

# Property, Home and Precarity: From Street Sweeps to Housing Justice

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**Event host:** SFU Public Square

**Speakers:** Janet Webber, Elder Margaret George, Nicholas Blomley, Delilah Gregg, Magie Ramírez, Meenakshi Manno, Victor Yin, Claire Aplas, Yvonne Huang, Greg Hansen, Zoe Muckle, Andrew Battle, Nathan Zemp, Eric Ramirez, Krishniel Ram, Natalie Bodenschatz, Jonathan Ling, Leo Dittmer

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## **JANET WEBBER:**

Good evening everyone! My name is Janet Webber and I am the executive director of SFU Public Square and we are a proud sponsor of today's event. It is my honour to invite Elder Margaret George, a member of the Squamish first nation to provide us with an opening prayer.

## **ELDER MARGARET GEORGE:**

Good evening, everyone. Can you hear me?



colonization of these lands. We are broadcasting live from 312 Main, 312 Main is a community centre hub for social and economic innovation located in the downtown Eastside. SFU public square team works out of the space, along with other SFU units including lifelong learning, the office of community engagement, the SFU library community scholars program, and the community engagement research initiative.

Welcome to all of you and all of you, and thank you for being with us for Property, Home & Precarity: From Street Sweeps to Housing Justice. We have a small in-person audience here and we have many of you joining us online.

For those online, please feel free to introduce yourself in the chat and let us know where you are joining us from. Tonight's event is special for a number of reasons. First, it is our final event of 2021. In the final event of our 2021 community Summit series Towards Equity. Our annual community Summit is a multi-day, or in this case, multi-month exploration of complex social challenges and potential solutions through programming that leverages the research excellence of SFU and the lived experience of our community partners. This year we have been asking – what must we understand and do to recover equitably from the pandemic? And reimagine our systems to confront the intersecting crises of systemic racism, and climate change. Tonight's topic is one of these crises that intersect very visibly. The other reason tonight's special is because this event is part of our Classroom Partnership Program, we are thrilled to have been able to cooperate this event with Doctor Nicholas Blomley and the students in this semester's fourth-year geography class, property, land, society. These incredible students have been engaged in research on housing for clarity and will be sharing it with us tonight. I

have had a chance to go around and see the presentations – they are amazing. I cannot wait to hear more.

Before I pass you on to Nick and his students, I will cover some housekeeping notes. To make this event accessible, we have closed captioning available you can access by going to the panel at the bottom of your screen and clicking the CC button. We ask that everyone respect the community guidelines you received when you registered for this event. So we have a safe, honest, and socially accountable dialogue together this evening. We remind everyone with us in person to please keep your masks on at all times except for when you are eating. Or drinking. What you have to do at your seats. And your mask goes back on when you are done. This event is being recorded and will be shared on SFU Public Square's YouTube channel and we will send it out to everyone in the next few days. A huge thanks to our SFU team for all of the amazing technical support, we could not have done our work without you.

Now to take us to the event, I will pass the microphone to our moderator this evening – after Nicholas Blomley who is a professor of geography at SFU. It has a long-standing interest in property, and procured you. He is currently involved in community based research projects concerning SROs in the downtown east side and the seizure of precariously housed people's possessions. Please welcome Nicholas Blomley.

(Applause)

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Thank you very much, Janet. Welcome to those of you here in person and to those of you joining us online, my thanks to Elder Margaret George for starting us off in the right way with that traditional acknowledgement and the prayer.

I am your moderator for this event. Thanks also to the organizers, SFU Public Square, notably Seth and the whole crew worked very hard on this project. My thanks to the

do and which this happens varies, many – maybe most people access shelter, and land through negotiations with powerful, dominant propertied interests.

One of asymmetry, and unevenness. For certain people and interests where they are given greater power over others. It can remove access to land, they can place others in heightened vulnerability, renters, houseless people for example, live under highly precarious property relations and we will learn about that this evening. We will explore certain dimensions of property home and for charity, with a focus on Metro Vancouver in particular. This is how the evening is going to proceed. Shortly I will introduce our panel, all of whom have experienced and acknowledged this subject in various ways.

Then we will listen to and engage with four brief presentations, put together by the student groups in my class. What they will do is they will explore four key sites in which questions of precarious property are expressed and contested. Street Sweeps, Rental

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**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**



**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

The dominant relation sustains the power relations we are going to be talking about.

Thinking about the relevant and sustaining the system, absolutely.

**MAGIE RAMIREZ:**

Pushing behind the whole idea of ownership, abolishing the concept that one person or people should own anything.

**MEENAKSHI MANNOE:**

And what Delilah is saying that people are also fallible. So you cannot just assume that one form of colonial dominant ownership can replace another. I have been through my building being resold actually. It did not really change. But it could have, I could have lost my own. So what does that mean? It is more than that.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Even people in the system have very different relationships than someone who is a tenant. Someone who is a financial last... Where the landlord is trying to get as much money as they can from the asset, which is the way it has been described. They are likely going to put people in more precarious relationships. In fact, it trickles right down to people's experiences of being kicked out, life on the street as well. That is a relationship of power and politics as well that we need to think about. Wonderful.





otherwise used for other activities like finding housing, looking for jobs, taking care of each other or even socializing. Possessions can also become commodities for someone housed people because street vending can be a main source of income. Street vendors sell their goods on the streets. And Street Sweeps interfere with this activity. And interfere with people's livelihoods and people's personal and economic agency as a result.

Property relations involve owner privilege, and the suites that happen in the downtown Eastside risk -- reflect the vulnerability for those who are unhoused. What are some solutions to Street Sweeps? It would be to end them altogether. This would have to occur at a policy level within Vancouver or other levels of government. There has already been a push to ending Street Sweeps by organizations and residents. For example, organizations like the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users and Pivot Legal Society have used media outlets and other news conferences to bring awareness of Street Sweeps to really push for the ending of the sweeps.

In the meantime, finding intermediary solutions can also help with mitigating the impacts and the harm that people face from this practice. So we have identified three potential solutions to reduce the effects of street sweeps. But these are not an alternative to ending Street Sweeps altogether. The first financial solution could be better carts for those who are unhoused. So for example, the UBC cards project seeks to redesign the traditional grocery card into something that is safer and more durable so unhoused people can safely and securely store their belongings. The second could be storage facilities. Many cities are starting to find storage facilities for un-housed people or they



Thank you so much for having us, it is great to be here.

**YVONNE HUANG:**

My name is Yvonne, and like it was mentioned we are part of the geography class and we are representing the Street Sweeps group.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Wonderful. Let's think of some questions. I imagine you might have a couple of questions given pivots role in this Street Sweeps project and more recently in the downtown eastside. You want to kick off?

**MEENAKSHI MANNOE:**

Great presentation. I am wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about how folks resist Street Sweeps and what you learned in doing your research.

**YVONNE HUANG:**

I think one main way that I found people have been resisting, and this has been a longtime practice I guess is using public art. So I think that is a very easily accessible way to resist because anyone can take pay accounts or something and create some art. And that is one way to communicate important messages such as how items are not just items, but they have deeper meaning for people who are on housed and -- on housed and by presenting these messages the wider population can understand that























**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

It is a very perverse irony. Indigenous people being expelled, and Indigenous people being forced into the housing market, but then they may get precarious due processes of eviction. This is the same logic that colonialism is unfolding.

**ZOE MUCKLE:**

The term that comes to mind is the circle of disposition. Land has been dispossessed, and continues to be dispossessed.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Evictions are not just one event, are they? They are part of a continuum of power, and racism, yeah.

**MEENAKSHI MANNOE:**

I can go next. Building off what Nick just asked, what did you find in your research that follows eviction for people who are at multiple intersections? Like, not only are they more vulnerable to eviction, what comes next for people?

**ANDREW BATTLE:**

Yeah. That's a good question. It is such a broad thing, and it can happen to so many







So I think if you can push more and find solutions like that on a broader scale, I think that would be a great step toward.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

That power relationship, because it is a power relationship, can be changed.

**ZOE MUCKLE:**

The idea of a landlord turning into a land Stuart -- steward, rethinking our ideas of relationships...

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

It is also a market right now and people have to make money apparently, we will learn more about that very soon. And of course some landlords also have people with mortgages who have to pay their mortgage because the cost of housing is so high. So people are also renting in different sorts of settings... Did you get a sense of that sort of experience of spaces and eviction?

**ZOE MUCKLE:**

Not through what I have seen.

**ANDREW BATTLE:**

We did not get too much into that side of it. But there is definitely that relationship where







have been comparable to returns in the stock market. Real estate investment trusts have taken note of this and started buying up apartment buildings.

The process of financial position is accelerated by neighbourhood zoning. In most neighbourhoods in Metro Vancouver, apartments are banned by zoning bylaws. In order to house the 35,000 new residents that move to Metro Vancouver every year, new apartments must be built in the few neighbourhoods they are allowed, which are almost exclusively lower income neighbourhoods filled with older apartment buildings. This causes gentrification as existing low income residents are forced out of their neighbourhoods and richer residents replace them.

It empowers privilege, financial as landlords and increases the vulnerability of renters.

Financial landlords employ two key strategies to maximize their profits at the expense of renters. The first technique, squeezing, involves maximizing profits by increasing rent or reducing the operating expenses of the building. The second technique, gentrification by upgrading, entails renovating or placing existing units to attract a richer clientele. This requires the disposition of current tenants who were not viewed as profitable enough.

While landlords enjoy immense profits from financial Institutions, renters enter the negative impact. Rent increases from squeezing make it difficult for renters to make ends meet. Residents who are evicted from gentrification by upgrading experience an increased risk of losing their jobs and community social networks. Those who remain face degraded living conditions due to profit maximizing budget cuts to building maintenance. Together, these impacts all intersect to create or exacerbate long-lasting physical and mental health problems. That disproportionately affects low-income



working to make the approval process for developers easier and incentivizing the creation of nonprofit and co-op housing projects will also be taxing empty homes. Overall, trying to increase the supply of housing. But more must be done to restore affordability in the city. The right to adequate housing has been federally recognized in Canada, but it carries no legal force and applies only to federal jurisdictions. Governmental policy so far had made little progress in addressing the ever skyrocketing housing market. The city of Vancouver has only conducted 6% of its role of 6000 new below-market housing rental units by 2027.

To conclude, we would like to reiterate that houses are not just financial assets. Homes are not meant to make money for other people or to sit empty as the 'Stolen Land' they rest upon accumulates value. They exist as a place to sleep, to eat, to work, to practice our hobbies and to spend time with the people in our lives. Everyone deserves to have that opportunity to be safe, comfortable, and secure. Thank you for listening to our presentation. If you would like to learn more, you can check out our poster at the back.

(Applause)

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Thank you very much Nathan. I would like to invite Chris now and Eric to join us on the stools. Thank you so much for joining us. I have been teaching this class where everyone is wearing masks and I am finally seeing the lower halves of their faces, it is very refreshing. That is what they look like. (Laughs) Thank you so much.

**ERIC RAMIREZ:**

the past 20 years. What might have been affordable 20 years ago is essentially completely out of range for the average 20 something year old nowadays.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

So `Nathan gave where the housing crisis is actually good for business. How did that make you feel, Krishniel?

**KRISHNIEL RAM:**

That quote shows the two sides of the story, your capital investors, who are benefiting largely from financialization of housing and the second side, the other side of the story, who is affecting our renters, and they are becoming more vulnerable – from one party getting many benefits.

**ERIC RAMIREZ:**

Back in 1999, there was another (Indiscernible). In their yearly report, their tagline was "apartments make money". It says a lot about the state of housing in the country.

**MAGIE RAMIREZ:**

You touched briefly on your presentation of the role of neoliberal policies and the shift. Could you speak more to that on with those policies –

**ERIC RAMIREZ:**





(Laughter)

**ERIC RAMIREZ:**





will be a chart that shows a map of Vancouver.

You will see a large portion of the city is owned for single-family residential homes. The only alternative is either condominiums that are along major corridors of the city or downtown for sub district zoning relations; there are no allowed uses for these neighbourhoods. What you essentially end up with is only two options – condominiums, and apartments, or single-family homes. The difficulties with that is there is a lack – there is a lack of mixed housing which is a combination of townhomes and other types of housing arrangements.

By relaxing the zoning relations we are able to diversify these communities. Which I will differentiate from gentrification. I am talking with the different types of housing options available in the community. And what this will allow to happen in these areas is you will have more housing choice, and allowing that choice, you will be able to cater to a wide range of other family sizes, or communities, and ethnic groups as well. That can also help with pricing especially for a lot of folks moving out to the Fraser Valley, or other communities where housing is cheaper or more accessible. Did you want to add anything to that?

**KRISHNIEL RAM:**

I think you got it all there.

(Laughter)



**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

So, the previous three presentations we explored real-world examples of housing injustice, and for charity. But as we know... these are never contested. The final group is going to introduce us to Housing Justice Movements, the challenge these have and can produce new narratives. The group comprises of Natalie Bodenschatz, Justin Lau, Marina Hussain, Leo Dittmer, Jonathan Ling, Ryan Vancise. Natalie will present the findings of this group. Natalie? Thank you for joining us.

(Applause)

**NATALIE BODENSCHATZ:**

Housing Justice Movements! What does that even mean? Housing justice is the assurance of stable, high-quality, affordable and safe housing to residents of all income levels. Housing Justice Movements urge that housing is a human right and an essential good to be protected.

Through collective action, residents of the Downtown Eastside fight racial banishment by educating themselves, questioning current laws, and at times, they push through the laws when necessary. Why is there a need for housing justice? It is because there is a divide between the housing landscape of the wealthy, and the housing crisis experienced by marginalized communities. These marginalized communities make up the Downtown Eastside.

They are forced into vulnerability through colonization, racism, gentrification,

commodification, and capitalism. However, it is through these nodes of struggle that residents come together and form resistance against their extermination and erasure. How do Housing Justice Movements fight vulnerability? First, they produce and use knowledge. This is particularly true of move



vulnerable and help resist the ongoing injustices of property space in the downtown eastside. Please come check out our poster for more information. Thank you.

(Applause)

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Thank you so much Natalie, for that powerful narrative. I would like to invite Leo and Jonathan, two members of the group, to join us on stage. Great to see you.

**JONATHAN LING:**

Thank you for having us.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Wonderful you are here. That was remarkable, I remember that well when the board turned that down. I think even the activists were surprised. It was unprecedented, it really speaks to the power of resistance and housing justice. And the potential, I think it is important as we begin to come to an end, to reflect on that, on the potential of possibility of housing resistance.

What do people want to pose for our presenters?

**DELILAH GREGG:**





**LEO DITTMER:**

For sure. There needs to be probably a big variety of problem-solving solutions.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Magie, did you want to chip in?

**MAGIE RAMIREZ:**

I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about what happened after, what has transpired since then?

**JONATHAN LING:**

Things for the question. It is not really over for BD. They decided to go to court after this because they felt that the city (Away from mic) had rejected this development, they had overstepped their boundaries. They had broken some bylaws. So they sued the city of Vancouver on the decision to be overturned. Unfortunately, they could not get it overturned. It has actually gone to the Court of Appeal. And they still have not gotten it to overturn. They only got the city to release the document. So at this point just 105 Keefer is still...

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

I think they were expecting the permit to go through, weren't they? I think they were

rather surprised when the city did not do what it usually does, which is maybe make a few cosmetic changes and then because it was a rezoning, wasn't it? It did not fit the zoning as it stood.

**MEENAKSHI MANNOE:**

Landlord is going to landlord.

(Laughter)

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Developer is going to develop.

**MEENAKSHI MANNOE:**

Exactly. In seeing your presentation at the end of this series, for you folks who are in your undergrad, thinking about next steps and then seeing the forces that are undermining the future you might have, unless you are ultra-wealthy, in which case why are you going to school? Just get your parents to buy you a degree. What do you think



keeper development.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

They rebranded to Chinatown in some ways. Hip and fashionable...

**JONATHAN LING:**

We see the name crosstown popping up more and more.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

Where is crosstown...

(Multiple speakers)

**LEO DITTMER:**

According to a marketing website we found it kind of overlaps Chinatown...

**DELILAH GREGG:**

So the four corners...

**JONATHAN LING:**

Today we see Crosstown elementary school next to Chinatown Station.

**MEENAKSHI MANNOE:**

Crosstown lives in a developer's imagination. It is here.

(Laughter)

**MAGIE RAMIREZ:**

Related to that question as well, as we have heard this whole evening about these different layers, the housing crisis, I wonder if you can give us, what would be a take away that we could take from the housing justice and what is the aspiration of what housing organizers are hoping the future we could build?

**LEO DITTMER:**

I think a lot of what they do... Summarizing some of the practical work. Spearheaded at 105 Keefer, do a lot of important work when it comes to challenging the dominant narrative in society. Rather than housing being for investment, it should be housing people. People that are undervalued because of a direct entity or where they live or because they do not have homes, they are challenging that as well. It is a lot of challenging the hedge company.

**MAGIE RAMIREZ:**

Flipping the script of what we value.

**NICHOLAS BLOMLEY:**

