

“Höfn”

a writing port of call

1 — “Höfn”: a writing port of call

The project “**Höfn**” is a writing residence, or, should we say, a residence of, for writingss. It is also the name for the association which supports this residence. It takes root in between a place and a story: an old house hooked on one of so many hills above the port of Marseilles (France), a life trail in Reykjavik (Iceland). Something which seems already written as a bound between two worlds, two languages, two perceptions. A story of seas and ports. “**Höfn**” means “port”, “harbour” in Icelandic...

The residence is at the heart of a project, which, day after day, will develop artistic, poetic, linguistic exchanges across France and more specifically Marseilles, and Iceland. Hence two poles, and one thread of thought and desire... and the crossing of encounters and understandings, paths and adventures much beyond those two anchoring places, connecting many other countries. Both Marseilles and Reykjavik are cities drawing the world to themselves... though in an almost opposite way (so much to think of and tell about that: probably a never ending question to discuss as Icelandic residents will experience Marseilles). Imagined within this “*duellity*”, the project is conceived as an opened and ever reinvented form, each time readjusted for each new encounter.

These exchanges are based upon the matter of writing, all forms of writings (literary, poetical, theoretical, musical, plastic, theatrical, cinematographic, digital code writing...). “Höfn” receives all those whose creative work leads to a writing process, whatever modes of writing are involved. It proposes to them a place for living and working. Listening to each one, apprehending each project, perceiving needs and desires, it offers to concoct situations nourishing, extending, flavouring each resident’s stay (meetings, seminars, concerts, meals, strolls in, and around Marseilles. Jean Cristofol, and Dominique Dögg Poulain, long before creating “Höfn”, have indeed woven a both solid and extendible web of contacts and collaborations in connection with artists, other associations, social, cultural, and educational organizations, which all may open up on to the real and the imaginary Marseilles and its surroundings.

2 — The residence as a home

Inside and outside a late 19th century house — originally a farm, tending later on to look like a “bastide” (typical Provence mansion house), although much smaller and humble really (!) — Jean Cristofol, the owner, and Dominique Dögg Poulain, the association manageress, have created, within their own habitat, a personal, independent... and common place for the artist in residence. It contains a double bed sleeping room leading to a kitchen, big enough to allow pleasant cooking times as much as shared meals with two or three guests. This kitchen is situated against the main house facade onto a spacious terrace, facing south, a much used outdoors extension... The bedroom adjoins a study, from which one gets to the bathroom. The residence is a private place: the bedroom, study, bathroom, and kitchen compose the resident’s intimate territory. Yet it is through the cooking/dining room outside door that one gets into the residence... **from the terrace**, the same spot from which Dominique et Jean can enter their own living-room and kitchen. Clearly, this tree shaded, flowery terrace during spring and summer time, much barer in the winter (as it must be in a Mediterranean region...), overlooking Saint-Antoine (the closest district, some kind of a village), opening out to the harbour and sea perspective, becomes spontaneously, freely, informally a scenery for meetings in between residents and greeters.

Both cooking and dining rooms may be the warm, sheltered havens (even in Marseilles, you can not **always** hope for a mild weather!) for shared breakfasts or suppers, according to one’s will. The terrace, as well as Jean and Dominique’s dining room, with the resident’s agreement or by his or her request, might occasionally host intimist concerts, thematic buffets, “literary tastings”, play, poetry readings...

3 — “Höfn”: its location

This fully equipped, comfortable residence, carefully considered before it was partly built and finally fitted out, opening onto an almost habitable outdoor space conducive to day dreaming, beholding roofs, sea, islands and sky... indeed this residence might seem almost luxurious... Still, the peculiar location of this venue in the town places it nearly at the heart of a paradox. The house is situated in the north districts of Marseilles, a popular area punctuated with rather rough housing estates, sheltering an essentially cosmopolitan population. Indeed, the residence “Höfn” is not just anywhere. Without making an announcement about it, it nevertheless seems important to point out the unavoidable reality of a harbour looking towards the sea and North Africa, built up through a long, sometimes brutal and always precarious (hi)story of migrations, work, but also cultural exchange and interbreeding. Lower down the house, a long boulevard leads on one side to Saint-Antoine, a “village” street bordered with many small shops (only six minutes’ walk), lowering on the other side towards the sea and the industrial harbour. Close by is “L’Estaque”, the small fishing port made famous by Cézanne, Braque, Dufy... There is also the huge Marseilles flea-market where anything is for sale, everything to purchase, from antiques to cars, from *halal* mutton, living guinea fowls, fish, Tunisian pastries, vegetables, computers... to the last radio that was stolen from your car. The house is at a few minutes drive from the expressway which leads to midtown (15 minutes), but also to Aix-en-Provence, 25 kilometres away, or the little towns around the “Etang de Berre”. It takes only an hour to get to Camargue, or Luberon. Still, a major drawback has to be mentioned: the transit organization is very bad in Marseilles, excepted for the lucky downtown districts... It is a three minutes walk from the house to the next bus stop, and then one has to take the metro... All in all you will have to reckon with at least a 45 minutes journey (!)... a time to experience with wide open ears and eyes... This problem should be partly solved sometime in 2008 when the railway station of Saint-Antoine linking the centre of Marseilles to Aix-en-Provence will be at last operative...

4 — Artistic surroundings

Very close to the residence (6 minutes walk) a group of artists started in 1999 restoring and fitting out a cluster of workshops. Since then, about twenty persons: artists (sound, video, new media installations...), dancers, architects, musicians, film producer... live and/or work in “CAP15” (the name of the place). Jean Cristofol and Dominique Poulain are deeply involved in running the association “La Jetée” which gathers around itself all the Cap 15 artists.

Nearby, the theatre company “Kosmos Kolej” created “La Gare Franche”, both a theatre stage and a very active site in its links to the neighbouring population.

In Saint-André, another district village between SaintAntoine and L’Estaque, “Lieux Publics” Centre National des Arts de la Rue (National Centre for Urban Arts), initiates, invites, co-produces performing art forms in the urban space involving theatre, music, performance, visual art practices.

Next to Saint-André, in Saint-Henri, (yes... many saints!), the “Alhambra” cinema is a very peculiar, specific work shop and theatre. Equipped with a huge screen, wide opening its doors to thousands of pupils and a very diversified audience, it selects for its programme blockbusters as well as author and documentary films. The cinema is also fitted out with a small studio, editing and preview rooms, mainly assigned to teaching activities. Every summer, the cinema Alhambra escapes from its own walls and offers free touring outdoor film screenings to all inhabitants of the Marseilles north districts.

5 — “Höfn”: its story..

“Höfn” cannot be restricted to a simple homelike place to be in. This residence, endorsed with the association, does have a role to play. “Höfn” would not exist if Dominique had not left France in January 1982 for a breakout stay in Iceland, an escapism holiday which lasted... ten years. In ten years, “up there”, she forged a life story: were born there her son, but also... masks, puppets, giant and dwarf sculptures, indestructible friendships (throughout intellectual, artistic, and emotional affinities), and... an experienced knowledge: the distance, the crossing of languages, the dissimilarities do not obstruct anything, far from it... What followed showed it: fifteen years have passed since Dominique came back to Marseilles, and this house she lives in has from then on reverberated with Icelandic voices. Marinated dill salmon, deliciously hot “shorbas” (North African mutton soup), “à la catalane” codfish have been shared around the big dining-room table... There were aperitifs with “pastis” (Pernod in Marseilles), and well chilled “brennivín” (strong Icelandic alcohol) was knocked back late in the night... essential life moments, but not full enough. Because beyond the instant gaiety and the reunion warmth, the need for knowing and comparing each other’s life and work evolution in France and in Iceland was present, powerfully, and there was not always time enough to explore the possible connections. In Iceland, books had been published, performances staged and films shot. There were echoes of it all, or not, in France... Icelanders’ curiosity towards Marseilles was always goaded, never satiated...Through, and beyond the relation to Iceland and Icelanders, links have been established with England, the USA and more generally with English speaking authors, artists, musicians... For Dominique, always attached to the notion of receiving and welcoming, an incompleteness and frustration feeling was little by little mixed up with the pleasure of conviviality. The “Höfn” concept presumably matured over a long period, secretly, insidiously...Today, “Höfn” gives a richer meaning to this notion of “welcoming”. The matter is not only to feather a cosy nest for odd migratory birds (!) but also, from and around this den, to draw trajectories, to create roads, repercussions: tools for thinking and inventing. If “Höfn” was born from a special partnership with Iceland, if this constitutes its foremost identity, it is undeniably devised as an opening on to other horizons.

6 — ...its approach

Dominique, who speaks French, English and Icelandic, would like to sound out (occasionally fathom intuitively?) each resident, beforehand, within, and well over the residence time, throughout sometimes loose, other times more organized discussions (all communication media are conceivable). That would be for her a way to grasp the resident's needs, desires, feelings, to learn about his (her) passed, present or future work. Owing to her role in the association, Dominique will try to fulfil several tasks:

- Supporting each resident (as far as he wishes) according to his own needs in his knowledge of Marseilles and the region. Guiding if necessary, and also providing on the fly practical information and occasions to explore the neighbourhood, the town and its surroundings. And maybe introducing Mediterranean cooking. Organizing on the premises intimist concerts, readings, lectures... little events that Cap 15, so close geographically and affectively, might enrich, more than once and in many ways. And of course, playing the role of a translator, when necessary.

- Relating the resident with some persons or organizations which could throw varied lights about life in Marseilles: possibly some district inhabitants leading a fairly important social activity, or artists in connection, (or not!) with the resident's work and interest areas. Some of those artists could drag the resident along into strange walks across the city, off the side, following first of all a poetic and perceptive flux; or show him — make him listen to — some aspects of their work. Others, more professionally speaking, could be valuable contacts belonging to several organizations: for example the “Centre International de la Poésie de Marseille” (Marseilles International Poetry Centre), le Groupe de Musique Expérimentale de Marseille (“MGEM”: Marseilles Experimental Music Group), “Film Flamme” (film directing organization), le Théâtre du Merlan, (a national theatre), art galleries...

In some instances, introducing the resident's work, or if he (she) wishes, enabling him (her) to get an audience: either through rather intimate situations as lectures, readings, viewings on the premises, or on a larger scale in partnership with Cap 15, galleries, picture houses, libraries inside or outside Marseilles, Radio Grenouille, etc... As part of a teaching project,

some residents' interventions (lectures, workshops) could occur at the Art Schools of Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence. Jean Cristofol, originally a philosophy teacher, has been for 15 years now teaching at the Art School in Aix-en-Provence. He would conceive, organize any kind of connections and actions between those two Art Schools and the residents.

In addition to the main residence partners, many other links exist in between artists, authors, Icelandic or not Icelandic cultural associates, setting up a far reaching web. "Höfn" will use this web. Although the purpose for "Höfn" is not broadcasting, publishing or producing, the creation of opportunities and small events contributing to bring forth some creative aspects of Iceland might arise, at an elementary level, from the united will of all.

7 — "Höfn": its memory

"Höfn" is certainly a writing and creation residence, but the residents may use their time in Marseilles as they please. They are not expected to offer, create anything in return in terms of publication or production. Still, contacts in Marseilles and Reykjavik will occasionally make possible paper or digital publishing.

A tape recorder will be made available. It might give an opportunity to store a day by day audio-memory which could supply material for radio broadcasts ("Radio Grenouille" would be the obvious partner in this case).

"Höfn", of course, has got its own website which is actually, more than a mere means of communication, a living and constantly renewed space: it will be each resident's one and only expected task (!), during his (her) stay or later on, to leave his (her) trace on the website...