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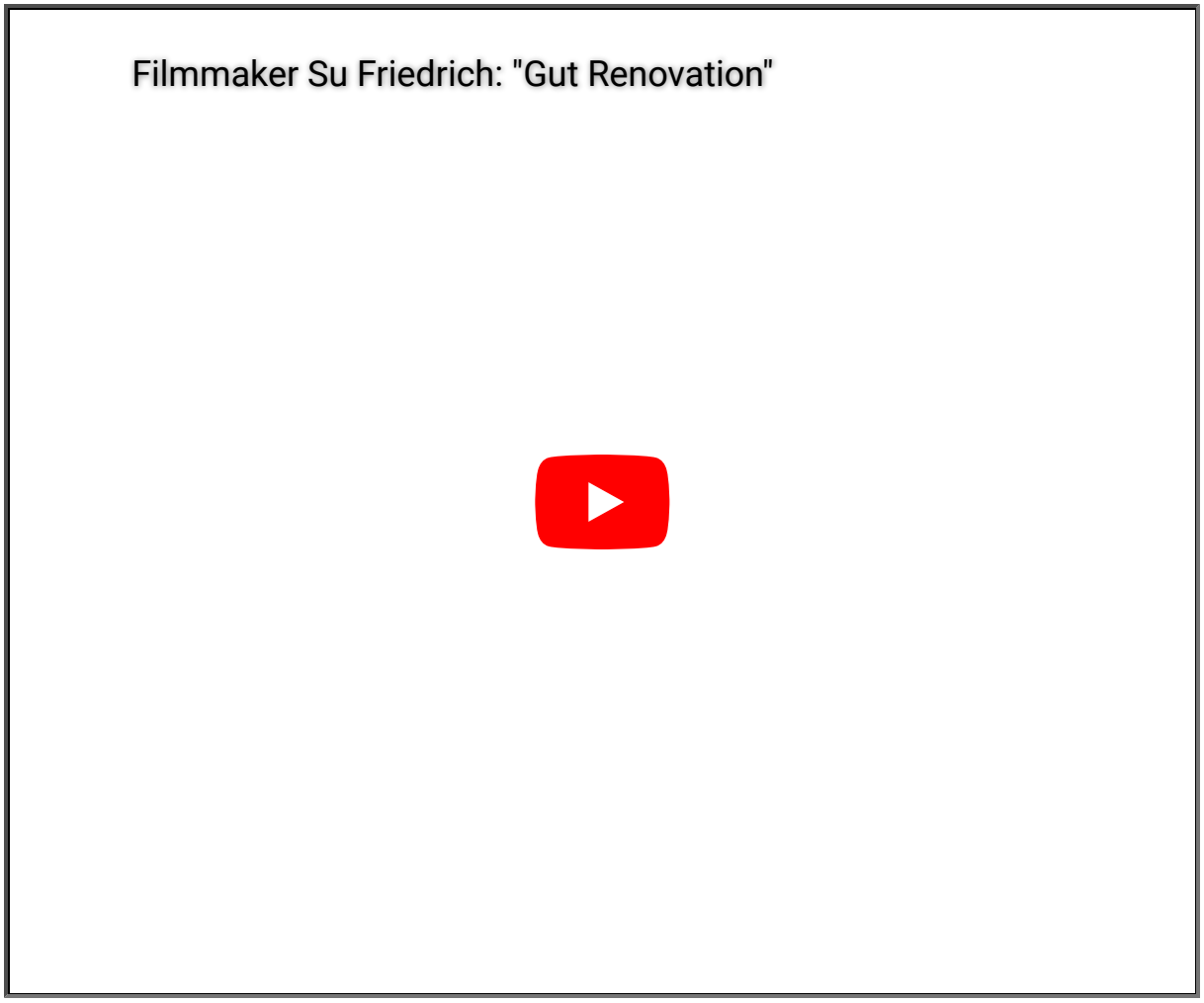
Film reviews and interviews with exciting directors, screenwriters, and actors. By Celeste Ramos

Gut Renovation, and an interview with director Su Friedrich

March 01, 2013

A banner reading "The Dawn of Luxury" flaps against yet another gutted warehouse in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The building's destiny is indeed an opulent one. Other spaces just like it, once simply known by a number and street name, now carry names like The Ikon, Edge, and Northside Piers. These condo towers of steel and glass, bearing names in slick fonts, have viewing parties that look like something out of a Hollywood red carpet event. Nothing of their appearance, or of their prospective tenants, hints at the history or the people that came before them and shaped the area into vibrant artistic communities. *Gut Renovation* is a film made by Su Friedrich, one of the many artists who lived in Williamsburg and eventually had to leave. The film is a passionate rant, a history lesson, a neighborhood portait, and a broken heart, documenting the quiet rise and pricey fall of Williamsburg.



In and of itself it's not a bad thing that an area gets developed. But the problem here is that the development ends up going against the reason why the area is interesting to people in the first place. And it doesn't even attract people who would keep it exciting. The buildings are catering to busy rich people who work in Manhattan. So we end up with a "lemming scenario" as I call it, where everyone lives in the same place, and works in the same place, and they pay obscene amounts of money in rent for a view of -- where they work. Nice.

Countless people have tried to fight the development. Even the ground itself has tried to resist. Among my favorite scenes in the film is "The Rock," a massive granite boulder that stopped construction workers from excavating for several weeks. It took a massive rock-splitter for the crews to be able to clear the boulder from the site. *Gut Renovation* is a fantastic film, which, if you're a city dweller, will make you look at your living situation through a whole new pair of eyes.

It was great to chat with Su about the film and life after Williamsburg.

CR: Did you get to keep part of The Rock?

SF: [laughs] Everyone asks me this! I never thought to take part of it. It's like the Berlin Wall, I can't believe I don't have a piece of it.

CR: Has *anyone* fought the developers and won?

SF: It's very hard to speak for everyone. I know that many people left, but there were people who stayed because the loft law that had been in place in Manhattan since the 1980s (which protected a few people in Soho) was applied to Brooklyn around 2009. A few artists have been able to stay because of the loft law, but there are many other cases where that didn't happen. There was one guy, who lived in Greenpoint for 12 years, and spent about two years trying to get the loft law to protect him but he lost and had to leave. There are some isolated cases of people who could stay but for the most part people had to leave.

CR: It seems that many of the developers deem a block or a building as "unliveable" when they inform residents that they're taking over. Obviously many people have been living there for years -- where does this term "unliveable" come from?

SF: After I finished the film, I learned about what happened in New York in the 1970s through Ida Susser's book Norman Street. She'd been in Williamsburg/Greenpoint in the mid 70s, researching the neighborhood from an anthropological standpoint. After the fiscal crisis of 1975, the City made plans to transform the city into something that became popularly known as F.I.R.E., which stands for finance, insurance, and real estate. So the big boys sat together and decided that the city's income was going to come from those three areas and not from manufacturing. They started making it more and more difficult for manufacturing to survive.

The administrations before Bloomburg looked at the Williamsburg/Greenpoint waterfront and thought it could be valuable property if it was developed. So they started impoverishing the neighborhoods by channeling the money away from school districts and fire houses for example. All of this has been in the works for a long time. The people who want more power and more money are always figuring out ways to get them, and one of the big ways is through real estate. Another thing that Ida talks about is that for a very long time, New York City was a place that really supported the working class. There were many worker protections in place, and protections for real estate, like rent control and rent stabilization. In the 1970s they started cutting back on those protections.

They created conditions, like, if you're a landlord and you do a certain amount of renovation, you can raise the rent a *whole* lot. Rents used to go up little by little, and now they just go up

and up and up. It's all an orchestrated thing from a really long time ago.

CR: Does this topic click with everyone who has seen the film? How have people reacted to the film, and to this topic, in the states and abroad?

SF: It was actually very surprising at the Berlinale. At the first screening there, people came up to me saying that the exact same thing is happening in Berlin. I've spent a lot of time in Berlin. I lived in Kreuzberg in 1984, and then after the wall came down and I was visiting friends, I saw a lot of the development happening around Potsdamer Platz. But the people who came up to me were talking about the neighborhoods -- Kreuzberg, Neukölln, and Prenzlauer Berg. I went to Toronto -- same thing. Same thing is happening is there, and in cities all over the world. In New York of course, it's a very passionate issue, people have very strong feelings about real estate. At the QA's there was a mixture I expected. People have said it was a sad film, and that it reflected a lot of what they've gone through. Others have said, who are you to complain, New York City always changes, all that kind of stuff. There has been a lot of debate because of the film.

CR: The argument of New York always changing is absolutely valid -- for a city that big and iconic, of course it has to change with the times. But it makes me wonder about the level of involvement residents have in their own demise when it comes to getting pushed out of neighborhoods they've lived in for a decade or more. Does change always have to mean that you're taken out of the equation? Why didn't people buy and hold on to their buildings sooner before predatory developers came in?

SF: In the case of Williamsburg, things weren't necessarily for sale. Take our building for example. It was abandoned for 20 years, then it was a sublease owned by this shadow family for 20 years, and they were leasing it to us for a 20 year period. They never offered it for sale. About two and a half or three years after we left, it was sold for 16.5 million dollars. Many of the other industrial buildings were never actually for sale; they could lease spaces to people because they could charge a lot and there was no protection with commercial vs. residential. I look back at my 35 years in New York and I think, you know, I lived in the East Village and I could have bought something there but I had no money. Then I moved to Chinatown, and I could have bought something there but I had no money. And then I went to Williamsburg, and if it hadn't been for the building we moved into, we could have looked for something somewhere to buy, but, we didn't have the money. So I think a lot of people were and are in that position.

One of the things that's great about New York City is that it's a city of rentals. It allows the city to be vibrant and fluctuating. But if everything is owned, the atmosphere becomes much more fixed. One thing that Ida talked about in her book was that there was a law at

one point stating that all apartments in apartment buildings had to be rentals and not sale units. Eventually, the law changed, which made it possible for landlords to sell the apartments. We're not talking about new structures, this is for existing places. They all became sale units. This increases the competition for available units, and raises the prices obviously. I never wanted to own, I didn't really *want* to buy because I like having the option be flexible. I still would have preferred that we moved somewhere else to rent after we left Williamsburg, but it didn't work out that way.

CR: Where did you move to after leaving Williamsburg?

SF: To Bed-Stuy, which has been a point of discussion for people with my making this film, because people have said, well, it's a historically black neighborhood, you're going to raise the rents there, start the same thing that happened in Williamsburg, etc. It's very worrying to us to have moved here for that reason. The man who lived in this house before us retired and moved back to South Carolina with his family. Obviously we didn't displace him, and we didn't pay an exorbitant amount for the house. But the reality is that we've moved in, and we're seen as the people who have come in and made the prices go up. One of the first things we did was get very involved with the block, and talk to people who've lived here for a very long time. We've made it a point to contribute to the block and have a relationship with the other homeowners. The part I hate is how so many people jump to the conclusion that one or two white people moving in makes other white people go, oh, now we can move in too.

CR: Is Bed-Stuy really in danger of becoming the next Williamsburg when it comes to developers taking over?

SF: Many people online say in their comments that the artists' moving into Williamsburg is what caused the gentrification. But if they'd look at the history and the plan the City had in the 1970s, when the artists weren't moving in, they'd see that that was not the case. The thing that happened to Bed-Stuy was also what happened to Harlem and other areas where there was a predominant black population before the financial crash. I read an article in 2008 where someone had analyzed what the banks did with the bad mortgages. What he found was that the banks started with the elderly, 15, 20, 30 phone calls, to get the elderly on board to take the mortgages. From there they hit the black communities. Many people in these neighborhoods had their homes for over 20 years, but then thought they could use the money to put in additions to their homes or whatever they wanted to do. So the banks saturated neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy and Harlem, and tons of people took on these bad mortgages. Now there are so many houses in foreclosure because of it. So again, the developers, the bankers, the City, set their own plans in motion.

CR: Out of curiosity, why did you choose "Auld Lang Syne" to play in several parts of the film?

SF: There were many parts of the film that I was trying to give a structure to. I had 42 hours of footage, and I spent close to two years editing, which was excruciatingly hard work. I wanted to use some footage from a previous film of a Christmas tree to mark the passing of time. And of course, New Year's follows Christmas, so the song was in my mind. It's a song about what you've lost and what you're leaving behind, so it just fit in.

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Su Friedrich has produced and directed twenty 16mm films and videos, including *Gut Renovation* (2012) her newest release. Her work is widely screened around the world and has been the subject of retrospectives. She is currently a professor at Princeton University. For more on Su and her work, check out The Films of Su Friedrich.

For more on *Gut Renovation*, don't miss the film's page on the Outcast Films website.

My thanks again to Su!

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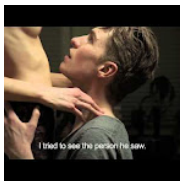

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