

## The Hot Seat: Su Friedrich



Name: Su Friedrich  
Nabe: Bed Stuy  
Prof: Filmmaker

Brooklyn Life

by Emily Nonko  50

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*Welcome to the Hot Seat, in which we interview folks involved in Brooklyn real estate, architecture, development and the like. Introducing Su Friedrich, the filmmaker behind Gut Renovation. Gut Renovation chronicles Su getting priced out of Williamsburg after the 2005 rezoning. The film is now showing at Film Forum in Manhattan.*

**Brownstoner: What neighborhood do you live in, and how did you end up there?**

Su Friedrich: I currently live in Bed Stuy. We moved from Williamsburg in June 2009 after an eight month search through various neighborhoods. We ended up in Bed Stuy because the loft in which we had lived for 20 years in Williamsburg became totally unaffordable due to the 2005 rezoning of the neighborhood. In other words, I'm happy to have found a nice home, and I think Bed Stuy has a lot to offer, and we've gotten very involved with our neighbors and our block association, but it isn't where I would be living (nor is any other place...) if I hadn't been forced out of the loft, and the neighborhood, which I had grown to love so much.

**BS: Can you talk about the premise of your film, and what inspired you to start shooting?**

SF: My film is a record “from the inside” of what happened to Williamsburg in the five years following the rezoning. It isn’t a conventional, objective documentary. Instead, it creates a more visceral experience as one witnesses the experiences that I had, and which I shared with countless other residents, when we found ourselves invaded by developers and engulfed by demolition and construction. The rezoning was announced in May 2005. Within a short time, the invasion began, and within a few months after that, I started recording what was going on, and continued filming until 2009.

*After the jump, Su gets into the specifics of the rezoning, the presence of artists in gentrifying neighborhoods, and her favorite business and building that survived the redevelopment of Williamsburg...*

**BS: Many residents didn’t assume the Williamsburg rezoning would so quickly have such a dramatic impact on the neighborhood. Did you, or your longtime neighbors, have an involvement in this rezoning? How do you think the rezoning process could be changed to better serve the long-time residents and business owners?**

SF: I don’t know about what “many residents” assumed, but speaking for myself and those friends and neighbors with whom I was usually talking, we all thought it was going to be a disaster as soon as we read the reports of the rezoning. It was clear that a dramatic change would occur by a rezoning of such a large area to make it available for residential construction — it would mean huge increases of rent in existing buildings, and undoubtedly very expensive new housing being built. And it obviously was going to mean that many of the industries and small businesses would be pushed out. They don’t have any rent protection anyway (with a commercial lease) and landlords would want to make more money by converting to residential if they had the option, which the rezoning gave them.

We had no involvement in the rezoning, but there were people in the neighborhood who had been very involved in trying to create better conditions for Williamsburg and Greenpoint. They worked for four years (from 1998 to 2002) to create a plan to improve all sorts of aspects, and published a 120-page, detailed report (called 197-

A) which was approved in 2002 by the City Council. However, three years later, the City Council and the Planning Office approved the “new” rezoning, the one that went into effect, and it had very little relationship to the earlier plan; a few ideas from the earlier plan were included (like more parks) but most of those haven’t been acted on, which I find typical and predictable. The only real purpose of the rezoning was to create a way for developers to build luxury housing, and that’s what they’ve done. If anyone wants to know more about what was promised, and what promises weren’t kept, they can get in touch with Neighbors Allied for Good Growth, an activist group which has been based in Williamsburg for as long as I can remember.

**BS: Your film chronicles the wave of artists moving into Williamsburg, which has planted the seeds for gentrification in many neighborhoods in New York. Did you feel like the changes in your neighborhood were an inevitability, looking at neighborhoods like SoHo and the East Village?**

SF: I think there are as many neighborhoods that have gone through gentrification in New York without the early presence of artists (for example, Park Slope and Prospect Heights), and I don’t think it makes much sense to blame artists or claim that the presence of artists inevitably leads to the next waves of wealthier and wealthier residents. After living in New York for 36 years and seeing how artists have been pushed from one neighborhood to the next (Soho, the East Village, Williamsburg, and soon from Bushwick), I think it would be useful to consider that the economy of New York has depended for a long time on the revenue that artists bring to the city in so many ways. And if a city benefits from its artists, then why doesn’t the city help artists by making it possible to afford to live and work here? We (the artists) need a place to work, and we have so often been willing to live in areas (and in buildings) that are unwanted by those with more money. That has often meant moving into poorer neighborhoods, areas neglected by the city, or areas with industrial buildings, and my experience has been that I’ve lived in those areas gratefully. I’ve used the local services, eaten at the local restaurants, etc., and I’ve also been a part of keeping that neighborhood stable, safe, etc. It wasn’t the artists who were “selling” and “branding” Williamsburg as a trendy place, it was the media and it was the landlords, because they saw that there was money to be made, and as soon as they could raise rents, the artists (as well as thousands of

working class residents who weren't artists) had to leave.

So I tend to say that it's landlords and politicians who create a situation for gentrification. For example, the majority of landlords who rented spaces (illegally) to artists in Williamsburg knew that they shouldn't be doing that but knew that it was in their financial interests to do it. They could have said "no living" (and a few did) but most just pretended not to know. And that was because they knew that artists would maintain, and often improve, an industrial building, and that down the line they could kick out the artists if a rezoning let them convert the building to residential use, and that's exactly what they did.

**BS: Your work also joins *My Brooklyn*, a recent documentary tracing the rapid gentrification of Downtown Brooklyn. The issues of development and the displacement it causes has become a huge talking point in this borough. Where does the conversation go from here? How can the arts help us deal with this huge force now sweeping through New York?**

SF: I'm really glad that Kelly made her film, and that Michael and Suki made *Battle for Brooklyn* (about Atlantic Yards) and that several other filmmakers have done related pieces (you can see a program list for the series called *Brooklyn Reconstructed* that FilmWax did last summer). I think it's crucial that we know what's going on, and that we continue talking about what's happening next and about what already happened. In making *Gut Renovation*, I felt first and foremost that I was bearing witness, that I needed to say, "This really did happen" so that no one could later claim that the changes were minor, ordinary, or "inevitable" (which I've noticed is a very popular word for developers to use in explaining why this is happening).

**BS: Finally, your favorites: favorite Brooklyn neighborhood, favorite building or business in Williamsburg that still survives, favorite building or business in Williamsburg that didn't.**

SF: I don't have a favorite neighborhood; Brooklyn is so diverse, and most areas have great things to recommend them. My favorite building in Williamsburg that (sort of) survived is ours. Built in the 1890s for the Hecla Ironworks, it's a gorgeous structure with vaulted ceilings and casement windows. The façade was landmarked about ten years ago, thank goodness, although the inside wasn't, and

the new owners spray painted the ceiling and somewhat buried the delicate carved plasterwork that had been there for over 100 years. Someone posted a history of the building here. And my favorite business that survived is Angelika's Hair Salon where I still go for my haircuts. Just a basic, cheap and good place to get a haircut, like so many of those kinds of shops and businesses that used to be along Bedford. My favorite building that got wrecked was the Old Dutch Mustard building on Metropolitan and my favorite business that got driven out was the fabulous L.A. Video store on North 8th and Bedford, run by Irene, a wild and wonderful local woman.

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## Comments

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**booya** 9 Mar 2013

There is hatred for everyone on this site, didn't you know? Hate hipsters, hate yuppies, hate poor people, hate newer folks, hate older folks, hate activists, hate lazy people, hate the way people paint their walls. It's always been the absolute weirdest thing of this site. I guess the haters always here, are some greek gods or something. That said, thank you for always being so thoughtful in your posts.



**booya** 9 Mar 2013

Home ownership seems to me, now as then, to be the only way to guarantee one will never be "pushed out." That's a nice bubble you live in. Sounds nice. Eminent Domain in your back yard much?



**fiordiligi** 9 Mar 2013

Eminent domain isn't too likely in the middle of a landmarked residential district, so where's the bubble? When I bought back in the day, I actually looked at houses in the immediate vicinity of what's now the arena and Ratner's mall. But the traffic and the unknowns about future construction in that war-zone area made me nervous, so I opted to buy at a substantial remove from all of that. Not to sound at all unsympathetic to those displaced; but if you have the opportunity to consider the envir ...more



**daveinbedstuy** 9 Mar 2013

Booya, Freedom is the Right to Hate!!!! 😊

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**booya** 9 Mar 2013

clearly. that and blogs.

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**booya** 9 Mar 2013

Well, we can't all be as smart as you, or to be as psychic. Stop pretending that any part of NYC is actually affordable, or safe from rezoning or the Mayor's whims, or natural disaster.

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**Montrose Morris** 9 Mar 2013

Mrs. Mingott, who's making assumptions? I merely pointed out that the reactions to his woman would make one think she smothered her children, not expressed her opinion in her film, or in interviews. I have no problem with people having issues with what she says, but it's quite disheartening to see the amount of vitriol aimed at her, personally, or artists in general. No one knows anything about her, except what they read here, or in the NYT. Only one commenter said they saw her film. Yet the amo ...more

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**mrsmanonmingott** 9 Mar 2013

Judgment via mob mentality, I agree, is grossly unfair. Su, unlike her sincere critics, has a platform for her opinions that extends far beyond commenting on a blog. Putting aside the veracity or intensity of Su's disenfranchisement, no one appointed her documentary ambassador for all Brooklynites. There are fair points on all sides, but this documentary is not objective and will be viewed by outsiders who then assume it best represents what is actually happening here. Most genuine vitriol is cr ...more

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**coopfornow** 11 Mar 2013

The movie does not for a second claim to be an objective one. She even jokes about it at some point. And most documentaries highlight an aspect of a bigger picture, and show exactly that what the makers want to emphasize. I am not sure that I have ever seen an objective documentary ever.

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**dirty\_hipster** 11 Mar 2013

ballin outta control

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