

An Architecture or Landscape/Garden Design Residency at I-Park – Why?

I-Park is very enthusiastic about hosting architects and landscape/garden/ecological designers. Why, might you ask, would a designer working in either of these fields, perhaps a busy professional with a lucrative career, choose to decamp to a rural community of artists, music composers and writers? How would one productively use/justify one's time – and what might be the long-term benefits?

For starters, consider the concept of a sabbatical or retreat, a time for reflection, opening one's mind to new possibilities and refreshing one's practice. Although it's unlikely that you have the luxury of being provided an extended sabbatical such as exists in academia, you probably get a 2- or 3-week vacation that you could devote to something worthwhile like this. You might even be lucky enough to have an enlightened employer who will give you a month off (paid) as a career development investment – because he or she appreciates the importance of nurturing your creativity. Make your pitch. You might be surprised by the response. Of course, if you are at an inflection point in your career, the value of a retreat such as this could be quite appealing on its face.

One of the greatest benefits of an artist's residency is the opportunity to share an intimate space with those working in other creative disciplines. I-Park has something called Artists' Exchange that takes place after dinner on the first night of the residency. Everyone takes 10-15 minutes to present/discuss some of their previous projects, their personal interests and perhaps their aspirations for the residency. Potential connections reveal themselves in this setting and become a jumping off point for conversation. Less formal exchanges will happen over the dinner table and through ad hoc encounters during the residency. An Open Studios event at the end of the residency is an opportunity to get an even deeper understanding and appreciation of what your peers have been working on. Open Studios also gives you the opportunity to mix it up with the curious-minded guests who attend this event. These connections, involving the exchange of energy and enthusiasm, will be professional, social and intellectual; you will make them readily and they will last long after you leave I-Park.

A precept of an artist's residency is that it be self-directed and non-judgmental. Although there is a competitive process that determines who will be invited to participate, once you're in, you're in – and you can use the time and space as you see fit. In the application process, you will be asked to describe, in general terms, what you intend to work on. However, you are free, even encouraged, to alter your plan as your explorations and the subtle influence of place and people take you in new directions. This "permission" to pursue an investigation without distractions or accountability is probably the most important element of a residency. We have heard many stories of individuals accomplishing more serious work in 3-4 weeks at I-Park than they did over the previous several years of their professional life!

So, what types of projects might you choose to work on? We hesitate to make suggestions in this vein as the thought process involved will be part of your creative journey. However, since the artist's residency model is something you may not be intimately familiar with, the following are offered with the modest intent of jogging your imagination.

- You may, of course, bring an existing project with you and continue to work on it in a quiet, relaxed setting. While this is not necessarily representative of a typical residency, it may be unavoidable due to professional responsibilities. But if this is your situation, please do take some time to go for a walk on one of I-Park's art/nature trails or take a boat out on the pond for some fishing or reading or dreaming. Or, put aside a block of time to think about your existing project in a new, perhaps improbable, way.
- Many designers have lost touch with the materiality of their practice. Spend some time in the workshop or out on/in the land and build, plant or de-construct something. Reacquaint yourself with how things are held together and relate to each other in space. Mess around with scale and proportions. Creating work with your hands can be an invigorating, enlightening process. It's different than designing from behind a computer screen and could result in some unexpected discoveries.
- A residency is a great opportunity to work on a proposal for a competition. If the dynamic is right, you may be able to enlist the views of an artist in your group or you could collaborate with your existing team remotely – or, within I-Park guidelines) have a member come to visit.
- For PhD candidates, I-Park could be an ideal setting for working on your dissertation.
- You might subconsciously succumb to the power of I-Park's rich landscape and decide to develop a site-responsive piece, either a physical installation, a digital emulation or a paper project. Even as an abstract exercise, you might discover, though perhaps not immediately, that some new creative methods developed during such a project could be very powerful in informing your future practice.
- Should you become intrigued/ensnared by I-Park's ethos in the realm of ephemeral art and architecture (which includes landscape/garden design), you may wish to devote some of your time to sketch out a project for one of I-Park's upcoming programs focused on this field (see the Symposium on Ephemeral Art + Architecture link on the What is I-Park? webpage). Your residency experience will give you a leg up for such opportunities.
- Although it's unlikely that you could actually build or plant something of great scale or ambition during the limited time frame of a residency, you will find that there will be generous staff enthusiasm and support for your project – and you might be surprised at what you have the potential to achieve. In the final analysis, realizing a physical installation is quite beside the point. But you are more than welcome to give it a go (it has been done).

- Consider undertaking a totally conceptual, blue-sky project, something with no client in mind, no budgetary or other constraints – in fact, no practical purpose whatsoever (unsolicited architecture, anyone?). Although the project would likely have no intrinsic economic value, it could be something interesting to include in your portfolio – something that would demonstrate your creative range – but also have the potential to return to you as a solution in some future project.

To the cynic in you, the thought may occur: why is it that I-Park wants architects and landscape/garden designers to participate in their residency program?

- Architects take 3-dimensional creativity to a monumental level and visual and other artists will want to know more about the implications of working at that scale.
- As for landscape/garden designers, I-Park is a huge, varied natural canvas practically begging to be engaged. Those who create physical interventions enrich the landscape for the benefit of I-Park’s artists-in-residence, visiting guests and staff.
- Designers bring a different, somewhat alien, perspective to the table – but one that should be engaged (poked, challenged, listened to) by the art world. There will be artists who would love to be invited to join design teams and become integral players in your field, without abandoning their underlying practice.
- Most designers are trained to be master collaborators – and collaboration, for better or worse, is all the rage in the artistic community. Artists are eager to learn more about successful rules-based inter-personal communications, sublimating the ego and fair-minded authorship models.
- You might be a designer with awesome classic or digital drafting or modeling skills. Your colleagues will be hungry to know the state of the art in these areas.
- There may be a few mischievous artists who will want to “flip” you to their side or persuade you to open your mind to new ways to make your designs more artful. Or, more likely, they may simply wish to tempt you with an idea for a fascinating collaboration. Of course, these machinations are just as likely to flow in the opposite direction.

The table is set. Feel free to contact I-Park if you have any questions about the particulars of the program, including available resources – or your ideas for a residency project. And since I-Park is new to this field, please do give us your thoughts (in writing, over the phone or in person) on how better to accommodate your special interests and needs and how we might otherwise enrich the inter-disciplinary conversation, which is, in fact, the underlying motivation for this initiative.

By the way, I-Park is about to launch a conceptual design competition for a new composer’s studio. What better way than an I-Park residency to get in on the ground floor for this opportunity?