

If These Walls Could Talk

"That thing? That thing should be pulled down, it is absolutely disgusting," the owner of the old Wellington motel spits when asked about the nearby abandoned mechanic's shop which sits derelict on the outskirts of town. "It's an embarrassment to our town and the sooner they get rid of it the better!" Once full of life, the mechanic's workshop now stands frozen in time, a snapshot of the past, often disdained, overlooked, and ignored. It is a place that the townsfolk drive past each day, but it stays forgotten, lost to the new pristine, sterile petrol station down the road.

But abandoned buildings do not have to be an unsightly, egregious shame. Rather, they spark curiosity, inviting us to uncover the memories hidden within the walls, beneath the peeling paint, and in each grain of the creaky wooden floors. Some people even seek these buildings out, like photographer Greg Davis, who can not understand the motel owner's disdain. "I saw this building I liked, and he only saw it as an embarrassment", Greg explains. "I really love the buildings that other people don't photograph when they come to visit town[s]."

Greg preserves the legacy of an old building in photographs. He explains, "It urged me to go exploring, to document old places and buildings before they're gone forever." Often these buildings are left to be reclaimed by nature, as ivy creeps up their sides and unkept grass hides any human life. "Someone has to record them", Greg says.

Not only does he capture their memory in a photograph, but Greg also researches the building's history, scouring through old records and asking townspeople for their memories. Although it is often a time-consuming task, he does it with a dedication to showing people what an old run-down site once was. "I might spend three months researching each building's history- when it was built, who opened it...", he explains. "I delve into what times were like back then. You find out different details about the people and what happened." Every building has a story, just as every person has a story.

Greg has a particular fascination with old towns as a whole, looking at old corner shops and churches. One of his recent explorations was surrounding the suburbs of Stuart Town in New South Wales. Still a lively place with the typical cosy small-town feeling, a few abandoned buildings hide by the local pub and behind the lush parks. In the 1850s Stuart Town, formerly known as Ironbarks, flooded with new faces as the Gold Rush spread across the state. Many recognise the name from the Australian poet Banjo Paterson's "The Man from Ironbark", as it put the town on the map. By the 1870s the local bakery was established and had a booming business. Locals lined the door, the air filled with the godly aromatics of a golden crust loaf, fresh from the oven and a sweet fragrance of toasty blueberry muffins, only akin to those of your grandmother. The service was anything but transactional and rather a morning yarn with a neighbour. The chime of the small golden bell rang out as school kids came rushing in of the afternoon, trading sweaty coins from their pockets for a cream bun they would somehow always smudge on the tips of their noses. But these days there are no cream buns in sight. The bakery's now rusted tin roof matches the auburn of its stone walls. And a crooked barbed fence bends around the small hut. It was forced to close after the recession left the baker, Walter Pulbrook with little money, and the costs of flour became exorbitant. The crimson block letters of 'Stuart Town Bakery' now fade to burnt amber in the sun.

Buildings that were once full of business now remain empty or are knocked down and replaced with uninspired blocks. As many do with most things we should cherish, we discard these buildings for

something more appealing. “But the thing is, the townspeople aren’t that impressed with them a lot of the time,” Greg says matter-of-factly, “Particularly some of those ones in Wellington,” he mentions, “They’re just like daggy old shops. But for me, they’re very photogenic and interesting... But the locals don’t like them.” Somehow through his photographs, it is obvious how much admiration Greg has for these old buildings. The composition makes them appear not so much as to say grand, but important. They are inviting and intimate, whilst also having an alluring eerie serenity.

“I do feel the quiet, and the eeriness”, Greg says. In our modern world, our lives are so fast-paced and perpetually moving forward. We are constantly under pressure to remain diligent and we often scramble to not fall behind. However, these buildings already have. They have been left to decay slowly with time as we move onwards and progress further away from them. In the hustle, old and abandoned buildings offer an escape, a sanctuary of solitude and peace. There is a stillness they have that can provide a disconnection to reminisce on what life was once like. This offers an opportunity for imagination and a nostalgic sense of wonder. These abandoned places, once bustling with life, now stand frozen, offering a glimpse into the past and igniting curiosity about what led to their demise.

But this tranquillity can be unnerving for some, as the buildings stand solemn and untouched. For many, abandoned buildings evoke uneasy feelings, stories straight from a Stephen King novel. They conjure up a scary tale from childhood, of an old, creepy house on the corner of the street. Though, this trepidation also offers an element of mystery- going on an adventure like the protagonist of a Goosebumps quest, in search of something unknown that only you can discover. There is an innate human desire for curiosity and self-discovery, and abandoned buildings offer a complex interplay of fascination, fear, and the allure of the unknown.

Perhaps these are some of the reasons more and more people have developed an interest in old and abandoned buildings. They call themselves “urbex”, a play on urban explorers. Over the past few years, the community has grown exponentially, likely due to the influence of social media. Some creators photograph their explorations on Facebook, such as Greg, or film their adventures inside buildings like the user @urbexsydney on TikTok, or Phil Bates known by the pseudonym @abandonedoz on Instagram. Everyone has their distinct methods and media in which they show audiences their discoveries. Greg, as a photographer, uses his camera to communicate the hidden beauty of town buildings, through composition and colour. His photography is welcoming and mellow. However, explorers such as @urbexsydney lean into the eeriness of a building, looking for large structures that remain untouched, such as the 19th-century schoolhouse she explored, that still had a mathematical equation from one hundred years ago scribbled on the chalkboard. She overlays her videos on TikTok with haunting music and films them similar to that of a thriller film. Phil is similar to Greg in that he enjoys buildings that hold a lot of history within their walls. However, Phil is most fascinated with grandeur in dilapidated mansions and affluent theatres with eccentric staircases that twirl from hardwood floors. He enjoys the comparison of luxury and ruin, saying in a short film he made, “The natural decay of a place is one of the things I appreciate so much.” His style of photography is much more of an artistic approach, with close-ups of an old teddy bear and a single chair, alone in a dark room.

The growing community is not just those who physically document the old and abandoned, but also those who observe from their homes. Greg himself has over twenty thousand people who enjoy his photography on his Facebook page, as well as the group he runs, “Old & Abandoned Australia”, which has over two hundred thousand members. Not only does Greg have the opportunity to showcase places that would otherwise be forgotten and overlooked, but he also introduces the space

for people to reminisce. His images and historical research illicit lost and scattered memories to resurface, unlocking a door in people's minds that was so close to fading away.

Comments tell anecdotes of the town's like; "These are such beautiful photos you've taken of the town, thank you for sharing them. My family has owned the house and studio (old Crick & Co general store) next to the Railway Hotel since 1980. It's such a special place.", and "My grandfather as a young man would ride his horse from the farm at Dripstone to Stuart Town to have a drink at the pub. As a practical joke one time he rode his horse through the pub door up to the bar to get a drink."

Greg chuckles, "One of the things I always try to photograph is the local school because the school really gets people talking, 'I was there in 1958!' The churches are also good because 'oh, my mum was married there'."

We live in a fast-moving, progressive time where moments are fleeting and the old is replaced with the contemporary, rickety with polished. But perhaps we may blow away the dust, peek through the cracked glass, and spend one of those fleeting moments to stop and experience what is here now before it is gone forever. As Greg says we, "don't notice the beauty of the buildings because [we] drive past them every day." But they used to be somebody's home, their livelihood, their local store. Now left to be forgotten as we forget to reflect on our history. These buildings will always be a signpost of how far we have progressed and perhaps in the coming years, your house, or your local pub, or the cafe you and your family frequent, will be nothing but broken brick and peeling paint.

Let us try to take a moment to embrace the beauty of the rich history these buildings inscribe, as Greg does. Shall we try to appreciate their imperfections and uncover their stories? Just like people, if we ignore buildings that we perceive as ugly or unsettling, we do not give ourselves a chance to unveil their true beauty. We may discover things, we otherwise would have never known. If we let the building's walls talk to us, what stories do you think they would tell?