

## ARCHITECTURAL RECORD—FULL INTERVIEW

### Interview: Filmmaker Su Friedrich

Yesterday, *Architectural Record* [published a piece I did on the film \*Gut Renovation\* and an interview I did with the director, Su Friedrich](#). While the film is billed as a documentary, it plays more like a diaristic work, capturing one person's on-the-ground, as-it-happens experience with the mother of all gentrification projects: Williamsburg. As I write in the piece, the film is by turns aggressive and meditative, an expression of grief for the unique civic tapestry that Friedrich believes has been unwoven by of the forces of urban evolution—and a memorial to what was lost.

I interviewed Friedrich at Film Forum (where *Gut Renovation* opens today) on February 25. We spoke for 30 minutes, and because of space limitations the interview was truncated for publication. So I thought I would publish the entirety of our conversation (with some slight editing for grammar and to excise side discussions) here. Be sure to head over to [Arch Record](#) to read the published piece.



Filmmaker Su Friedrich (courtesy of David Godlis)

**One of the things that struck me about the movie is that it's presented as a documentary but it's almost closer to a diary film rather than a traditional documentary. Was there ever the impulse to make it something bigger, like how your experience in Williamsburg spoke to a larger condition in Bloomberg's New York?**

Oh, taking on the whole city. No. (laughs) I mean, I feel like the labor of documenting Williamsburg and trying really hard to keep my personal story in the picture but not have that overpower the story of the neighborhood was really difficult. And so then to extend beyond that to what's happening on the Upper West Side, what's happening on the Lower East Side, was

maybe a Ken Burns, eight-hour-long film. But I didn't feel like I could really extend... So I think the hope was more that if somebody is hearing about Williamsburg but they're living on the Upper West Side, the Lower East Side, they can kind of by extension think about what's happening in their neighborhood.

**And how did you keep the balance between your experience and the neighborhood's?**

Well, through a lot of hard work in the editing. You know, it was close to two years of editing, interrupted with having to move. But I spent a long time doing a rough cut that was about two-and-a-half hours, then I spent about eight months getting that down to the 81 minutes. But, you know... And there's a lot of trial and error and there's also bringing in other people to say, "Well, how's it going?" And one example of taking out the personal was, I had a lot of footage when we were looking for a house and when we were doing the closing and all that stuff. And a friend said, "People know how to buy a house, they know what a closing is. You don't have to include that. That's not germane to the story." So it went away. So there was a lot of juggling and talking to people and seeing how things balanced out.

**Were there other parts you didn't include with the people who were displaced? That's some of the more powerful, or visceral stuff, is the people who are losing their stores. Were there more scenes like that that you just couldn't include?**

Well there... A little bit. There's the old stationary store on Bedford that closed out, and there was a woman who ran a really fantastic video store, Irene, and her's had already been closed out before then but she was still living in the neighborhood. So there are other characters, let's say, I spoke with. But, again, when you're trying to cover that much ground you have to make choices. So I thought, Well, if I have Harry the auto mechanic, Frank and Eddie, the forklift guys, and the butcher, Peter, then they also sort of represent the larger community of let's say business owners and the same thing with the industry. So there wasn't any major storyline that got left out other than what's in the film.

**You have a few moments where you're taking some footage of the developers who are walking around and people who are showing you an apartment, but it's kind of striking that there aren't more moments of that other side, that developer side. Did you talk to more people, or was it something that wasn't really in the scope of what you were trying to accomplish?**

Meaning did I interview developers about what they were doing?

**Yeah, I guess I could have just said, Why isn't it more balanced? If it's going to be a documentary, some people might see this and think, "Oh, it's just one angry person who was kicked out of her neighborhood."**

Right. Somebody could say that. People have said that. But you know, I don't think... The question of what a documentary can or should do is kind of contested and discussed. Some people would say it *has* to be objective and other people would say it never can be because we all come from someplace, some position. So... And I'm also not the maker of conventional

documentaries. So I didn't really set out to say, "I'm going to look at both sides of this and see what the developers have to say." But I did spend enough time reading things that they said, reading their brochures, hearing them do their sales pitches that I thought, "Why would I give them more time to sell this false argument to me?" And I can show, in whatever fashion I do, that I at least think that what they're selling is a false argument and if somebody wants to find out what they think they can just go online and listen to it or read about them. And I think it would actually be kind of dishonest of me to have tried to make it objective or try to make it balanced because I was not objective and I was not balanced. I was quite angry about what the city had done, had decided to do to the neighborhood, and I was also very sad about what was happening and I knew lots of people who were really, really upset and I wanted... And, you know, in a way it's sort of also about telling the story of the people who don't get their stories told. And it's not a personal thing. It's not like I want everybody to know how I feel. It was, "I know lots and lots of people who are really flipping out and who are going to have to leave, who don't know where they're going to go and all we're hearing is, 'Oh this great thing is happening' and 'Oh these fabulous buildings' and who's telling the story of these other people."

**That was one of the things I liked most about... I just sort of, blanket, like capture that memory and memory is something that's very important. And that's something that's an overarching theme, I guess, in your films, memory and capturing that sort of experience... Did anybody have a problem talking to you? Did anybody say, "I don't want to have a reminder of this painful moment in my life and my experience in this area that I hold so dear?"**

That's an interesting question. Nobody that I can think of. But what I experienced most close to hand was that my partner did eventually become very involved in the film when I was editing it, did a lot of writing with me, did a lot of discussion about the editing. But after the rezoning and I started working on the film and we started understanding what was happening she didn't want to talk about it. She just said, "Here I am. I'm going to keep painting, and if we have to leave we'll figure it out. But I don't want to hear every day about the next building that's going up or the next building that's going down." And I felt that she was in denial and that I was (self-deprecatingly) very aware and paying attention. And what I realized, four years, five years later, was she was actually grieving privately and I was making myself really busy so as not to deal with the amount of grief I was feeling. And lo and behold, I was sitting in my editing room after we moved, in this new place, watching the footage of the green building being torn down across the street, and I just started sobbing. And I was, like, "Oh, that was so sad when that building..." You know? So I didn't encounter people who said, "I don't want to talk about this because it's too upsetting." But, you know...



Courtesy of Su Friedrich/Outcast Films

**When the rezoning was happening and these developers started moving in, was your first instinct to document this, or did that come later?**

It was pretty early because I lived in the East Village back in the '80s when it changed, then I moved down to Chinatown, and I would go back to the East Village and I'd be walking past some new boutique, and I would think, "Wait, was that the butcher or the baker?" And I thought we think we'll remember, but we actually forget. And in particular the butcher or the baker might still be in the same old tenement building in the storefront, but in Williamsburg if a building is going to go down you're really going to forget. So I started out just wanting to witness, bear witness to what had been there. And then I very soon thought, "Wow, I am so deeply into this and this is very important to me, what's happening."

**Speaking of other developments in the '80s, there's the one moment in your film where someone mentions what happened to Soho. And I think anyone who hears what your film is about, and they know New York, they'll think, "Oh, it sounds like Soho." That was my thought, anyway. What is different, and similar, about those two experiences?**

Well, I didn't live in Soho though I did work around in Soho back in the late '70s, '80s, so it was still... Well, anyway, it was in the process of changing. But I think the difference is that Soho happened somewhat in a gradual, messy, you know, unplanned way. And Williamsburg was a

plan. The city said, “We want to develop this, we’re going to change the zoning, and we’re going to make sure that all these developers have everything they need in order to make this happen.” And they had a vision and they implemented it. I don’t think... Robert Moses did a lot of that back in the day, and Bloomberg has been doing a lot of that now, certainly in other parts of the city, in smaller ways. But this Williamsburg is sort of the biggest and most ferocious example of what it means when the city imposes itself on a neighborhood.

**I’m glad you mentioned Robert Moses because something else that struck me was this battle that Jane Jacobs fought to preserve neighborhood identity, people think it’s over...**

Right.

**...because no one is trying to bulldoze neighborhoods for highways.**

Right.

**But people are losing their cultural identity in their neighborhoods.**

Look what happened with NYU just now with its new plan.

**That’s right. And so the scheme of the conversation has changed. And I think the nature of your film might make not be appealing to a general audience because it’s tough, you know, it’s personal, you’re not getting this objective, or fake objective documentary, but it seems like it’s something that people should see because it says, “No, this is still happening.” Can people watch this and come out of it and say, “I need step up my neighborhood watch,” in terms of keeping it’s identity.**

I think that’s interesting. I would hope so because I think there are so many people who live in New York and love where they love and want it to remain more or less what they’re loving and not turn into some other strange creature. And so... One thing that was so interesting me, looking back at how it happened in Williamsburg and seeing how little things started changing and there were little clues to us. “Hm, they just put in a new running track. It seems like we’ve been needing a new running track for years. But why did it happen now? Why are we suddenly hearing about the pool getting fixed?” You know? And it was like, “Oh, it’s because the tsunami just hit.” And so I think people in other neighborhoods, if they start noticing, like, groups of men in black coats coming around with their clipboards, you know, yes, something is about to happen, so start paying attention. And, God, there’s a brief book called Wrestling with Moses, which is wonderful, and the description of his plan to extend Fifth Avenue down through Washington Square Park, and you think that would have so permanently and profoundly altered that wonderful park... A few weeks after reading that book, I walked through the park – I hadn’t known about that plan before – and I walked through and thought, “It’s not possible that it would have happened.” So, yeah, I think what Jane Jacobs was trying to do then really has to continue for anybody who loved the city like she did.

**And how far in advance of the heavy-duty demolition of buildings did you start noticing those little things start to pop up, like the new running track and swimming pool?**

Oh, it's hard to say now. But, you know, by the 2000s we were starting to wonder, little ones that people would do. It was like, "Oh. What's that little glass and steel thing that says 'Authentic Loft Living'?" But it's hard to say, exactly, now.

**From a personal standpoint, I live in Carroll Gardens, and I've been there for a few years. And just a few months ago an Apartments and Lofts thing opened up. And then I saw your movie. And I walked passed it with my wife over the weekend and thought, "There goes the neighborhood."**

Right. There was actually a thing recently about the change in rental prices for different neighborhoods, and Carroll Gardens had...

**We couldn't afford to live there now, if we moved there now. But... Yeah. We look at it, oh, let's move somewhere else in the neighborhood. No, it's impossible, we can't afford it.**

And it's interesting because I think part of the vitality of a city – I grew up in a city, I grew up in Chicago, also lived in Philly for a while, but basically in Chicago and then I moved to New York, been here, you know, 35 years or something – and it seems like the vitality of a city is that a large part of the housing stock is rental, not owned, and is more or less affordable. Of course there are going to be more affordable areas. I moved to New York and there was Park Avenue and I knew I was never going to live on Park Avenue. One knows that there's a range available. And there's always been a struggle for can I find a really great place to live. And I remember that from 1978, people were wondering where... But I feel like it's really getting altered in New York, and the sense of, like, desperate panic about having even the most unaffordable, crappy place to live in is more the case now than it was before, and more and more things are becoming, you know, condos that you buy instead of rentals. And so that really cuts out a lot of people and also people then scrape together what money they have to buy something and then they're sort of stuck because what happens if housing prices go down? So it's really changing the ways in which a city can be this moving, transforming, organic thing.





Filmmaker Su Friedrich's graffiti adorns the walls of a Williamsburg, Brooklyn condo building construction site in her documentary, *Gut Renovation*. (courtesy of Su Friedrich/Outcast Films)

**How do you see Williamsburg as part of that change? Because I think people hear “gentrification” and they think, now, “Williamsburg,” but gentrification had been going in Brooklyn. But was Williamsburg kind of a canary in a coal mine in terms of the city’s changes that were on the horizon?**

Yes. I think so. Because, I mean there were... I’m sure Bloomberg was doing things prior to the Williamsburg plan, but in his tenure he has rezoned 15 percent of the city. So, yes, there are rezonings in other neighborhoods. But as far as I know, none of the other areas that were rezoned have then had this scale of building of luxury housing happen the way it did in Williamsburg. So it may not have been the first place that it happened, but it’s certainly it’s the biggest. And I think, you know, there’s talk about these huge units that are proposed for the Lower East Side and Chinatown.

**Coney Island’s another one. And it’s always areas that have deep neighborhood roots. Why uproot it?**

Because he doesn’t care about the populations that live there.

**That leads me to my next question. I wanted to ask about the way you portray some of the people who move in to Williamsburg. Because it comes off a little bit antagonistic...**

Right.

**So I wondered what you thought their role, these new renters or owners, what their role in this story is. Were they enabled by developers? Is it symbiotic? Are they as much on the hook as the developers are?**

Well, you know, that's a really hard question because it's hard to generalize about 40,000 people. (laughs) You know? It's a legitimate question, but it is a hard one to answer because one can't generalize. I know one guy, really great guy, part of the Bushwick art scene, whatever, and he moved into one of the condos. When I found out I thought, "Well that's really confusing. I would think he's the sort of person who would I would never want to live in one of these places." So I can't say I know all 40,000 people and I can't blame them all. But there is some way in which I think it's necessary for the very privileged among us to at least own up that they are... And act accordingly. And I don't even know what that would mean. But you cannot be extremely wealthy and pretend that you're not. You cannot be living off your extremely wealthy parents and dress down and pretend that you're like somebody who's really poor. You just can't. The income disparity in this country is so profound now, and I don't know when it's going to not be. How will that change back to something a little more workable? But I refuse to act like they're me, and I think they shouldn't act like they're like me either because, that way, what we're doing is we're completely whitewashing the issue of class in this country. And Americans don't really like to talk about class difference, right?

**No they don't.**

The English seem to like to.

**Yeah.**

But the Americans really don't. Because everyone is supposed to be able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, everyone is supposed to finally be the inventor of the next app that will make them a million dollars. But actually that's not really the way this country works, so that's not really what happens for a majority of people. So that is my problem, is this pretense about how they're all like everyone else. So if they said, "Well, I love a lot of money, I don't want to live in a shitty neighborhood, and I want to live around other people who have a lot of money and are just like me and that's why I moved to Williamsburg," I'd be, like, "Great. At least you know who you are." But that's not usually what they say.





Filmmaker Su Friedrich's graffiti adorns the walls of a Williamsburg, Brooklyn condo building construction site in her documentary, *Gut Renovation*.  
(courtesy of Su Friedrich/Outcast Films)

**Yeah. No, and I guess what people call hipster culture, that's part of it, right?**

Yeah, but that's long gone.

**Is it?**

I think so. I don't even know. Somebody else was asking me, they said, "I noticed you didn't even use the word hipster anywhere in the film. Why was that?" And I said, "Because I don't even think about it anymore." I'm so sort of passed all the raging debate about what are hipsters and what are they and it's like, at this point I don't know. What can you say about that anymore? Because some people would say all the hipsters have moved to Bushwick, along with the artists, because they can't afford to live in... (laughs) I don't know.

**Did your attitude toward what you just said about class change or evolve in any way when you went back and rewatched and edited the footage for this movie? Did any of the antagonism that comes across in the footage you shot in 2007 soften or change at all when you went to edit it?**

Well, I think there are ways... There are certainly other ways in which I tried to inject some humor into the film. And my partner, who's the co-writer, also contributed to that. So, for

example, when I get into that altercation with the woman and I say “I’m just filming the rich people who live in the neighborhood,” and afterwards, in the text, I say, “Well, I can see her point I don’t like to be filmed either.” So I would sort of look at it and go, “Oh, maybe I was being a bit much at that moment and I should perhaps acknowledge that.” But I don’t know if, overall, my feeling changed because I go back to Williamsburg and I just think, “God, it’s so gross here.” And people I know who are still in the neighborhood who were lucky enough to have bought a little building 25 years ago, so of course they’re not going to leave because that’s where they live, they hate it now. It’s just so alien and so crowded.

**And there are a lot of empty lots, from after the crash in 2008. It’s almost like a weird ghost town in some parts.**

Although some of those, like the one on Union and N. 10th, and there were three almost entirely block lots and they all kind of stopped being developed at the crash, and I thought, oh boy, that’s a lot of land that’s now going to lie fallow. And then one of them did get built, and I just was by recently and another huge building is going up on the other side. So the money has started to come back in.

**What do you want people to come away from your film with, in terms of gentrification, communities, neighborhoods, urbanism maybe?**

Right. I hope that they understand that we need to bear witness to what happens and try to remember how things were and not believe all the hype. And also if something like that is happening in their neighborhood, think about what they can do to keep it from happening. And I’ll give you an example. Bed-Stuy, we moved to Bed-Stuy and the rents were, there was a certain sense of what the rents were. And we have tenants and, it’s like, we charge a certain amount in the range of what’s been more or less the rents in Bed-Stuy. We could charge double, you know, and thereby drive up all the rents in the neighborhood. So, also as people who possibly own property or who are moving into a new place, check with the landlord and see the previous rent was. See if they can legally raise the rent as much as they can or not. Because that was something that happened in the East Village back in the ’80s. Rent-stabilized apartments can only go up a certain amount, they have to do a certain amount of renovation in order to raise it more than that, and the landlords kept just every time someone moved out just raising, raising, raising. So there’s a way that the landlords keep really driving up the rents and the whole level for everybody, and as tenants or homeowners, we also have to try to keep things affordable for us in order to maintain our neighborhoods.

**How often do you get back to Williamsburg?**

Oh, pretty often, just for this and that. I go buy my tobacco over there and I still get my haircut at the little place on Bedford.

**It’s good that there are still places like that in the neighborhood.**

Yeah. Angelica, the haircutter, she’s like, ugh, she hates what’s happening to Williamsburg. But, you know, it’s where her shop is so she stays.