

FILM JOURNAL INTERNATIONAL

Louis Proyect: The Unrepentant Marxist

March 7, 2013

Gut Renovation

Filed under: [Film](#) — louisproyect @ 10:14 pm

Playing at the Film Forum until March 12th, Su Friedrich's "Gut Renovation" could have easily been called "I Hate the Rich", a title suggested to her by a friend who sympathized with her struggle against the real estate industry's largely successful effort to transform Williamsburg into Condoburg.

Friedrich's documentary is an angry and deeply personal look at the 20 years she has spent in a Brooklyn neighborhood that I always considered a bohemian stronghold even if there were obviously attempts to gentrify it. As is the customary practice in New York, artists like Friedrich flock to somewhat seedy but charming neighborhoods in search of cheap industrial lofts to turn into studios. The most famous example is Soho, the area "South of Houston Street" that is nothing but a warren of overpriced restaurants and boutiques nowadays. The only artists who remain there are those who are successful enough to mount shows in Madison Avenue galleries, a snooty area that the once downscale Soho now resembles.

Friedrich is a remarkable personality whose flair for vitriol is worth the price of an admission ticket. She is not above accosting well-heeled couples on the street that are toting shopping bags from Bloomingdales and accusing them of destroying her neighborhood. In one priceless moment in this darkly comic saga, she yells at a bunch of real estate agents and developers from the window of her loft. She is both shameless and priceless.

Anybody who has lived in New York for the better part of 40 years as I have can bear witness to the incestuous relationship between city government and the real estate industry. Friedrich spent a year turning a run-down loft into a pleasant living space even though she understood that it was not licensed as a residential dwelling. Landlords anxious to exploit every inch of rentable space looked the other way. Once Williamsburg became trendy, the real estate sharks moved in and began tearing down older commercial and industrial buildings in order to erect condos that would feature studio apartments selling for \$500,000. And after they got done with the candle and ornamental iron-fabricating firms, they went after the artists.

The building complex I am living in now was a cat's paw of gentrification. Called Ruppert-Yorkville Towers after the working class beer brewery, it was clearly designed to pave the way for condos, Duane-Reade pharmacies, and Starbucks. The working class residents of the neighborhood would soon be forced to relocate after rents skyrocketed.

Big powerful institutions are always using their political connections to get their way. My former employer Columbia University used eminent domain to force Manhattanville small businesses to go elsewhere. Bard College trustee Bruce Ratner (the brother of leftwing constitutional lawyer Michael Ratner) get his way to build a white elephant development in downtown Brooklyn. NYU is in a struggle against its own faculty to muscle its expansion through in the heart of Greenwich Village. Whether private or public, this is capitalist development at its most thick-fingered, vulgar worst.

Jane Jacobs died in 2006 at the age of 90. Author of “The Death and Life of Great American Cities”, there was nobody more perceptive about the terrible harm done to culture and civilization by the relentless drive for real estate gains at the expense of the human need for beauty and tranquility.

Jim Kunstler, the author of “The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape”, interviewed Jacobs back in 2000 for Metropolis Magazine. She recounted a battle waged in the mid-50s against developers who wanted to do to the West Village what has happened in Williamsburg. Kunstler asked her, “Who wanted to knock down the West Village?” Her reply:

It was the Rockefellers wanted to knock it down. But that’s never been established; watch out, you might be gotten for libel. But that was really where it was generated in the downtown lower Manhattan Association which was David Rockefeller’s organization. And they wanted it.

There were all these essentially private visions of how beautiful the city would be, and it was to be all these high rises here. And there would be a little enclave all the most expensive and pretty houses in the village would be left. But all the parts along the edges—the ones that people of lower income occupied—especially of mixed uses. That was our sin in the West Village. We had all these mixed uses. And now all these former manufacturing places are turned into the most expensive lofts with condominiums that sell for over a million dollars. These people, even as real estate experts, they didn’t know from nothing. They were so ignorant. Not only about what they were destroying, but about what people would like. Well, I am digressing. I still get angry about it.

It’s the same kind of anger found in “Gut Renovation”. Highly recommended.

<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2013/03/07/gut-renovation/>