

Exposing the Grande-Dixence's secondary infrastructure (1950 – 1965): Territories, Architectures, and Labor

Rune Frandsen

02.2023



The P4 settlement above Arolla © Frank Gygli, Grande Dixence

First Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Günther Vogt (LUS, ETHZ)

Second Supervisor: Dr. Hollyamber Kennedy (GTA, ETHZ)

Co-Examiner: Prof. Dr.-Ing. Silke Langenberg (IDB/ITA, ETHZ)

Keywords

Land histories; Swiss Alps; Resource Frontier; Secondary Infrastructure; Labor; Territorial archive.

Abstract

The National Office for Water Management of Switzerland released a study in 1945 listing the remaining opportunities for hydropower within the Rhône River watershed, in Valais. It sparked a massive campaign of dam building in this mountainous region, which lasted for the three following decades. Most of this hydroelectric infrastructure is remote and underground, which means that it is less visible and therefore absent in the representations of the Alpine space. In the same vein, its invisibility also pushes from the spotlight the thousands of workers employed for its construction. This dissertation focuses on one case study, the construction period of la Grande-Dixence, which lasted between 1950 and 1965, through the lens of the temporary settlements the workers were housed in. Through archival research and field studies, two elements of these settlements are studied in detail. Firstly, a portrait of the population that this construction relied on recenters human figures in this Alpine landscape. Secondly, a study of the barracks used on the construction sites illustrates the living conditions of the workers. The common trait of these two elements, labor, and barracks, was their mobility. Defining this function provides the theoretical footholds to coin the concept of *secondary infrastructure*. This includes the arteries for material transports and its roads, tunnels, bridges and cable-cars, the workers building the dam or digging the tunnels, and the architectures housing those bodies. Through this concept, the worker's settlements can be understood not as temporary, but as part of a continuously ongoing project, and as localized instantiations of a bigger assemblage. The dissertation provides two important outcomes. Firstly, it offers theoretical bearings to the study of **so-called** temporary housing, which still today represents the daily life of millions across the world. Secondly, it documents the territorial archive of this construction site, and presents it as the heritage of the contributors to the construction of the Swiss hydroelectric infrastructure.