

Struggles for Land and the Promise of the Community Land Trust

By Tom Angotti¹

Community organizers everywhere are hearing about an approach to housing that has been largely absent from public debates on housing policy – the community land trust (CLT). A CLT is a non-profit community-based organization that owns land; the title requires that the land be leased only for low-cost housing and that it remain affordable indefinitely. Thousands of households throughout the United States – there is no exact tally -- live in homes that are part of a CLT. CLTs have been proposed as an instrument to protect neighborhoods facing gentrification and displacement and to empower communities that have historically lacked power. After the 2008 collapse of the housing bubble, the CLT was proposed as an antidote to widespread foreclosures, predatory lending, and the growing proportion of households paying more than 30% of their incomes for housing. Housing activists have proposed that vacant land and buildings be placed in land trusts instead of being put back in the speculative land market.

A community land trust is dedicated to the creation and preservation of low-income (or “affordable”) housing in perpetuity. The trust is the legal owner of land and leases it for exclusive use in accordance with the terms of the trust. The lessee is typically a non-profit housing corporation, closely related to the CLT, that rents to qualified tenants, or an individual owner whose ability to profit from equity gains is severely limited. The trust is usually run by a board dominated by housing advocates, community leaders and public

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officials – people who do not normally have a stake in housing as a commodity in the market.²

In this essay I make three major points:

1. CLTs are potentially an alternative to the displacement and inequalities of private housing and land markets. But land trusts in general have been used to protect elites and by themselves are not necessarily good or bad.
2. The CLT is only one among many tools for achieving the right to housing and the right to the city. Many more things are needed to keep land out of the market and make housing permanently affordable.
3. CLTs in the United States emerge out of struggles against displacement and the peace and civil rights movements. Sustaining organic ties with these and other movements is necessary if they are to achieve their revolutionary and transformative potential.

Struggles for Land

By essentially taking housing out of the private land market and increasing community control CLTs can help shelter communities from the global casino appropriately known as the FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate). Public housing (state subsidized and managed housing) also removes housing from the private marketplace, although control is not vested in community-based organizations. Many other state-subsidized housing programs, including rent regulations, vouchers and mortgage subsidies, shape or restrict the market. If we look at these methods together, they add up to an approach that values land more for its social utility (use value) as opposed to its price on the market (exchange value). When land is used for housing under these regulated regimes, housing is treated more as a basic human right instead of a commodity to be exchanged on the marketplace.

The struggles around the world for a right to the city include local organizing that removes land from the private market, protects land that is already out of the market, and effectively reduces the influence of the market. One of the main points of this essay is that the CLT, by itself, will not accomplish any the short-term objectives of community organizing – taking land out of the market – or the long-term objectives – the right to housing and the right to the city. CLTs are one among many tools that community organizers can use. Once a CLT is

² See www.cltnetwork.org; John Davis, Ed. *The Community Land Trust Reader*. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2010.

established, communities continue to face pre-existing and new contradictions. These include conflicts between the CLT and the state, with other community organizations, and conflicts within the CLT. Fundamental contradictions between the CLT and the capitalist marketplace in land and the labor market remain.

The CLT, however, can be an important building block in efforts to construct alternatives to capitalism from below, a concrete demonstration that, to use the term of the World Social Forum, “A Better World Is Possible,” contrary to Margaret Thatcher’s declaration that “There Is No Alternative.” The CLT, like many other alternatives, has been emerging at the margins of global capitalism, in urban and rural peripheries where land’s exchange value is relatively low. When land values increase, however, they can threaten the survival of the CLT – perhaps the single greatest contradiction faced by community organizing everywhere.

In 2008, I proposed a ten-point program for community-based planning that would increase community control over land and undercut the power of global and local real estate. The first and most important strategy in the program was to “expand the public trust and consolidate community land.” I gave a number of concrete examples of community land and strategies and tactics for expanding it, including CLTs, community planning, zoning, tax policy, reclaiming public streets and sidewalks, saving parks, schools and libraries, and generally rescuing the commons from privatization.³

In this essay I will discuss the CLT from the perspective of community organizing in cities and neighborhoods that face inadequate housing, homelessness, displacement and all the consequences that stem from them. What are community organizers engaged in struggles to improve the gross inequalities and exclusions of contemporary urban life to make of the CLT? Will it work? Is it worth trying? Or is it too radical to get any serious traction in a nation and world constitutionally and politically wedded to private property?

I will argue that the CLT can be an important tool for local organizing and that it must be seen as *a* solution, not *the* solution to housing and urban problems. The strategic goal for organizing must be much more ambitious than the CLT. The CLT is a new tactic in the organizer’s toolkit but not a replacement for the toolkit. This is particularly important in the U.S. because the history of community organizing in this nation is marked by short-term thinking and a deeply-imbedded pragmatism, which emphasizes “getting things done”

³ Tom Angotti, *New York For Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

through focused legal battles, building new organizations and non-profit corporations, pursuing foundation and government funding, and adopting the “quick fix” and new technique of the day. As necessary as these things may be as tactics, too often they have led people and organizations to forget the underlying strategic purposes that brought them together. As a result, organizers are often unable to deal with the inevitable contradictions within and among communities in ways that sustain longer-term objectives such as the right to housing. The issue of the CLT is particularly timely in the U.S. because it has begun to open up new insights in the discussion of the more important strategic organizing question: how can communities gain increasing control over land in order to prevent displacement, reduce inequalities and create more just communities? These are the key questions for community organizers and they lead us to find ways to democratically control land -- or what I call *community land*, the strategic focus of progressive community organizing.

The CLT in the United States: Radical Roots, Transformative Politics

The community land trust in the U.S. emerged in the 1960s from entirely different roots than its elite forebears, its European counterparts or other exclusionary monopolies over land. While many of the first CLTs started in small towns and rural areas, and some produced food on a small scale for local consumption, they mostly occurred on land where housing was the main use. For many, the express purpose of establishing a trust was to protect the land from being sold into the speculative market so they could be sheltered from displacement. For others, it was a product of utopian notions about community.

Peace activist Bob Swann and civil rights activist Slater King, building on the experiences of several self-managed rural Black communities in the South, established New Communities, Inc. on 5,000 acres of land in Georgia. Crushing hardships for small-scale agriculture and opposition from white property owners forced them to sell after less than 20 years.⁴ The early CLT pioneers had diverse ideological affinities: for example, the Gramdan Movement in India, formed around Ghandian notions of rural self-reliance; the Institute for Community Economics in Massachusetts, a radical think tank geared to local economies; and E.F. Schumacher, the guru of local thinking.⁵

Since the 1960s, small-scale land trusts emerged in scattered places around the nation, but mostly concentrated on the two coasts. Some, like the Northern California Land Trust,

⁴ Davis, *op. cit.* pp. 15-17.

⁵ E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*. New York: Harper, 1973.

linked individual communal homes that were made possible because property owners, for a variety of personal and political reasons, agreed to transfer their deeds to the trust at minimal or no cost. Some CLTs were homes for peace and environmental activists. Many were in small towns and cities.

While early CLTs often improvised, as the number grew, they tended to develop the same basic features:

- Title to the land is held by a single non-profit owner on behalf of (in trust for) a place-based community.
- The land is leased for the purpose of providing housing for people with limited incomes, or other specific purposes. This ground lease is often a 99-year renewable lease.
- The buildings on the land are owned by a separate entity, usually a non-profit housing development corporation or individual households.
- A key concept guiding the CLT is *stewardship* of the land in accordance with its trust doctrine.

In the 1990s, the community land trusts began to take shape as an urban phenomenon and on a different scale. The main purpose became to provide low-cost housing as a means for stabilizing communities. The National Community Land Trust Network was incorporated in 2006.⁶

The most important development along this line was in Burlington, Vermont. CLT activists in Burlington developed a close relationship with the government of Burlington mayor Bernie Sanders, an avowed socialist (and now a U.S. Senator), who adopted the CLT as a preferred recipient of federal and local funding for low-income housing. This moved the CLT from a fringe idea in the counter-culture to an established instrument that had distinct advantages both for the residents of the housing and for government. Residents were the beneficiaries of government funding to improve their homes and government had an instrument to guarantee that its sizeable outlays would not be monetized and appropriated by private real estate investors. The Burlington Community Land Trust, started in 1984, merged in 2006 with the Lake Champlain Housing Development Corporation to form the

⁶ www.cltnetwork.org

Champlain Land Trust. Today the Champlain CLT owns the land under 1,500 apartment units and 500 owner-occupied housing units.⁷

In the early 1990s, the largest CLT in a major metropolis was established. The Cooper Square CLT owns the land under some 330 units of housing in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where the average tenant makes around 40% of the area median income. Uniquely, the Cooper Square CLT is the result of a struggle against displacement that began in 1959 when the city announced an urban renewal plan that would have wiped out existing housing and built what would now be called “affordable housing” for middle-income people. Community organizers quickly figured out that over 90% of existing residents would not be able to afford the new housing and they feared their multi-ethnic neighborhood would become like the nearby Stuyvesant Town development, where a mostly Black population was displaced by a redevelopment project and replaced by mostly white tenants (after an initial struggle to defeat a racial covenant prohibiting Blacks).⁸

The Cooper Square CLT seeks to guarantee that the housing units it leases to the non-profit Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association will never be sold into the private market. This is particularly pertinent since for the last four decades the City of New York has followed a neoliberal policy of recycling abandoned properties back into the private market. This assumes that public subsidies of distressed housing is successful if the housing returns to the magical private market. Since the massive abandonment of housing in parts of New York City during the 1970s, city housing policy established public-private partnerships in which public subsidies ended up enriching a few individuals and many housing developers. Many of the homes that were built or renovated with public funds were eventually resold for enormous profits in the private market, feeding gentrification and displacement. In addition, approximately one-fourth of all previously-protected middle-income housing (under the post-World War II Mitchell-Lama program), once protected from speculative resale, has now been privatized. Today, Cooper Square stands as a rare exception to neoliberal policy and, as its neighborhood continues to gentrify, it remains among the last

⁷ <http://champlainhousingtrust.org>.

⁸ Tom Angotti, “Community Land Trusts and Low-Income Multifamily Rental Housing,” with Cecilia Jagu, Working Paper, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, December 2006. http://www.lincolninst.edu/pubs/1272_Community-Land-Trusts-and-Low-Income-Multifamily-Rental-Housing

bastions of affordable housing, which also includes public housing and a dwindling supply of Mitchell-Lama and other limited-equity cooperatives.⁹

This brings us to the two most powerful potential uses of the CLT model. First, a CLT can *deter displacement and eviction* due to gentrification and *assert community control* over land. The CLT can defy the dictum of most orthodox economists that gentrification is simply a natural consequence of a healthy land and housing market. Secondly, it is a means to *protect public investments* for low-cost housing and prevent their appropriation by private real estate. The billions of dollars in capital subsidies for housing in New York City should not have favored those who need housing the least. By creating some private wealth for the few who happened to be the lucky recipients of public subsidies, government fueled speculation in land. Today, even greater housing subsidies will be needed as government austerity measures continue to reduce the supply of public housing, rent subsidies and other forms of housing assistance.

The most important lesson we can learn from Cooper Square is that it was the end product of more than five decades of struggle by community organizers and residents. It did not start with a CLT. It started in 1959 when residents organized to stop the city's urban renewal proposal. It took them a decade to kill the project and advance their own proposal for low-income housing. Organizers fought for the right of tenants to stay in the buildings that were to have been condemned and demolished. Cooper Square got the city to provide funds to fix up and maintain the buildings. Without these capital improvements, the buildings would have been uninhabitable. The Cooper Square CLT was not started until the early 1990s, more as a mechanism to preserve the hard-won gains during decades of struggle than as a mechanism for housing development. The struggle to save the housing came first, the CLT came later, just in time to help Cooper Square survive the wave of aggressive gentrification that began in the 1990s.

The most important lesson we can learn from Burlington and the Champlain CLT is the critical importance of financial support from the state. Burlington's pioneering CLT leaders

⁹ Another important urban CLT that emerged in the 1980s was the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Boston (www.dsni.org). The CLT protects land that was reclaimed through the use of the city's urban renewal powers. As the result of sustained community organizing, the urban renewal land was turned over to the CLT and DSNI built new affordable housing.

won strong support from Mayor Bernie Sanders, who directed a significant portion of federal housing funds towards the maintenance and expansion of the CLT. As with Cooper Square, which received substantial capital funding from city government, the Burlington organizers understood the fundamental contradictions that arise once control over the land is secured: there is no way to provide decent housing for working people that have low incomes without subsidies. Middle and upper-income housing in the U.S. is heavily subsidized (moreso than low-income housing), and low-income tenants, without subsidies of their own, simply do not have high enough wages to survive, particularly in cities where land values and rents are extremely high. Without surrendering their mistrust of government, organizers have made the necessary political compromises to preserve their gains, and these include establishing close ties with local governments.

The Trust Doctrine. Elite Trusts and Community Land Trusts

It is worth emphasizing again that the CLT has come out of community struggles against displacement and for radical political alternatives. Too often land trusts are promoted as if they were some new and radical tool for controlling land, but the *land trust* by itself is neither new nor necessarily radical. What makes the CLT potentially different is its emergence from, and organic links with, radical community organizing aimed at taking land out of the market and placing it under the collective control of communities.

Land trusts in the U.S. are widely used to preserve open space, agricultural land, and the property of large institutions. Since the so-called Progressive era a century ago, many trusts were created by wealthy individuals and corporations and have served elite interests. The idea of placing land “in trust” to keep it out of the private market first came from the wealthiest elites, who had a keen appreciation for the power of monopoly control because they were the ones who most exercised and benefited from it. They were monopoly capitalists who sought to use both state and private capital to assemble parcels of land and consolidate control over it. They would acquire vast stretches of North American land and prevent it from falling into the hands of small-scale speculators. The private landholders insured they would reap generous tax benefits for donating their land to a “charitable” trust. Government took care of the rest of the land. Together the private owners and government would accomplish a concentration of landed interests that made the feudal landscape appear fragmented by comparison. The U.S. government is today the largest landowner in the nation and effectively manages this vast “trust” as a guaranteed source of profits for privately-held mining, forestry and recreational enterprises, who pay modest fees for generous concessions.

Wealthy capitalists and corporations have also bought up vast wilderness areas throughout the continent and effectively created trusts that would keep them out of the hands of speculators. For example, the Rockefeller family bought up huge swaths of land in the northeast and dedicated them to parkland and preserves. At the global level, a platoon of public-private partnerships has established natural preserves that permit long-term monopoly control over endangered species and cultures and valuable mineral resources.

By placing land in trust, the trustee – whether an individual, family or corporation – retains the power to use the land under the terms set out in the trust. The trust normally sets out in explicit terms those uses that are permitted. Farmland trusts are used throughout the nation, a product of efforts to save farmland in urban peripheries from land speculation and suburban tract development. While they have met with success in some regions, for the most part the temptation to cash in on skyrocketing land prices has proven too much for most farmers, particularly those on smaller farms.

The trusts of the elites combine with a host of regulatory mechanisms such as zoning and tax policies to preserve land in exclusive urban and rural enclaves. However, beyond the elite legacy of the trust, there are many strategies that are implicitly or explicitly based on an opposite objective – to break away from the rule of capital and private property and establish places in which people develop a new relationship with land and with each other, relationships de-linked from the land market. These radical approaches seek a different form of monopoly control over land than that practiced by investors, speculators and government. They are part of the legacy of the CLT.

Since the mid-nineteenth century many intentional communities were established outside urban land markets, though few lasted more than a few decades: New Lanark and the Owenites, the Quakers, the Shakers, communities following the socialist ideas of Saint Simon and Fourier, etc.¹⁰ In each of them land was effectively held in trust, but the trust was embodied in the social (sometimes explicitly socialist) or religious solidarity that held the communities together. Most importantly, what bound these communities together was not their title to the land, which might be held by one individual or an association, but their shared purpose. The communities were planned and built to accomplish these objectives and not to maximize the resale value of the land. They were entrusted with furthering the social and political objectives of the land holders and in this sense were among the

¹⁰ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972.

precursors to the community land trust. Like the CLT, the essence of these projects was to build relations of solidarity and collective responsibility among the people who live and work in the community.

In Europe there were many early practices governing land development that used the prerogatives of monopoly ownership to control the use of urban land. Urban planning was employed to dictate land use in accordance with a set of social objectives. These would include, for example, the Garden Cities proposed by Ebenezer Howard in late Victorian England that were rooted in the ideas of William Morris and Fabian socialism, and planned communities in the U.S. such as Sunnyside (New York City). By the late 20th century these more progressive utopias gave way to suburban tract development aimed at maximizing returns for land subdivisions, exclusive gated communities, and upscale urban enclave development characterized by The New Urbanism (such as Celebration, Florida). Modern architecture and urban planning from Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus until today has incorporated explicit social objectives, though it is more often than not part of a sophisticated marketing and branding strategy. There are also some important examples from the last century of metropolitan-wide control over land use through comprehensive planning that imply a strong sense of the public trust. For example, in the early 20th century, the Swedish crown, which owned most of the land around Stockholm, conveyed it to private and public entities for development in accordance with a comprehensive master plan. The British New Town program after World War II was possible because the government acquired agricultural land in suburban areas and conveyed it to public-private corporations that were obligated to develop it according to agreed-upon master plans framed with social objectives. All of these enterprises have now been ensnared in contemporary metropolitan-wide land markets that are dominated by finance capital, a globalized real estate industry, and public-private partnerships in which the private sector is now the senior partner. The new towns from England to Sweden, once havens for stable sectors of the native working class, are now segregated enclaves for new immigrants that face problems of unemployment and a lack of operating funds for housing maintenance.

It is worth mentioning that in many nations deeds to land held by individuals may include restrictions that accomplish the same purpose as the land trust. In the U.S., restrictive covenants are widely used to dictate how land may be used. In Houston, Texas, which has

no zoning regulations, deed restrictions typically regulate land use. These restrictions may forbid certain kinds of development as a condition that runs with the deed.¹¹

Affordable Housing in Perpetuity?

Another question often raised is how permanent can affordability be with a CLT? The CLT is a non-profit organization just like thousands of other non-profits, but what makes them any less vulnerable to selling out and using narrow, localist and exclusionary actions? What if they decide to dissolve the trust or legally change the terms of the trust, since any trust can be modified or dissolved? What about corruption and mismanagement?

The answer is that the CLT model by itself guarantees nothing. Like every other legal device, it must function in a legal, political and economic system that is dedicated to the preservation of private property and monopoly capital. This is all the more reason why *community* is a central and defining feature of the community land trust. Broad community support and vigilance is the only guarantee that the trustees will not sell out.

A recent proposal for “shared equity homeownership” by the National Housing Institute appears to be aimed at convincing people that the CLT allows for equity accumulation. It coincides with efforts, backed by the Ford Foundation, to “scale up” the CLT and bring it from the margins into the suburban mainstream.¹² While an admirable goal, this effort could end up ignoring the CLT’s radical roots, reinforcing the myths of the proverbial American Dream, and diluting the political and social value of community land.

CLTs often face the demand by their members for conventional homeownership, free from the restrictions of a land trust. After all, they say, why shouldn’t I be able to sell my interest on the open market and make a profit? If the CLT has the effect of freezing land values, isn’t it just preventing low-income tenants and homeowners from reaping equity benefits and condemning them to continued poverty? It is easy, they say, for middle-class CLT advocates to preach the wonders of collective ownership and poverty reduction, while preventing

¹¹ Though now illegal, restrictive covenants were a Jim Crow era instrument to limit occupancy to white people. June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf, Eds. *Urban Planning and the African American Community In the Shadows*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997.

¹² John E. Davis, *Shared Equity Homeownership*. National Housing Institute, 2010.

people from getting out of poverty. It is easy for white housing advocates to preach to Black renters who have been denied homeownership due to discrimination and redlining.

The answer to these claims is twofold. First, the trust guarantees permanency for residents and makes no claim to be a builder of equity. That is not its purpose. It helps prevent displacement and preserve community – and Black communities have been disproportionately displaced and shattered by a whole host of housing, economic, and policing policies. Secondly, long-term economic trends indicate that home equity on average does no better than other forms of investment. Community organizers who organize with the goal of enriching people individually instead of empowering a community might instead suggest they invest in a hedge fund, bank or casino. Also, because of segregation and redlining in U.S. cities and suburbs, low-income communities of color do not benefit nearly as much as others from equity appreciation in homes. Equity increases are dramatically higher in gentrified neighborhoods which, almost by definition, working people and most people of color are priced out of. Although the struggle for the rights of Blacks to home ownership remains an important part of the civil rights agenda, this should not prevent us from uncovering the giant hoax known as federal housing policy, which has for more than five decades supported home ownership as the solution to the housing crisis – even as more homeowners and renters are forced to live in miserable conditions, scrimp on meals to pay the rent or mortgage, or end up on the street with the over two million people who have no place to call home at all.

A shift of the CLT model to home ownership could possibly eliminate a central element in the CLT doctrine – community. While the CLT won't solve anything by itself, its unique integration of community in the housing formula offers the potential for addressing some of the problems with existing non-profit and government housing schemes. The CLT has a governance structure that differs markedly from the usual non-profit housing cooperative. Residents make up only one-third of the board, which means they could not easily vote to go private, as tens of thousands of limited-equity housing coop members in New York City did in the last two decades, enticed by soaring land prices in gentrifying neighborhoods. This feature – minority representation for tenants – often jars people who have been struggling to gain control over their housing and land by wrenching it from the clutches of greedy landlords and their backers in government. It also runs counter to the myth of home ownership as the key to building wealth, becoming independent and controlling land.

The “community” in community land trust is essential. This does not eliminate the contradictions inherent in every community – conflicts defined by race, class, gender and

other differences – and may even highlight them. While the local, place-based community is certainly the underpinning of the CLT, to be truly effective it must build a broader social consciousness and political awareness. For example, Cooper Square has a long history as an ally of struggles for racial and economic justice in New York City and beyond. Its leaders have been vocal allies of campaigns against racial profiling, war spending, and cuts in social spending. This kind of solidarity is what makes the CLT different from the average private cooperative, homeowners association, or charitable non-profit. It begins to establish a solidarity within the community based on shared principles of social justice and not shared profits from land.

Back to the Land

The community land trust can be a useful mechanism for securing and preserving truly affordable housing but in the long run the CLT will be vulnerable unless it is part of a broader strategy geared towards *gaining community control over land* – a strategy for *community land*. This kind of strategy can be looked at through the microeconomic lens of capitalist political economy or through the lens of Marxist political economy. If the former, the strategy for community land is clearly a means to reform capitalism without affecting its underlying logic. If the latter, it is a revolutionary approach that organizes communities to change their relationship with land and challenge the role of capital.

A rough definition of community land might be *land that is removed from the speculative real estate market, thereby enhancing social control over its use*. However, this could lead to a false definition of community land as a “thing” rather than a strategic and dynamic concept reflecting the struggles over the use and control of urban space. The struggles for community land have been a consistent part of urban life under late capitalism.¹³ In the cities of early industrial capitalism the urban proletariat was consumed with the daily struggles for survival in cities that were unplanned and disease-ridden. The earliest organized working class struggles were for livable wages and an eight-hour work day; although victories at the work place indirectly helped improve living conditions they did not result in greater worker control over living conditions. The urban reform movement of over a century ago that focused on miserable housing and living conditions was led by elite political figures and professionals. From Haussmann’s Paris to Burnham’s Chicago, modern

¹³ The earliest struggles for land in the U.S. were by indigenous tribes against settler colonialism. These struggles are not strictly urban but bear some important lessons for urban organizing.

planning and engineering sought to eliminate the worst conditions in working class districts by displacing the working class to more “orderly,” sanitized districts or simply expelling them from the central areas where land values were increasing and working class unity was growing.¹⁴

It was not until the early twentieth century, however, that nascent urban movements arose from working class populations facing evictions and displacement. In the U.S., tenants organized rent strikes and mobilized for legal rights against evictions, most notably during the upsurge of workers’ movements after World War I, and again through the Unemployed Councils during the Great Depression.¹⁵

After the Second World War urban protest movements arose throughout most of the capitalist core nations. In the U.S. the struggles against the federal urban renewal program were a key element in the civil rights movement and its challenge to segregation and discrimination. 1968 was a seminal year as struggles broke out across Europe and North America and, significantly, questions of displacement in the capitalist core nations were related to the rising tide of national liberation struggles around the world.

Colonialism and twentieth century imperialism perfected the art of displacement. With an iron fist they evicted whole communities and crushed protests with the most brutal violence, and with a velvet glove they used urban planning and design to rationalize attacks on those struggling against displacement. With the end of direct colonial rule, the flexibilization of labor, and the globalization of the surplus labor pool, control over urban land became an imperative to maintain global power and control over the labor force. Intense struggles for community land emerged throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia where vast stretches of metropolitan land were under the social control of residents who had been forced to migrate to cities by oppressive economic conditions in the countryside. They built, planned and maintained their communities without state involvement and struggled against eviction and displacement when the land they were living on was later coveted by powerful private or state interests. As with CLTs, popular control over land has occurred at the urban periphery, and its existence is especially threatened when the potential land rent increases and the land becomes more attractive to capital.

¹⁴ Leonardo Benevolo, *The Origins of Modern Town Planning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967.

¹⁵ Ronald Lawson, *The Tenant Movement in New York City*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986.

Land without markets

In pre-capitalist and indigenous societies all over the world, different forms of community land have thrived. Many indigenous pre-capitalist societies never considered land to be a commodity; they worshiped and paid tribute to land, and treated land as an integral part of human and animal livelihoods. Land was not sharply bounded in spatial terms and the notion of separating the past, present and future uses of land, a fundamental element of modern urban planning, was alien. Under the weight of settler colonialism, indigenous people now live in a world demarcated by privately owned lots or segregated on reservations where nature is commodified by state and private institutions.

In the 20th century the majority of urban land in the world was occupied, developed, and managed without significant state intervention, free from bank financing, government regulation and infrastructure. The “informal” sector and “self-built” housing have actually accounted for the vast majority of housing and urban development in the world; although this is changing rapidly there are still billions of urban residents living in these communities. To be sure, there are active land markets everywhere, including “informal” ones, but they are relatively modest in scope and often involve the bartering of properties.

Title to community land is usually unclear and complicated, especially in areas that were originally taken by squatters. Residents built their own housing, often in stages, and through individual and collective action created a basic infrastructure, often inadequate, including streets, utilities, and community services. The housing, in some places referred to as social housing, was largely developed without significant intervention by the state or capitalist financial institutions.

Another term for community land might be *the commons*. The commons preceded industrial capitalism in northern Europe. It refers to land used collectively by farmers for grazing. Modern bourgeois economics dwells on the myth of the “tragedy of the commons,” which states that the reason this institution collapsed was overgrazing: only if there is private property will land be effectively maintained, or so they claim. In fact, the commons faded because of the enclosures; small-scale agriculture could not survive under capitalism and farmers were forced to migrate to cities. Today the concept of the commons has been expanded to include any collective space.¹⁶

¹⁶ See for example, <http://onthecommons.org>.

In a globalized capitalist world now following, with both dedication and fury, models of urban planning and development that originated in late 19th-century Europe and early 20th century North America, it has become axiomatic that community land is but a relic of underdevelopment and should be banished. The leading institutions of global financial capital continue to promote as the solution to urban poverty the conversion of community land to private property by eliminating the myriad of land tenure options, establishing clear individual land titles, mortgage financing, insurance and an active real estate market. It is claimed that “normal” urban land markets will build wealth among residents, facilitate tax collection, attract capital for the improvement of infrastructure, and lift people out of poverty.¹⁷ In the U.S., the same formula has been for over six decades the centerpiece of national urban policy, promoting home ownership as the solution to housing problems, urban poverty and discrimination.¹⁸

As Engels argued in his polemic against Proudhon,¹⁹ having title in the land, by itself, has no effect on the exploitation of labor; if housing were to be free, employers could easily reduce wages. The more low-cost housing, the less employers would have to pay to reproduce their workforce. Thus, the CLT and other measures that take land out of the private market cannot, by themselves, guarantee that capital will not compensate by reducing wages, including the social wage that comes in the form of public services. The CLT by itself does not prevent unemployment, discrimination, educational disadvantage, or improve the quality of life in a community. Taking land out of the private market will not necessarily improve anything. Only more powerful social movements can force more systemic, transformative, and revolutionary changes.

What is Community?

The term “community” is, of course, filled with ambiguity and often problematic. It is a social construct, and may have enormous symbolic and political meaning. It can mobilize people who are struggling for individual and collective rights, against displacement, discrimination and oppression. However, it is frequently (mis)used to imply a coherent and homogenous subject, and reified as a virtuous political actor. However, community

¹⁷ The conservative classic is: Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

¹⁸ Rachel E. Bratt, Michael E. Stone and Chester Hartman, Eds. *A Right to Housing: Foundation for a New Social Agenda*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

¹⁹ Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975.

organizers not enthralled by blind idealism surely know that communities, like individuals, families, states and other institutions, are complex and filled with contradictions. Of course, this does not prevent any of them from acting in the political arena.

Notwithstanding the claims of community advocates and their organizations, neither individual advocates nor their organizations “are” the communities. In real community organizing, individual actions are often conflated with the interests of, and purported to represent, “the community.” But no community can possibly be homogenous because it is the *differences* among the various community members that make a community. The community, in this sense is greater than the sum of its parts because it is a collective entity that represents – no matter how imperfectly – interests that go beyond the individual interests of its constituent members, including leaders.

The community is not a thing; it is defined by the *relations* among individuals and institutions, which are dynamic. Most importantly, it is the goal of community organizing to change these relations while also changing the relationship between communities and the larger society.

Finally, the myth of the community is a powerful *exclusionary* tool. In the cities of developed capitalism, most communities are exclusionary enclaves and exclusion is the dominant principle of community organizing, whether explicit or not. In the U.S., segregation based on race is an obvious and defining characteristic of community today, more than 40 years after the Civil Rights Act and 125 years since the abolition of slavery. The challenge for organizers committed to social justice is to build communities with inclusionary ethics as part of a strategy for transformative community organizing.

The Struggles for Land: Local and Global

The struggle for community land includes the direct occupation of land through squatting and homesteading. It includes the use of all the levers of local and national policy to reduce or eliminate the power of private landowners and thwart speculation and profit-making in urban land: zoning, tax policy, preservation laws, public acquisition for parks and public services, etc. Depending on the circumstances, these are all tactics that can shape and regulate the market and slow or stop gentrification and displacement. These are levers that get pulled as people organize against public and private projects that would increase land prices and rents.

However, like CLTs, every one of these tools can be used to accomplish the very opposite result. The real estate market is quite adaptable and tolerant of significant public ownership and regulation as long as it leaves the private sector the space they need to hold on to the value of their investments and expand opportunities over time. Indeed, the entire public infrastructure of the cities with the hottest real estate markets (including streets, parks, and other public facilities) usually accounts for at least one-third of all land, and it will not be sacrificed by the real estate industry because these are also amenities necessary for investors to realize the future value of their holdings. The most powerful real estate interests are quite expert at monopolizing the use of zoning, tax laws and all of the other instruments that restrict the use of land to both enhance their own property values and give them a competitive edge over small-scale speculators and a political edge over communities that dare to stand in their way.

Again, community land is not a “thing.” It is not simply a physical space. Nor is it a legal category. It is a political process that arises from the historical place-based movements to gain control over land as a means of preventing or overcoming displacement. Most importantly, the struggles for community land in the U.S. have been part of the struggles against racist exclusion. For example, recent efforts to end the racist “stop and frisk” practices in New York City are effectively part of the broader movement of people of color to reclaim control over their land. It is important that community organizers proposing CLTs also value the many other tactics for controlling land and not fixate on one tactic alone.

By expanding the orbit of community land and establishing new forms of the commons, we can also pose our own alternatives to the impending catastrophes resulting from climate change. We must slow down the feverish pace of capitalism’s drive to stack up its unseemly surpluses into ever more brutal (and empty) monuments that produce enormous volumes of CO₂. Climate change and sea level rise are products of the disruption of nature due to capitalism’s unceasing drive for growth, consumption and accumulation. The global (urban) growth machine may result in cities that will no longer be viable for human habitation. As a result, the community land we have reclaimed may end up under water.

These epochal questions remain for us. Does community land also provide opportunities to nurture local ecologies and protect species from extinction? Can it be an alternative to disaster capitalism, which is now at the heart of capital’s adaptation strategies to confront climate change?

