NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS AS MEMORY SITES

BY ANNA STORM

Is it possible to imagine a disused nuclear power plant as a monument or memory site, a trace in the landscape that tells of days gone by? Have our notions of what constitutes history and cultural heritage expanded to the degree that we can also include a physical setting whose meaning is so controversial, especially considering the current political relevance of nuclear power technology?

One simple answer is: yes, it is indeed possible. It has already happened. Historical research surrounding nuclear power is relatively extensive; nuclear power is claiming space in museum exhibitions about the 20th century; and nuclear power plants have been documented and analyzed from a cultural history perspective in several countries.

However, the simple answer is not the whole truth. For many people, nuclear power plants carry such repugnant associations that it is impossible to understand them as cultural heritage. Nuclear power is burdened by potential disaster, has indisputable connections to nuclear weapons, and the question of how radioactive waste will be managed is by no means resolved. And cultural heritage, we have learned, is something chiefly good, something that creates meaning and contributes to our collective identity, and preferably something beautiful and with economic potential in the form of opportunities for tourism. Nuclear power plants seem to have no place in this canonized collection.

One might also think that nuclear power plants are too modern. How far ahead in time should history and cultural heritage actually extend? Should that which has only recently occurred be immediately viewed through a thin layer of dust and from a retrospective position? Some say no: "Nuclear power is the future, not history! Nuclear power is a key component in how the people of the world will respond to the climate crisis and is integral to our country's independence." From this perspective, nuclear power sparks hopes and visions, and has nothing to do with what has already happened, with that which cannot be undone.

Less strident voices can be heard. In local communities where nuclear power plants are located, the plants are generally appreciated places to work. It's not unusual for the plant actually to be the linchpin of the community's existence. There is strong faith in the technology and pride in having specialized expertise. If the nuclear power plant is shut down, a critical number of jobs is eliminated, and the memory formed over the years will probably take on an ambivalent nature.

The process involved in articulating and giving form to memories, monuments, history, cultural heritage, and museums is by nature extremely political. The process is characterized by negotiation and the struggle for interpretive precedence, often hidden behind putatively non-judgmental language cribbed from various professional contexts. Those involved may be curators and environmental experts, engineers and accountants, architects and local politicians — all with their specific areas of responsibility. In a recently begun study, I am investigating two nuclear power plants that have been shut down because of political decisions and which are the bearers of people's memories and affect their view of the future: Barsebäck in Sweden and Ignalina in Lithuania.

BARSEBÄCK, SWEDEN

The Barsebäck nuclear power plant was finished in 1977. It is in the municipality of Kävlinge in southern Sweden, situated along the coast in flat countryside where it dominates the area visually. Many of the people who worked at the plant live in Löddeköpinge, only about five kilometers away. In the 1970s, housing was built in Löddeköpinge for plant workers and the energy company, Sydkraft, paid for certain infrastructure upon which the plant depended, such as roads and a fire station.[1]

The familiar silhouette of the Barsebäck plant has become a symbol of nuclear power in Sweden. When it was opened, the Swedish nuclear power initiative was significant by international standards, before then it was mainly the superpowers that had launched such programs. The environmental movement initially supported the Barsebäck plant nuclear power as a better alternative to oil-dependency and continued exploitation of Swedish rivers. The Danish government was also in favor of Barsebäck: the plan was that Denmark would be able to buy power from Sweden until Danish nuclear power was up and running.

The actual construction of the nuclear power plant involved around 1,100 people and the workforce fluctuated between 340 and 400. Only Swedish citizens could be employed, but foreign nationals were allowed work as consultants or subcontractors. The Barsebäck plant was a popular workplace where people stayed a long time. It was known for its positive spirit and the workers were relatively well paid. The energy company worked consciously to build a good relationship with the local community, and according to a 1995 study, 80 percent of the people who lived near Barsebäck had very high confidence in the plant.

But even as the Barsebäck plant was being established, the public attitude toward nuclear power had begun to change. The Danish government abandoned its own nuclear power program and began expressing discontent with the location of Barsebäck, only 25 kilometers from the Danish capital. The Swedish debate also intensified and the atmosphere became increasingly negative, in part because of the incident in Harrisburg in 1979. Annual protest actions gathered tens of thousands of people around the Barsebäck plant, including a great number of Danes. One year after Three Mile Island, a referendum on the future of nuclear power was held in Sweden, and the winning alternative called for nuclear power to be dismantled at a rate consistent with the country's energy requirements. There would be no further expansion

of nuclear power. After the referendum, the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) resolved to shut down all nuclear reactors in Sweden by 2010.

In 1987 the Riksdag decided to shut down Barsebäck's two reactors, the first in 1995 and the second in 1996. The decision was rescinded and the reactors were actually closed in 1999 and 2005, respectively. In the interim, a seminar was held in 2001 on the possible cultural heritage value of the plant, and the regional museum assembled antiquarian and ethnological documentation before the second reactor was shut down. According to the energy company's current plan, demolition of the Barsebäck plant will begin in 2020, despite arguments from people in the cultural heritage sector that some parts of the plant should be preserved. Moreover, public opinion began to shift again in the early 2000s, becoming more in favor of nuclear power, partly in light of the threat of climate change. No Swedish nuclear power plants other than Barsebäck have been shut down as a consequence of the referendum vote, and nuclear power currently accounts for 50 percent of Swedish electricity production, a large share in comparison with many other countries.

IGNALINA, LITHUANIA

The nuclear power plant in Ignalina was constructed between 1972 and 1983 to meet the rising need for energy in the northwestern region of the Soviet Union. The plant is located in inland Lithuania near the borders of Latvia and Belarus on the shore of the largest lake in the country, Drūkšiai. When it began operating, it was the biggest nuclear power plant in the world. A workers' town, Sniečkus, was built about six kilometers away from the plant, which was intended to house a population of 30,000.

The Ignalina nuclear power plant and the town of Sniečkus were controlled by the central and secret Soviet Atomic Energy Committee, and architects with experience from other "atomic cities" were brought in from what was then Leningrad. The construction process involved more than 20,000 people. Tensions arose at the local level concerning the project, and most of the more than 25,000 people who moved to Sniečkus in the 1980s were Russians. Lithuanians made up less than one percent of the inhabitants of the town, whose setting of natural beauty, high housing standard, and relatively high wages at the plant made it something of a "Socialist Paradise".[2]

During perestroika and following the accident at Chernobyl in 1986, local environmental activists tried to raise public awareness of the dangers of nuclear power. The environmental movement may also be regarded as having been a covert arena for the endeavor to attain national independence in the Baltic countries.[3] The organization Žemyna was a key actor in this process, and one of its most pronounced goals in the late 1980s was to stop the Moscow-controlled expansion of Ignalina. This effort was supported by several Western European governments, which found it easier to support a struggle with environmental overtones than a struggle for political independence.[4]

When the Baltic countries regained their sovereignty in 1990–1991, the localization of Soviet nuclear power plants outside Russia became a complex economic and political issue. Paradoxically enough, the environ-

Barsebäck.

Ignalina.

ILLUSTRATION: KARIN SUNVISSON

A monument, an energy problem, a cultural heritage. Someone is surely formulating the question.

The balance between the ugly and the sublime. Ill at ease in the tension.

mental struggle, which had strongly contributed to the countries' independence, quickly died away once the goal had been attained. The Ignalina plant instead became a highly valued source of national pride and economic independence in Lithuania. For the Russian majority in Sniečkus, the change was, naturally enough, not entirely easy to take.

In 1993, Sniečkus was renamed Visaginas after an early Lithuanian settlement in the vicinity. Lithuania's accession to the EU in 2004 was made conditional upon the closure of Ignalina, since the EU had assessed the plant as far too dangerous, partly because the reactor type is similar to the one at Chernobyl. One of the two reactors was decommissioned that year and the other was shut down at the end of 2009. In 2008, the Lithuanian government asked the EU for permission to postpone closure of the second reactor, but, for various reasons, the request was denied. The plant had 5,000 employees and accounted for 75 percent of the country's electricity production. When Ignalina was closed, Lithuania was forced to import gas from Russia to meet its energy needs, which has had both economic and political implications.[5]

A RESEARCH PROJECT

One **track I want to follow has to do with nuclear power**er plants as border phenomena, as things that have engendered cooperation, but also conflict, concern, and real and perceived threats across national boundaries. The Danish view on Barsebäck was at first favorable and came about in the spirit of a joint energy policy initiative with Sweden, but government and public opinion rather quickly turned in a negative direction and for a few decades "Shut Down Barsebäck" became a central cry of the Danish environmental movement.

Ignalina, built as a Soviet nuclear power plant, became a symbol of Russian oppression during the liberation process, but retained a similarly strong position — now as promise and pride — once Lithuania had regained independence. Yet another border is, of course, that which runs through the Baltic Sea and has to do with how Soviet nuclear power plants have figured in the public debate in neighboring countries, and, in very concrete terms, through radioactive waste in connection with the accident in Chernobyl. How is the nature of these nuclear power plants, as emotionally charged border symbols, given space in the memory of both?

The question of risk is closely connected to the question of borders. How has risk been a part of life in the community, in business, and in political discourse? What risks can be considered acceptable, and what constitute comparable magnitudes in risk assessment? How did the Swedish and Danish governments, and the companies involved, reason when they decided to build the nuclear power plant in Barsebäck? And how can we understand the risk-seeking found lately in adventure tourism, with Westerners paying hefty sums to wander around the ruins of Chernobyl? The quest for authenticity, purity, and genuineness of place is leading people to seek out dangerous, non-sanitized environments. "Rust tourism", as it is sometimes called, is a search for cultural heritage outside the arenas where it is usually found.[6]

A third track to follow concerns cultural heritage as a double-edged sword. Designating something as a

cultural heritage is to elevate it and lend it value, but also to conclude and banish from contemporary reality something that can provoke and disturb the age if it does not perceive the identified cultural heritage site as something whose day is over. Nuclear power, as a highly topical issue, with renewed support in public opinion and with ongoing new construction in other countries, like Finland, is certainly not a closed chapter. At the same time, a nascent interest in decommissioned nuclear power plants can be discerned, which is entirely consistent with the way it has become an established practice for tourists to visit disused industrial settings of other kinds.[7] The negotiation, that is, a cultural heritage or "museumization" process, virtually always entails something lost and something gained.

The question of risk and cultural heritage as a double-edged sword leads to a fourth track that involves memory processes as a work of reconciliation, an integration of complex aspects of the past in the contemporary age, whose consequence is that the past must to a certain extent be disarmed and made harmless. This is a phenomenon manifest in the Western world's attitude toward its industrial past in general.[8] The project thus connects to research on cultural heritage as something that may be controversial and doubtful, such as industrial ruins, or obviously dark and painful, such as concentration camps and prisons.[9] Certain places, such as nuclear power plants, are also dangerous, not only owing to a complex history that must be dealt with in a cultural heritage process, but also due to physical contamination and literally risky settings. The presence of material risk entails substantial costs to secure and remediate the settings, but also triggers excitement and gives the place an atmosphere of adventure, which along with the perception of patina and nostalgia lays the foundation for the aforementioned "rust tourism". Can a conversion to tourist destination be an expression of reconciliation with the past?

CULTURAL HERITAGE AS POLITICAL PROCESS AND DEMOCRATIC OPPORTUNITY

What is required for memories to be regarded as cultural heritage? This is a critical political issue. Should the individual experience be defined as a collective concern or not? This is a question through which a society both creates contemporary images of itself and justifies directions and choices for the future.

Another way to approach the same question is to consider whether everything can be regarded as a potential cultural heritage monument. In the foregoing, I have dealt with cultural heritage as a contemporary product, constantly negotiated and renegotiated in relation to current social issues and interests.[10] From this perspective, cultural heritage is something that, explicitly or implicitly, carries value judgments about what can be considered important to remember, appropriate to reuse, or esthetically interesting and thus able to contribute to a good living environment. Recent decades have witnessed a movement aimed at involving ordinary citizens in this evaluation process and creating a more democratic cultural heritage. This should be seen in contrast to the designation of cultural heritage characterized by a more elitist perspective,

which nonetheless still constitutes a significant part of institutionalized work involving cultural heritage.

What does the contemporary ideal of a democratic cultural heritage actually entail, in theory and in practice? What are the possible consequences? Concerns have been expressed that designated cultural heritage monuments are increasing to such an extent that they will become worthless through inflation. And, one might ask, will the cultural heritage expert then become superfluous or need to find a new role? In any case, for individuals and collectives, the crucial skill continues to be an ability to manage change, at the intersection of past experiences, present situation, and future prospects. ≈

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And then there are always those who want to make the past safe. Though the danger is not imminent.