

By
Bernard Kennedy
 Photos by Melih Uçar & supplied by
Cer Modern

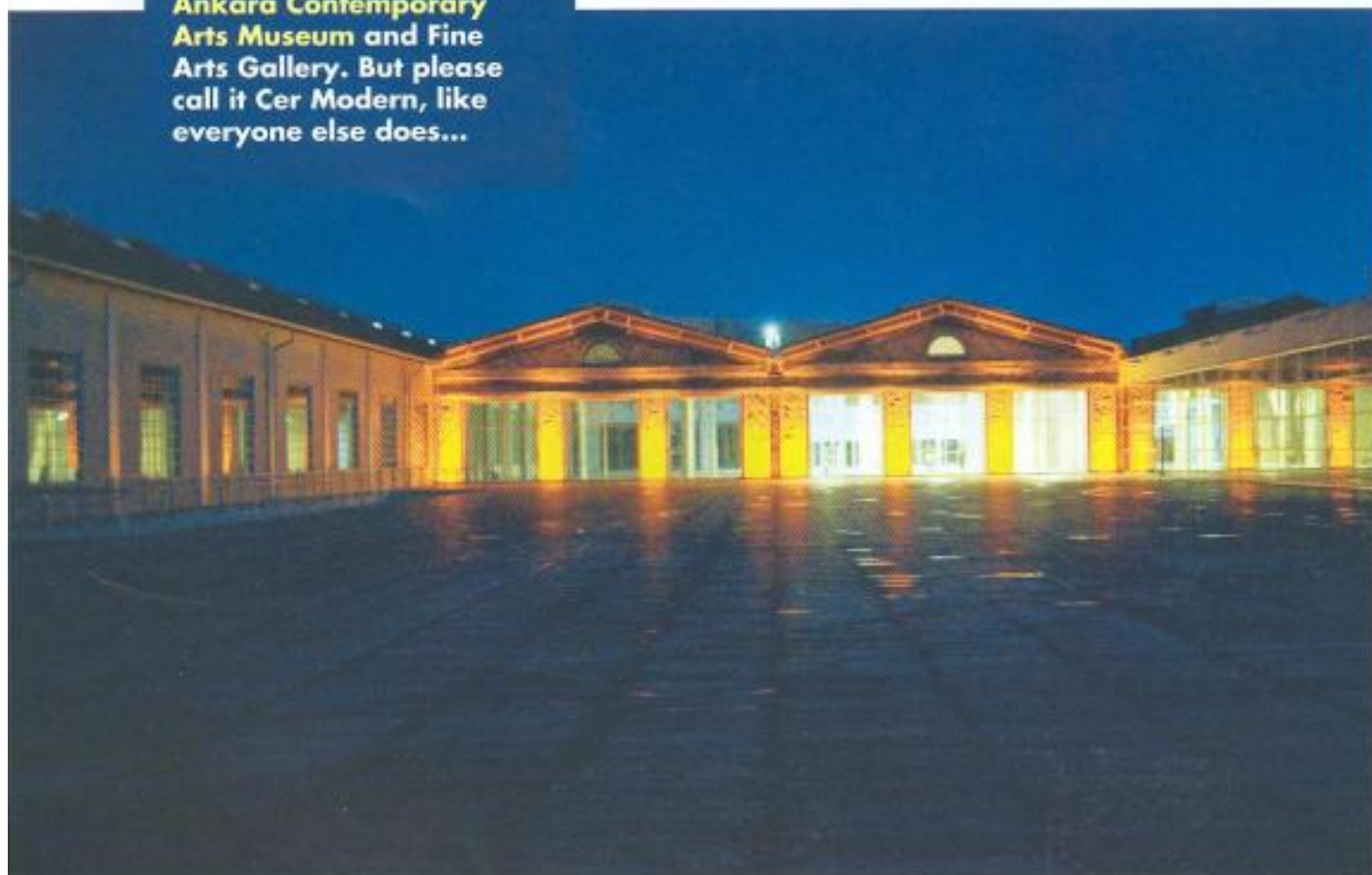
A Space to Breathe: Cer Modern

The Guide Ankara speaks to Semra and Özcan Uygur, architects of Ankara's new arts center.

Once upon a time, in a no-man's land between the old town and the new, stood three-and-a-half forgotten railway sheds. And then, as if by magic, they turned into a welcoming space - so close to the city center and yet so peaceful - where Ankara folk could view major exhibitions, enjoy live performances, attend meetings and receptions, or simply relax and watch the city's spectacular sunset.

The capital's latest venue, officially opened in April, is owned by the Ministry of Culture and operated by the Turkish Travel Agents Association (TURSAB). Officially, it is known as **Ankara Contemporary Arts Museum and Fine Arts Gallery**. But please call it **Cer Modern**, like everyone else does. "Cer" comes from the old name for a railway workshop, and refers to three contiguous stone sheds of 1926 vintage and a fourth of indeterminate date. These are now adapting effortlessly to their new role as a single-story, open-plan 4,500 square meter exhibition hall. "Modern" speaks of the recently-completed swirl of glass and concrete which shields crumbling

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walls from the elements and accommodates a cafe, shop and offices.

Where workers once sweated under the rolling stock, young artists now sculpt and paint in cool ateliers. And the rails which formerly carried wagons for repair now decorate an impromptu quadrangle where summer concerts are held. Once in a while, you may think you have seen a ghost – but it is only one of today's locomotives, looping around the sidings on its way back to Ankara station.

Needless to say, Cer Modern did not appear by magic. On the contrary, it is the first fruit of a long and still unfinished process. The railway sheds stand on the proposed site of a new concert hall for the Presidential Symphony Orchestra. Once slated for demolition, they were later reprieved thanks to the efforts of arts-lovers.

The task of converting them into an arts center fell to architects Semra and Özcan Uygur, who had won the competition to design the concert hall.

"The area is like a documentary of Ankara's architectural stock," says Semra Uygur. "Opposite you have the Language, History and Geography Faculty, which dates back to the early Republic. Then there is the present Presidential Symphony Orchestra (CSO in Turkish) building, which I believe was built in the 1960s, and the law courts, representing the 1970s. The new concert hall will also be a building representative of its own era. So it made sense to restore the railway workshops, to represent the very young Republic and its determination to build more railways. And as we got going we discovered that restoration work was more enjoyable than making a new building."

By the time the architects took charge, the State Railways had already demolished the rear of one workshop and a corner of its neighbor to make way for the loop line. *"The building had not been destroyed, but it had been left crippled,"* recalls Semra Uygur. *"If a person suffers a bad injury you have to put them in plaster and wrap*

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them with bandages and then get him walking again with a walking stick. So we thought we could look at this building in the same way. All those round things running parallel to the line are the bandages, and the cafe and library section are like the walking stick which holds everything together and makes it stand on its feet."

"We think that you can always give life to something by thinking architecturally and developing a concept," adds Özcan Uygur. "Whatever the situation, a solution can be found. We wanted to preserve what was old as it was, and to form what was new in line with contemporary architectural views. The old building is a symbol of the old and the new structure is a symbol of the new. But they still go arm in arm. Yes, there is a contrast, but you bring those contrasts together so that you only feel which one is new and which one is old when you look carefully. That's the way we approached it."

What has given Semra Uygur most pleasure since Cer Modern opened is the way people have started to use it. "We realize that we have done something good for Ankara – that we have given people somewhere where they can go and sit, a place where the city can get its breath back," she says, "especially the open atrium which is the space the public use most."

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Yet there is still something secretive about Cer Modern, hidden as it is behind the law courts and construction works, with access only from a little-known road at the rear. In the future, it will be possible to reach Cer Modern directly from Atatürk Boulevard - and hopefully to stroll on foot here among several cultural and social facilities. But before that can happen, the new concert hall must rise above ground level. If the restoration in its grounds is any sign of things to come, it will be a source of much pleasure and pride.



Photo by Melih Uçur

CER MODERN AT A GLANCE...

- Cer Modern is 11,500 square meters and has a variety of artistic spaces: temporary exhibition gallery, photography gallery, museum shop, conference and multi-purpose lounge, artist residents' studio, cafe and a sculpture park.
- The ground floor of the museum houses the main gallery and every year, four exhibitions will be on display. The museum plans on working with international museums and galleries and plans on displaying collaborative exhibits.
- Cer Modern is also available for all sorts of conferences and receptions. It has a conference hall for up to 370 people; built-in simultaneous interpretation booths; a 600 square meter reception area; and catering services are offered.
- Besides donations, Cer Modern is supported by the contributions of its members. Individual (100 TL); Student (50 TL); Family (75 TL); Support (400 TL) and Special (1,000 TL) are available – all offering different amenities – from discounts at the museum shop and cafe to invitations to special events.

Altınsoy Caddesi No. 3, Sıhhiye; Tel: (0312) 310 00 00
www.cermodern.org
Open Tuesday – Sunday from 10:00am to 6:00pm.

THE ARCHITECTS...



Semra Uygur



Özcan Uygur

Our works will live longer than us," says Semra Uygur, "We want to give people buildings that put them at ease."

Semra and Özcan Uygur, the architects responsible for the Cer Modern restoration, have been making their mark on Turkey's urban landscape for almost a quarter of a century. Their signatures can be found on modern public buildings of human proportions in cities as far removed as Giresun and Mersin. They have a portfolio full of the kind of spaces where people come together, such as schools, social centers, sports facilities and arts venues. In Ankara, where they live, they have designed several buildings and complexes which, though they may not dominate the skyline, play significant roles in the life of the city – from offices for members of Parliament to a new campus for the TED Ankara College.

Born in Erzincan and Anamur respectively, the husband-and-wife both studied architecture at Ankara's Middle East Technical University, from where they also received their master's degrees in the early 1980s. They founded Uygur Architecture Ltd. in 1986.

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