

14 March 2022

Architecture on Film: Property + Q&A

Activist-director and independent cinema trailblazer Penny Allen's satirical docudrama follows a collective's attempts to save their neighbourhood

Starts:

08:40pm, Monday, 14 March 2022

Until:

10:45pm, Monday, 14 March 2022

Venue

Cinema 1

(<https://www.barbican.org.uk/your-visit/getting-here/map-directions>) Barbican Centre, Level -2

Silk St, London, EC2Y 8DS (<http://www.barbican.org.uk/film/find-venue><http://www.barbican.org.uk/film/new-cinemas>)

Tickets

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£12.00

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We are delighted that this UK premiere of *Property* will be followed by a conversation between its director, [Penny Allen](https://pennyallen.info/director-detail/penny-allen/) (<https://pennyallen.info/director-detail/penny-allen/>), and film critic and scholar [Dr. Elena Gorfinkel](https://www.elenagorfinkel.com) (<https://www.elenagorfinkel.com>).

Property [UK Premiere]

After a lot of nine home goes up for sale – in a historically African American neighborhood now home to a diverse mixture of Black families and countercultural newcomers – its soon-to-be-evicted residents attempt to band together and collectively buy back their lives, after an idea sparked at a drunken birthday party. A part-time prostitute becomes the group's agent, seeking to charm the bank and local government, whilst the reality of community organization and the group's dreams encounter internal and external obstacles.

Allen has referred to the film as her "[land-use movie about the urban situation](https://filmmakermagazine.com/100963-activist-resistance-and-organization-in-portland-and-elsewhere-penny-allen-on-her-career/#.YZ_L5b3P2Rs)" (https://filmmakermagazine.com/100963-activist-resistance-and-organization-in-portland-and-elsewhere-penny-allen-on-her-career/#.YZ_L5b3P2Rs).

Adapted from her real life experience of a local community's fight against their neighbourhood's pending sale, demolition and erasure, and dramatized through bohemian local characters and members of the theatre troupe with whom Allen

was working at the time, the film conjures, in fellow Oregon director Kelly Reichardt's words: "A freewheeling adventure on the violence of economic relations; a genre for our time, yet born in another".

A prize-winner at the first ever [Sundance Film Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sundance_Film_Festival) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sundance_Film_Festival) in 1978, the film's legacy to independent American cinema includes the introduction of a young Gus Van Sant (the film's sound recordist) to Portland poet and *Property* protagonist [Walt Curtis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Curtis) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Curtis) – whose book, *Mala Noche*, [Van Sant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mala_Noche) would later adapt as his first feature (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mala_Noche).

An acutely playful and political timecapsule of 1970s social and cinematic ideas and ideals, *Property* talks directly to contemporary realities and crises – of speculation, community organisation and the fight for the city – and does so with verve, rye humour and a fierce manifestation of independence.

(USA, 1978, Penny Allen, 92 mins)

Regions of Eccentricity: Penny Allen's *Property* (1978), by Elena Gorfinkel

Although often overshadowed by other features, one of American independent cinema's definitive traits is a penchant for regional specificity. Grounded in a deep anchorage to details of place, independent films' expression of spatial materiality interrogates social and cultural margins, alternative modes of living, classed, gendered and raced existence and the vagaries and inequities of the American social experiment. Portland native Penny Allen's *Property* (1978) is an important yet too little-known milestone in this tradition, shot on vibrant 16mm with a gregariously mobile lens. It is a freewheeling portrait of an Oregonian collective of raconteurs, misfits and bohemians, who try to reclaim a South Portland city block from which they are about to be evicted, in the predominantly African American neighbourhood Corbett-Terwiliger-Lair Hill. Narrating a project of communal restitution and a battle against forces of real estate development, the story is drawn from Allen's own experience, a few years prior, when she became involved in a land-use dispute in her neighbourhood. Anticipating the work of other US independent filmmakers who attend carefully to the Pacific Northwest, such as Gus Van Sant and Kelly Reichardt, Allen utilised a cast of local personalities and members of a theatre group she was involved with, loosely playing themselves.

Property poses a fundamental question: can collectivity be forged and sustained through the repossession of the property form? In his book *The Spectacle of Property* John David Rhodes asserts that the hidden crucible of film spectatorship and a core pleasure of filmic *mise-en-scène* has long circulated around the spectacle of private property, condensed most notably in the form of the American house, especially as imagined by Hollywood. The house serves as a medium for the traversal of fantasies of class, possession, nuclear and other kinds of families, social capital, mobility, security, and ease. Cinema has long been besotted by the desire for space and its capture: the "temporary tenancy" as Rhodes describes it, of vicariously inhabiting the living space and domestic interiors of other's lives, produces a grabby, possessive spectator who hungers for replenishment in the aspirational illusions of the screen environment.

Thinking cinema through the prismatic ground and material exigencies of real estate complicates any neutral or purely formal understanding of cinematic space as the economic labours and intrinsic displacements of domestic space sign:

fundamental instability as idea and ideal. Penny Allen's *Property* takes cinema's romance with the domicile and drives it in another direction, one that questions the conditions of private property and its potential to be seized and redistributed, not according to the measure of wealth but that of need. Yet her assembly of bohemian misfits and rambling eccentrics soon discover that in the washed-out idealism of a post-countercultural political environment, as one character avers, once money needs to be borrowed, that "it's the 70s, nothing comes for free."

Property's insouciant, shaggy dog aesthetic relishes in the peculiarities and cacophonous voices of a cavalcade of artists, performers, and malcontents drawn from Portland's artistic scene – Lola Desmond, playing an occasional sex worker whose lover Jack has just been released from prison, the willowy hippie Marjorie with her vibey conviviality, and Corky Hubbert, a local comedian. Most prominent and legendary among them is the charismatic poet and artist Walt Curtis, an important figure in the Portland literary and artistic landscape. His novella *Mala Noche* would be later adapted by another Oregonian and collaborator of Allen's on the film, Gus Van Sant, in 1986 (Van Sant served as sound recordist on *Property*).

The film's opening announces the dynamic energy of local dwelling, as life, work and warm domesticity are held in a mellifluous suspension. Eric Edwards, Allen's cinematographer (who would later lens Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* and Larry Clark's *Kids*), traces a circular pan around a one room apartment in a Victorian house, as we hear Curtis's typewriter and his self-dictation, as he bangs out a sardonic poetic litany in stops, starts and comic retorts. Curtis' syncopated scattling in voiceover is placed against the lived in and burnished materiality of his cheerily cramped studio, where thickly slathered paintings in green and blue landscapes rest on counters alongside jars of grains, spices, stove-top and tea kettle, tucked under a sloped roof and opened up by the breeze and sun of a balcony view. The full revolution of the camera finally reveals Walt astride the typewriter, his curly pate dappled by sunlight as his phone rings, lyrical flow interrupted. He ambles out of his room and down the stairs of a shared house, as piano music wafts from the landing below, his housemate playing a mid-afternoon tune on an upright, seen from the stairs above.

A thickly sketched and observed mode of life made possible by the affordances of cheap rent, this picturesque diorama of creative autonomy, group life and hard-won idiosyncrasy is shortly disclosed to be under threat. Walt wanders out to the street to find a banker's realty sign hammered into the ground on an overgrown green lot at his street corner, where his neighbour Butch talks about the impending evictions, and his family's long history of residence here. Holding an empty window frame and aiming to take pictures, Butch speaks of the need for the place's preservation. Walt galvanises action, as he and comrades knock on doors to see if neighbours might want to fight back together by buying back the block as a cooperative. A rollicking series of meetings, arguments, dinners, and conversations structure the film, redolent with multivalent energy of the organising meeting and the bawdiness of the group hangout, one impulse at times thwarting the other. Delightful in its indulgence of multiple tracks of interruptive talk and convivial banter, Allen's approach invites a listener attuned to the density of social gathering and the pleasure of simultaneous and conflicting strands of colloquy. Allen seeks to embody the density of urban proximity through this approach to sound, and her film devotes itself to loquacious sociality, as multi-directionally expressive and essentially anarchic.

How can a film represent the tensions, conflicts and difficulties of political and social organising? Property's breezy, satirical approach to the affinities, alliances, and arguments that emerge from collective action attests to the shifted ideals and aporias of the moment, along with exhaustion and burnout of the 60s Left. Most in the group demur from spearheading the project, citing the limits of their own capacity and commitment. Walt, for one, announces that he wants the space because he seeks to drop out and pursue the lonesome vocation of poetic absorption. Fault lines of race and economic privilege also emerge – Butch remains the only Black member of the group. The financial and bureaucratic obstacles towards reaching their goals indicate the arbitrariness of capitalism's values – as Lola dresses up fancily to be the group delegate with the banker (in her own description to look like a “cardboard cutout”), as Corky negotiates his measly benefits at the Social Security office and Marjorie haggles with a haughty clerk at an antique store in order to hock some of her prized vintage possessions to find hard cash for her contribution to the group's pool for down payment. Yet the metric of value rests with cynical institutions that hoard liquidity. As a

compromised path emerges, one which requires routing their cooperative endeavour towards a model of individual ownership and a cooptation by wealthier co-signers, other tensions surface – which houses properly belong or must stay with whom, relative to the claims of longstanding residents such as Butch’s grandmother and the neighbourhood’s other Black occupants who are unable to be involved in the collective. The irony of group ownership rebounds back to the problem of property as a privatised economic form, one which this ragtag collective’s quest for securing some model of ownership paradoxically contests.

From the present moment, when gentrification and skyrocketing rents have become an incontrovertible reality in the metastasis of real estate interests and in the expansion of what queer underground filmmaker Jack Smith called the obscenities of “landlordism,” what might the promise of ownership or possession mean for those on the margins, perennially displaced or dispossessed? Property points to no easy resolution. As the deadline nears and many other evicted tenants move out, some of the displaced abscond with windows or other fixtures, a subject of debate in the organising meeting. The claims of what of a place belongs to who are difficult to reconcile, not least by those who wield a check book or hope to secure a mortgage loan.

Allen’s boisterously trenchant film asserts the creative necessity of finding a way to live otherwise, of occupying and claiming space, motivated by a spirit of community activism and the potential of solidarity that abrades and upends capitalist hierarchies of value. As the eviction deadline nears, group member Karen proceeds to sweep the stripped away interior of her house, its bones and walls visible, wooden floors bare. She suddenly wields the broom like an otherworldly instrument, sweeping in broad strokes, swinging it in the air around the space, as if casting a spell. This theatrical moment of domestic labour turned buoyant habitation suggests something else of the desire for dwelling, an urge towards self-definition that hews towards the improvisatory and expressive – drawing a line, cutting a rug. Sheltering small revolutions, a house is also for dancing.

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