



Prestes Maia

Freedom in Concrete

A documentary by **Levin Peter** and **Jonas Ginter**
52 min

Sao Paulo is globalization. Within the largest economic conglomerate of Latin America the contrasts between rich and poor could hardly be more pronounced. This metropolis of twenty million wants to reach the very top; and the people at the very bottom are left with a single chance only: to join together and fight in order to stay connected with the mega city and its aspiring society. Homeless people by the thousands break into abandoned buildings and take what they need: shelter for themselves and their families. The MSTC (Movimento Sem Teto do Centro = movement of the city center homeless) has organized itself as a solidarity movement. Altogether, 600,000 living units are lacking, contrasted by 650,000 real estate properties which are not in use. The movement's answer is squatting. In Sao Paulo currently fifteen buildings - old, empty factories for the most part - are occupied in this fashion.

Right at the center of Brazil's largest city stands a stronghold of the lower class – **Prestes Maia**, the biggest squatted building in Latin America with 468 families on 22 floors, with 1379 occupants and 1379 personal histories. Lamartine Brasileiro is one of them. "Prestes Maia is a cry for freedom", says the short, wiry water vendor who earns the money to support himself and his family of seven on a major street crossing. "We're poor, but we exist", he adds full of fighting spirit. **Prestes Maia** is the symbol of this fight.

To the rich and powerful the squatted house is an eyesore. Low income groups and homeless people are not supposed to find a space of their own in the downtown area. Among the glittering facades and helicopter landing pads there must be no reminders of the problems of the lower classes. And that is why **Prestes Maia** must be broken up. How? With money. Early in 2007 the squatters agreed to be bought out of **Prestes Maia**. Voluntarily they clear their paradise and move into ghettos way out in the suburbs. Too late they realize that thus they forfeit

their most powerful weapon, the "power of community". But the occupants are not giving up.

Prestes Maia – Freedom in Concrete is a very personal portrait of the squatters and their stories. Deep insights into strong characters allow for an understanding of the rifts and wounds that mark an uprising society. When Ivanete de Araujo returns to the bridge she used to live under before she decided to squat houses and is overwhelmed by traumatic memories; when Lamartine with his wife walks the eerily empty hallways of **Prestes Maia** and would wish for himself to return to his old paradise; when in his helicopter city planer Eduardo Trani grandly hovers above the endless sprawl of highrise buildings that is Sao Paulo and talks about "interesting mergers of slum neighbourhoods": then all of a sudden that which the simple word "dignity" conceals becomes apparent.

Deeply impressed by the Brazilian radicalism and sheer force of this united action the directors accompany three formerly homeless persons in their present fight for living space. They search for cornerstones leading to the creation of a framework for humanist ideals that seem intangible in a globalized market economy, yet are worth fighting for. The result is a very personal film providing intense stories within the present social context.

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Dramaturgy **Marla Fee Wilke**

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