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The Appraisal

For Good or Bad, Watching Williamsburg's Transformation



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Su Friedrich, the filmmaker behind the documentary "Gut Renovation," pointed out recent developments in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, from the roof of her old building on North 11th Street.

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“[Gut Renovation](#)” is a documentary that tells a familiar tale. It chronicles buildings torn down, communities elbowed out, and new residents ushered in as a tidal wave of gentrification swept through Williamsburg, Brooklyn.



Ms. Friedrich with a map of new developments in the area. (Todd Heister/The New York Times)



Sarah Burke, an executive vice president at Douglas Elliman, was involved in developing several projects in Williamsburg with her previous employer. (Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times)

It has been nearly eight years since nearly 200 blocks in northern Brooklyn were rezoned to make way for residential development, and dozens of new buildings have sprouted up there since. So the deed is done: Williamsburg is transformed. But the movie, which had its New York theatrical premiere last week, illustrates how emotions that sprang from those changes can still be quite raw.

“You may think it’s funny, but you’re the people who are coming and ruining our neighborhood,” the filmmaker, [Su Friedrich](#), yells out a window toward the beginning of the movie, as a group of people in fancy slacks and overcoats pass by. “And I’m recording it.”

“So, welcome to the neighborhood,” Ms. Friedrich continues. “You’re ruining it!”

At that, the audience at the movie’s opening night showing gave a good, hearty chuckle.

Ms. Friedrich, a filmmaker and Princeton University film [professor](#), rented a large, bohemian-dream of a loft with her partner, Cathy Quinlan, for 20 years, from 1989 until 2009. Shortly after the area was rezoned in 2005, Ms. Friedrich began to record the changes, for what eventually became “Gut Renovation.”

The film shows Ms. Friedrich’s friends packing up their airy lofts and moving, displaced when rents rose and buildings sold. It tells of local businesses and industries pushed out after decades in business. It chronicles the constant clatter of demolition and construction.

It also details an infestation of tiny dogs, at least one wearing a little green jacket, whose stout legs take over the sidewalk. It recounts vicious comments written on the real estate blog [Curbed](#).

("I'm so sick of it already," one commenter complained about artists who complained about gentrifiers. "Smelly, unshaven, haven't bathed in days, 'artists.' Go to hell already.") And the audience hears about a letter Ms. Friedrich received from a local real estate agent, inquiring about vacancies in their building. Ms. Friedrich scrawled a profanity on it, and then sent it back.

"It's not like I went out thinking, 'I'm going to make a film about being really angry,' but I just got more and more upset, but also more and more sad as I went along," Ms. Friedrich said on a recent stroll around her old neighborhood. "And I am, I guess, kind of direct," she added.

"Look at that gray building," she said a few minutes later. "I mean, could that be uglier?"

In 2009, Ms. Friedrich and her partner bought a two-family home in Bedford-Stuyvesant and waved goodbye to the old neighborhood.

At the opening night showing at Film Forum last week, where Ms. Friedrich was in attendance, a sold-out audience spent several minutes lined up outside in the wet snow. Once inside, they seemed to delight in Ms. Friedrich's rage. They laughed at all the right moments; they gasped at particularly ugly buildings; one woman began a question to Ms. Friedrich afterward by saying that watching the movie was like "watching my own life."

Seeking another perspective on the movie, this reporter asked several companies that have been active in Williamsburg's development — including [Toll Brothers](#), whom the movie calls out by name — if they would like to send a representative to watch the film. Their publicists stammered. Many sounded frightened. Requests were denied. Even a prominent local broker declined to participate, and real estate agents are hardly famous for being shy and retiring.

Some of Williamsburg's newer residents were also reluctant to participate for fear that they would become a convenient dartboard.

"I feel like it's an incredibly divisive issue," said a resident of [the Edge](#), a glassy tower on the Brooklyn waterfront, who did not want to be named. "If you bought a new construction apartment, then you own a piece of what people don't want to be there. By definition, you are part of the problem."

But the day after the premiere, at a Douglas Elliman real estate office in TriBeCa, an executive vice president named [Sarah Burke](#) agreed to watch the movie, in the relative safety of a company office. She sat very still, occasionally tapping a red fingernail on the blond wooden table in front of her, as "Gut Renovation" played on the flat-screen TV. With her previous employer, the Developers Group, Ms. Burke was involved in developing several projects in Williamsburg, including the Edge. She also lives in the area and has two small dogs.

"Can we fast-forward yet?" she said a few minutes after the film began. "Just kidding."

Ms. Burke watched calmly, for the most part, leaning forward in her chair every few minutes to dispense counterarguments.

“She fails to mention that building was in a total state of disrepair,” she said of a brick structure on Bayard Street that was torn down.

“At some point, people will sell a building; that’s why you buy it,” she added later in the film. “It’s not like shoes.”

And finally: “Who wants to live next to a chicken processing plant?” she exclaimed, as its old site and the building that replaced it flashed across the street. “I mean, come on.”

But even viewers with less skin in the game raised objections to the film. Damian Begley, a film archivist, who saw the movie at Film Forum said he was disappointed that the movie had no voices from the other side to discuss, perhaps, the economic advantages to the changes. Nick Occhiuto, a sociology graduate student at Columbia University who grew up in Williamsburg, shared that concern, and added another of his own.

“She’s doing to the inhabitants of Bed-Stuy what she was lambasting the capitalists for doing to her,” he said.

Ms. Friedrich does not agree. She said that she and Ms. Quinlan bought their new home in a middle-class area from a man who had retired and wanted to leave New York.

“We felt we were buying a house from somebody who wanted to sell it,” she said. “If a black person who made the same amount and paid the same amount as me moved into the neighborhood, would they be considered gentrifiers? I don’t know. Maybe they would.”

But Ms. Friedrich’s decision to buy in Bedford-Stuyvesant did garner enthusiastic support from what is, perhaps, an unlikely ally: Ms. Burke.

“That was the best time in the world to buy,” Ms. Burke said. “And if she would like to sell it and make a profit, then she can call me.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/12/nyregion/for-good-or-bad-watching-williamsburgs-transformation.html?pagewanted=all>