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The News Briefly



■ DOCUMENTING A SCAM

New documentary *Flipped* takes aim at city's biggest housing scam

Everyone knows that countless East Side neighborhoods are falling apart, but few understand how or why. That's why it's so important that the people who are working daily to combat the problem get a wide audience. Now that's possible, thanks to a new film documentary by Marc Odien, *Flipped*, which hopes to uncover one of the biggest problems, real estate flipping, and expose it to as many people as possible.

A centuries-old practice, flipping regained popularity in the late 1980s as a way for (mostly unscrupulous) real estate investors, especially novices, to generate cash quickly. Flipping property is not necessarily a bad thing. However, in Buffalo's case, these investors are willing to profit at any price, even when it means gutting the communities on whose labor the city was built and killing people's livelihoods. Even worse, the process has sped up recently thanks to eBay.

Flipping simply means the purchase and quick resale at a higher price of a piece of property. In distressed neighborhoods like the East Side, though, the seller usually inflates the house's worth without making any physical improvements to justify the price increase. The end results of such a sale are never good. Often the buyer realizes the house has such little value that it's not worth the trouble to make expensive improvements, so it is demolished at a cost of around \$8,000 to the buyer. A worse scenario frequently seen in Buffalo is when an uninformed, low-income buyer receives a mortgage far exceeding the home's value. Eventually they are forced to default on their mortgage, and their property is foreclosed. Another equally distressing occurrence is when a buyer quickly realizes he's purchased a lemon and immediately dumps the house at a reduced price to cut his or her losses.

After discovering they've been scammed, however, most buyers allow houses to remain empty and decay. Eventually they're put back on the market and are repeatedly flipped—a cyclical process—until the City finally decides the house must be demolished, leaving another scar on another block. Often times, several houses are flipped on a single block, starting a chain reaction that kills an entire neighborhood.

Though countless articles have been written about the situation, Odien realized that pictures speak a thousand words, and he thinks his documentary will help make the difference. Odien worked closely with housing activist and housing court liaison Michele Johnson on the film, and she often takes center stage. Johnson has been a bulldog on the issue, unflinching in her attempts to bring unscrupulous real estate flippers to justice.

"I think people will be enraged when they see it," Johnson says. "They're going to come in and say, 'What the hell is this?'"

Johnson and Odien spent about a week filming in March in and around the Fillmore District and parts of the West Side. During these portions of the film, they have the advantage of taking viewers firsthand into the bombed-out neighborhoods that they wouldn't otherwise see, of listening to the people who are forced to live in these neighborhoods. They put a human face on what is otherwise simply a complicated, abstract problem.

Odien, a former Channel 2 videographer, originally planned only a 20-minute video short about flipping, but once Johnson took him out on the streets, he realized the need for more. What followed was hour upon hour of filming, and interviews with City Housing Court Judge Henry Nowak, housing inspector Tracy Krug and Mayor Byron Brown.

The end result is more than just a polemic about the terrible people who prey on our poorest neighborhoods; instead it raises important questions and proposes common-sense solutions to them.

"We don't have all the answers," admits Johnson. "But I do hope we get more people that say, 'We have to stop this' and we find a way to stop it."

The film may have already found an important audience in Mayor Brown. It's rumored that in his interview for the documentary, Brown promises to make Buffalo a leader in anti-flipping practices.

"I still do believe that things are going to get better," Johnson says. "We're at the very bottom. The only way to go is up from here." We can only hope that she's right.

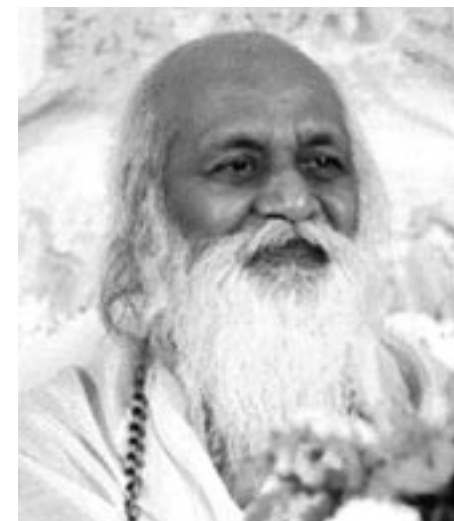
Flipped premieres June 8 at 6pm and 7:30pm at the Adam Mickiewicz Dramatic Circle on Fillmore Ave. Immediately following each screening will be a panel discussion with Johnson, Nowak and Krug. Admission is \$5.

—peter koch

■ THE PEACE PALACE

How the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi hopes to save Buffalo and the rest of the world

"The plan," says John Buckley of the



Maharishi Enlightenment Center of Buffalo, "is to build centers, palaces, in all the major population centers around the world and offer the programs for enlightenment that Maharishi teaches. Basically as you meditate individually—your brain becomes more coherent and your actions become more in tune with nature and natural things in a more life-supporting way."

Buckley and former Buffalo Philharmonic piccolo player Larry Trott are seated in the dining room of a beautiful West Ferry mansion, temporary home to the Maharishi Enlightenment Center of Buffalo, which offers community to practitioners of the Maharishi's transcendental meditation (TM) techniques and introductory sessions every other Tuesday evening for the curious-minded.

Temporary because a larger project is afoot: Buffalo—or rather a 6.5-acre plot of land on Transit Road—has been designated a site for one of 3,000 Peace Palaces, a network of centers that the Maharishi hopes to realize in coming years. These centers, it is imagined, will provide a full suite of facilities and services to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 13 >



both veteran and fledgling meditators, ranging from Ayurvedic treatments to training in advanced techniques—most notably yogic flying, or levitation, the effects of which, when practiced in groups, devotees of the Maharishi’s teaching say, “spreads throughout the environment, reducing negative tendencies and promoting positive, harmonious trends throughout society.”

Meditation, they say, has a net positive effect on humanity’s condition. The idea, in effect, is to bring harmony to our region and—with 3,000 Peace Palaces planned around the globe—throughout the world by increasing the number of people who practice TM.

“There have been studies that show that if one percent or more of a city is practicing TM, balanced against other cities with similar populations and demographics, that they found tremendous changes, various statistically significant changes,” Buckley says. “Productivity went up, crime rate went down and all the different criteria and good stimuli improved. So the idea is to get more people to practice in these meditation programs and to raise consciousness and to alleviate the crime and the rest of the things that bring productivity down.”

Both Trott and Buckley have been adherents of the Maharishi’s teachings since the 1970s, the heyday of the Indian holy man’s influence in the US. Most famous for his tutelage of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the Maharishi first brought his teaching to the West in the late 1950s. Currently the global network which he guides runs numerous learning and research institutions around the world, including a university of management in Iowa, and claims to have instructed more than five million students in TM techniques. That’s not one percent of the world’s population, of course, but it’s a lot. And Trott says that peer-reviewed studies have shown that if 1/10th of one percent of the world population were to practice Sidhi-TM, the advanced techniques that include yogic flying, that would be enough to significantly reduce the disharmony in the world.

“The Maharishi’s purpose has always been the same, essentially—to help people be all that they can be, to bring peace to the world, to save us from ourselves,” Trott says. “Therefore there is this huge

thrust now to do this and to make groups as large as possible, groups with the advanced techniques.

“For us the fabulous thing is that years and years ago there was a center in Buffalo and there hasn’t been a center in 25 years,” he adds. “And so for us this is so exciting that Buffalo is on this list of places to host a Peace Center.”

The building on Transit Road will be paid for by the national organization, which has commissioned a common design for all the centers, using all natural materials and aligned to Indian astrological principles, as dictated by Stapatyaveda, the Indian science of design. It will be about 12,000 square feet.

Buckley acknowledges that TM and the Maharishi have lost ground in the public consciousness in the US since the early 1970s. Back then, the Buffalo area enlightenment center had a list with 5,000 names on it. Many of those, he concedes, were transient—students, mostly. The new center, which he and Trott started in January, has no more than a dozen active members right now. But he reckons that many meditators practice in private, disengaged from the community. A new TM center, he hopes, will bring those veteran meditators back into the fold, as well as recruit new students.

And he thinks the evidence—the popularity of yoga, of Ayurvedic medicine and massage, of organic food and even of Vedic principles of design—suggests that the time is right for a resurgence in the Maharishi’s popularity.

“Certainly more people know they ought to be better to themselves than in the 1950s or 1960s,” Buckley says. “And organic food is a burgeoning market now—the fact that the government is trying to tamper with it shows that there is big money there. That’s a huge indicator right there.”

Buckley and Trott are awaiting the final plans for the Transit Road Peace Palace, but construction is expected to begin this year. They are content, in the meantime with their rented digs at 665 West Ferry.

“We hope we can keep this building, too,” Trott says. “We need enlightenment right here in the city as well.”

—geoff kelly

av

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