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SOUS LES PLAGES, LES DATA CENTRES! WALKING WITH SEBALD AMONG THE FUTURE RUINS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

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SOUS LES PAVÉS, LA PLAGE!

The slogan famously attributed to the events of May 1968 in Paris, "Sous les pavés, la plage!" ("Beneath the cobblestones, the beach!"), poetically transposed the realm of leisure and freedom into the city: the traditional space of work, utility, regulation, and social discipline. In its original context, the phrase suggested that beneath the paved order of urban modernity lay the possibility of another life: one marked by spontaneity and play. It condensed into a few words a critique of the alienation produced by industrial and bureaucratic society, while simultaneously invoking the utopian imaginary of a city transformed into a site of pleasure and liberation rather than mere production and control.

The idea of the beach beneath the city's stones evoked by the slogan took on a double resonance: the paving stones, which in May 1968 were literally being pried up and hurled against the police, were at the same time symbolically being lifted to reveal the image of another possible life. This gesture suggested that within the rigid order of the modern city lay the latent promise of play. The figure of the beach in the 1960s carried powerful connotations: it was imagined as a site of escape, where popular films projected visions of leisure. The beach embodied both a concrete landscape of recreation and a symbolic horizon of equality and desire, contrasting sharply with the alienation of industrial urban life.

It meant harnessing the traditional site of leisure and privilege of the upper classes to the everyday fabric of the city. If the blue Mediterranean waters of the Cote d'Azur were being celebrated in the 1950s as the quintessential backdrop of escapist fantasies for a hedonistic society – as depicted in Otto Preminger's 1958 adaptation of Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954)[1] – and, a few years later, even figured as a terrain of liberation from bourgeois conventions in Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965),[2] then the city itself could likewise be reimagined. It could be rescued from its role as a mere stage of labor, control, and alienation, and reclaimed as a space of emancipation, just as the beach and waterfronts had already been transformed into symbolic landscapes of freedom, even if it was just the temporary freedom granted during the holidays.

The boom of mid-century tourism development profoundly reshaped the shores of southern Europe. Modern resorts and large-scale hotel complexes in the Algarve in Portugal, the rapidly urbanised Costa del Sol in Spain, the exclusive Costa Smeralda in Sardinia, Italy, among many others, were conceived and promoted during the economic and cultural optimism of the postwar decades. These developments were embedded in the rise of mass air travel, new networks of highways, and the marketing of the Mediterranean as a paradise for both the

1. *Bonjour Tristesse*, dir. Otto Preminger (Columbia Pictures, 1958).

2. *Pierrot le fou*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard (Rome/Paris: Dino de Laurentiis/Columbia Films, 1965).

international jet set and an expanding middle class. In this context, the coastline became a laboratory for new forms of architectural and urban production, where speculative real-estate ventures, leisure infrastructures, and visions of modern lifestyle converged in spectacular but often fragile landscapes.

The promise of these new tourist complexes and coastal resorts, while initially catering to a more or less exclusive clientele, was nonetheless tied to the progressive incorporation of the masses into modern life. Tourism framed the holiday and the beach not simply as privileges of the wealthy, but increasingly as social rights connected to health, rest, and labor rights. In this way, mid-century development projects helped to normalize the idea of paid vacations, regulated leisure time, and mass access to seaside landscapes. The beach, once reserved for aristocrats or bohemian elites, was reimagined as a democratic space where workers and middle classes could also claim their share of the "good life." These transformations both reflected and reinforced the democratisation of pleasure, linking architectural and urban interventions with broader social policies and cultural imaginaries that celebrated leisure as a fundamental component of modern citizenship.

The places that were being developed to create the mid-century beach resorts were rarely tabula rasa, they were palimpsests where layers of declining traditional economies, such as fishing, small-scale agriculture, disused port infrastructures, that were gradually overwritten by the emergent industry of tourism. This transformation unfolded unevenly, leaving traces of the old within the new.

SOUS LA PLAGE, LA MEMOIRE!

The several layers of memory that are inscribed in coastal landscapes, which have absorbed the traces of successive industries, including fishing, shipbuilding, trade, and tourism, are evoked in the literary travelogues of W.G. Sebald.[3] In *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), Sebald's narrator wanders along the Suffolk coast, encountering towns marked by decline after the collapse of once-thriving economies, from the herring fisheries and maritime trade to fading seaside resorts. These places appear as palimpsests, where remnants of past prosperity persist in dilapidated infrastructures, abandoned factories, or seaside piers fallen into disuse.

The narrator walks through the streets of Lowestoft, observing and reflecting on the economic stagnation and political neglect that have shaped and constrained the city's development. In Sebald's account, the city becomes a microcosm of systemic decline, where the intertwined forces of economics and politics are inscribed in the urban fabric, giving rise to a melancholic reflection on impermanence, memory, and the legacies of modernisation:

> "The last time I had been in Lowestoft was perhaps fifteen years ago, on a June day that I spent on the beach with two children, and I thought I remembered a town that had become something of a backwater but was nonetheless very pleasant; so now as I walked into Lowestoft, it seemed incompressible to me that in such a relatively short period of time the place could have become so run down. Of course I was aware that this decline had been irreversible ever since the economic crises

3. About Sebald's work as a collage of narrative and image see: Kurt W. Forster, "Images as Memory Banks: Warburg, Wölfflin, Schwitters, and Sebald," *La Rivista di Engramma*, no. 100 (September-October 2012), 113–20.

> and depressions of the Thirties; but around 1975, when they were constructing the rigs of the North Sea, there were hopes that things might change for the better, hopes that were steadily inflated during the hardline capitalist years of Baroness Thatcher, till in due course they collapsed in a fever of speculation. The damage spread slowly at first, smouldering underground, and then caught like wildfire. The wharves and factories closed down one after the other, until all that might be said for Lowestoft was that it occupied the easternmost point in the British Isles."[4]

The narrator then recounts in a somewhat tragicomic episode the experience of a disastrous meal at a decrepit hotel, where the contrast between expectation and reality underscores both humor and melancholy. The comic absurdity of the situation is heightened by the unfortunate interplay of human error and institutional decay: poorly prepared food, inattentive staff, and the crumbling surroundings turn what should have been a mundane act of dining into a commentary on neglect and decline. In Sebald's description, the episode becomes more than a personal anecdote; it is a microcosm of the broader social and economic deterioration that haunts coastal towns, reflecting the ways in which infrastructure, governance, and history intersect. But this decrepitude was apparently contradicted by the past, since Lowestoft's waterfront had once been developed in the nineteenth century as a luxury seaside resort, complete with elegant promenades, piers, and hotels that catered to the tastes of the Victorian leisure classes:

> "At that time, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a number of hotels were built on the south bank of the River Waveney, under the direction of Morton Peto. They met all the requirements of London Society circles, and, as well as the hotels, pump rooms and pavilions were built, churches and chapels for every denomination, a lending library, a billiard hall, a tea house that resembled a temple, a tramway with a magnificent terminus. A broad esplanade, avenues, bowling greens, botanical gardens, and sea- and freshwater baths were established, as were associations for the promotion and beautification of Lowestoft."[5]

It is a deliberate strategy of Sebald to present first the fallen and dilapidated city, only then to recount the splendours it once possessed in a more prosperous era. His reflections remind us of the transience and hubris underlying great projects, and of the way they are ultimately destined to decline or fail, leaving behind ruins that testify as much to ambition as to impermanence. The architecture also testified to the reach and ambitions of empire, as the technology and materials were sourced and transported from distant places:

> «The crowning glory of the enterprise, which was in every respect exemplary, was the new pier, which stretched four hundred yards out into de North Sea and was considered the most beautiful anywhere along the eastern coast of England. The promenade deck was made of African mahogany planking, and the white pier buildings, which were illuminates after nightfall by gas flares, included a reading and a music room with tall mirrors around the walls."[6]

In a further passage, the narrator recounts his visit to Dunwich, a site where the beach has, quite literally, buried the historic fabric of the past. Once a prosperous medieval port and one of the most important towns on the East Anglian coast, Dunwich has been eroded over centuries by

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4. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Vintage International, 2002), 41-42.

5. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 45.

6. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 46.

the relentless force of the sea. What remains is a coastline haunted by absence—where the beach itself becomes a memorial, covering over the material traces of a once-thriving urban life. For Sebald, this site epitomises the fragility of human settlements before natural forces, and the way in which history can be submerged, leaving behind only fragmentary records:

> "The Dunwich of the present day is what remains of a town that was one of the most important ports in Europe in the Middle Ages. There were more than fifty churches, monasteries and convents, and hospitals here; there were shipyards and fortifications and a fisheries and merchant fleet of eighty vessels; and there were dozens of windmills. All of it has gone under, quite literally, and is now below the sea, beneath alluvial sand and gravel, over an area of two or three square miles."[7]

The town, as the narrator describes it, becomes the image of a past catastrophe that mirrors processes we are witnessing today: the coastal erosion and submersion of structures which, at the time of their construction, seemed solid, enduring, and indestructible. What was once built as a testament to prosperity and permanence is now reduced to fragments, reminding us that human ambition is always subject to the elemental forces of nature. The collapse of Dunwich into the sea thus resonates as both a historical precedent and a contemporary warning, echoing the vulnerability of present-day coastal settlements and infrastructures: ports, resorts, industrial complexes, and even the massive data centers rising along the shoreline. These sites, too, are imagined as permanent fixtures of economic and technological progress, yet the fate of Dunwich underscores their inherent fragility, and the likelihood that they too may one day exist only as submerged ruins or traces in memory:

> "Shipbuilding, and the trade in timber, grain, salt, herring, wool, and hides, were so profitable that the town was soon in a position to build every conceivable kind of defence against the attack from the landward side and against the force of the sea, which was ceaselessly eroding the coast. One cannot say how great was the sense of security which the people of Dunwich derived from the building of these fortifications. All we know for certain is that they ultimately proved inadequate."[8]

As he wanders around Felixstowe, the narrator recalls how the influence of the aristocracy, together with the rising power of the newly accumulated wealth of the nineteenth-century "business barons," transformed the landscape to create vast estates, ornamental parks, and seaside promenades that reinvented the coast as the leisure grounds of the privileged classes:

> "Under the patronage of their imperial majesties, the North Sea coast might become one great health resort for the upper classes, equipped with all the amenities of modern life. Everywhere, hotels mushroomed from the barren land. Promenades and bathing facilities were established, and piers grew out into the sea."[9]

These grandiose buildings, now little more than faded remnants, once stood as symbols of what the narrator describes as an Anglo-German global alliance, a network of trade, culture, and architectural ambition that projected power and prosperity. Yet this alliance was ultimately dismantled by the turbulence of history: wars, shifting political allegiances, economic crises, and the decline of the empires. In Sebald's account, these buildings are material witnesses to

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7. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 155.

8. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 157.

9. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 225.

the collapse of once-mighty networks of power, their current dereliction amplifying the sense of historical disjunction and loss:

> "War was declared, the german hotel employees were sent back home, there were no more summer visitors, and one morning a zeppelin like an airborne whale appeared over the coast, while across the Channel train after train with troops and equipment rolled to the front, whole tracts of land were ploughed up by mortar fire, and the death strip between the front lines was strewn with phosphorescent corpses."[10]

If the German Kaiser lost his empire, the same era also witnessed the dissolution of the vast fortunes accumulated by the so-called "business barons", who had once seemed untouchable in their wealth and influence, and saw their empires unravel in the political and economic upheavals of the early twentieth century. The volatility of global markets, the disintegration of imperial structures, and the devastation of the First World War all contributed to the evaporation of fortunes that had been built on shipping, colonial trade, and extractive industries. What had appeared to be unshakable dynasties of capital proved in fact to be as vulnerable to historical currents as the empires themselves. In Sebald's telling, the decline of these fortunes underscores a broader theme: the impermanence of power and the fragility of the structures that such wealth produced.

The walks of Sebald in the decaying coastal towns, evoking a way of life now lying in ruins, can be fruitfully compared with Robert Smithson's walks and writings, specifically in *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967), where he discovers a strange monumentality in the mundane remnants of human activity.[11] Yet in both Sebald and Smithson, these remnants are charged with the weight of human optimism and hubris, offering the unsettling sense that all forms of human endeavour already contain within themselves the seed of their own ruination. The decayed pier, the obsolete factory, or the half-finished infrastructural project are read not simply as failures, but as the inevitable afterlife of ambition: monuments to entropy that turn the promise of progress into landscapes of melancholy reflection.

SOUS LES DATA CENTRES, LA PLAGE!

One of the future retroactive monuments, destined for ruin, will be the data centre. The gigantic containers of information and energy that sustain our diaphanous and seemingly immaterial modern life will be the ruins of the digital age. They are the materially heavy infrastructures that carry our wireless everyday instruments: our phones, our cloud storage, our streaming platforms, our virtual meetings. In their scale, land occupation and water use they embody the paradox of a culture that imagines itself light and weightless while depending on colossal, resource-intensive constructions. Inevitably, they too will become ruins.

The place of data centres within architectural history has been examined by Marina Otero Verzier, who has been investigating both the material realities and the socio-political implications of these structures.[12] As Otero's work makes clear, this typology is not merely a

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10. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 226.

11. Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jerse," in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 68–74. Originally published as "The Monuments of Passaic." *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December, 1967).

12. Merve Bedir, Ludo Groen, Marten Kuijpers, Víctor Muñoz Sanz, and Marina Otero Verzier (eds.), *Automated Landscapes* (Rotterdam: Nieuwe Instituut, 2023).

technical container for information but a cultural and architectural phenomenon that touches on multiple dimensions of contemporary life: from questions of ecology, energy, and labor to issues of sovereignty, memory, and planetary infrastructure.

One of the the most critiqued feature of data centres is their massive cooling systems, which consume enormous quantities of water. However, the rhetoric of sustainability and green innovation is frequently co-opted by corporations and governments to justify the expansion of new data centres, framing them as engines of progress or digital modernisation. Thus, the discourse of sustainability operates as both a critical lens and a strategic marketing tool.

In Portugal, one of the most recent and ambitious projects is the Sines Data Campus, which markets itself as a new model: the coastal data centre. Its design emphasises renewable energy integration, seawater cooling systems presenting the campus as a benchmark for environmentally conscious data centres. However, its scale and ambition also makes it a monumental intervention in the coastal landscape, raising questions about resource consumption, territorial transformation, and the environmental impact of concentrating digital infrastructure in that location.

It is located in a coastal area that has been a center of heavy industry since the mid-twentieth century. The Sines port, developed in the 1960s, served as a hub for a variety of refineries, petrochemical plants, and energy-intensive industries, shaping the region's economic and infrastructural landscape. The Sines Data Campus[13] represents a new addition to this industrial continuum, introducing a high-tech, digital layer to a territory historically defined by extractive industries. While the campus embodies cutting-edge technological ambition and sustainability initiatives, it also overlays a landscape already marked by environmental stress and industrial legacies, contributing to the palimpsest of industrial, technological, and environmental histories along the Portuguese Atlantic coast.

One of the first built facilities within the Sines Data Campus is The NEST, a pilot data center designed by the architectural office ARX Portugal in collaboration with international engineering and sustainability consultants.[14] Conceived as a functional prototype and a symbolic gateway for the larger campus, The NEST integrates advanced cooling strategies, modular design principles, and energy-efficient systems intended to align with the project's overarching sustainability narrative. Beyond its technical role, the building also serves an architectural and representational function: ARX's design emphasises a streamlined, industrial aesthetic that seeks to reconcile the monumental scale of digital infrastructure with the surrounding coastal landscape.

Despite being adjacent to other zones of heavy industrial activity, the Environmental Impact Study (EIA) for the Sines Data Centre acknowledged that the project would affect areas of sensitive wetlands and protected habitats, with potential consequences for local flora and fauna.[15] This stands in contrast to the architectural renderings, which depict the data center as emerging among bodies of water and greenery, creating the illusion that the surrounding

13. Start Campus, *European Data Campus*, accessed 22 August 2025, https://www.startcampus.pt.

14. AFA Consult, *Data Centre SINES 4.0 - The NEST*, accessed 5 September 2025, https://www.afaconsult.com/projects/category/pt/industrial/438.

15. Agência Portuguesa do Ambiente (APA), *Estudo de Impacte Ambiental - Data Center Sines 4.0 (Fases 2 a 6)*, Relatório Final, versão 1.0 (Lisboa: APA, 2023), accessed 5 September 2025, https://siaia.apambiente.pt/AIADOC/AIA3633/22045_datacentersines4_0_eia_r1_novo2023523145011.pdf.

environment remains pristine.[16] In reality, the necessary interventions to construct and operate the facility were substantial, highlighting the gap between promotional imagery and ecological reality. The renderings suggest a harmonious integration with nature, but the environmental assessments reveal that significant mitigation measures were required to reduce impacts on wetlands, seasonal ponds, and biodiversity.

In a way, the architectural renderings recreate, in a somewhat distorted form, the famous slogan of May '68: "*Sous les pavés, la plage!*" In this case, instead of suggesting an imaginary place of liberation waiting to be uncovered beneath the pavements, they stage the symbolic occupation of nature itself, a nature temporarily subdued under the dominion of technological infrastructure. The renderings promise harmony, but they also betray a deeper tension: the environment is reduced to a backdrop. Thus, the images operate like a Wittgensteinian "duck–rabbit": if seen from the present, they appear as representations of technology and its seamless integration into the landscape; but if imagined, as Robert Smithson once envisioned the banal sites of Passaic, as the ruins of the future, they reveal a different reading. Looked at from that vantage, these polished architectures will inevitably become abandoned shells, relics of a passing technological era. What will remain is the inexorable power of the natural world, slowly reclaiming the traces of human hubris and exposing the fragility of even the most monumental infrastructures.

16. 18-25, *Data Center*, Sines, Portugal, 2020, accessed 5 September 2025, https://www.1825.pt/project/2009i/.

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