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DISSOLVED CLOUDS: ERICSSON'S VAUDREUIL DATA CENTRE AND INFRASTRUCTURAL ABANDONMENT

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Over the past decade much of internet connectivity and communication infrastructure has been re-shaped towards the provision of video streaming and computation services within the 'cloud.' Tech giants and smaller actors alike have been fervently constructing data centres to enable these practices, animating hopes and promises for 'a fourth industrial revolution' and likewise new paths of value creation within digital capitalism. Despite these visions, any industrial revolution is bound by the logics of capital growth to leave its ruins (Harvey, 2001).

This paper engages with infrastructural abandonment that emerges in the process of rapid construction of data centres. We do so by tracking the afterlife of an abruptly abandoned data center constructed by the global telecom giant Ericsson in Vaudreuil, a town near Montréal, Québec, Canada. The company erected the data centre in 2016 as part of its global network of data centers, only to shut it down less than a year after becoming operational. In our attempt to recover the history and afterlife of this rapidly obsolete global communication node, we argue for the need to take perspectives of ruination, discard, and contingency of digital technologies to understand digital futures through their infrastructural pasts in-the-making. In our work we build upon earlier debates on post-industrial ruination (Edensor, 2005; Storm, 2016), and extend them to discuss the aftermath of 'cloud' construction.

Our methods were ethnographic, with material collected between 2018-2020, after Ericsson withdrew from their high-profile Canadian expansion. Brodie visited this abandoned Ericsson data centre in Vaudreuil, interviewed several individuals who had a

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relation to the site, and traced the online media coverage of the shut-down. Our findings were limited by the secrecy surrounding the site and the aftermath of its shut down, requiring us to sift through rumors and speculation about the fate of the data centre. Velkova visited the Canadian site's sister-data center that is still operational and located in Stockholm. She interviewed the site manager, the architecture company that had designed the data centers, and had contact with the Ericsson Headquarters in Sweden that all provided additional context of the closure in Canada.

Abandoned Promise

Between 2015 and 2017 Ericsson invested 7 million USD to construct a network of three large-scale data centres. Two of them were located in Sweden and one in Canada, where the company already had a long history of research and development. The stylish white, prismatic façade of the Canadian facility located in Vaudreuil mirrored the architecture of the Swedish data centers, designed by its architects to reflect timelessness and scalability. Like in other places (Vonderau, 2018), the data center was imagined by the local government as a shortcut to development, which would alleviate local problems and provide future prosperity.

Vaudreuil-Dorion is a small community on the shore of Lac des Deux Montagnes. Not long ago, the region was sustained by the agricultural sector, but recent years have brought significant economic and social change. Projects such as Je Suis..., a municipal initiative designed to promote 'sustainable urban development through culture,' promoted the data centre as an example of the community's ability to progress and host a thriving enterprise culture. However, the difficulty in finding community responses to Ericsson's investment—filtered through government talking heads like the city's mayor, Guy Pilon—leaves questions and gaps about the interface between people and the forces of development that shape their economic futures.

After construction delays, reduced capacity, and falling profits by Ericsson, the company consolidated its data centre needs to its two still-operating nodes in Sweden. The Vaudreuil facility was abruptly shut down in 2017 to the dismay of the local community (see Velkova, 2019). The aspirations of different social and possibly digital futures on the shore of Lac des Deux Montagnes were suspended.

Tucked away in a suburban industrial and logistics park, Ericsson's ostentatious former Vaudreuil facility still stands out against the surrounding landscape. As of February 2020, the building remains mostly vacant, sold to US real estate firm GI Partners. After local political mobilization, government tax breaks, and the promise of jobs and prosperity, the inert site now employs only a skeleton crew of security and maintenance professionals tasked with not letting the impressive structure fall to ruin while waiting for new buyers. The mechanical connections in the building wait to be fired up by a new influx of tech capital to rescue them from ruin.

Conflicting stories exist across the press and our informants. An employee of BGIS, the Montréal firm administering the site, told us that GI Partners cannot operate on Canadian soil and thus needed a new buyer. However, media reports assert that Ericsson maintains a physical data presence, renting server space as the only

remaining client at the site. Other brochures indicate that vague multinational Stream Data Centres is in charge of the building, in spite of zero evidence of this anywhere on their website.

Whatever is happening at the site, the Vaudreuil-Dorion community seems intent on forgetting. Mayor Pilon, who strongly advocated for the data centre, expressed deep disappointment in Ericsson's withdrawal, but his statements on the matter have been removed from the municipal website. Local press write-ups argued that because Ericsson had not fulfilled their promises, their tax holiday would be revoked, and this would bring significant revenue into the municipalities' pockets. On social media and in the local presses, residents expressed similar disappointment, but were eager to move on from the whole affair. A comment on Facebook suggested that Amazon Web Services should take over the site, as they have been expanding their infrastructure region in Montréal. Otherwise, references to the data centre have largely disappeared from the public discourse and materials available to us.

Conclusion

What gets lost in the real-time and localized (non-)coverage of the data centres' construction and aftermath is two-fold. First, there is the digital obsolescence of the global tech market. In an age of planned obsolescence and accelerated capitalism (Wajcman and Dodd, 2017), the lifespans of digital infrastructures are dramatically shortened, producing sites of digital ruination like de-commissioned data centres. Second, the politics of 'infrastructural abandonment' reveal the degree to which public visibility and actual corporate operations are always discrete. While the municipality of Vaudreuil-Dorion saw a stable future revenue stream in the data centre's operations, global tech infrastructure is anything but stable. Obsolescence only accelerates the timelines of abandonment. These are not 'eventful' processes, as large-scale thinking and investment tends to indicate. Rather, our research finds that the promise of such infrastructures seems to 'dissolve,' leaving behind material ruin and affecting social relations in ways that reflect the crossed but mismatched wires between communities and big tech capital.

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