

# THE FORGOTTEN BALLROOM

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Photographs by GÉRAUD BOURSIN and YENNY

Text by INGA WALTON

The red brick and amber stucco heritage landmark that is Flinders Street Station (1910), one of Melbourne's most recognisable buildings, stretches across two city blocks and overflows with the bustle and passage of commuters. In 1899 two railway employees, James W. Fawcett (1863-1934), an architect on staff at the Railways Department, and H. P. C Ashworth (1871-1903), a departmental engineer, won the internationally advertised competition for a new building on the site with their entry entitled 'Green Light'. They described the eclectic design as 'French Renaissance style treated in a free manner', and its five storeys were envisioned on a grand scale.<sup>1</sup> The soaring Edwardian Baroque-meets-Queen Anne exterior featured stained-glass windows, and included Art Nouveau internal stylings, of which Fawcett was a leading exponent.<sup>2</sup> The range of facilities Fawcett and Ashworth incorporated for their fellow employees and the public meant the station once housed a gymnasium, billiards and table tennis rooms, concert hall, reference library, social club rooms, dining hall, kitchens, a crèche, and

<sup>1</sup> Robyn Riddett, Amanda Matthews & Matthew Young (Eds), 'Flinders Street Station: Conservation Analysis and Master Plan', Allom Lovell & Associates (Conservation Architects) for Hillside Trains, January, 1999, p. 20-21. More recently see, Peter Fischer & Susan Marsden, *Vintage Melbourne: Beautiful Buildings From Melbourne City Centre*, East Street Publications, Bowden, 2007, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Riddett, Matthews & Young (Eds), op cit, p. 23-24. Several of Fawcett's decorative works are in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria.

even an open-air playground on the roof. Thus the station became a hub for city social and cultural life, synonymous with Melbourne's identity in a way which transcended its primary transport function.

The station still has its vocal advocates who are passionate about seeing the integrity of the building faithfully restored to its former state. These enthusiasts reserve particular, almost wistful, reverence for a room on the third floor, secluded from the din. Shuttered in the twilight of disuse and faded memories, is the VRI<sup>3</sup> Ballroom, an almost mythical space, folkloric in the imagination of those old enough to have been there, and those who have only ever heard about it. Originally a lecture theatre, it was transformed into a ballroom in 1933, the 'urban myth' which was always real. Apart from a small number of private events, it has been closed to the public since the first of numerous re-development plans were mooted in 1972.

In the meantime, the plasterwork and moulded cornices continue to crumble, layers of grime build on the arched windows, the parquet dance floor has lifted around the edges, rain spatters the walls from the leaking roof, and bricks protrude where the walls have completely degraded. The ornate pressed-metal ceilings were described in a major report as, 'the largest and most extensive example ... in a public building in Victoria and possibly Australia, and a rare example of the use of this technique in large scale external wall cladding and decoration'. Nearly ten years have passed since then, making the report's assertions seem somewhat ominous now, 'The significance of this work is greatly enhanced by the fact that it is substantially intact'.<sup>4</sup>

Decades of intransigence and neglect have meant a prime venue, which could fulfil any number of civic and tourist agendas, has languished in the too-hard-basket for the governmental agencies which control its fate. One of the many articles lamenting the steady demise of the ballroom commented,

<sup>3</sup> Victorian Railways Institute.

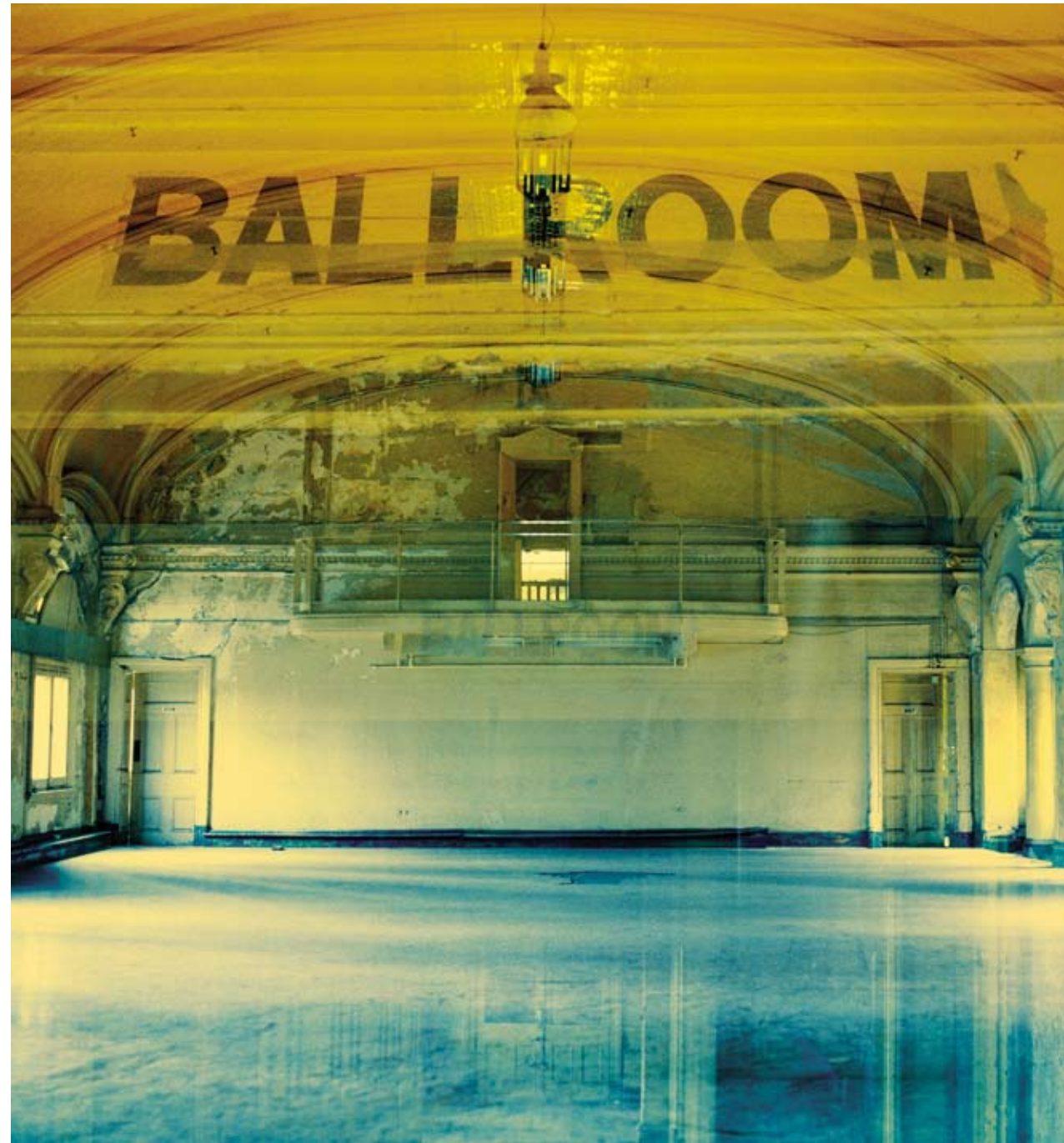
<sup>4</sup> Riddett, Matthews & Young (Eds), op cit, p. iii.

‘... it’s such a waste that a space with so much potential has been out of reach to ordinary Melburnians for so long.’<sup>5</sup> As is often the case, it took ‘outsiders’ to apprehend its worth, and mount the most recent action on its behalf. Géraud Boursin, the deputy managing director of Veolia Transport Australia (which owns Connex), has an office in the building. ‘I heard about the ballroom and went one day to look at it, I was fascinated. It looks so beautiful, all the decay,’ he remarks. ‘But that it is closed for so long in the middle of the city—that is so interesting.’ Boursin’s view is tinged with a note of disbelief, ‘It is the kind of neglect you expect to find in some places in Europe, but not here. In Melbourne, old buildings are expected to be heritage listed and restored.’

YennY (Yenny Huber), one of Boursin’s lecturers at South Melbourne’s International College of Professional Photography (ICPP), had heard stories about this romantic site, but thought it would be impossible to gain access. ‘I’m originally from Vienna, which is known for its magnificent ballrooms, so I was immediately struck by how stunning this building and the rooms were,’ she enthuses. Two European photographic artists, Boursin and YennY, one French, the other Austrian, immediately saw the narrative potential of this once proud and vibrant place at the city’s heart, now in such a dilapidated and forlorn state. They decided to join forces on a project, creating two distinct, but complementary interpretations of ‘The Ballroom’. This poetic and haunting tribute to the station’s halcyon days was presented with the hope of spurring action to avert further damage.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Barrett, ‘Above The Clocks’, in *The Age (melbourne) magazine*, Issue 37, November, 2007, p. 28-34.



YennY, *Untitled*, Type C print, Edition of 6, 90 x 89 cm.



Géraud Boursin, *Untitled* (detail), Gelatin Silver Print print, Edition of 6, 35 x 30 cm.



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