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Gentri-film-cation: Brooklyn's filmmakers turn the lens on development

By Eli Rosenberg



Photo by Stefano Giovannini



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Brooklyn's thriving community of filmmakers has discovered it needs to look no further than the surrounding blocks to find a good story.

A boom in locally made films is a surprising byproduct of Mayor Bloomberg's legacy of big development projects in the borough — with numerous documentaries taking a long and critical look at what years of rezoning and development in different areas of Brooklyn mean for residents.

“There's nothing better than making something in your back and front yard, and there's a lot of development taking place in Brooklyn,” said Megan Sperry, one of the filmmakers behind “The Domino Effect,” a film that looks at the reuse of the former sugar factory on the Williamsburg waterfront.

“The Domino Effect” is joined by “Gut Renovation,” about the 2005 rezoning of Williamsburg and gentrification; “My Brooklyn,” which looks at the 2004 rezoning of the Fulton Mall; “The Battle for Brooklyn,” about the Atlantic Yards project and the use of eminent domain; “The Zipper,” about the development of Coney Island; and “At the Corner of 3rd and 3rd,” an upcoming short about the Gowanus lot that Whole Foods plans to develop and the historic Coignet Building.

The bumper crop of films on these issues has even inspired its own film series: Brooklyn Reconstructed, an eight-month long showcase of gentrification-centric films that was so successful in Brooklyn that its creator, Brooklyn documentary maven Adam Schartoff, exported it to Oakland, Calif.

The filmmakers say that firing up people is part of the point of their projects, which are part-education, part-activism.

“Whether in Williamsburg or Chinatown or Flushing ... we’ve been setting up screenings and getting it out there so people know what they’re up against, specifically so they could mobilize,” said Sperry.

At the very least the films have moved Brooklyn’s discerning film-goers off their couches.

Sunset Park-based filmmaker Kelly Anderson originally planned to screen “My Brooklyn” for one run at ReRun theater in DUMBO, but was called back for an additional 20 screenings after selling out the small theater every day.

Both “My Brooklyn” and “Gut Renovation” — a documentary by avante-garde filmmaker and Williamsburg-cum-Bedford-Stuyvesant resident Su Friedrich — won the 2012 audience award at the Brooklyn Film Festival.

And Friedrich’s film just finished a run at the Film Forum in Manhattan, generating a significant amount of media buzz in the process.

It’s a lot of success for filmmakers working mostly with low budgets and small staffs donating their time to produce their films — a sign the subject matter is touching a nerve.

“These films are getting at some very edgy and controversial aspects of the power structure,” said Anderson. “Brooklyn is sort of like the cautionary tale for other areas of the country.”

“My Brooklyn” was the product of Kelly Anderson and Allison Dean, who were working off an \$80,000 budget, but other filmmakers say that they’ve done it for even less.

Sperry and fellow collaborators Brian Paul and Daniel Phelps made their film with pocket change and a \$10,000 campaign on Kickstarter.

Filmmaker Max Kutner plans to release the 20-minute “At The Corner Of 3rd and 3rd,” after spending little more than the cost of his time and a MetroCard.

And ultimately the films are the result of the personal relationship that many filmmakers have with gentrification.

“I’m making a film about losing my home and in the middle of my filming I lost my home,” said Friedrich, who had to leave her loft on N. 11th Street after her building was sold in 2011. “That was sort of ironic.”

“My Brooklyn” at the Park Slope Food Coop [782 Union St. in Park Slope, between Sixth and Seventh avenues, (718) 622-0560, www.mybrooklynmovie.com]. April 5, 7 pm, free.

Watch for screenings of “Gut Renovation” at www.outcast-films.com.

Watch for screenings of “At the Corner of 3rd and 3rd” at maxkutner.tumblr.com/3rdand3rd.

“Domino Effect” for sale at thedominoeffectmovie.com.

“Battle for Brooklyn” for sale at amazon.com.

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