

## Raw Anger Permeates a New Film About Gentrification in Williamsburg, Brooklyn

- [Sarah Goodyear](#)



'Gut Renovation'

There is nothing subtle about *Gut Renovation*, Su Friedrich's new documentary on the gentrification of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which [opens today at New York's Film Forum](#). She's pissed, and she wants you to know it.

This is a personal story for the award-winning independent filmmaker, who moved to the neighborhood in 1989 and was eventually pushed out when the authorities decided that, after 19 years, they were finally going to start enforcing building codes in the old Hecla Iron Works factory. She had been living there with a rotating assortment of roommates, most of them fellow artists, for most of her adult life. But with zoning changes and residential redevelopment of the entire area, it was only a matter of time before they got the boot, and she knew it. So she started documenting what she saw happening to the streets around her.

She tells a tale of rampant demolition and new construction with a mixture of outrage, bewilderment, and sorrow that is leavened (fortunately) with some self-deprecating wit. This is

by no means a balanced journalistic account, but rather a howl of disbelief. From the first frame to the last, Friedrich pounds away – like the pile drivers on the construction site across the street that made her life hell for months on end. All the considerable frustration and anxiety embodied in the insane New York real estate market find expression here.

Friedrich grimly maps new construction sites in her immediate vicinity, a count that she eventually abandons when it hits 173. She chronicles the fate of buildings that were emptied out and torn down to clear construction sites that then sat idle when the market crashed. She interviews owners of longtime businesses that are forced out as the area flips to high-density, high-end residential. There's the Polish butcher, the garage owner, the guy at the forklift repair shop – all thriving businesses that were [swept away](#) when a fat package of zoning, tax breaks, and other incentives was passed in 2005 by the City Council, part of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's vision for the revitalization of the city's industrial neighborhoods.

Friedrich argues that those neighborhoods were pretty damn vital to begin with, and that a more mixed-use approach would have preserved Williamsburg's working-class character and light-industrial job base. Lots of people argued that, she says, but those voices didn't prevail.

The filmmaker also turns her camera on the area's well-heeled new hipster-professional residents, without any pretense of sympathy. She spies on them as they walk their “designer dogs” on the sidewalk under her window, waits for them, paparazzi-style, as they tote shopping bags to their sleek new glass condos. When one developer-type turns his own camera back on her, she yells at him, “You may think it's funny, but you are the people who are coming to my neighborhood and ruining it, and I'm recording it!” She sounds shrill and strident, and she knows it: A title appears on the screen, reading: “How typical, I make a fool of myself and they don't give a shit.”

That's the type of self-awareness that makes this movie work in the end. Friedrich may be filled with righteous anger and deep sorrow, but she never loses her sense of humor. Particularly amusing are her tours of various open houses for cramped, cookie-cutter apartments selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars. She may be trying, but she just can't pretend to be anything other than furious, and her barbed and bitter commentary invariably ruffles the people showing her around. You can see the alarm in their eyes: just who is this woman, anyway? She seems like she might be dangerous.

Maybe she is. Artists are supposed to be that way, after all.



Sarah Goodyear has written about cities for a variety of publications, including *Grist* and *Streetsblog*. She lives in Brooklyn. [All posts »](#)

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