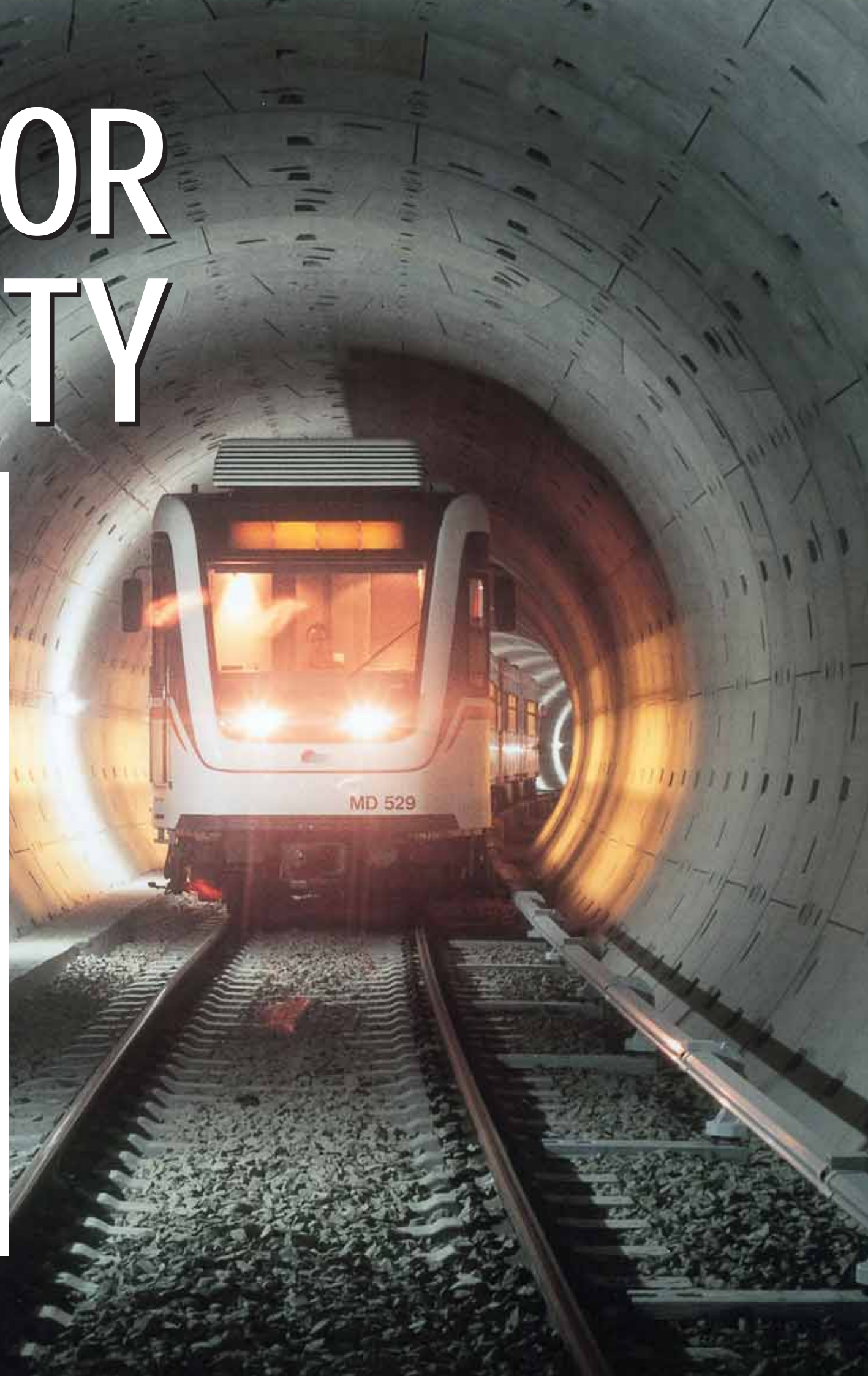


ON TRACK FOR PROSPERITY

In the 40-plus years since its inception, Yapı Merkezi has grown from a purely research and design company to a multi-division concern engaged in a wide variety of projects around the Mediterranean as well as in its native Turkey. James Colwill spoke to their Managing Director Mr Sedar Oncel to find out more. Article written by Michael Poxon.



Formed in 1965 by civil engineer Dr. Ersin Arıoğlu and architect Köksal Anadol, both of whom remain involved with the company to this day, Yapı Merkezi began life as a research and design company for the engineering and construction industries. In 1969 they began to take on an increasingly diverse range of projects, so that now, as Mr Oncel says, “we are now involved in building, transit systems, construction and restoration.” In essence, these take the specific forms of housing (chiefly in Turkey), mass transit rail systems, both within and between cities, in which connection Mr Oncel informs us that the company were recently awarded “one of the largest contracts in Turkey, a high speed railway project from Ankara to Konya” which is a distance of over 200 km. They also undertake heavy construction projects, primarily, though not exclusively, in the Mediterranean area which represent, as Mr Oncel explains “our target areas – North Africa, the Middle East and of course Turkey”.

A humanitarian approach

Since its foundation, Yapı Merkezi’s mission has been ‘to create and to realize construction projects that will serve humanity by creating happiness environments’. This civilised approach to construction was perhaps inevitable given the founders’ backgrounds in engineering and fine-arts architecture and archaeology.

Many subsidiary companies followed, specialising in such fields as fabrication, tensioning technology and housing, while the educational institution Nitelikli E itim Kurumları was established in the 1990s and introduced the Irmak Okulları primary school in 1995. As Turkey’s first school to obtain the ISO 9002 certificate, Irmak Okulları continues to serve its original mission, which is, as can be seen on the company’s website, “to raise happy and qualified human beings who are conscious of their abilities and responsibilities, whose cognitive and thinking abilities have developed in a free and scientific way, so that they are productive, open to communication, good in problem solving and creative”.

In the following years other companies were created within the group, covering such fields as high-quality pipework and railway R & D. All this diversity strengthened the need to provide a unifying strategy and Yapı Merkezi Holding was founded in 1998 to build a more effective financial and administrative structure in the strategic

framework to strengthen the Group culture. Even so, the company always considers the wider social setting in all of its activities, and as Mr Oncel points out, "This is where we were born... we are happy to invest some of our gains and give back to the community" and since the early days, the company has put great stress on quality, accumulation of knowledge and the development of new technologies. Mr Oncel quotes a saying of one of the company's founders: "The rule of being a good contractor is to think three times, measure twice, and do at once", and the creative approach that the company takes may be illustrated by another quotation from the same source: "When you are tackling a difficult problem, leave your prejudices outside". The successful achievements produced from such innovative thinking have repeatedly resulted in awards from national and international science circles.

Project expertise

As a diverse group, Yapı Merkezi are involved in a wide variety of projects both locally and internationally, although they like to concentrate on specific geographical areas. "Our target places in the world are North Africa and the Middle East, and of course Turkey" Mr Oncel tells us, adding that "we have been awarded one of the largest contracts in Turkey", this being construction of the 212km high-speed railway between the cities of Ankara and Konya. The total period for the project is 18 months, plus a trial run period of 12 months to test the many criteria involved, such as the design speed (some 250 km/hour), construction of track superstructure (sub-ballast and ballast layers, sleepers, rail, turnouts, etc.), electrification systems (transformer stations, overhead line, catenary system, etc., signalling system design, telecommunication systems and personnel training. Outside of Turkey, they are especially active in North Africa, for instance the Halfaia Bridge over the river Nile in Sudan, for which the groundbreaking ceremony took place in October 2007; or the Bir Touta railway line in Algeria, a new 23 km double-track railway line based on a 140 km/h design speed. Once constructed, it will serve as the railway link between the city centre of Algiers and the Zeralda district. Along the alignment, there are five railway viaducts, 12 overpasses, three prefabricated railway bridges, one cut-and-cover tunnel of

340m length, and five stations. Because of the hilly geography, the project will include approximately 10 million m³ of earthworks and 30.000 m² of heavy construction structures like bridges and viaducts. However, this diversity and the attendant capabilities required did not emerge ready-formed; Mr Oncel informs us that the separate divisions of the group emerged naturally, as needs, for instance in the railway field, "In Turkey in general there was a need for railway systems, because we were a little bit behind in terms of a railway system... and now we are one of the world's major systems" as can be seen by their being awarded the contract, together with a Japanese consortium which includes companies such as Mitsubishi, for the huge Dubai Metro, the largest such project in the world. And not just awarded the contract, but, as Mr Oncel announces "we were awarded it at once" and goes on to add, "we are also doing a lot of metro systems in Turkey, especially in Istanbul". Even here, the company's dedication to learning even extends to themselves, as he says: "of course, we are gaining something from each project we go into. We learn something new every day." This attitude is likewise responsible for the emphasis placed on Research and Development; the R&D department is part of the company's core culture, it being funded from within but also employs collaboration with Technical Universities, through which they arrange internships within the company. One field in which expertise is constantly being refined is that of concrete technology. Currently there is ongoing research into concrete strength, self-compacting concrete and even the production of translucent concrete! Of course, in the pursuance of new technology, as Mr Oncel stresses, "a trained and educated workforce is vital. Without our staff, the company is nothing" and not only that: "Without education and the following up of new technologies... we cannot guarantee our future", so it can be seen that the company's interest in education is not just a question of idealism. It actively supports a whole host of social, artistic and of course scientific ventures, an outstanding example of which is the Science Center Foundation, whose purpose is, to quote from their website "enhance knowledge, skills and employability of Turkish citizens from all age groups; with special emphasis on our youth; by contributing to the growth of interest of the society in natural and social sciences, inno-



vative and recent technologies and emerging Turkish industries in order to help for the strengthening of our national economy and to facilitate a healthy social transformation towards a knowledge-based society."

Forward directions

To bear out this emphasis on the value of knowledge, Mr Oncel describes how, "at the beginning of each year all the management teams get together and arrange a plan for the staff, consisting of both internal and external courses" and this expertise is used to facilitate development, for instance in the current trends towards "going green". A current trend for some companies maybe, but not for Yapı! A glance at their huge list of social responsibility projects reveals that as far back as 1991 they were planting forests and helping extensively with seismic phenomena (Turkey is in the middle of an earthquake zone, and suffers accordingly). Environmental concerns, Mr Oncel says "are becoming a very important issue in Turkey as well as in the wider world... our company was, from the start, open to innovations, and we always follow developments in the field." Those firms who have not taken on board environmental concerns have, he says, had to change "because of pressures coming from the public. Also, the government puts restrictions on some projects". Clearly, a company that has already absorbed a green agenda will find far less difficulty adapting to these changing conditions.

So how does Mr Oncel see the future developing? With their environmental credentials firmly established, will YM become involved with the energy sector, for example? In fact, he thinks not: "it is very fashionable, and a lot of companies are going into it, but we are not planning to go into that sector. We will stay in our sector, of construction... we would like to grow inside, and outside, Turkey". He pointed out that the North African area was going to be a fruitful one as far as future investments were concerned, and gave the example of incipient projects in Libya as it emerges into a modern society, adding further that "Saudi Arabia, Dubai... all those areas are in our target".

Given the company's investments in training, education and Turkish society generally, plus their advantageous position at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, there would seem to be a great deal of Turkish Delight in the offing. □

