

“Well, I feel that we should always put a little art into what we do. It's better that way.” So wrote Jules Verne in *From Earth to the Moon*. The utilitarian Art Déco jewel of Budapest's Kelenföld Power Station is a testament to this idea. Once the primary source of electricity for the city, its interior is straight out of a futuristic novel and was once unparalleled both in its output and scale. Now frozen and sealed like a pharaoh's tomb on the banks of the Danube, it retains the breathtaking *genius loci* that made it one of the great wonders of the age when unveiled in 1914.

Designed by an ambitious pair of architects, Kálmán Reichl and Virgil Borbíró, the station was a beacon of ingenuity as the storm clouds of war galloped across Europe. The sweeping scale of the architecture and grand visual tropes are both eerily magnetic and deeply desolate. Although it closed in 2007, the power station cannot be destroyed or resurrected under Hungarian law. So it remains the ghost ship of Budapest, silent except for the faint sound of wind blowing through the branches outside. Reached by crossing the river Buda, the leviathan rises above an industrial suburb, dubbed *Krenfeld* in the 18th century, meaning “Horseradish Meadows” in German, and renamed *Kelenföld* in 1847 in honor of Kelen, an early 9th-century Hungarian chieftain.

It is not surprising to learn that one of the creators, Reichl, was a noted folk artist as well as an architect. Kelenföld is a masterpiece of visual conjuring: the banks of dust-wisped buttons, gauges and dials arranged like a poetic symphony, where electricity rather than chamber music was produced. Only an artist could have designed such a seamless *mise en scène* arching the eye up towards the ornate stained glass dome, added in 1927 and aptly reminiscent of a golden-era cruise liner. This is industrial art in its most elevated form, a pine-green *wunderkammer* slowly sinking into the mist of degradation.

Reichl's partner architect Virgil Borbíró was an enigmatic figure. Physically striking, with a Dali-esque

appearance, he came from a noted Budapest family of architects. His maternal grandfather was the head of engineering for the iconic Szabadság and Erzsébet bridges in the city, and his father, István Bierbauer, was the chief director of engineering at the Royal Hungarian Post. It was a lineage deeply colored by a sense of Hungarian nationalism and pride that ran through the generations. As the Soviets descended in 1956, Borbíró's nephew, the Minister of State István Bibó, courageously stayed behind rather than be evacuated. Before being arrested, he penned the now famous proclamation, For Freedom and Truth, and for one brief moment was a one-man representative of the entire Hungarian government. He had also been arrested for harboring Jews at the start of World War II—the story of a nation woven into one family.

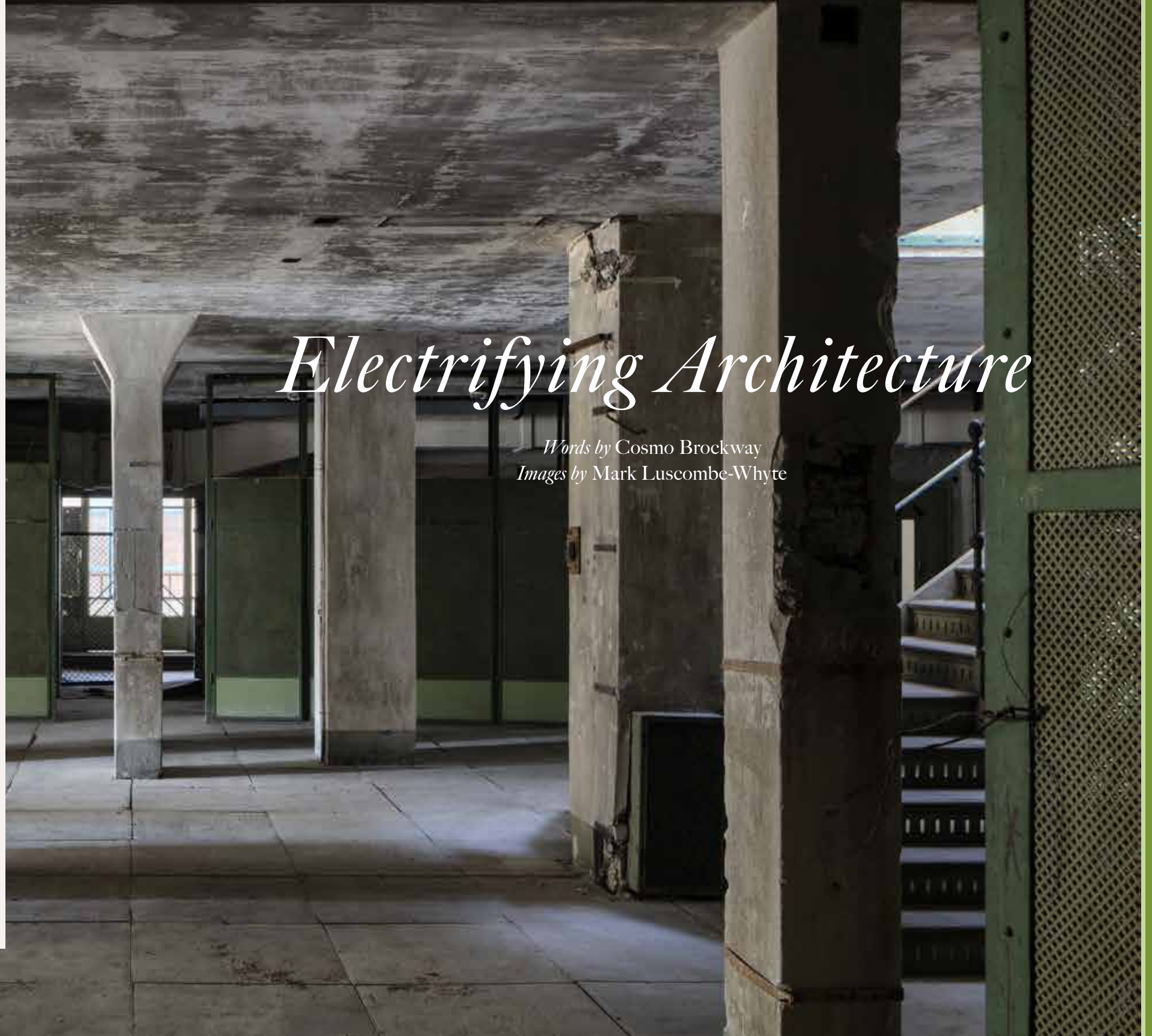
Borbíró's wife, Adrienn Graul, also no doubt influenced the power station's aesthetic plans. A graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts, the talented painter spent time at the experimental artist's commune of Nagybánya, known for its forays into Cubism and love of plein-air style work.

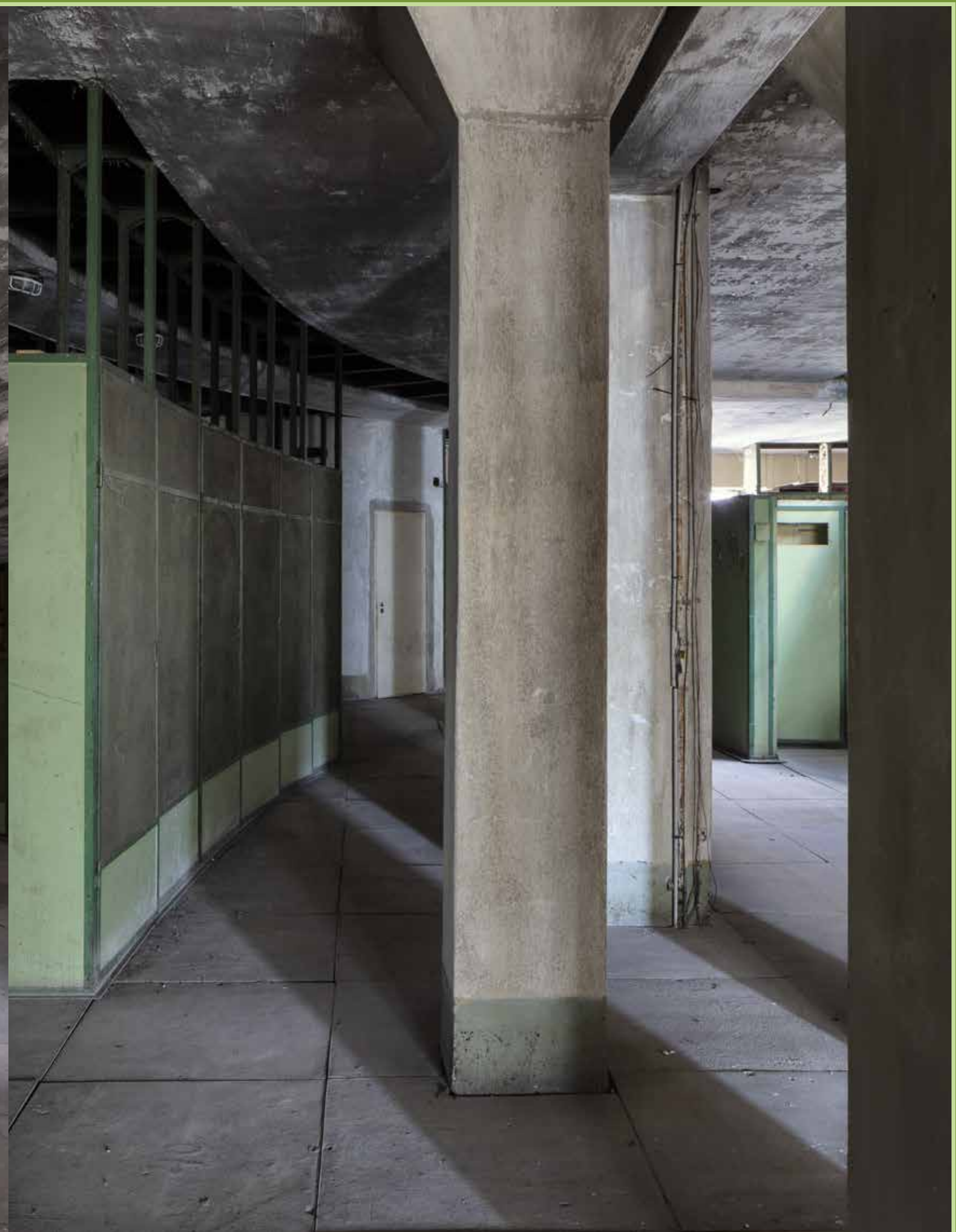
Underneath the great dome of the control room, reached by a tantalizing set of cast iron stairs, another anomaly stands in the form of an airless coop-like bunker, in the style of a sentry hut, built to shield workers against Soviet bombers during the World War II. Thankfully, desecration from the skies never came.

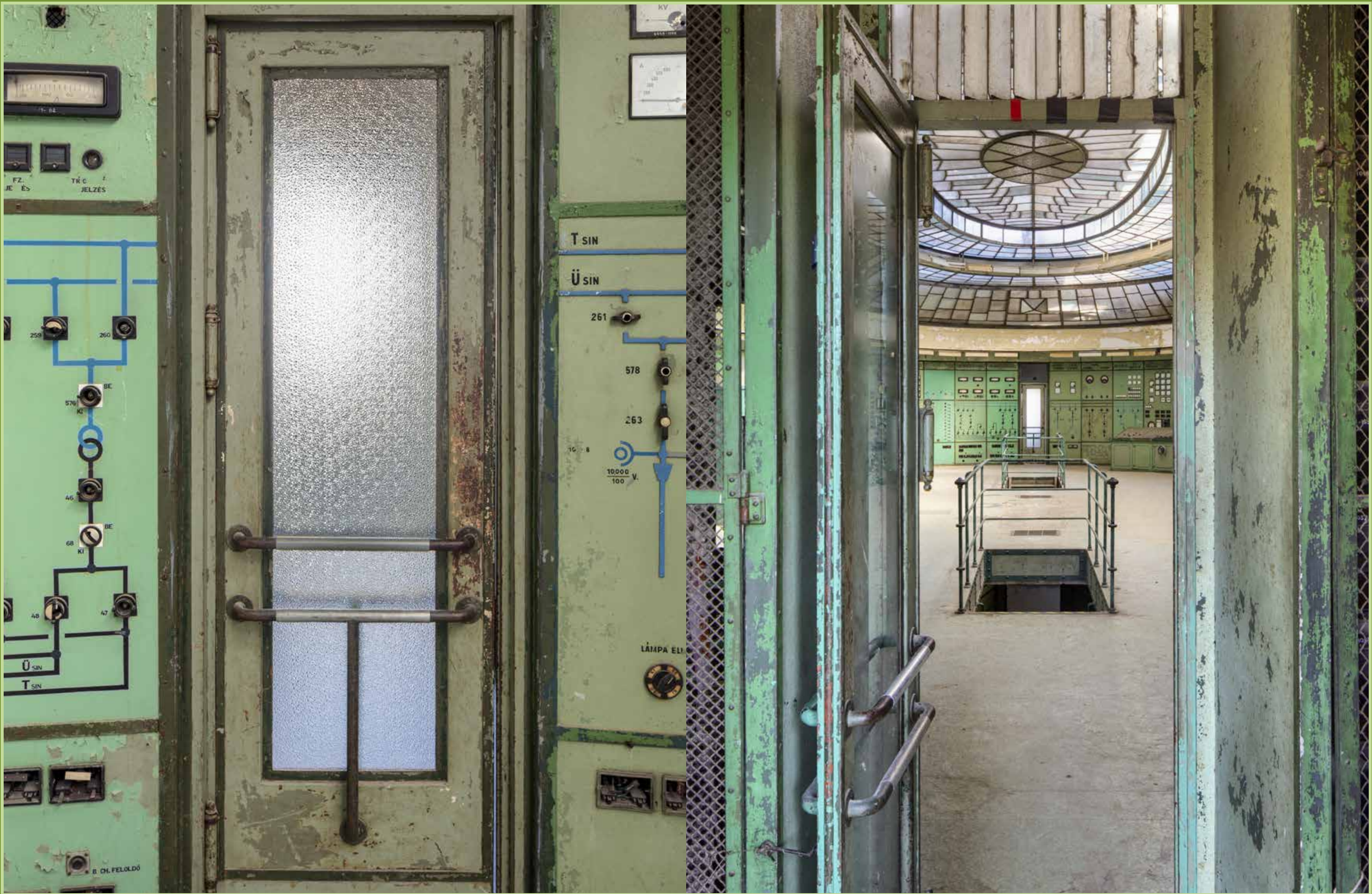
Standing in the chiaroscuro of shadows, watching the light flit across the vast space, it is fascinating to think that in its early days, the station was, in fact, the first boiler house, the first electricity supplier for the region and Europe's earliest electricity exchange. Now destined to be overtaken slowly by nature, the space becomes increasingly lyrical and cinematic, and it is still given glimmers of life by filmmakers who shoot among the Wes Anderson-like chambers. If ever there was poetry written into architecture, in a Soanian echo, it is here, in the most unlikely of industrial stanzas.

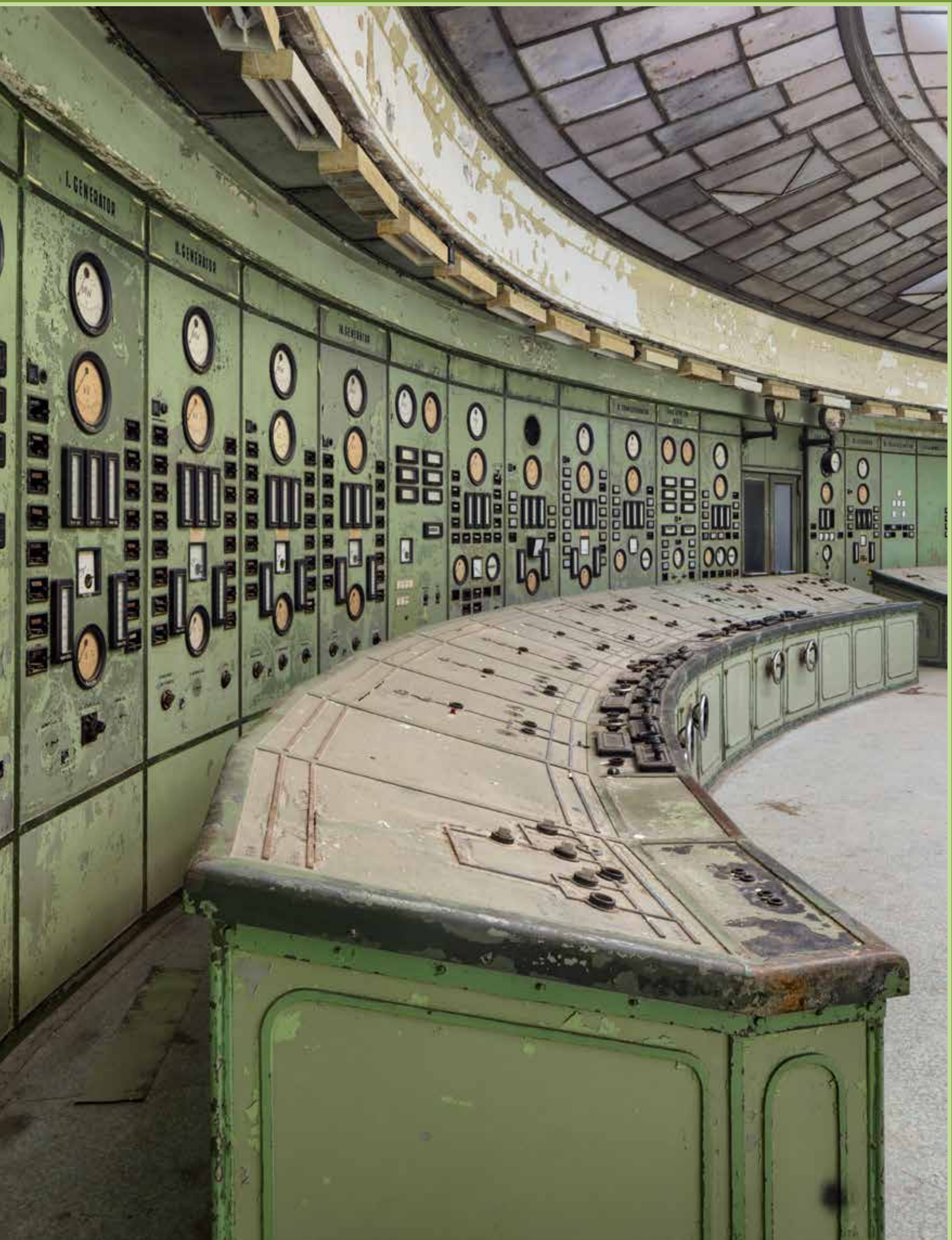
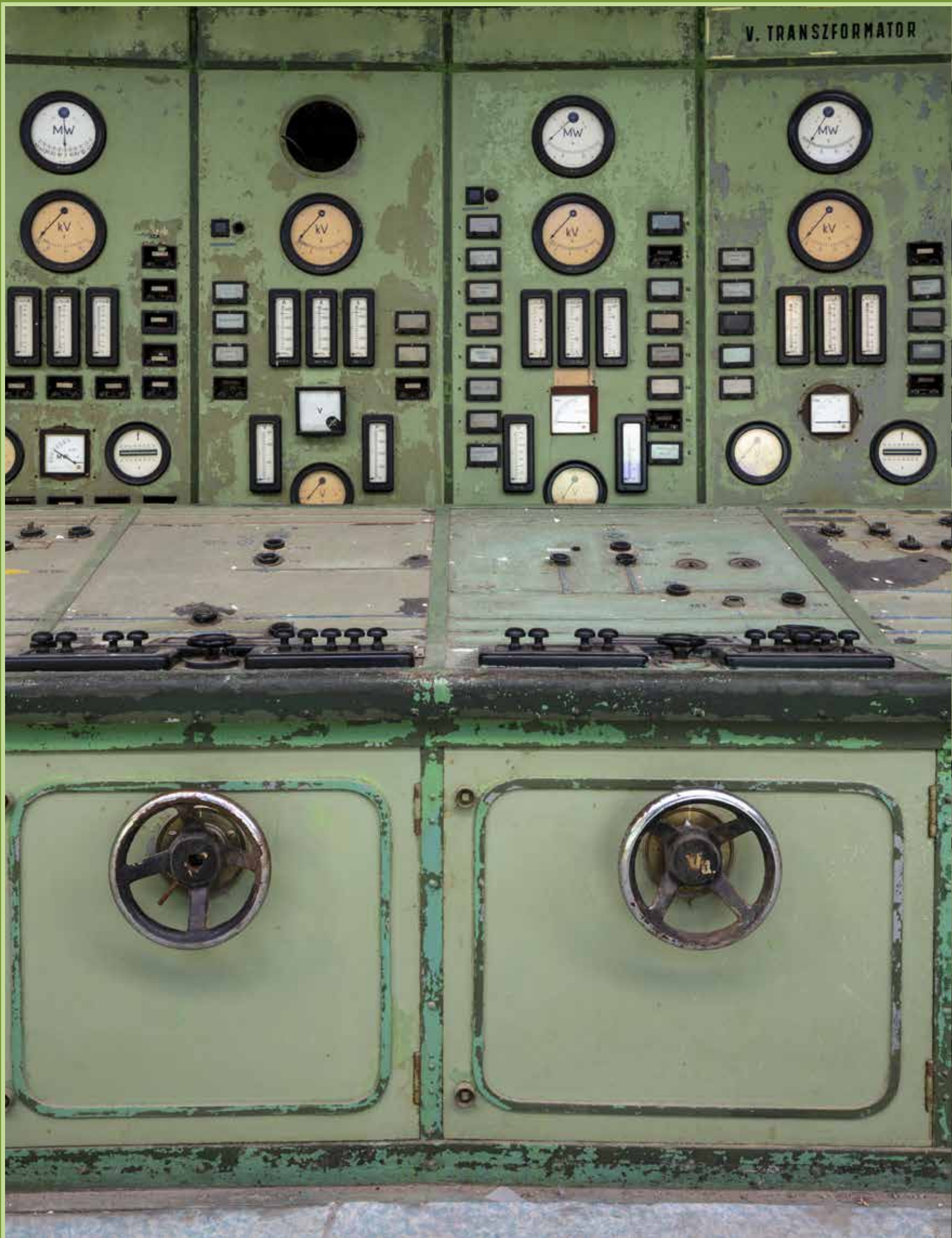
## Electrifying Architecture

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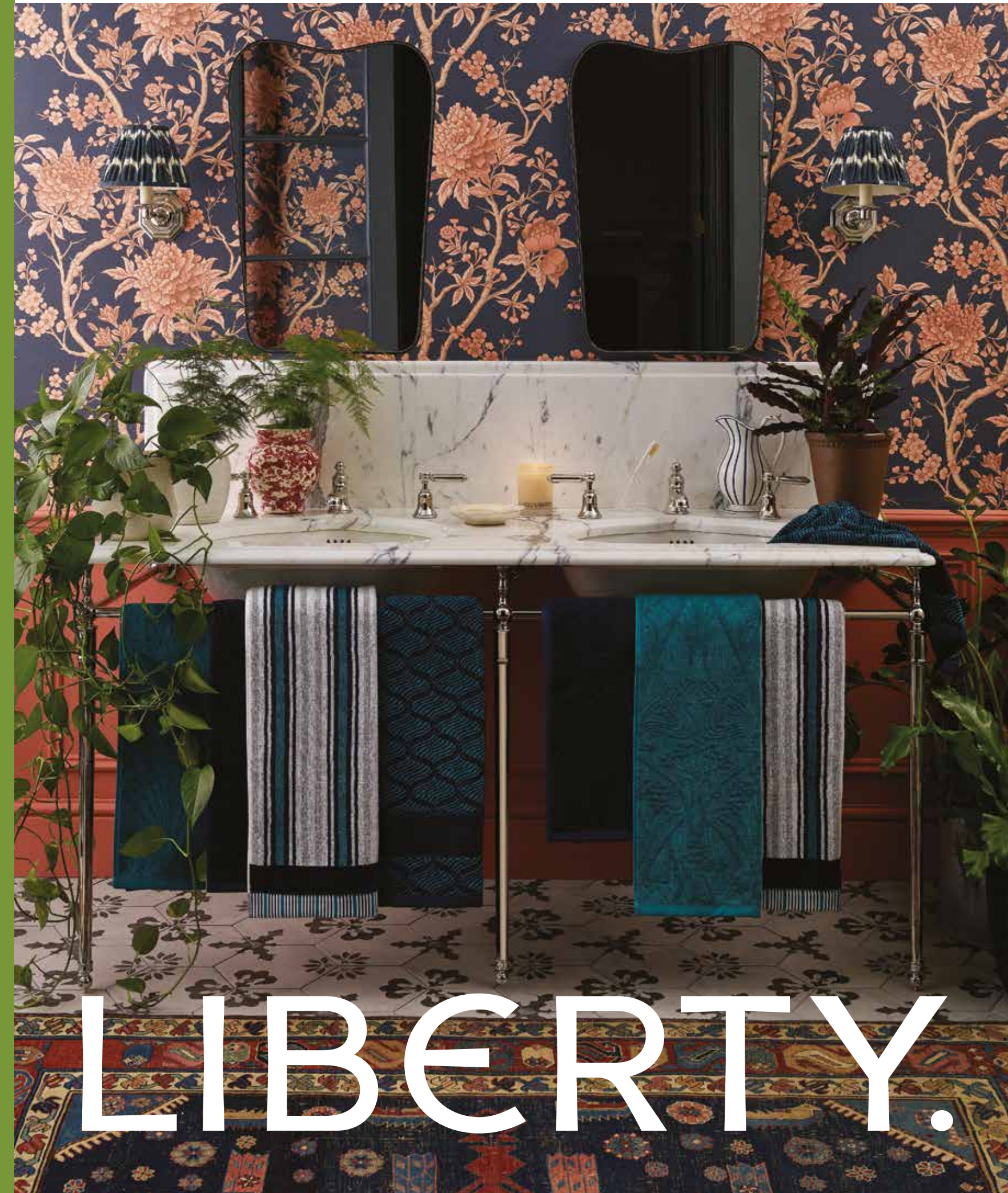




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