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BIG WIN, LITTLE MOUNTAIN Film screening turns into victory party; pending eviction cancelled

By Natalie Corbo | Published: NOVEMBER 6, 2012



Relief, more so than celebration, seemed to be the atmosphere at the Little Mountain Gallery impromptu victory party for tenants and supporters of the Little Mountain social housing project.

The film screening on Oct. 26 was intended as a lead-up to what should have been a stressful week for the last four households living in the Little Mountain social housing in Mt. Pleasant. They planned to spend Monday at City Hall, pleading a case against eviction that they did not expect to win. The eviction of the tenants, who had been fighting pending eviction since 2009, was officially cancelled by the City of Vancouver and Holborn Properties the day



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prior. "We thought that today we'd be at a meeting listening to lawyers for BC Housing cram their eviction notices down the throats of the tenants," says David Vaisbord, the filmmaker behind the short documentaries that were screened at Little Mountain that night.

The short films are part of a project that will ultimately turn into a feature-length documentary. The gradual process was intentional, explains Vaisbord, as the films added to the ongoing dialogue within the public sphere about the fate of the housing project. "The process is the product," he says. "So at any point in the process of making the documentary film I can find a product to put onto the web, or to put somewhere ... where it needs to be placed when it's relevant."

The Little Mountain Gallery screening was the last of a series of screenings that has included UBC, Spartacus Books, Emily Carr and, perhaps most importantly, Vancouver City Hall. The five films, which were screened in immediate succession, provoked audible reactions of surprise and outrage among crowd members.

One film centres around rapper and former Little Mountain tenant Red1, who talks about growing up in the project. He points out the house where the first girl he had a crush on grew up, and improvises a rap about the pending demolition. In another short, former resident Debbie Lawrence subverts security guards with a cameraman, in order to get one final shot of the house she grew up in, before it is torn down.

The films make sense to be viewed as parts of a whole, which is indeed what they are. One film entitled *The Eviction of Sammy and Joan* does stand alone especially well, though, and provoked emotional reactions (and following the film, utter silence, according to Vaisbord) when it was screened in front of City Council. In seven minutes, it tells the story of the blind senior couple who wonder how they could possibly learn to adapt to new surroundings if they are evicted. It's an intimate glimpse into their life, as Sam shows off a box of his old sports medals, and harvests vegetables from the organic garden in his yard that he has tended to for years.

The subjects of Vaisbord's documentary project were all in attendance at Little Mountain Gallery, and pleased as they are with the City's decision, they recognize that the struggle for social housing and justice in Vancouver is always ongoing. Ingrid Steenhuisen, who grew up in the project, is the subject of one film that documents her five-year fight to stay. She's pleased with the victory, but notes that we must "make sure it never happens this way again."

Vaisbord calls his project a "hyper-local documentary," and explains, "I was convinced that I could really find compelling stories in my neighbourhood that would speak to not only local issues but international issues ... I discovered Little Mountain housing which is only three blocks away from my home, but it's a place where neoliberalism, which is a big, huge juggernaut, is acting out its process."

Beyond that, the whole event is a reminder of the importance of looking close to home for inspiration. Friday night's musical guest, neighbourhood resident and singer-songwriter Rose Melberg, talked about raising her son in the neighbourhood, and about writing one song while walking past the boarded up windows of the Little Mountain housing project. "This is a song about hope," she said, in the middle of a set that prompted Vaisbord to ask her to collaborate on music for his documentary.

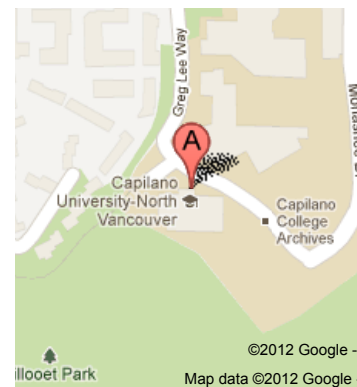
Vaisbord expresses concern about people's ability to tell these kinds of stories about their own communities. "You have to be self-financed if you want to look into your own neighbourhood because there's nothing too sexy about Canada," he says. "We can't get

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international money to tell our stories.”

Indeed, these kinds of projects have the ability to change public opinion, and sometimes even make an important impression on City Hall.

For the future, Vaisbord is planning a digital installation, called The Sign Project, at the site of the Little Mountain housing project, which will allow people to view the films and learn about the site’s history while walking around the area.

To watch *The Eviction of Sammy and Joan*, visit Vaisbord.com/blog/eviction-sammy-joan/, and for more info on the upcoming Sign Project, visit Vaisbord.com/blog/sign-project/.

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