

Film review: **PUSH** Fredrik Gertten, 2019

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Abstract

Push is a film of great ambition and great skill. Director Fredrik Gertten takes on the global housing crisis, and aims to uncover and expose the systemic forces that increasingly make contemporary cities unaffordable to working and middle class residents. The concept of gentrification no longer seems useful in this quest, and Gertten is looking for a new language to speak of the phenomenon. It is notoriously difficult to make cinematic, gripping films about the inner workings of the economy, and Gertten skilfully uses every trick in the filmmakers' hat to produce an engaging and relatable work that carries the audience along and makes a complex but digestible argument.

Keywords

film review, financialization, right to housing, housing crisis

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The film follows UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing Leilani Farha as she investigates housing conditions in cities across (mostly) the global north. A warm, engaging, compassionate character, Leilani visits residents in London, New York, Toronto, Uppsala, Valparaíso, and through these encounters we discover that the struggles they face with expensive, low quality, insecure and unreliable housing are a common, global problem. If

Leilani's journey provides the narrative thread that carries the film along, theorist of urbanity and globalisation Saskia Sassen, Nobel Laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz, and writer on organised crime Roberto Saviano act as guides into the theoretical aspects of the crisis via sit-down interviews that are seamlessly woven into the film. Each focusing on their particular area of expertise, the three deliver authoritative analyses which together paint an articulated but intelligible picture of the forces that drive access (or the lack of access) to adequate and affordable housing in the contemporary city.

The film has a slick and polished feel - immaculately photographed by acclaimed directors of photography Iris Ng and Janice d'Avila and edited with a keen sense of pacing and rhythm by Erik Wall Bäfving, it is a documentary that aims high. Smooth drone shots take us across the shining cityscapes of contemporary urban financial districts: disembodied interludes that reference the financialization of the economy and of the housing market, attempts at translating the arguments set out by the stellar cast of characters in the visual language of cinema. The film inhabits a hybrid space between cinematic work and expository documentary, and given its success on the international film festival circuit and its airing on TV channels such as Arte and German ARD, it seems to have managed to straddle the two well.

A human rights lawyer by trade, Farha diagnoses the problem of access to adequate and affordable housing through a lens of human rights. After exposing and humanising the issue through moving encounters with common city residents in the first part of the film, it is resolution and analysis time. A third into the film, at that crucial moment of narrative dramatic structure when a turning point is reached and the protagonists attempt a resolution of the problem laid out in the first act, a revealing argument is made. We see Leilani walking down a New York street, and we hear her say: 'I don't believe that capitalism itself is hugely problematic'. This is the point where the film starts to derail and lose its potency. She continues to explain that the current housing crisis is created by the financialization of the economy, an 'unbridled capitalism' speculating outside of the realm of pure commodities such as gold and encroaching into areas that should remain inalienable, such as housing. In such analyses, which have become common in the wake of the 2008 crash, the financialization of the economy is an aberration of a system that is, with the right checks and balances in place, a healthy one. What is needed is a framework of laws and regulations that would work to keep the excessive parts of a functioning capitalist system in check. Whilst of course an analysis of financialization is needed to understand the contemporary conjuncture in relation to housing and land politics, in readings such as those put forward by *Push*, the aberration is not capitalism itself but its financialized excesses, embodied by off-shore unaccountable corporations such as Brownstone, which become the focus of Leilani's investigations in the second part of the film.

Blackstone becomes the incarnation of all the ills of the housing and financial systems – and while Roberto Saviano's intervention adds another dimension to the analysis by speaking about how organized crime uses investment in housing assets to launder its money on a global scale – Farha wisely does not take on that particular antagonist. She attempts however to get a meeting with Blackstone representatives, in the utterly naïve hope that if

only they could hear of the human misery they create, they would change their ways and become a kinder offshore conglomerate. While Blackstone refuses to meet Farha, the last segment of the film focuses on her efforts in setting up an international movement, *The Shift*, bringing together all stakeholders to figure out solutions to the housing crisis, and we see her meeting with the mayors of world cities who make vague commitments about making change happen.

It is disappointing that ultimately *Push* steers away from presenting a radical analysis of the global housing crisis and remains within the confines of a limited discourse of rights when seeking solutions – as Madden and Marcuse put forward in the conclusion to their *In Defense of Housing*, the invoking of a discourse of rights has its place if it is accompanied with transformative demands that are 'system challenging' (2016, p. 200). These kinds of politics cannot exist without social movements, residents and housing activists – in *Push*, residents at the sharp end of the housing crisis are given a voice to expose their problems, but they are not part of the conversation when it comes to analysing the wider systems at play, or in developing solutions. Those arenas remain firmly in the hands of the experts. No significant shift will happen without a foregrounding of the rent strikes, movements, struggles and campaigns that only appear as fleeing background images in the ambitious world of *Push*.

References

Madden, M. & Marcuse, P. (2016). *In Defense of Housing*. London, New York: Verso.