

RE; Clout Transfer

George Kafka

Editors' Introduction

From museums to universities, residency and fellowship programmes have been incorporated into existing institutional structures as an opportunity to bring in external practitioners to work with collections and archives, to engage with outreach and public programming, and to support independent research and practice without always setting specific deliverables. Hosted within larger institutional structures, these residencies and fellowships can provide valuable support for recent graduates and early-career researchers to develop their projects, research, and practices. In many cases, a larger institutional setting connects residents and fellows to internal expertise (other researchers, teachers, technicians, students, etc.) and can allow access to valuable resources (workshops, specialist equipment, gallery spaces, audiences). Here, we wanted to dig deeper and return to two key questions of the forums: “What do residency and fellowship programmes enable and produce?”, and “What benefits do residency and fellowship programmes provide to practitioners and the hosting institutions themselves? The following text from George Kafka provides an insightful response.

“Design Researchers in Residence is one of the Design Museum’s longest-running programmes.” During three years working as the curator of the residency programme at the museum, between 2021 and 2024, I gave countless introductions to the programme and habitually – almost unthinkingly – opened with that same line. It seems a fairly mundane assertion, but perhaps can be an interesting one to consider and unpack within the museum’s history and the broader framework of design residencies. Why mention its long-running nature? What does that reveal about the programme? Who does it serve?

First, it’s useful to point out that it is a true statement. The residency began in 2007 when the Design Museum still occupied its building in Shad Thames, central London, and in the years since its founding has operated as an annual programme, providing an opportunity for emerging designers and design researchers to spend a period of time paid to work on a self-initiated project, and present that project to the museum’s audiences. That the programme pre-existed the museum’s current building in Holland Park, west London (where

it moved in 2016), imbues the residency with a certain institutional legacy – even memory – otherwise limited to a dwindling number of museum employees and more ephemeral elements (networks, branding, a collection) that make up an institution's identity.

Of course, the residency itself is another of those ephemera. There is nothing or no one specifically continuous about it; the residents themselves change year-on-year, it has changed building, it has been run/stewarded by numerous different individuals, it has changed funder (once the Arts Council, now the Arts & Humanities Research Council), and even changed name (Designers in Residence became Design Researchers in Residence in 2021). What lingers, somewhat admirably, seems to simply be the pure intention of the programme: to support emerging practitioners.

To look through the alumni of the programme is to see that the residency has, and continues to, fulfil its own aims. Another common trope of my presentations was to highlight Asif Khan, the award-winning architect and artist,

MBE holder, and trustee of the Design Museum, who was once also a museum resident, as a form of proof that the residency does, in fact, help practitioners to “emerge”. Khan’s trajectory from resident to trustee is particularly satisfying, but he is far from alone as a former resident in his accolades. The direct role of the residency in the progress of individual designers will, of course, vary from person to person, but what is clear – or at least appears self-evident – about the programme is the benefit for its participants, the residents themselves.

The residency is presented as an opportunity for the young designer to work in a self-guided way. They apply via a short application form with a project of their own making (albeit in response to a theme and open call) and, after impressing in an interview, the successful candidates are given the “keys” to the museum to pursue this project. They are provided with a stipend, a production fee, a desk in a residency studio which they can access whenever they wish, and the honour of adding their names to “one of the Design Museum’s longest-running programmes”.

It is, undoubtedly, a generous programme and indeed an opportunity, but also one with transactional dynamics. The residency is an intense programme. The longevity of its operation (17 years and counting) is in interesting relation to the brevity of each annual edition which, in the period I oversaw the programme, ran from late-October to late-June – eight months. There are, of course, shorter residencies, but the intensity of the Design Museum residency is amplified by its outputs: a publication and an exhibition (or, in Design Museum parlance, a “display” – meaning it is free to enter).

These outputs of the residency mean that residents, while free to pursue projects according to their own methodological and disciplinary priorities, are essentially commissioned by the museum to make work to a suitable standard for public display. The residency has productive requirements and, as a result, residents are working *_for_* the museum as much as they are benefitting *_from_* it.

What is in this for the museum? The pragmatic (and cynical) answer is that

it fulfils a funding requirement and increases the museum's offer to visitors, particularly over the summer months when the residency display is open. More significantly, I'd argue the residency has been a valuable way for the Design Museum to maintain a position within emerging design discourse which, in a sense, produces the very museum-ness of the museum – its cultural clout.

In the three years I ran the programme, we saw residents come through with projects exploring: climate justice in north Kensington; the uses of human hair as a sustainable textile material; algae farming; light touch architecture; the typography of Celtic languages; material extraction for green technologies; architecture for pigeons; the social design of damp laundry; the changing scent of plants; the history and future of conservatories; the queerness of peatland bogs; and the carbon footprints of data centres. Each of these projects, explored by driven, diligent, and accomplished researchers, was individually imbued with an urgency befitting the climate emergency we all face. Yet also, as a body of projects perceived either by annual

cohort (of four), or as a broader group of twelve over three years, the topics were absorbed into the broader curatorial and institutional language of the Design Museum.

Now, clearly, the museum is more than its residency programme, and it also derives its discursive or curatorial power from its collection, its paid exhibitions, its public programming, and so on. Yet reduced cultural funding, leading to financial pressures and the resulting need to sell more tickets via blockbuster exhibitions, means opportunities for the museum to exert its more critical capabilities – its self-professed contemporaneity – are rarer and rarer.

In this sense, one might argue that the residency programme and its residents allow (and have allowed) the museum to bring more criticality into its institutional framework than it would otherwise be able, even willing, to do. To put it another way, the transactional nature of the residency is not simply in the endowment of design/cultural capital in one direction, from the museum to the resident as opportunity. It also runs in

the opposite direction, from the individual resident (and cohorts) back to the museum.

I reach this conclusion not simply to think anew or destabilise the relationship between the Design Museum and its long-running, growing list of design residents, but to raise broader questions about the relationship between residents and their residency hosts, and the extent to which the mutually reinforcing or transactional dynamics of those relationships are acknowledged, welcomed, or even cultivated.

Design institutions committed to contemporaneity, to criticality, and to engagement with political concerns must remain open to new thinking. This is crucial not only to allow for the development of the design industries but, perhaps more directly, to allow for the development of cultural institutions themselves. In this sense, we can consider the design residency as an opportunity. For the individual, yes, but also for the institution; to reflect on itself, to question its directions, and to reshape itself year after year after year.

Biography

George Kafka is an interdependent writer, editor and curator based in London. He produces texts, publications, and exhibitions that explore the political and environmental consequences of architecture and design.

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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