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Movie Review

A Work in Progress, From the Inside Out

‘Gut Renovation,’ Su Friedrich’s Look at Gentrification



Su Friedrich/Outcast Films

Su Friedrich mapping construction in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in her film “Gut Renovation,” which criticizes gentrification.

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An alternate title for [“Gut Renovation,”](#) [Su Friedrich](#)’s cranky, sarcastic documentary polemic about the gentrification of a Brooklyn neighborhood, might be “The Rape of Williamsburg.” Ms. Friedrich, an independent filmmaker, moved there in 1989 when it was an artists’ haven and a multiethnic, working-class neighborhood with a vibrant street life. After the City Council passed a rezoning ordinance in 2005, an area 6 blocks wide and 17 blocks long became the site of a frantic real estate boom.

The developers who swarmed into Williamsburg were offered 25-year tax abatements to build condominiums. A visual leitmotif is a map on which Ms. Friedrich marks off 173 sites with new construction. Her nickname for the neighborhood is Condoburg.

To justify the demolition of much of the area, developers claimed that industry in Williamsburg was moribund. Not true, insists Ms. Friedrich, who interviewed many owners of small businesses on the eve of their evictions.

Where they are resigned and fatalistic, [Ms. Friedrich is fighting mad](#). She is a provocateur who films the mostly white, affluent new arrivals making their way through the rubble and describes the climate as one of “fancy names, fancy dogs and nannies with fancy strollers.” She paints graffiti on a construction fence — “artists used to live here” — and shouts at a group of developers: “Welcome to the neighborhood. You’re ruining it!” One friend, she says, suggested that she call the film “I Hate the Rich,” a feeling she doesn’t deny.

Her contemptuous attitude is distilled in intertitles like the gushy comment “Honey, it’s just like Paris.” The accompanying image, however, suggests a cheap architectural cartoon of the kind of structure that you might find in an instant housing development in a California desert.

The funniest scene involves the removal of a giant rock, which is too large and heavy to be carted away in one piece, a problem that takes weeks to solve. It is finally removed by breaking it up.

Late in the movie Ms. Friedrich makes the rounds of the new condos, pretending to be a prospective buyer, and we hear the mechanical sales pitches and survey the cramped, high-priced spaces.

The financial crisis of 2008 temporarily dampens the enthusiasm, and one project, financed by Lehman Brothers, is temporarily stalled. Eventually, though, the condo fever catches up with Ms. Friedrich, who had renovated an abandoned loft in a commercial building.

In the first sign of trouble, city inspectors descend to check on code violations. The laissez-faire attitude that had allowed Ms. Friedrich and her partner, Cathy Quinlan (credited as a writing and editing consultant on the film), to live in an industrial space hardened, and they were forced to move.

The images of Williamsburg in the wake of a gold rush are not attractive. As pictured by Ms. Friedrich, who photographed the movie, it is a mostly ugly architectural mishmash executed without an overall vision, beyond the prospect for developers of making as much money as quickly as possible.

Gut Renovation

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

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

http://movies.nytimes.com/2013/03/06/movies/gut-renovation-su-friedrichs-look-at-gentrification.html?_r=0