

THE SurRealEstate

by [Cea Weaver](#) | March 11, 2013 · 2:39 pm

“Gut Renovation,” Domino Sugar Factory, and the Redevelopment of Williamsburg

It’s your last chance to head over to [Film Forum](#) and catch a screening of [Gut Renovation](#), Su Friedrich’s new documentary about the rezoning and redevelopment of Williamsburg that has displaced many longtime residents and businesses. The movie gives an angry and uniquely personal look at how rapidly Williamsburg went from being an industrial zone and an affordable artistic and ethnic community to “Condoburg,” as Friedrich calls it.

To longtime residents, gentrification happened at such a dizzying rate that Williamsburg became nearly unrecognizable overnight. According to the [New York Times](#),

The imagines of Williamsburg in the wake of a gold rush are not attractive. As pictured by Ms. Friedrich, who photographed the movie, it is a mostly ugly architectural mishmash executed without an overall vision, beyond the prospect for developers of making as much money as quickly as possible.

Though much of Friedrich’s footage is from 2008-2010, the film remains particularly relevant today, as Two Trees Management has [released their plans for the much contested Domino Sugar Factory site](#). The designers are the New York based SHoP Architects, who are most recently responsible for the bronzed behemoth Barclays Center.

The plan for the Domino Sugar Factory, though, is potentially even flashier and more out of place than the rest of Williamsburg’s new buildings. Williamsburg residents have concerns around the height of the buildings, which will overshadow the iconic Domino Sugar building and are reminiscent of Manhattan — a more skyscraper friendly borough. The proposal requires City approval and significant rezoning to be realized.

As Friedrich reminds us, the rezoning of Williamsburg is at least partially responsible for how rapidly the neighborhood changed. Spaces that were once purposed for industrial use were redistricted as residential spaces, and the developers came running. In the documentary, she says of the city:

The city could have passed a loft law to protect artists and current residents, but they didn’t.

Friedrich tells the story of a friend of hers, displaced from an industrial loft into an “affordable housing” unit in a nearby new-built condo. The unit is small, and as an “affordable” resident, she is not able to use the front entrance of the building along with a whole host of amenities that

condo owners have access too. According to Two Trees, this will *not* be the case at the Domino Sugar site. Their proposal actually includes *more* affordable housing than initially discussed for the site, and the Walentas claim that affordable housing tenants will have equal access to luxury amenities as market price residents. (The plan is not all bad – it also includes a public school and plans for community spaces, like a YMCA.)

Like Williamsburg, DUMBO (though it wasn't called that then) was once an entirely industrial neighborhood that, at Two Trees' behest, was rezoned and redeveloped into something that is nearly unrecognizable and certainly not affordable. You can read more about the history of Two Trees and about their involvement in changing the face of Brooklyn neighborhoods [here](#). One thing is certain – if developers have their way, Williamsburg will look a lot more like Midtown Manhattan within a decade.

Gut Renovation, for all its fury, is not a call to action. The extent of Friedrich's activism (at least on camera) is small time graffiti and some mild harassment of new (wealthy) Williamsburg residents. But if Two Trees is going to build their project, they need the cooperation of the city and its elected officials. Now is the time to organize and call on representatives to protect our neighborhoods and stop the "Manhattanization" of Northern Brooklyn. Rather than lament after the fact that the city didn't pass different rezoning laws, force them to do it now.

Another thing Gut Renovation doesn't do: Friedrich doesn't question her own role in how Williamsburg has changed. In their book, "[Gentrification](#)," Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wiley tell us that gentrification is process that almost always begins with what they call "pioneer gentrifiers" – people like Friedrich and her partner, who move to a "new" neighborhood and rehab their homes on their own. The feverish "super gentrification" wrought by developers like Two Trees is made possible through a process that begins with Friedrich herself. Lees, Slater, and Wiley explain that "pioneer gentrifiers" prime the neighborhood and make it attractive to profiteering development companies. In the movie, we'd like to see Friedrich reflect a bit on her own role in the gentrification of Williamsburg.

Before there were "artists" in Williamsburg, like the ones depicted in Gut Renovation, there were low income immigrants who worked, among other places, at the Domino Sugar Factory. The site was the location of some of the most powerful labor strikes in Brooklyn's history, [most recently in 2000](#). While on strike, workers highlighted their diversity as one of their greatest assets. Even though there will be "affordable housing" provided at the new development, we doubt if Two Trees could ever recreate the racial and national diversity that once existed in Williamsburg. But I guess we'll just have to wait and see.

Gut Renovation will be screening at Film Forum for 2 more days. To view the times, click [here](#).

<http://thesurrealestate.org/2013/03/11/gut-renovation-domino-sugar-factory-and-the-redevelopment-of-williamsburg/#comment-1814>