

HISTORY

SAWEEKEND JANUARY 20-21, 2018

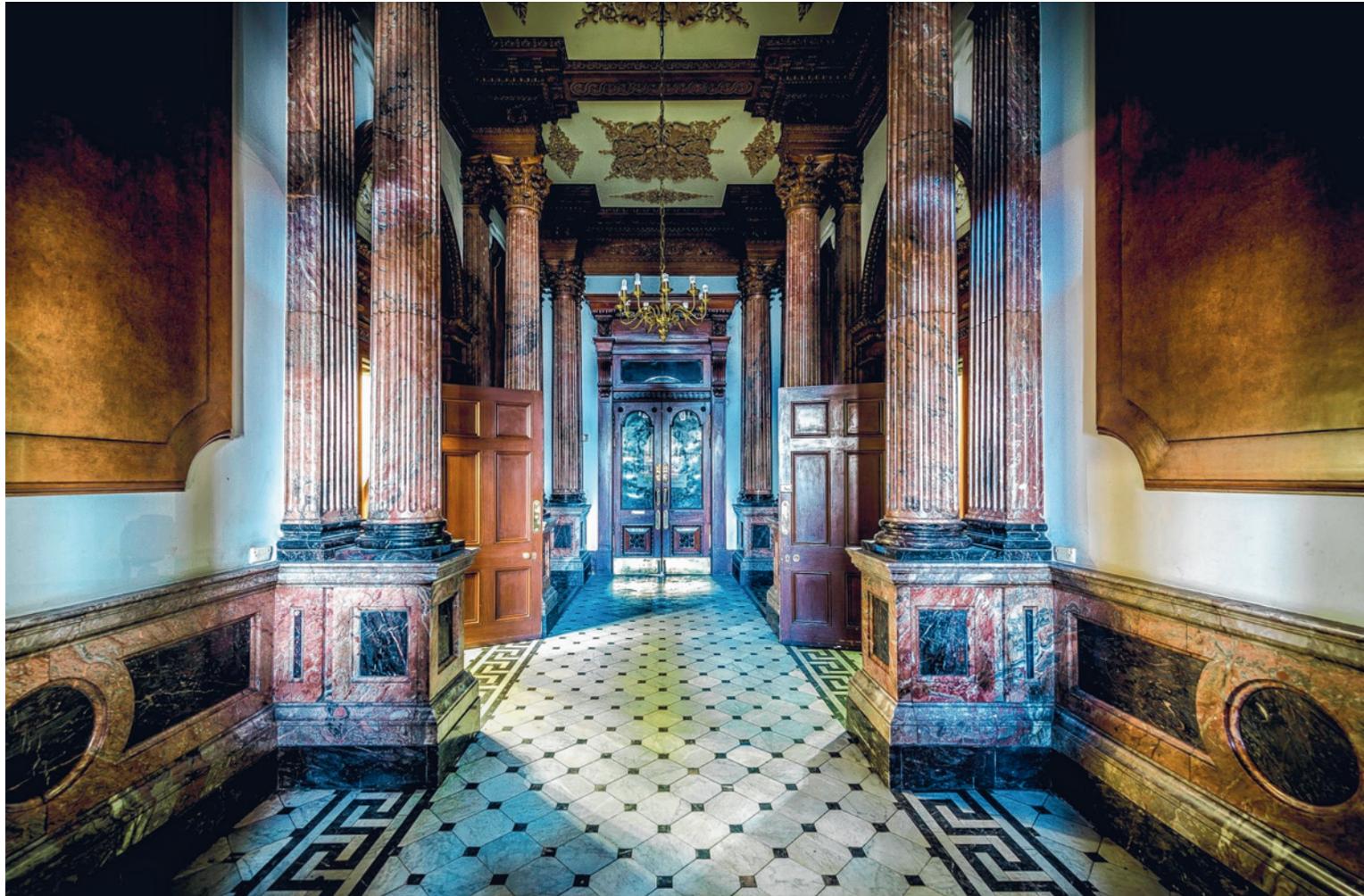
“The owner put it on the market ... he didn't have the energy to keep it going. Then somebody broke in one night, stole or smashed up the displays, all kids' stuff, and in the end the owner pulled it all apart, sold it all off, and that was the end of it. Sad.”

There'd be very few locals who haven't visited at least one of McCarten's subjects. Edmund Wright House, Maughan Church, Port Augusta Power Station, Gallerie Arcade (“I've got clear memories of this place and now it's a gutted shell”), Derek Jolly's Futuro House, the Hindley St Greater Union 5 Cinema and, more recently, the ruined sheds and machinery of “Timber Town” (McCarten gives little away) in the state's South-East.

“I know if I drive down to Mount Gambier people aren't going to follow me. And again it's documenting the death of industry. Timber mills. Like the people just walked off,” he says. Photos showing generators and saws, but also a gauge, a phone receiver, yellowing invoices and a topless calendar from 1999 (“I like to look for the little details ... they suggest more of a human element.”)

But why not landscapes and sunsets? It gets back to childhood, when McCarten's parents would throw the kids in the car.

“I've got a very distinct memory of being about four years old and my parents went somewhere in the Flinders Ranges and there was an old hotel, and the floor didn't exist and you could see straight down to the cellar,” he says. “I've still got that image in my head 40 years later.”



Edmund Wright House, King William St, Adelaide; Greater Union Cinemas in Hindley St, Adelaide; Storybook Cottage & the Whacky Wood, Tanunda (Pictures: Scott McCarten)



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This sense of discovery, of learning for the first time what the world's like. “Growing up in the hills I used to go into these abandoned houses,” McCarten says. “Later, I lost it for a while, but it's the curiosity of wanting to know what's behind the door.”

Once, he explains, “my Mum and Dad took me down an old mine shaft in Echunga ... that fuelled it a bit”.

Now, the reasons are more complex. For example, do we value our cultural heritage sufficiently? “Everyone talks about the ferris wheel on top of the Cox Foy building, but there are no photos of it. Of all the people who went there no one took a photo.”

Are we too obsessed with material progress, with the new, the shiny? Maybe you either feel the history, or don't. “Every time I went out I was seeing things other people weren't,” he says.

McCarten has slowly and patiently worked at developing his own aesthetic. It's not for everyone. At last year's SALA exhibition he only managed to sell one print, perhaps because “no one wants to put a picture of something as depressing as a derelict building on the wall”. “But there's beauty in it. It's the stuff you just pass by,” he says.

So what's next for him? He won't say, although he does suggest “there are people who'd like to get into the old RAH, there are parts, but perhaps after a time ...”

Like cheese, ruins need time to age, flavour, develop a bouquet. The abandoned Croydon TAFE, for instance, didn't have “enough that connected to the memory of



people who had been there. It was sterile”. Whereas Panorama TAFE had “a beauty in its anarchy”.

It's nearly lunch time, and I've had enough of pigeon poo and the smell of lanolin, but McCarten is settling in for a big day. I think I've worked out the attraction of urban exploration, although, in a way, this is a real autopsy of our shared history. As McCarten suggests, “maybe there's beauty in all of this ... maybe it speaks to our own mortality”. ●

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