



Sense of Place: 10 ways to connect artists to a residency program

More residency programs are working to connect art making with community, ecology and a sense of place. Unlike the older “retreat” model, which serves artists (often from urban areas) by allowing them to “get away” and commune with something vaguely referred to as “nature,” a true sense of place helps artists comprehend that they have arrived somewhere with a rich history. This history is not just the names and stories of artists who have come before or the biography of the founder, but a complex interweaving of ecology, economy and community.

What follows are some notes toward a future document: Ten ways to connect artists to a sense of place at a residency program. This list is slanted towards ecological awareness, rural areas and the ecology of ISLAND’s home in northern lower Michigan. Comments and additions are appreciated.

1.) **Nature-based interpretation.** Used to great success in our national parks, interpretive signs, tags, displays and tours readily communicate plant and animal species, historic events, wayfinding and other basic information about the ecology and history of a place. *Examples: a display illustrating what a residency looked like 500, 200, 50 and 10 years ago, and how the ecology has changed in that time. A Studio in the Woods has an environmental curator on staff!*

2.) **Artistic interpretation.** A variation on the above, but using local artists to create the signs and referring to the creation and appreciation of art. *Examples: signs directing potters to local seams of clay with notes on different types’ usefulness in glazes. An outdoor installation that comments on and directs attention to the surrounding landscape.*

3.) **Life on the land.** A residency program must have other uses and be a place of activity and work outside of the work of the artists. *Examples: Madroño Ranch is a working bison ranch that offers hunting, fishing and cooking workshops to the public and sells meat, eggs and produce. Atlantic Center for the Arts keeps beehives and sells the honey to raise funds.*

4.) **Invite artist engagement** with the above. Artists can work on the land outside of their art making. *Example: morning chores in the garden, help milking the goats, trail work, volunteering at the local food pantry.*

5.) **Connection to the community.** This is always easier said than done, and requires care in creating seclusion for working artists while still allowing them to experience the larger culture in which they work. *Example: residency tours/open studio, readings or concerts in community spaces, inviting community elders to dinner at the residency.*

6.) **Create art supplies from the land.** Use locally available natural resources to provide raw materials for art making, either as equipment or supplies. *Examples: beeswax (bees), milk paints (goats), art-grade charcoal (willow), wood for carving, clay for pottery, fiber (sheep, alpaca, etc.), natural dyes and found materials.*

7.) **Use the land itself for art making.** This can be as simple as installation art using local resources or using the land itself as gallery. Think beyond just a sculpture park. *Examples: much of the work being done at A Studio in the Woods and Art Farm.*

8.) **Hospitality from the land.** Grow food for the artists. Use native flowers as table centerpieces. Use local materials in the construction of buildings. Partner with local farms to eat food that is local and in season. Partner with local breweries, wineries, cideries, dairies, butchers, smokehouses, fermenters and other craft industries to supply as many needs as possible for the artists. *Example: the Hill House comes stocked with local and seasonal produce, fish, cheese, meat and wine, along with empty growlers that can be filled at the local pub.*

9.) **Keep it wild.** Resist the urge to over-manicure the landscape. Allow for wilder plants and fungi to populate the grounds, even if some of them are “weeds.” Value the edges where the cultivated meets the wild. Create simple paths leading visitors into less manicured places. And yes, provide mosquito spray or bear mace or even a guide. *Example: both the Hill House and the ISLAND property are connected to large tracts of public forest, including a canoe river. A Studio in the Woods keeps the cultivated footprint to a minimum to allow artists to engage with the bottomland forest ecology.*

10.) **Seek close encounters.** Vistas are great, but real engagement takes place at arms length or closer. Use wild space, along with bat houses, bird feeders, butterfly gardens and meandering paths to help create dynamic, intimate encounters between artists and the wild nature. If your wild nature includes mountain lions, bears or alligators you’ll want to think carefully about what to invite in and what to exclude. *Example: A Studio in the Woods has a simple dock overlooking a small pond, and allows fallen trees to decay in place, creating more habitat for wild creatures.*

This list is intended to be a rough beginning to a more polished document. I expect it to change drastically as more folks look at it and offer their thoughts, and I realize it is focused on my part of the world – the woods and water of rural northern lower Michigan. Your help is appreciated in tailoring it to your own ecological, economic and cultural landscapes.