

Fired up

Silahtaraga Power Station was once the jewel in the crown of industrialisation in Ottoman Turkey. Now it is sparking the imaginations of the expanding artistic community





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If I was standing here 30 years ago, I'd be dead. I'm in the belly of the beast, an industrial leviathan that snorts steam and eats coal.

This monster is Istanbul's now defunct Silahtarğa Power Station. Its heart is an AEG generator the size of a bus and its lungs are a Siemens turbine group. This century-old construction dates back to the days when industrial design meant pumping pistons and roaring furnaces and was characterised by hissing pressure valves that took the strength of two men to turn.

Silahtarğa's history falls in the middle of the industrial revolution when all eyes were on Paris for the Great Exhibition and the Eiffel Tower was unveiled, illuminated head to toe by electricity. This was quite a coup in 1889 and the rapidly westernising Ottoman court simply hated to be left behind.

So, in response, the royal mint melted down its diminishing reserves to fund small scale power plants in the Empire's trading capitals of Izmir (1905), Damascus (1907) and Beirut (1908). But then, the Sultan demanded electric lights in Istanbul itself. The petroleum used for illumination came with self-evident storage problems and when local authorities experimented with natural gas, they succeeded in blowing up several municipal buildings.

City leaders finally settled on a coal-fired power station to harness the current and so Silahtarğa was born. For a site, they selected the famous Golden Horn, the watery arc off the Bosphorus. Coal could be shipped in by barge from the Black Sea and the power plant benefitted from access to water too.

As visitors who wander around the site today will confirm, the power station was visionary. Workers were housed in state-of-the-art dorms. Employees shared an infirmary, clubhouse, steam bath and football pitch. Engineers and managers were housed in luxury villas. While just outside the factory gates, some Istanbulis still lived in yurts.

Silahtarğa's capacity was set at a 13,000kw. Today it's enough to run just 5,000 homes in the UAE but at the time such power was unimaginable. Electricity flowed to streetlamps on Istiklal Caddesi, still Istanbul's main shopping boulevard. In the following years, cables connected the city's elite areas: the seaside suburb of Örtakoy, the banking district of Galata and the Greek neighbourhood of Fener.

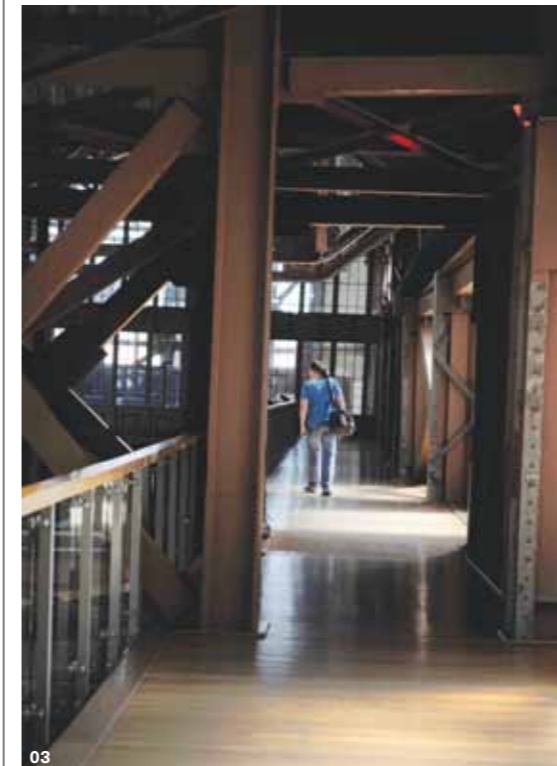
Also along these cables flowed new ideas. Istanbul's newly electrified trams featured advertisements for table lamps, gramophones and electronic leg massagers. Hoardings for the new Telefunken music machine showed a well-dressed lady gazing at a wooden radio set. Theatres, dancehalls and movie houses stayed open until midnight. Electric oven cookbooks abounded.

Such novelties put great strain on Silahtarğa. The power plant's control room boasted a crescent bank of dials, valves, levers, clocks and lights stretching 30m by 15m and they were working to full capacity. In 1952 Silahtarğa was the sole supplier of electricity to Istanbul's one million residents. The 40-year-old powerhouse was cracking at the seams.

By 1963, several other power stations had joined the fray. But the city's population stood at two million and Silahtarğa



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SILAHTARAGA

The power plant started service on the 11th February, 1914. It supplied power initially to the tram network and shortly after to the sultan's palace.

Before long Silahtaraa was the sole electricity producer in Istanbul until the 1950s. On the 13th March, 1983, Silahtaraa power station was shut down because it was no longer economical to operate. The plant was left largely derelict for the next 20 years.

In 1991, the plant was listed as a 'cultural and natural object of Istanbul' giving it special protection



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BILGI UNIVERSITY

Istanbul Bilgi University is a private, non-profit university that was established in 1994 under the name ISIS (Istanbul School of International Studies). Its name was changed to Istanbul Bilgi University with the establishment of the school on June 7, 1996. The arts university has attempted to establish a cultural and scientific community that promotes tolerance and respect for a diversity of individuals with different lifestyles, beliefs and ways of thinking within the framework of contemporary universal values





SANTRALISTANBUL

The Santralistanbul opened in 2007. It is an arts and cultural complex located at the upper end of the Golden Horn in the Eyüp district of Istanbul, Turkey. The centre consists of a modern art museum, an energy museum, an amphitheatre, concert halls and a public library. It is situated within the Silahtaraga campus of Istanbul Bilgi University that was formerly the first power station of the Ottoman Empire. The arts, cultural and educational buildings of Santralistanbul, cover an area of 118,000m and the site is named after the Turkish word 'santral' for power plant

was now surrounded by suburbs. Transporting dirty coal through a thriving city was causing dismay to residents and authorities. Waste deposits had silted up the Golden Horn and the idea of repairing pre-World War One industrial machines after five decades of abuse was inconceivable.

Twenty years later, Istanbul's new Ambarli Power Station was producing 630,000kw of electricity. Poor old Silahtaraga was pumping out just 80,000kw. Eventually the industrial giant was put to sleep in 1983, when it was deemed no longer economically viable. The Siemens turbines were mothballed, having breathed their last. The site mirrored the Turkish economy during the military dictatorship of the early 1980s: moribund, sedated, and unlikely to shine again.

As any architecture aficionado will attest, yesterday's industrial legacy is today's urban jewel. The Turbine Hall in London's Tate Modern and the High Line Rail Walk in New York City are two shining examples. In 2004, Istanbul's Bilgi University signed an agreement with Turkey's Ministry of Energy to preserve the Silahtaraga Power Plant and put it to good use. The ambitious plan was a hybrid: part industrial site, part energy museum and part university campus. The result astounds.

Steel walkways now wind through the industrial complex. Museum visitors may hit the palm-size buttons on the AEG generator. The control room is a playroom; a mechanical workshop in a hundred shades of Soviet grey.

Interspersed around the 100-year-old machines are the Museum of Energy exhibits. Guests may interact with

hydraulic rockets and plasma balls. Or touch a Van der Graaf generator, which makes one's hair stand on end. Electrophiles may construct their own electro-magnet (but keep your iPhone well clear).

If Vogue made universities, the surrounding campus of Bilgi University would be one of its own designs. Like the adjoining Museum of Energy, it is also open to the public, but this time for free. Silahtaraga once powered Istanbul's elite. Bilgi now trains them; and it is a sight to see.

Take, for example, Bilgi's large campus bar. Tamirane is housed in an old factory building. It has a wood-fired pizza oven and a marble-topped cocktail bar. Its alfresco coffee tables are loaded with supercool Istanbul magazine XOXO, plus the Turkish satirical comic Penguen. If only those smokey-faced power station workers could see their communal canteen now.

Like Silahtaraga, Bilgi is channelling fresh ideas into Istanbul. It hosts hundreds of foreign students. Most courses are run in English. Final project architecture pieces are constructed outside in the summer sun. One is a serpentine monster made from metal coils. Another is a pop-up city made from paper and aluminium foil. Bilgi's latest hot course is storyboarding, producing and marketing mobile video games. It's tomorrow's industry, built on top of yesterday's.

Across Istanbul lie countless deserted factories, warehouses and schools. A thousand similar stories can evolve from Istanbul's 2,000-year-old legacy. With the blessing of city authorities, history's industrial waste can be our gain.