



DECADE OF FIRE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES GUIDE

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SEASON THEME: WHAT'S YOUR VISION FOR YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

This season, we will build on our Indie Lens Pop-Up season theme of “neighborhood” by asking audiences: **What’s your vision for your neighborhood?** As we experience increased polarization and division in our everyday lives, we will come together to watch and discuss *Independent Lens* documentaries at hundreds of events hosted by Indie Lens Pop-Up partners in communities across the United States. Together, we will hear diverse stories, learn what it means to listen with acceptance and openness, and build communities where all neighbors belong and feel welcomed.

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

Growing up in the South Bronx, I often heard that we, Blacks and Puerto Ricans, did not know how to take care of our neighborhoods. We were blamed for the fires that destroyed my community during the 1970’s, told that we were the reason our neighborhoods turned to rubble and ruin.

As an adult, working in youth development in the South Bronx, I, along with my co-worker Julia Steele Allen (who became my co-producer), set out to teach young people Bronx history. We noticed how young people carried the stigma of being from the nation’s most notorious “ghetto.” They deserved to know the history behind this label, who was responsible, and the incredible legacy of creative resistance that is their true inheritance. Together with filmmaker Gretchen Hildebran, we began to conduct research and talk to community members about their experiences and share memories from my own family.

After years of hearing and seeing outsiders lay claim to our stories, I and my team decided to make a film about what really happened in the South Bronx. How could 80% of the South Bronx’s housing stock burn and be left to rot? How was it that we were written off? What really happened?

Decade of Fire is my story, and a people’s history about the policies, practices and attitudes that led to the fires. *Decade of Fire* flips the narrative about why the South Bronx burned. “We didn’t burn the Bronx. In fact, we were the ones who saved it.”

At a time when South Bronx residents were neglected by the media and at all levels of government, we came together, resisted and stayed. People fought to protect their homes and after many years they succeeded—because of their efforts the City government finally stopped the fires and rebuilt their neighborhoods. In *Decade of Fire* I share their stories for the sake of people who work for justice today in the Bronx—and beyond. These unsung heroes put everything on the line to keep their blocks and neighborhoods intact. I want to let the world know that the community saved the South Bronx, how they did it, and why it means everything to us today.

— Vivian Vázquez Irizarry, filmmaker



FILM SYNOPSIS

In the 1970s, fires raged through the South Bronx. Abandoned by landlords and city officials, nearly a half million residents were displaced from their beloved neighborhoods. With the help of fellow survivors, filmmaker and Bronx native Vivian Vázquez Irizarry tells the story of the residents who banded together amidst the rubble and built a better future for their community.

SCREENING CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

Filmmaker Vivian Vázquez Irizarry made *Decade of Fire* to tell a story that needed to be told about the Bronx. What stories from your community need to be told or re-told? Your screening events for the film are an opportunity to amplify voices from local neighborhoods that have been historically marginalized by government policies based on race and class. And while housing costs continue to rise nationwide, your events can engage people in a conversation about how to keep housing affordable and accessible for all people in your community. The overall objectives for the Indie Lens Pop-Up screening campaign of *Decade of Fire* include:

- Provide a platform for neighborhood advocates to share their work in the community and connect with other people and resources that might support their efforts.
- Discuss current housing issues in your area, such as housing affordability, homelessness, and gentrification, and how communities are responding.
- Educate people about redlining, Urban Renewal, budget cuts, and other policies that have contributed to systemic disinvestment in neighborhoods historically populated by communities of color.
- Inspire people to take an active role in shaping their neighborhoods and the policies that affect their lives.
- Celebrate the neighborhood pride, collective resilience, and creative culture born out of historically marginalized communities.

RELEVANT TOPICS AND ISSUES

- Affordable housing
- Redlining, Urban Renewal and budget cuts
- Displacement and homelessness
- Neighborhood revitalization
- Civic engagement and community organizing
- Collective resilience
- Community and belonging
- Creative expression and resistance
- Storytelling and oral histories
- Stereotypes and media bias
- Racism and classism



POTENTIAL AUDIENCES

- Neighborhood associations and tenant organizations
- Housing justice advocates
- Community organizers and activists
- Local elected or appointed officials, such as alders and city planning personnel
- Faith communities
- Humanities associations
- Latinx and/or Black member organizations, such as the NAACP
- Filmmaker, artist, and storytelling groups
- High school educators and students
- College students, in particular: urban planning, policy, architecture, and urban studies students

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Bronx is one of New York City's five Boroughs located along the Northernmost boundary of the city. It experienced a boom in population during the early 1900s as a mix of incomes and ethnicities settled there. The South Bronx was a manufacturing neighborhood. As a result of redlining and other government policies, the South Bronx became a predominantly Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood. Today, the Bronx is going through a development boom, raising fears of gentrification and displacement among families like those featured in the film that have lived there for generations.

Redlining began in the 1930s and 40s during the era of the New Deal. Federal housing agencies designated neighborhoods with a certain percentage of Black and immigrant residents as "declining." Federal agencies like the Home Owners' Loan Corporation literally took maps and drew red lines around "undesirable" neighborhoods. Banks and government agencies refused services, such as mortgage loans or fire insurance, to residents inside the redlined neighborhoods. At its height, redlining was widespread, affecting a diverse array of cities in almost every state—from large metropolises such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit to medium-sized cities such as Sioux City, Iowa and Amarillo, Texas. For a map of redlined neighborhoods, visit here: <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>. When the **Fair Housing Act** passed in 1968 as part of the Civil Rights Bill, it outlawed housing discrimination from then on. However, it did not remedy past housing discrimination, leaving many neighborhoods in a perpetual state of segregation still seen today across urban, suburban, and rural areas. (Rothstein, 2017)

Without investment in redlined neighborhoods, conditions deteriorated for those that lived there. White families could move out to the suburbs with the assistance of federally subsidized loans in a phenomenon known as **White flight**. But residents of color that wanted to move out of deteriorating neighborhoods were outright denied mortgage loans and public subsidies based on their race. (Rothstein, 2017) Discriminatory government housing policies contributed to the **wealth disparity** among racial groups seen today. For example, the median White American family has twelve times the wealth that their Black counterparts have. (da Costa, 2019) When families of color were prevented from owning homes, they had less wealth to pass on to their children and grandchildren, while White families profited from early home ownership.



Urban Renewal was a federally funded program started in the 1950s that affected more than 600 cities of all sizes across the country—from Fairbanks, Alaska to Wilmington, Delaware. (Digital Scholarship Lab, 2019) For a map of Urban Renewal projects, visit here: <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/renewal/#view=0/0/1&viz=cartogram>. Its aim was to clear out “slums” and relocate families into better housing conditions. However, city governments often opted to replace torn-down housing with commercial buildings, forcing the displaced to find housing in new neighborhoods. In many cities, the majority of those displaced were people of color, and because redlining barred them from housing in many neighborhoods, their housing options were limited. As shown in the film, the razing of neighborhoods throughout Manhattan to make way for new development displaced 100,000 people, many of which moved to the Bronx, and the influx of people further strained the neighborhood’s infrastructure. (Zipp, 2010)

Budget cuts typically occur when a government is bringing in less revenue from taxes than it has budgeted for services. To balance the budget, government officials can raise taxes or borrow money to increase revenue, or they can reduce costs by cutting services. Groups that have been historically under-represented in government, such as Black and immigrant communities, often bear the brunt of budget cuts. In 1975 in the wake of a national recession, New York City faced bankruptcy. City finances were taken over by a non-elected state body comprised primarily of bankers that chose to slash city services in already resource-starved neighborhoods like the South Bronx.

More recently, many local governments experienced budget shortfalls during the Great Recession. A few dozen—including Detroit, Michigan; Stockton, California; Jefferson County, Alabama; and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania—filed for bankruptcy. New York’s response has served as a blueprint for other bankruptcies, such as in Detroit and in Puerto Rico, which is currently facing a severe budget crisis. (Flood, 2011)

Since the Great Recession ended, rent costs and home prices have risen at an unprecedented pace making **housing affordability** a nationwide concern. More than 11 million rental households in the U.S. are spending more than half of their income on their housing (the recommended amount is no more than 30 percent). (NLIHC, 2019) Nearly two-thirds of renters nationwide say they cannot currently afford to buy a home; meanwhile, home prices are only rising—at twice the rate of wage growth. (Sisson, 2019) People in Hawaii, the District of Columbia, California, Maryland, and New York face some of the highest housing costs. The affordable housing crisis is fueling the problem of **homelessness** in the U.S. Studies show a correlation between areas with higher median rent and home prices and the number of people living on the streets or in shelters. (Khouri, 2018)

The demand for housing has led developers to invest in neighborhoods historically populated by Black and immigrant communities. However, developers looking to turn the most profit typically opt to build luxury condos as opposed to low and middle-income housing, pushing prices up across the neighborhood. It gradually becomes unaffordable for families that have lived there for generations to stay. **Gentrification** occurs when new residents move into a neighborhood thereby changing its character and demographics. Since 2000, a pattern of gentrification has emerged in cities across the country, now affecting one in every six predominantly African-American census tracts. (Badger, 2019)



Community organizing occurs when citizens in a community band together to address a shared problem. Activists in the film organized their neighbors in the Bronx to fix up abandoned buildings, pool their resources to buy and manage abandoned buildings through **tenant-run cooperatives**, and lobby elected officials to invest in fire prevention. In the Bronx, **music, art, and culture** were important tools that community organizers used to revitalize, unify, and beautify the neighborhood. Hip hop culture, including graffiti art and DJing, grew out of the Bronx during this period, giving birth to celebrated artists such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

Sources:

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FRAMING THE CONVERSATION AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Decade of Fire focuses on the Bronx. Your screening events will be most impactful if you focus on a local neighborhood in your community or state that has been affected by redlining, Urban Renewal, budget cuts, or other discriminatory policies. You can also focus the conversation more generally on housing affordability in your community. Your audience members will likely relate to questions about how much of their income they are spending on rent, how likely it is that they can afford to purchase a home, or how gentrification is changing their neighborhood. It can be helpful to discuss these questions with a multi-generational audience to provide insight into the ways housing affordability changes our neighborhoods over time.

The story of the Bronx presented in the film is compelling because it comes from the perspective of the people who were born and raised there. The memories shared by its residents paint an authentic representation of what the neighborhood was really like during the time of the fires. When planning your event, look for ways to prioritize the voices of residents that have strong roots in the neighborhood you are discussing. For example, seek out advocates that are born and raised in the neighborhood and/or organizations that are democratically run by residents from the neighborhood. It can be helpful to read up on news articles and member comments about potential partner organizations to make sure they are authentically connected to the neighborhoods in which they work.

At screenings of *Decade of Fire*, audience members have often asked specific questions about their housing situations. It can be helpful to have a housing advocate or eviction counselor there to field these types of questions. You could also direct people to the Tenant Rights Hotline (sliding-scale membership): <http://www.tenantstogether.org/tenant-rights-hotline>.

CONVERSATION STARTER

Your DVD of *Decade of Fire* features the following conversation starter on the menu screen before the film starts:

Share a story about your neighborhood.

Project the conversation starter before the film begins as guests are taking their seats at your venue. Prior to the film or your panel discussion, encourage participants to turn to a person sitting near them to share their answers for two to three minutes including any recent examples that come to mind.



POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND/OR SPEAKERS

Invite speakers from one or several of these suggested categories below to discuss the themes of the film with your audience.

- Partner with **community organizers** and **advocates** from community-based nonprofit organizations focused on housing in underserved neighborhoods. They can share information about initiatives they are working on with neighborhood residents. Look for grassroots organizations that are democratically run by members of the neighborhoods—like the neighborhood associations and tenant-run cooperatives featured in the film. To find advocates, search your media outlets for stories about local housing initiatives and the community organizers behind them. You can also search for housing advocates affiliated with the National Low Income Housing Coalition: <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state>, Rebuilding Together: <https://rebuildingtogether.org/find-your-local-affiliate>, or NeighborWorks America: <https://www.neighborworks.org/Our-Network/Network-Directory>.
- Invite officials from **city planning or urban development departments** to talk about new initiatives planned in your community. This can allow for community members to learn about and provide input on programs and policies that will impact their neighborhoods. It may be helpful to feature city planners alongside community-based housing justice advocates so that audience members can hear from multiple voices working in the community.
- **Historians** from local universities and colleges can help to educate audience members about redlining, Urban Renewal, and other discriminatory policies in your city or state. Because redlining heavily targeted Black neighborhoods, these historians often are affiliated with African-American history departments. Ideally, speakers will help to connect the dots between 20th-century policies and the contemporary issues facing communities of color. Institutes or associations, such as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), may have speakers bureaus available for your area; learn more here: <https://asalh.org/speakers-bureau/>.
- Neighborhood **faith leaders** often work on issues of homelessness or provide services for those with unstable housing. Look for the churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith centers located in underserved neighborhoods for potential partners or speakers.
- Groups that work with **under-represented artists or storytellers**, such as Latinx filmmakers. There may be nonprofit organizations, artist cooperatives, museums, festivals, or city programs that work to promote artists of color or women artists in your area. For example, see if your city has an office of diversity and inclusion that can help connect you. Or look to groups like your state humanities association: <http://www.statehumanities.org/the-state-humanities-councils/find-a-state-council/> or regional arts organizations: <https://www.arts.gov/partners/state-regional>.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If you are planning a post-screening discussion, arrange a moderator to pose questions to your panel of speakers. You could also have a moderator facilitate a group conversation with your audience. The questions below can be adapted for either type of discussion. Be sure to review questions with your speakers before the event and select discussion topics accordingly.

- What topics or themes in *Decade of Fire* resonated with you? Are the experiences that Vivian and her neighbors share in the film parallel to those of local community members?
- The high school curriculum created for the film *Decade of Fire* asks the central question: How are community narratives shaped, interrupted, and reimagined? What are the narratives or stories that exist about your neighborhood? Is there a different story that needs to be told? If so, what would you like people to know?
- The residents of the South Bronx argued that Hollywood films like *Fort Apache* contributed to harmful stereotypes about their neighborhood. How are neighborhoods in our community portrayed in the local news or national media? What effects do these representations have on the people who live in the neighborhoods?
- What is the significance of telling one's own story? Are there local films like *Decade of Fire* or other storytelling projects that are helping to get under-represented voices in our community out to the wider public?
- Vivian says, "our neighborhoods were being targeted by government policies based on race." Were policies like redlining, Urban Renewal, or budget cuts prevalent in our area? How did widespread disinvestment in communities of color affect the lives of our local residents?
- How affordable is housing across the neighborhoods in our community? What do renters and home-owners face in the local housing market today and how has this changed over time?
- How prevalent is homelessness in our community? How does housing instability affect the lives of our community members?
- "Developers want to carve up the Bronx all over again... The same people who were redlined for years are now being displaced," Vivian says in the film. What types of housing development projects are planned for our area? Is displacement a concern among communities of color or low income communities?
- What can we do to make sure new housing developments include affordable housing for low and middle-income renters?
- What is gentrification, and how does it happen? Are there local examples in our community? If so, what can we do to minimize the negative effects of gentrification?



- Bronx community activist Hetty Fox describes the sign of a thriving neighborhood as the sound of kids playing outside with a “pitch of happiness.” What would you say are the indicators of a thriving neighborhood?
- “Community organizing is what finally stopped the fires,” says Vivian. What local community organizing efforts are inspiring you right now? How can audience members support grassroots efforts in historically underserved neighborhoods?
- In the Bronx, grassroots organizations used music, art, and culture to revitalize blocks devastated by fire and abandonment. What role do you see art playing in revitalization efforts in local neighborhoods?
- How might residents, developers, and elected officials work together to create more inclusive and welcoming neighborhoods throughout our community? Are there examples that we can look to for inspiration?
- Throughout this season of *Independent Lens*, we are asking participants at Pop-Up screening events across the country a common question: What’s your vision for your neighborhood? How would you answer that question?



ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES BEYOND A PANEL

These activities can help to further create an engaging and memorable experience for your audience. They can be organized in addition to or instead of a traditional post-screening panel discussion.

- Plan a post-screening **walking tour** in a formerly redlined neighborhood or one previously affected by Urban Renewal, highway construction, or demolition of public housing, etc. Ask a community organizer or someone else from the neighborhood to lead the tour, explaining landmarks, development projects, and grassroots initiatives as you walk. Locally-owned businesses may be interested in sponsoring or partnering on this type of event, especially if your walking tour takes them past their locations. In the spirit of the film, look for sponsors or partners among the businesses that are owned and operated by people of color from the neighborhood. For inspiration, read about the Central District Red Line Tours in Seattle: <http://bit.ly/2P6oBpS>
- Arrange an **educational exhibit**. For example, a historical society could display archival photographs of how neighborhoods have changed throughout the years. You could also invite audience members to post their own “now and then” photographs from their neighborhood on social media using the hashtag #DecadeofFirePBS and then display them at the event for all to see. A display of redlined maps is also an option; printable maps can be downloaded for free at this link: <http://bit.ly/2ZzAUiS>. Additionally, the exhibit “Undesign the Redline” may be available for your event; learn more here: <http://www.designingthewe.com/undesign-the-redline>.
- Organize a **resource fair** to help connect audience members with the advocates and organizations working in underserved neighborhoods. You can set up tables for organizations to distribute information before and after your screening. See the Potential Partners and/or Speakers section for ideas of groups to invite to table or present at your resource fair.
- Encourage audience members to **collect oral histories** from people who grew up in neighborhoods subject to redlining or Urban Renewal. You can use a StoryCorps booth or the app to record conversations between generations, similar to Vivian and her son Antonio’s conversations featured in the film. Learn more about recording with StoryCorps here: <https://storycorps.org/participate/>. Make sure to ask participants to tag StoryCorps uploads with “Independent Lens,” “PBS,” “Decade of Fire PBS,” and “redlining” to help catalog clips. Some questions for interviews could include:
 - Where were you born and raised?
 - When did your family move there?
 - What are some of your earliest memories of the neighborhood?
 - What were some of your favorite hangouts growing up?
 - How do you see your neighborhood changing?
 - What’s your vision for your neighborhood?



- Host an **artist showcase** to support artists from underserved neighborhoods in reaching new audiences. As in the film, look to highlight artists of color that are authentically connected to the neighborhoods. Some examples could include:
 - Live performance by local musicians
 - DJs spinning records from local and/or Bronx artists
 - Youth spoken word poets writing about their experiences
 - Live painting by a neighborhood graffiti artist
 - Photographers that document the neighborhood and its residents
 - Film shorts by local filmmakers screened before or after *Decade of Fire*
- Invite audience members to contribute to an interactive **community art project**. The act of creating something together serves as a metaphor for how people can work together to shape a neighborhood. For example, audience members could collectively paint a large-scale mural or create a sculpture. It is best if this activity is led by a local artist, ideally from a historically marginalized neighborhood in your community so they can connect the art project to a local place. After the event, find a space to display the art in the area.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the resources listed throughout this guide, these websites provide information that may be helpful in preparing for your screenings of *Decade of Fire*.

- The companion site created by *Independent Lens* for *Decade of Fire* with additional content to support Indie Lens Pop-Up screenings and the PBS broadcast - <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/decade-of-fire/>
- The site created by the filmmaking team for the promotion and distribution of *Decade of Fire* - <http://decadeoffire.com/>
- “Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America” is a digital archive of redlined maps drawn by the federal government - <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>
- “Renewing Inequality: Family Displacements through Urban Renewal, 1950-1966” maps those neighborhoods that were affected by federal Urban Renewal programs - <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/renewal/#view=0/0/1&viz=cartogram>
- “Alright: Surviving Resegregation in Silicon Valley” is a short film from the *We Gon’ Be Alright* series developed by the Indie Lens StoryCast - <http://bit.ly/2zap7bl>
- “Segregated by Design” is a short film narrated by Richard Rothstein, author of the book *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* - <https://www.segregatedbydesign.com/>
- *Where We Call Home* is a 2019 public radio series on housing affordability in the U.S. produced by WBUR’s *On Point* - <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/tag/where-we-call-home>
- The National Low Income Housing Coalition advocates for affordable housing in communities nationwide through its network of affiliates - <https://nlihc.org/>
- The Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University tracks housing availability nationwide - <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/research/interactive-maps>
- This PBS Learning Media resource developed by KQED analyzes the pros and cons of gentrification - <http://bit.ly/2TNxXFz>
- The Urban Displacement Project (UDP) is a research and action initiative of UC Berkeley - <https://www.urbandisplacement.org/>
- The website for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development - <https://www.hud.gov/>, including HUD web tutorials (<http://bit.ly/2KJ81YS>)



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ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 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 other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. For more information, visit itvs.org.

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: facebook.com/independentlens and on Twitter @IndependentLens.

LATINO PUBLIC BROADCASTING is the leader of the development, production, acquisition and distribution of non-commercial educational and cultural media that is representative of Latino people, or addresses issues of particular interest to Latino Americans. These programs are produced for dissemination to the public broadcasting stations and other public telecommunication entities. LPB provides a voice to the diverse Latino community on public media throughout the United States. For more information, visit lbbp.org.