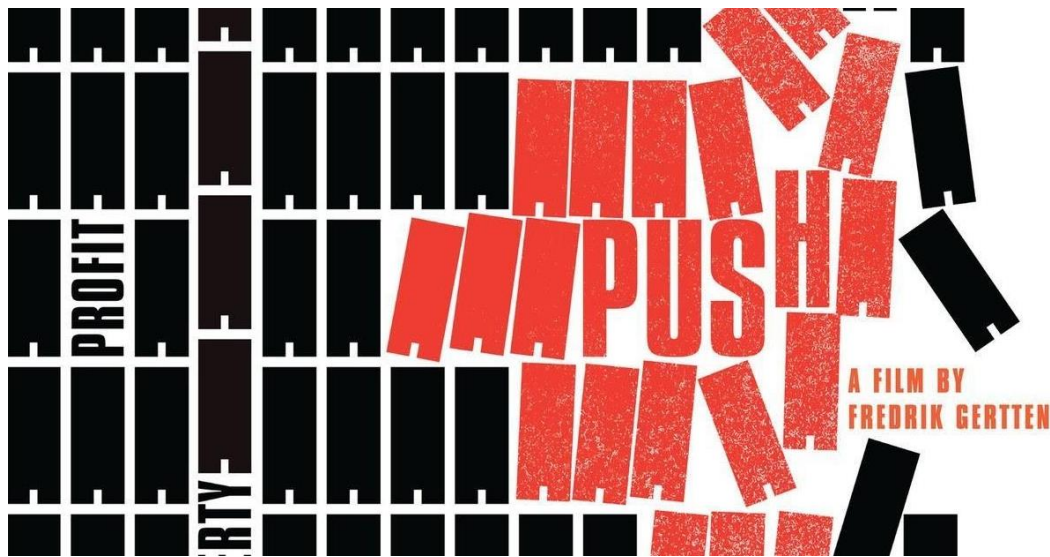




# Event Report

## Movie Night on #SustainableJustCities: The Right to Housing with "PUSH - The Film"

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## 1. Introduction

The event “Movie Night on #SustainableJustCities” presented an online screening of “PUSH - The Film” about the global housing crisis, and included an introduction and discussion on the topic of (right to) housing and how to contribute to a more just and sustainable housing system. The increasing financialization of the global housing market is threatening our right to housing and constantly changing the very nature and rules of living in cities. The lack of access to adequate and affordable housing is one of the first topics that need to be addressed as a step toward just and sustainable cities. Further, it can also be identified as one of the core social justice issues that increase the vulnerability in communities during the COVID-19 crisis.

“Housing has become the front line defence against the coronavirus.

Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation”

- Leilani Farha, Former UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing & Director of The Shift

Creating and adding to the discussion around the housing crisis and the right to housing has become important now more than ever. The event was hosted online on 17 June 2020 in Zoom and Vimeo. It focused on the theme of the Right to Housing - the right of all individuals to have access to adequate shelter. This report summarizes the main insights and outcomes of the discussion and provides links and references mentioned in the presentation and the note-taking document.

## 2. Background and context

### 2.1 VCC, UrbanA, DRIFT

The Movie Night was organized by the [Vital Cities & Citizens](#) (VCC) initiative of the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, in collaboration with the research project [Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities](#) (UrbanA) and [The Dutch Research Institute for Transitions](#) (DRIFT). VCC is part of Erasmus University Rotterdam and works towards improving the quality of life in cities by identifying the conditions for equal opportunities in life, safe living environments, and harmonious coexistence for an increasingly diverse population.

DRIFT institute is also based at Erasmus University Rotterdam and aims to accelerate transitions towards more just, sustainable, and resilient societies by generating new knowledge and creating societal impact. UrbanA, on the other hand, is an EU-funded project that brokers and synthesizes actionable knowledge on and for sustainable and just cities that are relevant and accessible to as many people as possible.

### 2.2 Purpose

The aim of the Movie Night was primarily to engage on the theme of [Sustainable & Just Cities](#) while reaching out to a diverse audience in an accessible and attractive format during the Covid-19 lockdown. It also aimed to explore the causes and consequences of the housing crisis and how to challenge these while contributing to more just and sustainable housing and cities in general. Besides sharing “PUSH - The Film” with a wider audience, the

event engaged them in an interactive and critical discussion about what they can do in their own cities.

## 2.3 Participants

A total of 187 people registered for the event, of which 80 people attended the introduction and movie, and 42 people attended the World Café discussion afterward. About half of these participants were from the Netherlands while the other half joined from both European and non-European countries including Germany, Sweden, Finland, USA, UK, India, and South Africa. About half of these participants were researchers and/or teachers, and about 20% were students. They came from diverse professional backgrounds including activists, entrepreneurs, policymakers, government officials, architects, urban designers, project coordinators, consultants, journalists, etc.

## 2.4 Design

The event consisted of three main sections - an introduction, movie screening, and World Café discussion. During the introduction, we started with a short poll as a way to check-in with all participants and to get to know each other and was followed by a presentation from [Flor Avelino](#), theme-lead of [Sustainable & Just Cities](#) for the VCC initiative and researcher at DRIFT. Sustainable and just cities were introduced as cities that strive to improve quality of life and well-being, meet the needs of both present and future generations, enable justice and equity, and live within ecosystem limits.

In addition to studying the underlying power relations and ways of empowerment to create change, these topics are studied through a translocal (locally embedded and globally connected) and transformative perspective (transition and social innovation). The presentation ended with a general note on the right to housing as an approach to sustainable & just cities, and about [The Shift](#) - a global movement to secure the human right to housing (see full presentation slides [here](#)).

After the movie, there was an interactive World Café, a knowledge sharing method designed to connect multiple ideas and perspectives by engaging participants in several rounds of small-group conversation. We organized two rounds of 15 minutes each. All participants were split into 11 Zoom break-out groups with about 3-4 people in each group and were redistributed for the second round. The discussion within the groups was self-organized and informal, and these were recorded in a shared google document by the group's note-taker (see shared note-taking document [here](#)). The following questions were discussed:

- What are your key takeaways from the PUSH documentary?
- What are ideas/ strategies/ best practices to challenge the housing crisis and contribute to a more just & sustainable housing system? (Local, national, and/or global)?

After the World Café, we formally ended with a check-out through another poll where participants described their experience of the movie night in one word. We tried to create a welcoming and informal environment throughout the event, for example, the participants

could join the event over drinks and/or food, were asked to wear a 'silly hat' when joining back for World Café, and were given fun check-in and check-out polls for more active engagement. The event ended with an open and optional virtual after-talks to share their initiatives and network with other professionals.

### 3. Main insights & outcomes from World Café

The World Café aimed to discuss the participant's key takeaways from the movie and share their ideas, strategies, and best practices on how to tackle the challenges for [#Right2Housing](#) and contribute to more [#SustainableJustCities](#). This section presents a summary of the answer to these key questions.

#### 3.1 What are your key takeaways from the PUSH documentary?

"PUSH – The Film" follows the investigation of Leilani Farha, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on adequate housing about the global rise in housing prices and rents which are pushing several people into poverty and homelessness. Most of the participants believed that the movie is powerful, shocking, overwhelming, and depressing all at the same time.

The main takeaway for most of the groups was that the documentary established the 'financialization' of the housing market as the reason why urban housing has become unaffordable for the middle class and poorer sections of the society. This means that housing is treated as a financial asset or commodity, and the resulting housing crisis becomes ever more complex and intangible due to layers of interconnectivity with the financial system, private institutions, housing system, local government bodies, pension funds, etc. Housing issues such as gentrification, speculation, privatization, and eviction are all a manifestation of this financialization. As a result, it can be difficult for people to wrap their heads around this issue. One of the group summarizes that,

"Housing is not about living places for people anymore, it's about making profit for corporations like Blackstone... the financialization of housing is so deep that you can't just think about it as - this is my home and it will stay so"

The main players behind financialization of the housing sector are private equity firms such as Blackstone, who has massive wealth that is growing exponentially and holds power to impact cities and communities. Many groups held these powerful financial players responsible for the housing crisis and for abusing their power with apparent impunity while others found it more difficult or problematic to point out 'the bad guy'. For example, some groups pointed out that it is not just the financial players, the policymakers and the law enforcing government bodies are also responsible for this social injustice due to the lack of interventions to protect the interest of the citizens. They should have the necessary power to create a balanced system, yet in the documentary, it seems that the local politicians don't have power or feel powerless. In addition, government officials have to often bring financial experts on board when making decisions about this complex socio-economic mechanism. This raises questions for some people: Who do we trust? How do we keep 'experts' accountable?

Other groups took important insights for individuals and communities as well. Some believe that it is “crucial that the voice is being mobilized from people and communities that are affected”. This is important to build critical counter-narratives and power to actively oppose the processes of social injustice, or else the affected people risk being outnumbered and outsmarted. Another group points that besides the lack of morality on the side of the financial sector, the lack of knowledge about the consequences of our individual choices as a consumer is also at the heart of the problem. One participant explains this using the example of remarks made in the documentary that due to the massive buy of rural land, people have to move to the cities and the urban land becomes more precious:

“What drives many people to live in the cities. Is it only because of ‘massive buy of rural land’ (by whom and why?) or also because we learn to value city life and work more than the rural life and work? Can we ‘blame’ that on corporate marketing or should we also blame ourselves for not being more critical and as a consequence, our education? Why does going to Starbucks feel better than going to the streetcafé? I will end up with a chicken-egg story...”

Most groups were surprised by the information about money flows from the pension funds to the hedge funds of the real estate investment companies, because they need to invest their money to create more money to prevent devaluation. The documentary through several case studies cleverly shows how unchecked capitalism is causing tragedy at the human level across the world. A few people also questioned whether the language or framework of addressing this problem as a ‘human rights’ is right and/or sufficient as this is not just about housing but also financialization more generally. A participant remarks about the challenge of a common language to bring this complex and interdisciplinary topic together:

“It was interesting to see how she (Leilani) was struggling to find a (legal) language that would bring all parties (States, movements, and finance) together. How to put into a framework that is also legally binding? Is the human rights perspective/language the right tool to fight against these developments?”

While many groups acknowledged that this housing crisis is an issue throughout the world, some people said they were shocked to see this crisis in the Global North countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden, especially with the pension funds system. Some people remarked that the housing rental versus ownership debate was missing in the documentary. Others highlighted that a few remarks from the movie were too simplistic and sometimes the connection between statements was not obvious. Overall, the documentary created a strong emotional reaction for many and raised several questions: How do we fight back? How are groups of citizens taking action? What strategies could we use? How do we connect translocally? How can we bring balance into the system? How can we dismantle the system?

### **3.2 What are ideas/ strategies/ best practices to challenge the housing crisis and contribute to a more just & sustainable housing system?**

Participants mentioned several formal and informal practices, from government regulations to social movements to community action, to tackle the housing crisis and ensure the right to housing. Firstly, all the groups recognized that the most important practice to maintain

balance in the housing system is through efficient tenancy and housing laws by the government that limits the commodification of housing and ensures stable conditions of adequate access to housing and affordability for its citizens.

These laws may include but are not limited to rental control, investing in housing infrastructure, imposing restrictions on empty buildings and speculation, and regulating the investment of large multinational corporations. Vienna, for example, has a unique social housing program in which the city government regulates the rent at 20-25% of household income. In Barcelona, the municipality promotes Masoveria Urbana or Urban Farming that uses an old system of exchange where a person can access housing on cheap social rent through investments in labour. The Dutch government also subsidizes mortgages. However, these questions remain: What about the housing that is already owned by private financial actors? How do we extract the ownership back? How do we restore balance in the housing system?

Social movements, collective action, and activism were the other identified practices that play an important role in building counter powers by uniting the citizens. For example, housing in itself is so expensive for all, and in particular, poor people who struggle to access money, particularly from banks. Community-saving groups empower communities to access housing or funding and can also be linked well with incremental housing. In Spain, Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) or People Affected by Mortgages is a social movement that aims to prevent the systematic eviction of tens of thousands of debtors. Estate Watch is a platform to provide resources for tenants and residents undergoing estate regeneration and scrutinizes the actions of the Mayor of London. In the last two examples, it is a direct conflict between the social movement actors and the government. The success for such action, however, is dependent on context, geography, and the political situations:

“Housing cooperatives did not survive very well in South Africa. They had a high rate of failure as a low-cost housing project and needed a lot of policy support. It is not easy to implement a cooperative as it takes a lot of enthusiasm among the stakeholders to make it sustainable along with resource support, technical support, and architectural planning.”

Some groups have suggested a need for new models that use interdisciplinary knowledge, participatory approaches, and collaborations between local government, civil society organizations, researchers, and local communities to frame the problem in a broader context and find unique solutions. Also, education and awareness about the housing crisis were recognized as important for self-awareness and to create counter-narratives of de-financialization. Rather than blaming “the gentrifying hipsters” as the perpetrators of rising prices, it is about more people realizing the role of the financial sector. Other groups discussed strategies of using data repositories with the mapping of housing demand, availability, and ownership for more transparency and enabling the right to housing, especially when tenants don’t get the required services or when they are at risk of eviction.

At an individual level, one lacks the power to control where your pension fund is invested. It is also not common knowledge that your pension funds may end up as the hedge funds of private equity firms like Blackstone. Besides creating awareness about these funds, most groups proposed ideas of some alternative to pension funds which are commercially valued

but ethical. Someone also questioned if again, we should start looking after each other instead of handing over all care to institutions, while another proposed that the pension holders can create a code of conduct to ensure that their money is invested ethically. One group also discussed that homelessness is rampant and several buildings are lying empty, which can be used for squatting, and how is it possible to get widespread support for that. A large number of participants also suggested the banning of tax havens and fiscal paradises as they provide space for money laundering mechanisms.

## 4. Links & references from presentation & note-taking document

### 4.1 Links

- Network of housing projects in Germany: Mietshäuser-Syndikat, <https://www.syndikat.org/en/>
- London tenant's organization - <https://estatewatch.london/>
- Vienna's social housing program: [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr\\_edge\\_featd\\_article\\_011314.html](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/pdredge/pdr_edge_featd_article_011314.html)
- Mortgage Victim Platform (PAH) in Spain: <https://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/2014/09/18/stop-desahucios-octubre-2/>

### 4.2 Publications

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- Schlosberg, D. (2013). Theorising environmental justice: The expanding sphere of a discourse. *Environmental Politics*. 22(1), 37-55. [10.1080/09644016.2013.755387](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.755387)