

RE: What Can Design
Residencies Do?

Jana Scholze

Editors' Introduction

As part of our research into design and architecture residency and fellowship programmes, we organized two forums which invited practitioners, curators, educators, and residency organisers around the question, 'What do Design Residencies Do?' As a participant in both forums and a design educator specialising in curatorial practices, we asked Jana to reflect further on design residencies, how they function as a framework for practice, and their possible impact on contemporary design practice, education, and residency providers.

(I warn you), I am biased. I am writing from the position of a design curator and educator who participated closely with my students in various design residency projects, judged on interview panels for residencies, and serves on two boards of institutions with design residency programmes. This position offers me not only insight and allows critical reflection, but fuels a genuine enthusiasm for what design residencies can offer. But then again, I am speaking from a place of not knowing, as I have neither hosted nor experienced a design residency myself.

Design residencies are semi-structured programmes that provide designers with time, resources, and a conducive environment for creative exploration, experimentation, and development of ideas or projects. As spaces for learning and unlearning, research and discovery, collaborating and listening, rethinking and experimenting, reflecting and making, they are always places of careful or radical transformation of practice. They are places of possibility, of thinking and acting otherwise, of imagination and world-building. They should be spaces characterised by safety, generosity,

community, equity, openness, and collaboration, embracing criticality and risk-taking in attempts for no less than the transformation of our world.

*Spaces of detachment
and possibility*

Residencies create distance and detachment. They intend to provide a space outside and remote from home and studio, allowing a resident to take themselves out of routines, to offer pause and possibly a move away from familiar practices. The physical separation creates a space that ideally opens to opportunities of learning, testing, and rejecting without the immediate pressure of delivery. It supports deliberating ideas possibly too risky and radical to engage in generally, considering techniques that need to be learned or discovered, methods that seem outside of one's practice, and skills that might involve training or unlearning.

Residencies are often located on the edges and borders of urban life, or even in the remoteness of the countryside,

in castles, on farms, or hillsides. The transition of context, and often also environment, can further perceptions of detachment from common practices, approaches, and thinking, leading ideally to reflection and freedom to rethink, relearn, and discover.

In addition to space, the set time frame – even if flexible – provides a certain kind of security for risks to be taken and experiments to be tried. The temporary residing, similar to a holiday, allows one to be influenced by different worlds, values, and thoughts – to, in some sense, assume a different persona – and eventually engage in different work that might be, in the true sense of the word, “new”. However, the safety of the temporary detachment equally supports mistakes to be made, directions and bifurcations to be taken that lead to dead ends, and might confirm the prior and common, rather than encouraging possible alternatives. This is by no means an unsuccessful or unexpected outcome of a residency, as the protected space encourages risk-taking, speculation, and the chance to embrace the potential, but also the impossible.

Spaces for integrated practice

But participating in a design residency is often still understood as taking time away from income-generating work, and might require pausing or stopping lucrative contracts with the design industry. In contrast to art practice, design residencies are seldom considered in the process of developing and realising projects, which is why some designers see residencies as unrealistic luxury, and dream of circumstances and time to afford one.

While promoting an integrated practice, design residencies are not always accessible to everyone. Some limit applications to nominations, and others focus on established or emerging designers but might exclude talents from marginalized communities or geographies. Most residencies are highly competitive. They often rely on funding from large institutions, organizations, or sponsors, which may prioritize themes, approaches, or even desired outcomes. Geographic, financial, and cultural barriers may also make it difficult for underrepresented designers to participate.

This can inadvertently position residencies as opportunities available to the privileged few. To ensure residencies are perceived as accessible platforms for creative stimulation and social change for the many, the value of design residencies needs to be communicated and understood by funders as well as designers, to establish them as practice integrated as relevant part of a designer's work. In contrast to interpreting design residencies as a privilege of time, resources, and access, their potential for inclusivity, innovation, care, and societal contribution should inform how they are defined and structured, who they attract, and who they serve.

*Spaces for working and learning
in the world itself*

Every residency offers specific conditions for work, determined by access to workshops, tools, mentorship, funding, but also local resources, traditions, and techniques. Increasingly, residencies are rooted within specific communities and offer, as well as demand, engagement with local

conditions. They can encourage research, ideas and even solutions for communities and their environments that are the product of learning and collaboration.

This context can request a shift in design practice from individual analysis, ideation, and proposal to a practice built on observation, listening, and participating. Ideally, designers then exercise what the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar proposes as “redesigning design from within and from without” (Escobar 2017: 205), a process of engaging with design’s foundational assumptions while acquiring an understanding of alternative worldviews and ontologies.

Residencies would then be experienced as spaces of learning and reflection which reconsider and redefine intentions, functions, and outcomes of design practice and research. These learnings might not only lead to new concepts but might distance design from commercial and lucrative ends, and move towards a non-extractive and accountable practice.

The context of such residencies

stimulates questions around how, by whom, and for what ends design is practiced. By rehearsing collaborative, interrelated, and situated approaches, they can support a transition away from the destructive ecologies design practice has fostered for decades. As such, design residencies can function as places of radical pedagogies within a community and beyond, where new thinking, making, and togetherness is learned and practiced, following Paulo Freire's understanding of "education as practice of freedom" (Freire 1996).

*Spaces for conviviality and
relational practice*

All residencies create temporary communities of practice, of researchers, learners, educators, makers, thinkers, and activists. They are seldom offered to individuals only, but individuals that form small groups of practitioners who share title, sometimes space and/ or time, but always ideas, critique, and reflection. Their community is further built by staff of the hosting institution as well as its local community.

Hence, residencies are – and should be – built on relationships as acts of mutual care, reciprocity, and interconnectedness. These acts might will inspiration for approaches, contexts, and sources, but they can also lead to sharing anxieties and dreams – but also drinks and meals. The relational care should build resilience through experiences and feelings of being held and supported by a community.

Care should define the residency as a safe space: safe to feel free to imagine, safe to feel free from constraints and demands, safe to feel protected to take risks, safe to encounter communities outside of common networks, and safe to feel encouraged to think otherwise.

As relational spaces, they allow the individual to thrive through and with the community with which they can be profoundly entangled and sometimes even become co-dependent from. Relationality is then not only informing the specific work produced, but embraces ecosystems of life and practice defined by care, solidarity, and community. These ecosystems increasingly foster not only

human but multispecies relationships that encourage to reroute position and focus away from an anthropocentric model. The design practice that results from these reroutings will define the work of the residency community in some sense, or part as test or model for worlds rather different to the damaged and unfair planet humans created.

*Spaces for “speculative fabulations”
(Haraway 2016)*

Residencies, in general, are independent of markets and industry and bear more similarities with schools and laboratories. Their dominant productions are seldom consumables, but verge on speculative constructions and stories rooted in untamed imaginations. These position design residencies into the realm of speculative fiction, which opens space to the imagination beyond conventions, disciplines, the rational, and pragmatic.

These imaginations and fabulations, as Donna Haraway (2016) suggests, are aimed at – and empower – transformative futures: futures that are

capable of intervening in and reshaping reality. Speculative fabulations as design practice embrace the tensions of the impossible and unbelievable, the alternative and otherwise, often starting from the position of the “What if”, as encouraged by Dunne and Raby (Dunne and Raby 2013: 86f). The speculation allows the resident to be radical in thought and imagination, while the fabulation helps to test ideas in contexts of space and time.

Here, design residencies become the places of not storytelling but “story-making” (Dunne and Raby 2013: 88) – a materialisation of these potentially radical new prototypes of imagined worlds that are distinctly different from the one we know. As public sharing of the work conceived in a residency is an important function, these materialisations should – whether through exhibitions, publications, films, or public programmes – not only aim at introducing ideas, objects, and spaces but attempt to potentially move from fiction to possibility and new reality.

This practice requires taking active

responsibility for the futures that are co-created through thinking, imagining, and making; in Donna Haraway's words "a worlding practice" (Haraway 2016: 7). Design residencies are a safe space for such radical action and for responsible communities that intend to impact, with their fabulations, the realities of new worlds – an impact that goes far beyond their place and community.

References

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Biography

Jana Scholze is a design curator and Associate Professor at Kingston University. From 2002-2015, she was a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum. She serves on the board of the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg and the Stanley Picker Gallery in London. Her research covers questions around curatorial formats and contemporary design engaging with society, technology, and the environment. Exhibitions include *What is Luxury?* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2015) and *At Home* (XII International Design Biennial Saint-Étienne, 2022). Publications include *Medium Ausstellung* (transcript, 2002), *Barber Osgerby Projects* (Phaidon, 2017), and the co-edited *Exhibitions as Interior* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

RE: Design Residencies publishes commissioned texts on design and architecture residency and fellowship programmes. Practitioners, curators, educators and residency organisers provide reflections, case studies and provocations on the role, value and impact of residency and fellowship programmes on contemporary practice and education today. RE: Design Residencies is a project collaboration between Stanley Picker Gallery at Kingston University and IASPIS, The Swedish Arts Grants Committee. The project has been developed out of two forums with many of the invited guests contributing further with texts based on their presentations.

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