

'It would be nice to assemble all of the MPs and screen this film in parliament'

"Where artists go the corporates will follow," says Ingrid Swenson, founder of the PEER Gallery, in Zed Nelson's powerful new documentary, *The Street*, which charts the changing face of Hoxton Street across four eventful years.

"We've all seen gentrification happening around us but change occurs so gradually we hardly notice it until things have gone," says Nelson. "The idea was to document it as it happened and follow peoples' lives so that you could experience in an hour-and-a-half film what happened across four years."

And that's what he has done. In 2015, he headed to this impoverished, but historically rich, corner of Hackney and started filming. His efforts were initially met with suspicion by shopkeepers and residents.

"It wasn't always easy," he says. "Understandably, people were wary. Was it going to be a tabloid, Benefits Street-style look at the street?" Over time, however, Nelson built trust with the locals whose testimonies propel his film.

"I would visit the street on many, many consecutive days spread across a long period of time. I was working alone. I didn't have a crew. I didn't have researchers or fixers. I would just go there with a camera, hang out and meet people." By sheer coincidence, filming occurred at the same time as some seismic events. "Extraordinary things happened. The EU referendum was announced. Brexit was voted for. Grenfell Tower burnt down, and this exposed deep social divisions."

Hoxton Street has personal resonance for the 54-year-old acclaimed photographer-turned-filmmaker. "I've lived in Hackney since the age of four," he states. "I



Joe Cooke at his Pie & Mash shop.

Picture: ZED NELSON

grew up in Hackney and it was always a bit of a ramshackle, rundown place. We used to leave Hackney to go out, whereas now Hackney is a destination. In some ways I've fallen back in love with it like never before. Equally, there's this sense of wanting to protect what is unique about it.

"Probably the only good thing that could come out of Brexit is a lowering of house prices. If you look at the architecture of a lot of the new builds you can see the signage: 'Concierge', 'Gym', 'Underground Parking'. It's the architecture of separation. It says,

'you can live in Hackney, but don't worry, you can be protected from the locals'. Everything has a price tag on it now. People look at a youth club or a pub or a church and think of turning them into flats.

"I met a guy called Colin who rents an ex-council flat for £250 per week. It has been divided into three flats by a private landlord who rents out each unit for £250 per week. Colin lives in what would have been the kitchen of the previous flat." Despair and frustration is perceptible in Nelson's voice.

He moves to another contributor: "There is a scene where the vicar of a church says people are angry because they can't get a council flat. They are on waiting lists for years and as they get to the top they are often bumped off by a family from abroad; maybe a refugee family. He says that anger is rising.

"You can take that on face value or you can look at the fact that we used to have six-and-a-half million council flats in Britain. We now have two million." He pauses for a moment. "It's such a massive reduction that of course people

are angry that they can't be housed. They might blame a refugee family, but the problem is that the government have sold off council homes and not built any new ones.

"It started under Thatcher's 'right to buy' scheme," he offers. "Giving people the opportunity to buy their council home is a really nice idea. If they'd rebuilt every single one they'd sold that would have been alright, but they've only rebuilt one in five."

The Street is a conversation-starter that speaks of decimated communities and the price we pay for rapid gentrification. "It would be nice to assemble all the MPs and screen it in parliament," Nelson considers. "Whether or not that's achievable, I have no idea but I have discussed it with the distributor.

"I think this film gives a voice to people who are underrepresented. I don't think it's overtly political though. It's a film about life.

"Hopefully, it's funny, entertaining and moving as well as being a call-to-arms for people to wake up and consider what kind of life they want to lead."

It's fair to say that *The Street* is all of the above and much more. Timely and timeless, it is essential viewing.

Greg Wetherall

The Street is released tomorrow (Nov 29). Visit thestreetfilm.co.uk for a full list of cinemas that are playing the film



Left: Nelson's film charts the changing face of Hoxton Street over the past four years. Right: Gentrification is a key theme in the film.

Picture: ZED NELSON