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‘Gut Renovation’ Documents Sweeping Change in Williamsburg

by [Jason Andrew](#) | 3.12.13 |



Robert Moses was responsible for the displacement of hundreds of thousands of individuals, most notably and cruelly through the development of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. “When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis,” said the powerful city planner Robert Moses, “you have to hack your way with a meat ax.” This infamous quote came to symbolize the excess of a top-down approach to city development.

In 2005, after the City Council passed a rezoning ordinance, a neighborhood in Brooklyn 6 blocks wide and 17 blocks long became the site of a dramatic real estate boom. Developers were offered 25-year tax abatement to build condominiums. Thus begins [Su Friedrich’s](#) epic personal documentary charting the destruction/reconstruction of the neighborhood where she had lived for 20 years. Her film *Gut Renovation* opened this week at [Film Forum](#).



Filmmaker Su Friedrich. Photo: David Godlis

Filmed over a number of years, it's a scathing portrait of one neighborhood's demolition and transformation.

I started documenting it all because I didn't want to forget what had been. I didn't start by thinking, "Oh, this is going to be the end of us living here." That wasn't the initial impulse – it came from a larger and more generalized concern, but I certainly was thinking that we probably weren't going to survive unscathed when so much was going on around us. We knew that our landlords were in it for the money, not for love, so if they could find a way to make us unable to stay, they would, and it seemed that the rezoning was going to help them move in that direction. The title reflects that fact that my gut was being torn out by what was happening – and was being "renovated" without my consent.

And capture it she does. The film begins with the filmmaker climbing a flight of stairs, opening a heavy steel door and walking into a vast, but now vacant, floor with gorgeous historic vaulted ceilings. Where she had lived, where she had celebrated her life for the past 20 years. It was where her partner, the painter Cathy Nan Quinlan, started The 'temporary Museum of Painting (and Drawing), which championed the local art scene. The floor had been completely gutted. Her first words in the film are:

“Oh...Oh my god...they took everything down! Oh, there’s birds!...When we first came here, pigeons lived in here.”

The film is chock full of clips featuring the resident community. There is an elderly lady with her pushcart, another resident working in a garden near the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Transfiguration of Our Lord. They seemingly face off with the new, mostly white, affluent condo dwellers. Friedrich finds herself confronting them as she carries her camera to document new development after new development. “I’m allowed to film because you’re on public space,” she insists to one spritely, well-heeled gal who snarls at her for filming. The gal fumbles with her hands full with trendy shopping bags. Soon Friedrich films the infestation of small fancy dogs and sleek granite kitchen counters featured at the condo openings she attends. The entire audience cracks a smile when one realtor after another comments on the use of subway tiles as fashionable accessory.



Friedrich charting and mapping new constructions sweeping across Williamsburg. Photo: Su Friedrich/Outcast Films.

The film’s genius is in the way Friedrich charts and counts the demolition of the old and the construction of the new. She charts each new development while marking it in red on a map. The rising number of new condos – 60, 61, 62, 63 – underscores that fact that eventually she too will be displaced. And she is. But it’s not without a hilarious scene of her heckling real estate brokers wandering her street below from her window, “Welcome to the neighborhood. You’re ruining it!”

Around 2007/2008, when feelings were running really high, anti-building graffiti began to appear on the fencing around new developments. Across the street from her loft, where an

industrial building had been demolished, Friedrich tagged the construction fence with one of her own that reads: ARTISTS USED TO LIVE HERE



The filmmaker personalizes the construction site across her street. Photo: Su Friedrich/Outcast Films.

Much of the justification for demolishing was based on developers' claims that there was no longer any industry left in Williamsburg. Friedrich's film does a good job dispelling this notion as she walks in and out over the course of the film in an attempt to document thriving businesses hard at work. We grow fond of these businesses and when their buildings are sold out from under them some, like Friedrich's local mechanic, are given a month to clear out. She films the local butcher vacating the storefront he had occupied for 38 years. We grow particularly fond of the Forklift Repair Shop located directly across the street from Friedrich and Quinlan's loft. "Hey Cathy! There it goes!" she yells as the mighty backhoe pulls down the last of the remaining façade.

There is some poetic justice in the fact that it takes a team of construction workers nearly two weeks to remove a huge boulder from the foundation of the Forklift building. Friedrich films the crew struggling to break it up. All hope seems to be placed in the rock's fate. But it too succumbs to the sweeping change of the neighborhood.



Anti-condo graffiti as documented in Gut Renovation. Photo: Su Friedrich/Outcast Films.

After number 173, Friedrich gives up counting and mapping new resident towers. Where there were once thriving industries, working-class families, and artists, there now stand luxury condos. As the credits roll, Friedrich offers up comments left on Curbed.com, a site devoted to real estate. When Friedrich's graffiti tag appeared on the site it spawned a slew of anti-artist comments. Here is Friedrich's favorite:

The last "artist" we had was Picasso. The rest of them should just eat shit and move on.

FYI: [an article released last this week](#), reports that last month Bushwick's residential rent prices leaped by 20 percent. Hey Su can I borrow that camera? Gut Renovation: Bushwick Edition begins now.

Gut Renovation

[Film Forum](#), 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village. Written, directed and edited by Su Friedrich; director of photography, Ms. Friedrich; writing and editing consultant, Cathy Quinlan; released by Outcast Films. Running time: 1 hour 21 minutes. This film is not rated.

Additional information about the filmmaker:

Since 1978, [Su Friedrich](#) has produced, directed, shot and edited twenty 16mm films and videos. Her films have won many awards, including Grand Prix at the Melbourne Film Festival, Outstanding Documentary Award at Outfest and Best Narrative Film at the Athens International Film Festival. Friedrich has had retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, the Rotterdam Film Festival, the Buenos Aires Festival of Independent Cinema, and the National Film Theater in London, among others. She has received Rockefeller and

Guggenheim fellowships, grants from ITVS and the Alpert Award in the Arts, and multiple grants from the Jerome Foundation, the NY Foundation for the Arts and the NY State Council of the Arts. A boxed set of 13 of her films is distributed by Outcast Films.

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