

Neighborhood Watch: Su Friedrich Follows the Evolution (and Devolution) of Brooklyn for 'Gut Renovation'

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by Jennifer Wolfe

In the late 1980s, Brooklyn's Williamsburg was a working class neighborhood populated by small manufacturers, family-owned butchers and auto repair shops. The city's bohemians—artists, writers and filmmakers—began to filter into the area, establishing themselves in commercial loft spaces built out with DIY ingenuity and old-fashioned elbow grease. Williamsburg landlords turned a blind eye, and an artistic community blossomed and thrived. Then, in 2005, the neighborhood began to change.

While New York's trendy SoHo district took 30 years to make the transition from artists' haven to art gallery hotspot to outdoor shopping mall, Williamsburg, the victim of new zoning laws and tax subsidies, underwent a transformation in just eight short years that pushed out generations of local businesses and a community of artists.

The documentary feature *Gut Renovation* by independent filmmaker Su Friedrich and co-writer Cathy Quinlan records the neighborhood's transformation from an artists' refuge to its current incarnation as a sleek and moneyed hipster paradise.

Friedrich, who has been making experimental documentaries since the late 1970s, has taught film and video production at [Princeton](#) since 1998. She has received retrospectives at [MoMA](#), [the Whitney Museum of American Art](#), the [Rotterdam International Film Festival](#), the [Pacific Cinematheque](#) in Vancouver, and the National Film Theater in London.

She spent five years documenting the changes in the area between New York's East River and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, showing the demolition of industrial buildings, watching old tenants leave and keeping a meticulous record of developments. One of the most moving sequences depicts the destruction of the building across from Friedrich's, including the ugly demise of what appears to be the world's most stubborn and spirited rock.

Distributed by Outcast Films, *Gut Renovation* made its U.S. premiere at the Brooklyn International Film Festival in June 2012, prior to its international premiere at the 2013 Berlinale and a limited theatrical run in March at the NYC Film Forum.

Friedrich began shooting in early 2006 with a [Panasonic](#) AG-DVC30 MiniDV camcorder and [Sennheiser MKE](#) shotgun mic, supplemented by a wireless mic, recording the systematic gutting and renovation of the neighborhood.



Su Friedrich in front of The Edge, one of the huge new condos she discusses in *Gut Renovation*. Photo by Cynthia Lugo

teach what they were doing, and pretty much all of them are moving to Premiere,” she comments.

Always the experimentalist, Friedrich participates in her documentary as well as directs it. There are scenes of her accosting developers and new tenants, and she provides graffiti commentary that resonates against the narration and scenes of destruction. Shooting on the fly, Friedrich interviews departing small business owners and workers at demolition sites, and documents the goodbye parties and farewell celebrations within the artist community. She also covers loft sales and condo parties, openly filming as she walks through the newly gentrified spaces she can no longer afford.

“For so many years I shot 16mm, and usually when I went into a public space, people were very aware of the camera. It was an unusual object that made noise and people really noticed it,” Friedrich says. “Now everyone has a camera. Whether they have a larger camera like the one I was using, a little Handycam or their cell phones, there’s this sense of everyone filming all the time. It’s so pervasive that you can be at public events such as these condo parties and film and no one even notices. It’s interesting if you’re trying to do work like this to see this general acceptance of the presence of the camera.”

“One of my abiding rules as a teacher is that students always have to work with the camera in manual mode. There is no auto anything. So whenever I go to look for a new camera, I look for the ones that make manual shooting the most accessible,” Friedrich explains. “At the time, we were looking for a new camera for the advanced class and found that with the Sony models, for instance, many functions were buried in the menu, while the Panasonic functions were still on the body, making it very easy to control exposure, do white-balancing, etc. Now it’s obsolete, of course, and we use the HD version at the school, but that was what we chose back then, and I really ended up liking it,” she relates.

Editing nearly 43 hours of footage down to 81 minutes proved to be one of the biggest challenges of the project. Equally versed in Avid and Apple editing tools, Friedrich employed an Apple Final Cut Pro 7.0.3 workflow for *Gut Renovation*, but made plans to migrate to [Adobe Premiere Pro](#) for future projects. “To avoid being rash, I had been asking other filmmakers who