

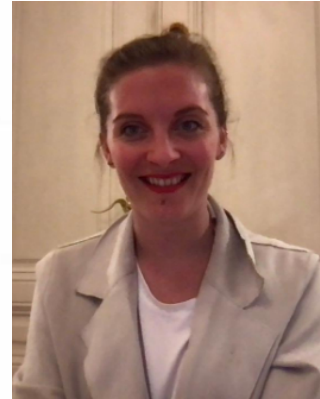
Vienna STS Talk

(Im)materialized Promises: the non-monotonic transformations of the Zwentendorf Nuclear Power Plant

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Date & time:
23.06.2022, 5:00 pm

Venue: STS Seminar Room
Universitätsstraße 7, 1010 Vienna
(staircase II / 6th floor)



Austria is a country well known for its strong opposition to nuclear energy, the political turning point of which came in 1978 with the national referendum that prevented the operation of the then newly built Zwentendorf nuclear power plant (NPP). Today the facility stands as a material symbol of a nuclear future that never materialized. Yet, this building complex composed of 1,000 rooms that were built up with up to three meters of steel-reinforced concrete is still maintained for several uses that accumulate over time (EVN 2022). In 2005, engineers transformed the plant and turbine halls into a training center for nuclear operation and prevention process and decommissioning practices. In 2009, the cables and the electricity distribution system were adapted to the production of solar energy. Some other parts of the plant have recently been converted into “animal-friendly infrastructure” (e.g., birds nest atop the exhaust stacks). Last but not least, Zwentendorf can also be rented out for artistic (filming, photography, music festivals) and private uses (EVN 2022).

In the same vein of Anand et al. (2018), this presentation explores the (im)materialized promises of one infrastructure. It relies on the interrelated concepts of ‘maintenance’ and ‘ruination’ (Velho and Ureta 2019), and contrast them as two modes in tension in the incomplete and ongoing processes through which policy decisions and socio-technical practices address the decay of infrastructures.

Based on virtual and on-site observations and semi-directive interviews with Austrian nuclear experts and representatives of Zwentendorf maintainers and users (e.g., the EVN, Powertech Training Center, the Vienna University of Technology, the Photovoltaic Research Centre Zwentendorf, the municipality, Association of Austrian Hedgehog Friends), this article explores how the same infrastructure can live multiple lives incidentally, which are inscribed and overlapped in time and space.

It highlights how Zwentendorf’s infrastructure concentrates practices of repair, maintenance, abandonment and repurposing (Schabacher 2021) and how it could be considered as an ‘non-monotonic’ transformation process - where the dynamics in question unfold in more undulating (regular or messy) ways, through different episodes or loci of change (Cairns et al. 2021, 15).

