

GOTHAMIST

Williamsburg Gentrification: The Movie!



Courtesy Su Friedrich/Outcast Films

Filmmaker Su Friedrich moved to Williamsburg in 1989, when the North Side was a budding artistic community. But when the waterfront was rezoned from industrial to residential in 2005, the condos started piling up, and the artists found themselves pushed out. Friedrich documented this phenomenon with her camera until 2010, when she lost her own apartment—her new documentary, [Gut Renovation](#), explores the neighborhood's rapid change as she saw it.

There's a lot of talk about the artist being the first step in the wave of a changing neighborhood, and then the hipsters follow, and then people with money and so forth, and the artists get priced out. Are artists a migrant community? I think we are a bit of a migrant community. And not everyone goes in the same direction when they migrate. Artists are moving away from New York. They're moving upstate, they're moving to Philly, or Portland, or wherever. I don't think we move as a mob, but there's certainly a feeling of wanting to be around one's peers or one's kind. I think that's partly why Bushwick was such a popular place for people

to move, and because it did have a lot of older industrial buildings where people could get studios.

It's funny because, after seeing the film, some people have said, well, here you are complaining about what happened, but isn't it the artists who were the first ones who gentrified it? But let's take a neighborhood like Park Slope. Park Slope has been completely and utterly gentrified over the past 20 years—more than 20 years now—and that had nothing to do with artists moving in. I think there are a lot of factors that go into why a neighborhood changes, but I certainly don't think that artists are a guarantee of a neighborhood becoming gentrified.

It seems like what's happened to Williamsburg is unprecedented. I understand that gentrification happens, neighborhoods change. But it feels like what happened with Williamsburg is more of a commodification than a gentrification. Why do you think that is? I agree with you that it's a commodification, and it was like the whole neighborhood was sold. If you read the brochures that these condos put out to sell their properties, it's just remarkable the kind of language they were using. There was a certain tone to these brochures that was just so obnoxious. It was not unprecedented, if you consider what Robert Moses did to New York in the '30s, '40s, and '50s, where he wiped out whole neighborhoods and put up new housing projects, and tore down neighborhoods to build highways, the BQE, the Triborough, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, all of that.

But this particular case was different than, let's say, Soho. People have always cited Soho as this incredible transformation from an industrial neighborhood to a very wealthy neighborhood. But that happened so much more gradually and on such a smaller scale than Williamsburg, because there was city planning office model for what happened in Soho. It was, in a sense, more organic. And what happened in Williamsburg, is that the city planning office got a plan that was devised by the local community called 197A which they worked on for four years, and the City Council passed it in 2002. But then the city planning office, and later the City Council approved a rezoning that was drastically different than that plan. The city and the mayor had their eyes on Williamsburg and the waterfront for years before, and then they just went ahead and did it. And so it was a very topdown—like, "Ok, we are going to give these people the right to build incredibly expensive things, and push everybody out in the process."

Have most of your friends who were there for the early stages—the artists of the previous Williamsburg era—have they been forced out? Where did people end up going? Oh yeah. I know very few people who still live there. Huge numbers went to Bushwick or Ridgewood. And Sunset Park a bit, you know, Red Hook. But I think the main exodus was to Bushwick.



Courtesy Cynthia Lugo

There's a lot of concern about Bushwick becoming condo-fied, and LIC and Greenpoint. Do you think this is going to be a widespread problem in the future?

It seems like if they can get away with it they'll do it. The mayor just announced this phenomenal plan for Greenpoint at the Newtown Creek inlet—it's like six high-rises that are designed by the person who did Trump Towers. And one of the things that was really remarkable in his SOTC address—which is when he announced it—was he talked about creating a new Greenpoint community. It's like the city is making communities instead of the community making its own community. Everybody in Greenpoint was like, "Well, we already have a community here. We all live here already. We don't need you to come in and create a community for us!"

What kind of hope do you see in the city left for artists, writers students and people who don't make the kind of money to afford this brand of real estate wealth? I teach, and I have students saying that they want to move to New York when they graduate. I go do screenings in you know, Ohio, or in Pittsburgh, and they're like, "Oh, I really want to move to New York! What's it like for you? What was it like for you when you moved to New York?" And I have to say, to be honest, as much as I want New York to continue to be a really fantastic environment in which art is incubated, developed, and produced and performed, I don't feel that it's as possible as it used to be. I don't want to discourage people from moving here, because this is why I came to New York, this is what I love about New York. But I feel like the young people I see living here are just tormented. They just cannot manage.

Williamsburg was once a vibrant Hispanic and Italian and Polish neighborhood. Have you seen those families and demographics forced out? Definitely. Particularly, the Hispanic population has dropped dramatically. There's been a real forcing out of the Hispanic population. To some extent the Polish and Italian population, also, but I think there were a lot of Italian and

Polish families who owned homes on the North Side. They either could stay because they owned their homes, or they could sell for good money. On the South Side, in the Hispanic neighborhood, there were more apartment rentals. They were a much more vulnerable population, and did get pushed out. There are certainly activist groups on the South Side, like El Puente, who are trying to hold on to what they can in the neighborhood, but it's very difficult in the face of this kind of money and power.

Gut Renovation *opens today at [Film Forum](#), 209 West Houston Street. It runs until March 12th.*

By [Rebecca Fishbein](#) in [Arts & Entertainment](#) on March 6, 2013 10:11 AM

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