

## ***Track and Trace*** **Ansonia Woolstore Exhibition**

Renovated industrial buildings like the Brisbane woolstores manifest a unique type of environment owing to their history and the conscious decision to preserve and embed this history in designs for contemporary living spaces. The transformation, occupancy, and use of place and specific spaces for homemaking represents a large part of the story of humanity through the ages, and indeed the story of all animals. What is a home? Ideally, a personal residence, a dwelling place, a place to feel safe and secure, in which to seek refuge and to flourish. What is involved in making a woolstore (or any other structure) into a series of homes? It is first and foremost an invitation to create a sense of belonging within a set of given or purposefully crafted elements. These may be taken as they are or reimagined and reconfigured, as in the case of the Ansonia. Here we see around us the original flooring, beams, high ceilings, girders, skylights, artifacts, and brickwork. We also discover, within the building itself and at numerous Teneriffe locations, historical plaques and photographs that help keep the past alive in our midst. Though it is not clear what the precise connection is meant to be, the very act of calling this 1926 woolstore Ansonia—after a classic New York Beaux-Arts style residential hotel (built in 1899-1904)—also establishes continuity with the past.

But these continuities are framed by even more important transitions. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dredging of the Brisbane River made it possible for large vessels to travel upstream, which resulted in a shift from a residential to an industrial profile for the area. As Vicki Bridgstock records in her book *Tides of Teneriffe* (2009, p. 17), “Brisbane became one of the earliest ports in the world to develop wharves designed to handle a specific product. The first of these wharves was at the sugar refinery at New Farm. The wool companies followed suit, creating their own wharves for handling and transporting wool.” During World War I troop ships and hospital ships docked here. After the war the canning industry developed and a range of items were processed in Teneriffe, including pineapples and other Queensland fruit. World War II saw Teneriffe evolve into a serious naval port, with submarines and submarine tender ships populating the shore, as we are reminded by the displays and memorials along the riverwalk. With the end of the city trams in the 1960s and the winding down of the Teneriffe wool industry in the 70s, the area was losing population, falling into a developmental limbo until the 90s, when the city recognized the heritage value of the buildings we love and acted to implement some inspired urban revitalization plans.

This is only the briefest sketch of the changes experienced by Teneriffe; it omits, for example, the first inhabitants (the Turrbal people), the era of stately mansions, the effects of periodic floods, and the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The point, however, is that like all urban areas of note, ours has many stories to tell, many identities and guises it has worn, many moments of gain and loss it has undergone. In short, it is a process rather than a static thing. We can also notice that the transformations described above have themselves become part of Teneriffe’s heritage. All of this provides the key to appreciating the ways in which preserved traces of the past can help to energize and illuminate the present.

This month, we enjoy and celebrate in the Ansonia a collection of works by a remarkably diverse and distinguished group of contemporary artists from Brisbane, Sydney, and the Blue Mountains region of New South Wales. Whether exhibiting, performing, or both, artists are dealing with the contrasts and shadings of stability, mobility, and transition. Their practice is dynamic, transforming place and space and

creating new meanings in often old and familiar settings. Therefore, the woolstore is a natural “found” gallery in which to mount an exhibition tying together the threads of past, present, and future.

In the Ansonia show, we find mixed-media artist Caroline Austin inviting her audience into the garbage collection area of the carpark to experience new perspectives on place, non-place and mobility of materials, her subjects of special interest. The carpark is also the chosen venue for Victoria Lawson’s artistic creations exploring mobility. Franz Ehmann continues his ongoing investigation of themes such as the uses of language, communication, and luxury and ephemerality as he engages with his specific display environment in the building. Through photography and sound, Vincent Wozniak-O’Connor develops his project of detailing how we construct “natural” spaces. Finally, Ebony Secombe’s installation aims to enhance our understanding of the presence of residents within urban contexts.

These aesthetic experiments offer us a series of opportunities to reflect on the use and occupancy of space, how places speak to us and we respond to them, and the meanings of our residential environment. With luck, this exhibition will become an annual event. To all those generously participating in and organizing this year’s show, thank you so much.

**By Michael Allen Fox, resident of the Ansonia since 2016 and author of *Home: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *The Remarkable Existentialists* (Humanity/Prometheus, 2009), and other works.**