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“RAZING LIBERTY SQUARE” SET TO PREMIERE ON INDEPENDENT LENS JANUARY 29

DECEMBER 1, 2023

The Alarming Documentary Explores How Liberty Square Public Housing Community In Miami Has Become Ground Zero For Climate Gentrification

(San Francisco, CA) December 1, 2023—From Academy Award-nominated filmmaker Katja Esson, “Razing Liberty Square” is set to premiere on INDEPENDENT LENS January 29, 2024. The documentary captures an inside look at the struggle of the residents of the historically Black neighborhood as they fight to save their community. Located just eight miles inland from Miami’s world-famous beaches, Liberty City, Miami, sitting on a ridge, becomes real estate gold.

A character-driven verité documentary about a rapidly changing Miami, “Razing Liberty Square” will debut on PBS’s INDEPENDENT LENS on January 29, 2024, at 10 p.m. (check local listings). The film will be available to stream on the [PBS App](#) and will also be accessible via [PBS’s flagship YouTube channel](#).

Three contemporary issues—climate change, housing insecurity, and economic inequity—become a unifying force driving redevelopment in Liberty City, Miami. Until recently, it was home to the oldest segregated public housing project in the United States, Liberty Square. Now, it is ground zero for a burgeoning trend: climate gentrification.

As rising seas threaten Miami’s luxurious beachfront, wealthy property owners are pushing inland to higher ground, creating a speculators’ market in a neighborhood previously ignored by developers and policy-makers alike. Located 12 feet above sea level, Liberty City becomes more attractive with each rising tide and as a result, the original Liberty Square is demolished, displacing residents and erasing a decades-old community.

“The dramatic changes happening in Miami’s Liberty Square are a looking glass for contemporary issues of wide-scale significance: the affordable housing crisis, the impact of systemic racism, and climate gentrification,” said director Katja Esson. “Miami is experiencing sea-level rise before the rest of the

country. What is happening in Liberty Square is a prescient story of what is to come, and strategies put to the test here are being closely observed by the rest of the world.”

“Razing Liberty Square” begins at the very moment when Liberty Square is being razed to the ground to make way for the “New Liberty Square”—a \$300 million revitalization mixed income development project. However, one year into construction of new, mixed-income housing, news spreads that some promises made by the developer will not be honored. Principal Samantha Quarterman finds out that instead of a new building for her community school, the developer plans to build a brand new charter school, and the much-needed health center is shrunk to a mini-facility. The news triggers alarms for Samantha and local climate justice activist Valencia Gunder, who are both all too familiar with Miami’s long history of broken promises made to its Black communities.

With tensions on the rise between the community and developer, Aaron McKinney is hired as the developer’s “community liaison.” A lifelong Liberty City resident, he is convinced mixed-income housing is the solution to generational poverty, but also very aware that his position is tenuous. Despite ongoing obstacles, Valencia reclaims her grandparents’ home from the bank and moves back to the heart of Liberty City, and Aaron resigns from the developer to take on a new job, while Samantha is still fighting to build her own school building. The strides they make in the face of adversity bring hope to a critical predicament.

“‘Razing Liberty Square’ is an even-handed universal call for alarm as developers in Miami (and across the country) take an increased interest in rezoning housing, to allow people with greater financial means to move inland and avoid rising sea levels due to climate change,” said Lois Vossen, executive producer of INDEPENDENT LENS. “Environmental justice is no longer an abstract idea, as Black and low-income communities are being forced out of their longtime neighborhoods to create new housing for wealthy and middle-class citizens fleeing the encroaching ocean.”

Despite its eclectic mix of cultures, Miami is one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States. Liberty Square, and the surrounding Liberty City that grew up around it, were a cultural hot-spot for famous black entertainers and public figures. Barred from the whites-only beach hotels where they consistently sold out performances, world-class celebrities like Sammy Davis Jr., Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, and Lena Horne had to stay in

Liberty City hotels like the Hampton House. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the first version of his “I Have a Dream” speech there, and Malcolm X threw a victory party for Cassius Clay after he beat Sonny Liston in 1965.

“Razing Liberty Square” received Open Call funding from ITVS as well as funding from Black Public Media.

Visit the [“Razing Liberty Square”](#) page on INDEPENDENT LENS to learn more about the film.

About the Filmmakers

Katja Esson, Director/Producer

Katja Esson is an Academy Award-nominated filmmaker based in Miami. She has produced and directed documentaries for PBS and HBO. A Simons Humanities Fellow at Kansas University, her films have screened at MoMa and the Smithsonian, and is supported by NEA, Knight Foundation, IDA, NYSCA, Redford Center, Sundance, and Ford Foundation.

Ann Bennett, Producer

Ann Bennett is an Emmy® Award-nominated filmmaker, multimedia producer, and nonfiction storyteller for exhibitions, digital platforms, and networks like PBS, HBO, and Showtime. She holds fellowships with Sundance Creative Producing, Impact Partners, and Black Utopian Practice. Bennett is a graduate of Columbia Journalism School and Harvard College.

Corinna Sager, Producer

Corinna Sager is a producer whose projects have received an Oscar nomination, World of Change Award, and Cinema for Peace nomination. She is a Sundance Documentary Grantee, founded a film festival with the United Nations, and as professor at Pace University created the “Let’s Be Frank” discussion series about America’s melting pot.

CREDITS

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Katja Esson

Producers

Ann Bennett
Corinna Sager

**Executive Producers**

Sally Jo Fifer
Lois Vossen
Anja Murmann and Sabine Schenk
Leslie Fields-Cruz
and Denise. A. Greene

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning PBS documentary series. With founding executive producer Lois Vossen, the series has been honored with 10 Academy Award nominations and features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, INDEPENDENT LENS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. Stream anytime on the PBS App. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens.

ABOUT ITVS

Independent Television Services (ITVS) is the largest co-producer of independent documentaries in the United States. For more than 30 years, the San Francisco nonprofit has funded and partnered with documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning titles and premieres them on our Emmy Award-winning PBS series, INDEPENDENT LENS. ITVS titles appear on PBS, WORLD, NETA, and can be streamed on various digital platforms including the PBS App. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit itvs.org.

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