

El Arteal Under Siege.



El Arteal under siege.

My stay at El Arteal in January 2020 was tinged with sadness. The imposing Central de Transformación building, built in the 1920's by Luis Siret's Société Minière d'Almagrera to house the 535Hp German diesel generator which powered two of the subterranean pumps, was open to the sky. Daylight was streaming in where, once, the roof had been. The roof girders hanging drunkenly, the walls blackened and not a single pane of glass remaining. There had obviously been a fire, but why and how? Who would want to torch this historic, iconic building? The friends with whom I stay with at El Arteal told me the sorry tale. Sometime during the night of December 3rd a fire had broken out in the building and the tons of discarded irrigation tubing, which was stored within it, had burned for the best part of 24 hours.



The fire in the Central de Transformación.

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Neither the local police, who surveyed the scene from the other side of the Rambla de Muleria, nor the owner of the tubing, seemed in the least bit bothered by the event. The weather was wet and the Rambla was crossable only by 4x4, so no attempt was made to douse the fire nor to examine its cause.

There is the possibility that the building was hit by a lightning strike and the tubing, or something else which was stored in there, caught alight. Whatever the cause, the walls contained the fire, the roof girders buckled, the terracotta tiles fell, the remaining windowpanes shattered and tons of unwanted plastic was reduced to a sticky mess. How long will the walls, which had so valiantly resisted the inferno, remain standing now that the roof has gone, and will anyone care?



Then



Now



Open to the sky.



Not a window remaining.

Worse was to come. Between the 6th and 17th of January, truck loads of earth and rubble trundled along the track to el Arteal and returned empty. I thought that perhaps the old water deposit up by the bath houses, or the one by the transformer building, was being filled and prepared for agricultural use. I was horrified when I saw what in fact was being filled.

The 1908 coke storage bays, which themselves had been repurposed as ore sedimentation tanks, probably by MASA, were now almost completely full and the site levelled. The pump house where the slurry was pumped into the tanks is still, for now, just about standing. It is in the centre left of the before photograph.



The tanks before their destruction.



What tanks?

I can understand that the area could be put to agricultural use, as the tanks would retain water, thus minimizing irrigation, but what I saw next was totally incomprehensible. The only remaining wall of the massive, 30 metre long, double galleried boiler house, built in 1908 to house eight condensing boilers had been demolished. Now all that remains of the magnificent power plant, built to power the pumps situated 220 metres underground, is the water tower and the base of the 45 metre chimney.



The boiler-house wall before demolition.



What wall?

For what end had this wall been demolished? Now there is nothing to indicate the presence of a once magnificent piece of turn of the century industrial architecture. Will the water tower be next?



The extent of the boiler-house wall.



The rubble is buried.

I am also becoming increasingly concerned about the future of the married miners' quarters. They have been quietly decaying since they were 'comprehensively decommissioned' when MASA pulled out in the 1950's. Every year, more of the roofs cave in, and the courtyards become more and more overgrown. However, now they are under siege from another quarter, from below. This time it is water, and not just the rain that falls on them but unnecessary flooding of their shallow foundations which will soon take its toll. The occasional flooding when the Rambla de Muleria overflows its banks is one thing, but flooding every time there is a day of rain is quite a different, and more frequent, matter.

For whatever reason, in 2018, one, but only one, of the old acequias, or irrigation ditches, was re-excavated.

Because the rest of the network of ditches were left overgrown, silted up and incomplete, the result was, that every time it rained, water flooded into the field on the northern side of the main track into el Arteal. Now, a drain has been run under the track, and the water flows at an alarming rate into the field at the side of the miners' quarters, creating an almost perfect wetland habitat for the ducks and drakes.



In this diagram of the acequias the red line denotes the ditch that was re-excavated. The new drain was built under the causeway, presumably to relieve excessive flooding in the northern fields at the end of the new ditch.



Flooding in the northern field



and in front of the miners' quarters.

Whether this has been done to enrich the soil as the water brings important nutrients, or not I don't know. What I do know is that clay soil, alternating very dry and very wet conditions, and shallow foundations, equals subsidence and further disintegration. There is a small measure of embankment in front of the miners' quarters, but this is inadequate and barely contains the surface water. The rapid increase in the amount of cane growing in the courtyards since the opening of the acequia tells its own story.