

# ICORN: SHELTER AND SANCTUARY IN SAFE CITIES AROUND THE WORLD

By Nick Cunningham



Marianne Wulfsberg Hovdan

The number of filmmakers who have received shelter and support from The International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) may be small (in 2019 they numbered just six out of a total of 138 applicants), but their impact is significant, says the institution's Protection Manager Marianne Wulfsberg Hovdan.

She cites such examples as Ali Al-Ibrahim (Syria, director of *ONE DAY IN ALEPPO*), Andrei Nekrasov (Russia, *REBELLION: THE LITVINENKO CASE*) and producer/filmmaker/freedom fighter Prudence Uiri (Zimbabwe) who were offered both sanctuary and the opportunity to work without restraints in the host cities of Jönköping, Sweden, and Haugesund and Lillehammer, Norway, respectively.

"But I think there is probably a need for us to get better known in the film world," Wulfsberg Hovdan concedes.

ICORN is a network of more than 70 cities and regions that offers shelter to writers, artists and filmmakers at risk, in the form of two-year residencies. These are creatives who are particularly vulnerable to censorship, harassment, imprisonment and even vulnerable to death, simply because of their chosen vocation and/or their decision to speak out when freedom of speech is threatened.

The majority of the ICORN residencies are in Europe (particularly strong in the Nordics), with a smattering across the US and Latin America. It is a city-led organisation, which means that funding for the residencies is sourced locally, whether from local government support or through private donations or even crowdfunding. Norwegian cities can apply to join the network through a partnership with the Norwegian PEN organisation, Wulfsberg Hovdan points out.

Every member city, irrespective of size, be it Paris or Piteå, has an equal vote on the ICORN board, which meets for a general assembly every two years. The organisation is run out of Stavanger in Norway with a permanent staff of six. All applications for residencies are submitted to that head office.

When the residency is agreed, the local co-ordinator will help the guest find their feet and solidify their professional base. "They help the resident to build a network, find the people in the city that they need to get to know in order to best continue their work," says Wulfsberg Hovdan. "So for filmmakers that would mean finding a studio, finding colleagues, or if they need translation [services], getting publicity, hooking them up with media, all kinds of things like that."

So, are the residents safe in exile, and how does ICORN seek to guarantee this? "Of course it depends on the person," says Wulfsberg Hovdan.

"The majority are safe once they are taken away from where the immediate threats are. But it depends also on [whether] it is the regime that is the problem or smaller groups or individuals that are threatening. We do an assessment together with the local police of the threats and needs for safety and the procedures to put in place even before arrival, if it is a really serious case."

"And if there is a person who is not comfortable being public or using their real name, we will of course make sure that it is possible for them to remain anonymous. We don't expect a resident to do events if the need is for them to be safe and in secret for two years, that's totally fine."

Nor is there any requirement that the residents publish from their safe houses. "We of course hope that that is a goal, but we don't have any [stipulations] that they have to produce, because we see that many of them come from years of being persecuted and threatened, and sometimes survival is what they have to do first."

"But what we do see is that most of them want to work," Wulfsberg Hovdan adds, "and also that working and being active and continuing to do what actually caused them to get into trouble is a way of surviving and coping."

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