



IMAGE COURTESY OF BILL BROWN AND SABINE GRUFFAT

Boom, bust and rebellion

'Speculation Nation' shines a light on Spain's housing crisis with lessons for all about what we consider 'home'

BY JARED PABEN
STAFF WRITER

At some point on the train trip between Madrid and Pamplona, out in the countryside, Bill Brown and Sabine Gruffat spotted something strange in the distance. It looked like a large abandoned city, but the rail line passed it by, and there were no obvious highways leading to it.

"It sort of looked like a mirage. I couldn't understand what I was seeing out there," Brown recalled. "It seemed like maybe a movie set or something."

It was one of Spain's numerous housing developments built during the pre-recession real estate boom. When the bubble burst and the economy tanked, they remained unoccupied.

That sparked the filmmakers' curiosity, eventually culminating in the creation of "Speculation Nation," a 2014 documentary exploring the Spanish housing crisis, the proliferation of brand-new yet long-vacant buildings, and the resulting occupations by activists and regular citizens alike.

The 75-minute lyrical documentary, as they describe it, will screen at Portland's Northwest Film Center on Aug. 2. Co-directors Brown and Gruffat, visiting from their home in North Carolina, will provide an in-person introduction to the film and participate in a question-and-answer and discussion session following the screening.

The filmmakers talked with Street Roots about the parallels between Spain's housing crisis and similar situations much closer to home.

Jared Paben: *In your research and in*



Sabine Gruffat



Bill Brown

IF YOU GO

What: A screening of the 2014 film "Speculation Nation" with an introduction and post-screening question-and-answer period with the co-directors

When: 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Aug. 2

Where: Northwest Film Center, Whitsell Auditorium, Portland Art Museum, 1219 SW Park Ave.

Cost: \$9 for adults, \$8 for seniors and students, \$6 for children

Information: nwfilm.org/films/speculation-nation

your travels, do you have any sense of why this boom resulted in these almost ghost towns?

Sabine Gruffat: I think there's a couple issues. The housing was built more for investment reasons than necessarily to be lived in. So a lot of this housing was not where people actually needed housing: outside of the cities, away from the infrastructure of the municipal water systems, outside of the boundaries of the city with no transportation. And then a lot of vacation homes were built on the coast. But

the housing that was actually needed and the housing that ended up being occupied ... would be more the houses, the condos that were built closer to the city infrastructure. A lot of what's considered a ghost town, they're sort of like a financial deal made physical. They're kind of like a symptom of a financial bubble of European money.

J.P.: *As far as some of the people you met, what most surprised you with how people are trying to find housing there?*

S.G.: I think the thing is that there's a safety net in Spain that is expected, and we don't have the same expectations in the U.S. For example, they were talking a lot about the European constitutional right to housing. So there was an assumption that everybody sort of agreed on that basic premise. Which I think is very different here when we had our financial crisis, that people would have a place to live isn't necessarily a right in the U.S. system. What was interesting to us was the assumptions that are already built into the Spanish idea, or European idea, of what are the basic necessities of a human being. Another issue we thought was interesting was questioning "What does it mean to have a home? Is it just a place that you live in? Is it a place that becomes a home by living in it?" That was also an interesting idea that people would talk about. The idea of a home being something other than an investment, something that becomes a home over time.

Bill Brown: To add to what Sabine is saying, my experience in the U.S. with

housing activism was primarily the idea of squats and squatters. The idea of squatting was certainly people who needed a place to stay but, oftentimes, it was very political, very politicized. What we were seeing in Spain was definitely ordinary people. We were seeing people who were occupying buildings who I don't think would ever have thought to identify themselves as activists or as radicals or any of those things. Like Sabine was saying, there was more of an expectation like "Hey, we don't have housing, there are these buildings that were built and many of them are brand new and unoccupied, why don't we move into them?" We were beginning to talk to people who were becoming politicized and, in some cases, kind of radicalized. But for the most part, the occupation movement was very broad based and it was ordinary citizens who were part of this crowd.

J.P.: *What kind of responses did they face from the authorities there? Were they facing police coming in and removing them by force?*

S.G.: It depended, depending on the city, depending on the relationship - sometimes depending on the day. Generally, because the sidewalk is considered public, one thing that they were doing that was very surprising to us is that they would sometimes set up camp in front of bank ATM machine spaces and, as long as they weren't blocking the entryway, they could stay there as long as they wanted. The police would let them stay. It was sort of thought that the cops were sometimes on the side of the activists or the people who were occupying a bank teller. They were generally a lot less antagonistic toward the occupiers in that situation. But then there were also forced evictions. They would come and try to evict people from their homes or occupied spaces. But even so it was very different than in the U.S., because people would stage sit-ins to prevent the cops from evicting people, and it was very infrequent that the cops would resort to violence. Most of the time, they'd just give up and walk away. If they'd tried several times to evict someone and the situation had gotten really out of hand, they would carry the people away one by one. But the cops were a lot less aggressive than they are here, I think.

B.B.: There are people that asked us, "Why did you go to Spain?" Obviously, the U.S. had a housing crisis here and, of course, the Occupy Movement here. One response we had was what was fascinating for us and part of the reason we made the film: Yes, we were very interested and often inspired by what was going on, particularly with the housing activists in Spain. But it was also interesting to see the Spanish situation and the response to the Spanish housing crisis as a sort of funhouse mirror of what was happening in the U.S. and to see a country that was experiencing many of the same pressures and crises as the U.S., but the response was, in so many ways, based on assumptions that were very different from American assumptions about what is public space, or what rights do we have as citizens - what are the limits of police authority, what can be discussed, what are some of the basic assumptions that

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