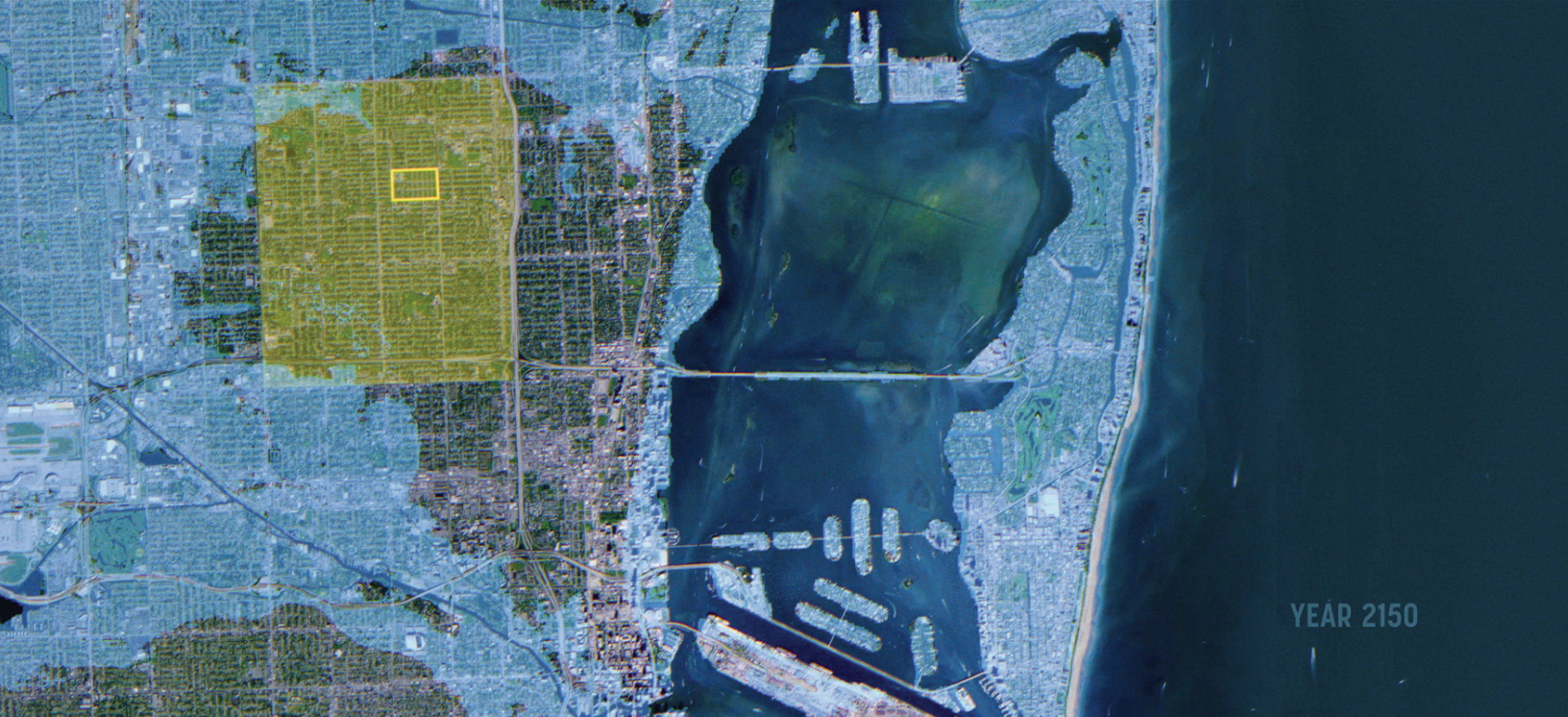


# RAZING LIBERTY SQUARE



**DISCUSSION GUIDE**





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## LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

Liberty Square is located only a few blocks from where I live. When I came to Miami in the late 1980s to study film, this crazy, exciting, vain place blew my German mind. My first job in the film industry was as a production assistant on 2Live Crew music videos, all filmed in Liberty City. In pursuit of my dream of making documentaries, I moved to New York City—but Miami never left me.

When I moved back in 2016, Miami had exploded into a metropolis with a changed cityscape and thriving new neighborhoods. Only Liberty City seemed frozen in time. And then the bulldozers started rolling in.

I picked up my camera and started filming. I wanted to document something remarkable; something that continues to be ignored by the larger part of the city. That was 2017, and we have been filming ever since.

During our five years together, the protagonists' and community's growing trust and collaboration have fiercely inspired me to make this film. As they share their stories, an intimate portrait of a community that is fighting to save itself from being erased is emerging. My hope is that *Razing Liberty Square* will become part of the larger conversation.

—Katja Esson, Director and Producer, *Razing Liberty Square*





## ABOUT THE FILM

Liberty City, Miami, was home to one of the oldest segregated public housing projects in the United States. Now, with sea levels rising, the neighborhood's higher ground has become something else: real estate gold. Wealthy property owners push inland to higher ground, creating a speculators' market in the historically Black neighborhood previously ignored by developers and policymakers alike.

Learn more [here](#).

## SCREENING OBJECTIVES

As the climate changes and sea levels rise, our communities are changing too. From Miami to Maui, neighborhoods are fundamentally shifting as developers move investments from the beachfront to higher ground and capitalize on natural disasters to buy cheap land. For Black people, Indigenous people, and other communities of color whose lives are shaped by legacies of housing injustice, these examples of climate gentrification threaten their homes, livelihoods, and neighborhoods. We hope your screenings will provide a forum for residents, advocates, and decision makers to explore ways to make sure climate redevelopment is equitable for all residents. Suggested topics include:

- Discussing how to communicate the urgency of addressing climate change in ways that facilitate environmental justice for communities most impacted
- Discussing how the affordable housing crisis is impacting people who have been historically marginalized in the community and how residents are responding
- Connecting the dots between climate change and housing struggles by examining the current and potential future impacts of climate gentrification on local communities.

# POTENTIAL SPEAKERS AND PARTNERS

Your screening is an opportunity to bring together panelists and partners who can speak to the intersecting issues of affordable housing, climate change, and racial justice. There are many options:

## Climate advocates, scientists, and researchers

- See [the map](#) from 350.org to find a group in your area that is working on climate justice organizing
- Find [a local chapter](#) of the Sierra Club
- Find [your state affiliate](#) of the League of Conservation Voters
- See if there is a [Climate Hero](#) profiled by Project Drawdown near you
- Check out [the map](#) from the Solutions Project to find leaders near you who are investing in climate and equity solutions

## Affordable housing service providers, organizers, and advocates

- Search for [housing advocates](#) affiliated with the National Low Income Housing Coalition
- Find [a local affiliate](#) of Rebuilding Together
- Explore [the directory](#) at NeighborWorks America
- Connect with [a local affiliate](#) of PowerSwitch Action

## Grassroots and civic engagement organizations

- Find [a local affiliate](#) of The Center for Popular Democracy
- Check if People's Action has [a member organization](#) in your state
- See if Right to the City Alliance has [a local member organization](#)
- Check if Local Process has [a chapter](#) in your state



## ABOUT LIBERTY CITY

Miami has long been considered one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States (remnants of the approximately 7-foot-high “race wall” around the Liberty Square housing development are still visible today). For decades, Liberty Square and the surrounding Liberty City were cultural hot spots for famous Black entertainers and public figures. Barred from staying in the whites-only beach hotels in which they were performing, world-class celebrities like Sammy Davis Jr., Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, and Lena Horne instead stayed in Liberty City hotels. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the first version of his “I Have a Dream” speech at the Hampton House (then a hotel, now the Historic Hampton House), and Malcolm X threw a victory party there for Muhammad Ali (then, Cassius Clay) after he beat Sonny Liston in 1964.

The people of Liberty City rose up against police brutality during the 1980 Miami Riots when an all-white jury acquitted officers in the death of Arthur McDuffie—a Black Liberty City resident and former U.S. marine who was brutally beaten by police during a traffic stop.

Now Liberty Square and the surrounding area are undergoing redevelopment, but the history of segregation and overpolicing, gun violence, and the rising cost of living continue to be concerns of residents who are working to secure a seat at the redevelopment planning table.

Learn [more](#) and see the mementos from Liberty City residents.





## CLIMATE CHANGE

**GOAL:** Communicate the urgent need to address climate change in ways that facilitate environmental justice for communities most impacted.

*“When I was a child, my grandfather would always say, ‘They are going to come take Liberty City because we don’t flood.’”*

—Valencia Gunder, Climate Justice Organizer

The term climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns that are accelerated when people burn fossil fuels like coal, oil, and gas. Emissions from fossil fuels that enter the atmosphere, called greenhouse gases (GHGs), create a blanket over Earth’s atmosphere, trapping heat and altering climate conditions. On a per-capita basis, the United States is the world’s largest contributor ([C2ES](#)), with transportation, electricity production, and industry creating the majority of emissions ([EPA](#)). The climate has already warmed by 1.1 degrees Celsius since the Industrial Revolution, and the last decade (2011–2020) was the warmest on record ([UN](#)). Communities are starting to experience multiple consequences from climate change, including glacial melt accelerating the sea level rise for coastal communities like Miami. In the next 30 years (2020–2050), sea levels along the U.S. coastline are projected to rise by an average of 10 to 12 inches, which is equal to the amount of rise over the 100-year period of 1920–2020 ([NOAA](#)). Storms and flooding are growing more extreme in many parts of the United States, and in other areas, climate change contributes to drought, wildfires, and biodiversity loss ([IPCC](#)). And even though low-income people, people with disabilities, and elderly people who cannot afford to move contribute the least to GHG emissions, they are the most severely impacted by climate change. Climate justice organizers, like Valencia Gunder in the film, have been educating citizens about climate change and urging leaders to transition to clean energy, but progress has been slow and fraught with resistance. However, public opinion and political will reflect a growing acknowledgment that climate change demands our urgent attention ([PEW Research](#)).

## Discussion Questions

- What is climate change and what causes it? What are the biggest contributors to climate change?
- How is climate change impacting your region? What do scientists expect will change in the next 15, 25, and 50 years?
- What can you do to bring awareness of the issue of climate change to your friends and family? How can they learn more on the subject?
- In the film, Valencia says, “People think that climate change or environmental things is not like a ‘Black people’ issue, but one thing I learned about climate, it affects us in the worst way.” What does she mean by that?
- What are some strategies that communities are using to adapt to climate change? What is being done in your area to prepare for extreme conditions?
- Who are the biggest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in your community? What is your community doing to reduce local emissions?
- What can we do individually to make a difference in climate change? What more can we do collectively?

## More Resources

- **VIDEO** – Climate collection from PBS
- **MAP** – New climate maps show a transformed United States
- **BOOK** – *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet*, by Leah Thomas

## Activities

- **Climate Change Solutions**—Most people are now aware of climate change, but many aren’t sure what they can do about it. Project Drawdown is a nonprofit that measures and ranks the potential for climate solutions to slow climate change. To add interactivity and engagement, you could print out the top 10 solutions to climate change as ranked by Project Drawdown and invite audience members to rank them for potential and feasibility. Make Project Drawdown’s answer sheet available for people to compare their rankings. Learn more [here](#).
- **Safety Planning**—Preparedness in times of crisis is important for building individual and community resilience. You could lead a safety planning workshop to help your audience prepare themselves in the event of a natural disaster. The Red Cross offers emergency [planning worksheets](#) in English and Spanish that you can make available at your event.
- **Climate Curriculum**—Connect with a local school, college, or community senior center to screen the film and teach environmental justice curriculum. For people of all ages, climate science may be a topic that was seldom or never discussed in their education. Look for climate curriculum that has an environmental justice lens, such as the [Zinn Project’s climate curriculum collection](#) for elementary through high school levels that can be relevant for all ages.





## AFFORDABLE HOUSING

**GOAL:** Discuss how the affordable housing crisis is impacting people who have been historically marginalized in your community and how residents are responding.

*“Every time I see these kids that look like me, remind me of myself, playing in the yard back in the day, I get why we are doing it, to create this new space—this clean safe space that folks can have pride and dignity in ... to provide folks a better quality of life.”*

—Aaron McKinney, Former Development Coordinator, Related Urban

Public housing is the result of years of grassroots organizing by housing advocates during the Great Depression who pushed to include a public housing program in the New Deal. The first public housing units were built in the 1930s, but were available to white residents only ([NLIHC](#)). Over three decades, the Federal Housing Administration deeply segregated housing—subsidizing affordable subdivisions for white families while “redlining” Black residents and immigrants, in effect forcing them into urban centers, where it discouraged private investment ([NPR](#)). Civil rights leaders, some of whom met in Liberty City, organized to pass the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which made all housing segregation illegal in the United States. In 1974, the Nixon administration issued a moratorium on public housing spending, and subsequent presidents followed suit—even as units deteriorated and became unsafe. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration demolished many public housing projects and largely displaced the people who lived there ([NLIHC](#)). In place of public housing, federal policy has shifted toward providing Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers, like those offered to Liberty Square residents in the film. Vouchers are housing subsidies paid directly to landlords on behalf of residents who are eligible based on income ([HUD](#)). In 2008, the housing market experienced a major disruption during the subprime mortgage crisis, and many small developers went out of business. Big developers that survived focused on maximizing profits rather than providing affordable or mixed-income housing, which has driven housing costs up in cities across the country. ([JHU](#))

## Discussion Questions

- What are the impacts of the housing crisis on your own life? Have your family or friends been impacted by not being able to afford current housing?
- What affordable housing options exist in your community? How affordable is it for all people in your community?
- What is the history of public housing in your community? What public housing exists or has existed?
- Why do you think public housing is no longer built in the United States? What perceptions about public housing shape decision making?
- What are Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers? How accessible are they in your community?
- Aaron says in the film, “We’re creating a mixed-income community, where you have public housing units, affordable housing units, and market rate units all in the same development.” What is mixed-income housing and how does it compare with public housing projects?
- Where is development occurring in your community? What would you like to see developed and how?

## More Resources

- **PODCAST** – *Bending the Arc*, by The National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities, Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University
- **REPORT** – State of the Nation’s Housing 2023 Report
- **WEBSITE** – Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America, by the University of Richmond’s Digital Scholarship Lab

## Activities

- **Housing Assistance**—Offer free housing counseling assistance to people at your screening and the wider community. You could partner with a local housing organization, a school in a gentrifying neighborhood, or a clinic to make the opportunity available to people who need it most. Explore [the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s housing counseling services](#) for more resources.
- **Resilience Resource Fair**—Invite housing, climate, health, and education organizations to table at your event to help connect your audience members to resilience-building resources. Look for organizations that can help people reduce their climate impact, find affordable housing, explore childcare and after-school options, find low-cost healthcare services, and get involved with a community-based organization that offers mutual aid. Ask your partners and speakers to recommend organizations that have built trust in communities of color and provide time before and after the screening for people to have one-on-one discussions about resources. You can also browse [Guide Star](#) to find nonprofit organizations near you.
- **Community Forum**—Use your screening discussion as a space for residents and citizens to express their views on housing issues to elected leaders. Invite your mayor, city council members, county board members, and local redevelopment authorities to be active listeners at your screening discussions and work with local organizers to invite residents who want their voices heard. Remember that Indie Lens Pop-Up organizers and speakers cannot advocate for or endorse specific legislation at events, but they can share educational information about solutions being discussed by local leaders and how to participate in local government. Check out [this guide](#) from Community Catalyst with more tips on organizing community forums.





## CLIMATE GENTRIFICATION

**GOAL:** Connect the dots between climate change and housing struggles by examining the current and potential future impacts of climate gentrification on local communities.

*“All the people I see that are talking, that are planning this don’t live in this community. That’s what’s happening all over the Black communities in this county. This is our community.”*

—Mr. Murray, Liberty Square Resident

Climate gentrification occurs when affluent people move to climate-safe areas historically occupied by communities of color or immigrant communities. The influx of income and development into the neighborhood drives up housing prices over time, making it unaffordable for the people who have lived there for generations to remain in their communities. (NRDC) In coastal cities, housing policies and prices had pushed communities of color and immigrants to live in neighborhoods on higher ground because wealthy people wanted beachfront real estate. (AP) But now that sea levels are rising along waterfront property, that is changing. Affluent people and developers are looking for climate-safe real estate investments on higher ground, like those in Liberty City, displacing longtime residents in the process. The risk of climate gentrification is that low-income people—who have contributed the least to climate change and have fewer resources to protect themselves—will be forced to live in areas of the community that are less safe. Accounting for equity and environmental justice, the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to environmental regulations is an important consideration in climate redevelopment. (EPA)

## Discussion Questions

- How do you define climate gentrification? What are some examples you see elsewhere in the United States?
- How are climate gentrification and the housing crisis contributing to the populations of homeless/unhoused people throughout the country?
- How have legacies of segregation, redlining, and disinvestment shaped your community?
- Which neighborhoods in your community are considered more climate-safe? How do you anticipate those neighborhoods changing over time?
- Samantha says in the film, “I have a problem with them tearing down Liberty Square. Liberty Square is the heart. When you destroy the heart, you destroy this community [and] you destroy the people.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- What are strategies for creating diverse and inclusive neighborhoods? What’s working and why? What more could be done?

## More Resources

- [MAP](#) – Mapping America’s Rental Housing Crisis
- [ARTICLE](#) – “Climate Is the Newest Gentrifying Force, and Its Effects Are Already Reshaping Cities”
- [ARTICLE](#) – “A Nation of Walls: The Overlooked History of Race Barriers in the United States”

## Activities

- **Power Mapping**—You can lead a power-mapping activity that invites people to identify and reflect on the decision makers in their community who shape the way neighborhoods develop. Power mapping is a tool that can be used to advocate for increased transparency in decision-making processes and to identify the people who support or oppose a given position. The Commons Social Change Library provides [guidelines](#) for your power-mapping activity.
- **Local History Exhibit**—Celebrate the history of a redlined neighborhood in your community by inviting people who have lived there to share stories, photos, and mementos. You could also contact your local historical society, cultural heritage centers, and leaders from local housing associations that could invite residents to bring materials to show and tell. Check out the [directory of historians](#) to get started.
- **Storytelling**—Encourage people to record their stories about climate change and gentrification. Suggest they use the 350.org [Storytelling Toolkit](#) to guide them through digital storytelling. Or your participants can download the [StoryCorps App](#) to help them create recordings at your event. The app offers questions for them to ask in advance so people know what to expect and can give informed consent to media makers. Some questions for storytelling prompts include the following:
  - What is the first place you considered home?
  - What made it feel like home to you?
  - Share a happy memory from the place you grew up.
  - If there is something you’d like to change about the place where you live, what is it?
  - How has the neighborhood where you grew up changed?
  - How is climate change affecting your community?
  - What gives you hope about the future of your community?



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## INDIE LENS POP-UP

Indie Lens Pop-Up is a neighborhood series that brings people together—virtually and in-person—for film screenings and community-driven conversations. Featuring documentaries seen on PBS's *Independent Lens*, Indie Lens Pop-Up draws local residents, leaders, and organizations to discuss what matters most, from newsworthy topics and social issues to family and community relationships. Since its inception in 2005, more than 6,700 Indie Lens Pop-Up events have brought an estimated 400,000 participants together to discuss issues that impact local communities. For more information, visit its [website](#).

## 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 its [website](#).

Join the conversation with #LibertySquarePBS on X, Facebook, and Instagram at @IndependentLens.

## ITVS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for more than 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, *Independent Lens*, as well as on other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Humanities: American Rescue Plan, Acton Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit its [website](#).

## BLACK PUBLIC MEDIA

Black Public Media (BPM) supports the development of visionary content creators and distributes stories about the global Black experience to inspire a more equitable and inclusive future. For more than four decades, BPM has addressed the needs of unserved and underserved audiences. BPM continues to address historical, contemporary, and systemic challenges that traditionally impede the development and distribution of Black stories. For more information, visit its [website](#).

## CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private, nonprofit corporation created by Congress in 1967, is the steward of the federal government's investment in public broadcasting. It helps support the operations of more than 1,500 locally owned and operated public television and radio stations nationwide. CPB is also the largest single source of funding for research, technology, and program development for public radio, public television, and related online services. For more information, visit its [website](#).

