

## BROOKLYN INK

### [Gutting Home: ‘Gut Renovation’ Takes on Gentrification in Williamsburg](#)

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By [Bryan Koenig](#)

The word gentrification never appears in filmmaker Su Friedrich’s “Gut Renovation,” now playing at the Film Forum through Tuesday. But the word doesn’t have to be spoken — it’s there in every shot, every frame; a personal, ringside view of the remaking of Williamsburg.



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.

This is not a balanced perspective on gentrification. And therein lies its strength, not in camerawork but in raw, emotional editing and storytelling. This is Friedrich’s story, Friedrich’s poignant frustration. But it is also the story of Williamsburg, something those who’ve witnessed gentrification in their own lives should be able to understand.

Friedrich, a Princeton University professor with 19 other documentaries under her belt, had been living in a modified Williamsburg industrial space since 1989. The neighborhood Friedrich recalls had been a humble space for creativity, full of artists and small custom businesses, one where residents were fighting for improvement bit by bit. Then the city rezoned the area and the developers got to work.

“I do feel that I’m speaking for Williamsburg as well as for myself,” Friedrich said in an interview with the Brooklyn Ink.

“I also know so many people who went through what I went through and they’re really, really angry,” she said.

With a map of Williamsburg and a lot of frustration, Friedrich records the changes outside her window and across the neighborhood. For five years, she chronicles, brick by brick and block by block, the disruption, construction, destruction and remodeling of the waterfront Brooklyn neighborhood. She shows mom and pop bodegas and ancient brick artist's spaces being forced aside in favor of high-end apartment buildings and the people who live there. She calls the new neighborhood "Condoburg."

The film's footage begins in 2005, telling a depressing and potentially divisive story that shows no upside to these changes. In "Gut," Friedrich's affection for her neighborhood, its people, its food and its aesthetic, clashes violently with the forces of economics, in muted protests and unwelcome city inspections.

In Friedrich's telling, the molding of Williamsburg was driven simply by willful, apathetic greed. The basic narrative is broken up into little vignettes, focusing on a building, a business, a community meeting, a stubborn boulder that offers one of the lighter moments of the film when it refuses to be broken apart by construction workers. Until it is.

The rock and its stubbornness was emblematic. "The old Italian family that's been in Williamsburg for a hundred years," Friedrich said, or the Polish family that's been there for 50. They were still forced out despite their role, and the boulder's, as bedrock. "We need that bedrock," she said.

Friedrich is more than just an observer in these events. She is an active participant, scrawling bits of protest graffiti on the walls surrounding construction sites and chastising the developers for "ruining our neighborhood." She talks about her own trepidations and fears of being evicted, fears that finally came to fruition in 2009.

The expensive condos Friedrich often "sneaks into" on the pretense of a buyer feel under her gaze less like homes and more like monochromatic and mass-produced rat cages, full of painful modernity and layouts that came from a handful of architects. New apartment buildings that might have looked modern and fashionable before watching "Gut Renovation" start to blend together afterward; taking on a stench of sterile wealth and prefabricated personality.

Complementing the documentary's underground atmosphere is an eclectic musical score, ranging from classic New Year's songs to mark the passage of time to modern German music of change and holding onto the past.

Growing up in tenement apartments on the Lower East Side, Friedrich has always felt an animosity towards those she feels have too much money and spend it all on themselves. The inclusion of the alternate title was also something of Friedrich laughing at herself, she said.

The title of "Gut" could easily refer to the living guts of a neighborhood as to a building being gutted. As personal a documentary as they come, Friedrich mourns for the community as it was and lambasts, angrily and often, those who seek to change it. She develops an incredulous fascination onscreen with the "designer dogs" that begin to crop up in the neighborhood; a

fascination matched by her distaste for their owners. An alternative title for the documentary suggested by her partner, Friedrich tells us, was “I Hate Rich People.”

Early in the film Friedrich wonders aloud if she is a dinosaur watching the first snowflake. The difference is that this dinosaur had a camera. Unapologetically personal, “Gut Renovation” is a singular but incredibly meaningful perspective on a faceless, multifaceted phenomenon. But the documentary manages to give the impact of gentrification a face and ascribe to it a voice.

When asked if she was still angry, Friedrich said yes. “But I’m more still sad,” she said. She related the story of editing footage of a building she’d seen every day for 20 years being torn down and for the first time, crying over it. “It was a friend,” she said.

The bulldozers are coming, paid for by the rich and operated by the callous. If you are a developer or a bureaucrat, this is not your film. This is Su Friedrich’s film, her outrage. Take it or leave it.

<http://thebrooklynink.com/2013/03/11/51855-gutting-home-gut-renovation-takes-on-gentrification-in-williamsburg/>