drone footage by **Jake Butters.**

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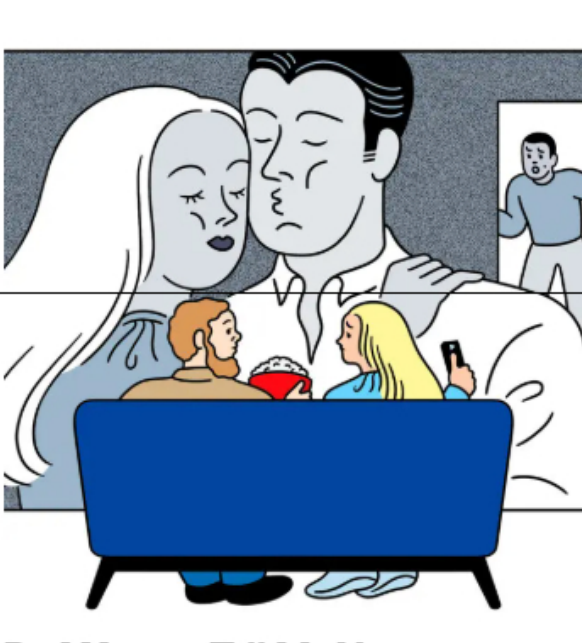

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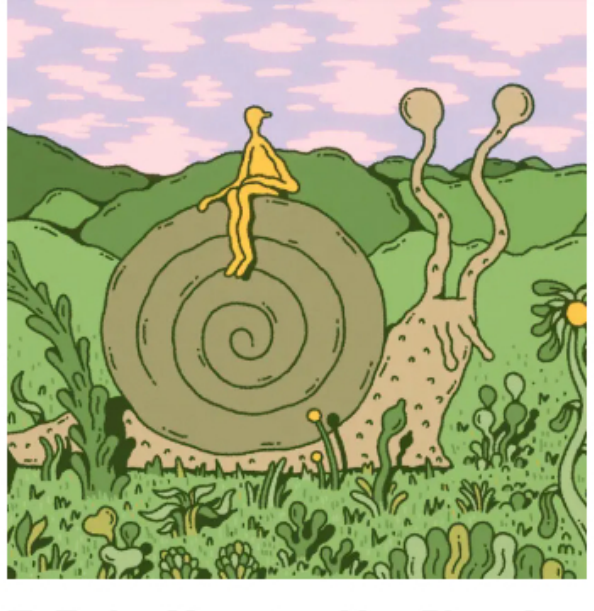

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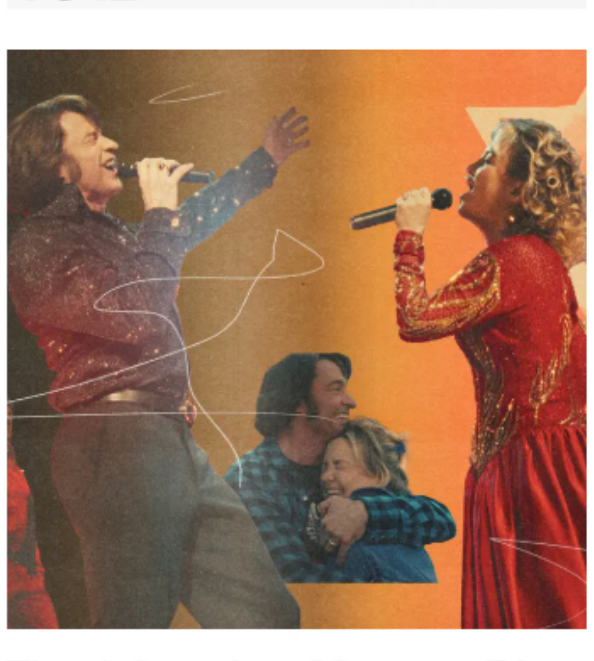

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