Community Matters

Conversations with Reflective Practitioners about the Value & Variety of Resident Engagement in Community Land Trusts



Edited by John Emmeus Davis



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Dedicated to the memory of
Reverend John Whitfield (1950–2022),
a servant leader and faithful builder
of the beloved community.

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Concluding Thoughts: Community Land Trusts as Scaffolding for Continually Thriving Communities



Theresa Williamson
July 25, 2022

[Editor's note: The panel discussion that begins this book was moderated by Theresa Williamson. It ends with a meditation by the same reflective practitioner, who was asked to discern common threads of aspiration and action running through the preceding chapters, viewed through the lens of her own experience supporting resident engagement in favela communities in Rio de Janeiro.]

So much that we value and take for granted in our cities is as it is thanks to the efforts of those who came before us acting, advocating, or organizing for it to be so. Some even lost their lives to make those changes happen, or to inspire those changes. Look around you and think of the qualities of the neighborhood where you currently sit, qualities that you most appreciate. Chances are someone fought for them, or better, a group of people fought for them. These were

people with a common purpose or a shared geography—*a community*—that derived its satisfaction not from being remembered but from being part of the process that made that change happen, a hoped-for legacy that would be left for others, even if they themselves didn't live to see it materialize.

Throughout *Community Matters*, the critical role of community organizers and the importance of community—the "C" in CLT—are spotlighted by each practitioner, despite the dramatically different scenarios, needs, opportunities, contexts, and cultures that each community land trust is responding to. Each practitioner spoke to a local reality, reminding us that just as community matters, context matters! Yet a number of commonalities, particularly around the role of community and organizing, can be discerned.

The multigenerational, ongoing role of organizing was highlighted throughout the book, as were CLTs as a high-potential, effective scaffolding supportive of that continuous evolution. Though they're touted as a solution for affordable housing, the book's practitioners make clear that CLTs are about much more than building homes. As Dave Smith explains, "That's what other developers do: they come and build a building and then they go away because it's ended. But we're . . . in the business of building homes and *continually thriving communities*."

Addressing the gamut of human needs

The best community land trusts thus strive to be engines of community-building, working to meet the gamut of human needs at a scale where people thrive. This starts with *shelter*, yes. But today we know housing to be a necessary precondition to achieving the *security* necessary for individuals to access many other rights and opportunities. From a sense of security and safety, people are able to invest emotionally and connect with others, from which the need for *belonging* and *connection* is met. In turn, working together, residents can

focus on other needs, from basic needs like food, as Dudley Street's gardens exemplify, to *self-actualization*, as the Caño CLT's Leadership Academy promotes in San Juan. CLTs also provide a secure base from which to achieve financial security and to raise a family, as Tony Hernandez describes. And within which migrants can find a new sense of belonging, as is taking place in Brussels.

At a minimum, CLTs are working to provide, as Ashley Allen explains, "a place to be *stable*, to not get kicked out, to be able to afford to stay put, both today and tomorrow." But stability is the foundation of so much more. Even those of us marked by privilege have gained an appreciation for this in light of the pandemic and climate crises.

In Rio de Janeiro, I have the honor of being a part of the Favela-CLT Project which has recently advocated for CLTs in municipal legislation. In coming years, we hope to have a pilot community land trust, inspired by the Caño CLT in Puerto Rico, that would be organized in one (or more) of our informal settlements. Stability is a key to why we are fighting for CLTs. Here, CLTs are also about preserving values that residents have built into their historic favela communities. CLTs are about creating the means for existing communities to stay and to maintain their already deeply-met need for belonging. As was done in Dudley Street, as is happening in Houston, and as was emphasized in San Juan.

Trust, engagement and power

This isn't easy. As Alejandro Cotté Morales puts it, our hegemonic, capitalist system is "always looking for ways to . . . undermine the collective. So part of the support to be given by organizers is to constantly *open up spaces for critical thinking and community organization*."

María E. Hernández explains how the logic shifts when organizers work to build a common understanding of community: In the

Caño, "before the community land trust was created, people said they were *divided* by the canal. But now, they are *united* by the canal. They have a vision now, just one vision for the community."

How did the Caño CLT open up spaces for critical thinking and unite residents like this? There was a shift in worldview from the logic of individualism to that of community. From the starting point of community, all needs can be met.

Another recurring theme across the practitioner stories in *Community Matters* is the critical nature of developing *trusted relationships* that in turn produce *engagement* and, ultimately, *power*. Such relationships can only be built through a long-term commitment, which is a characteristic of CLT practitioners.

Alejandro Cotté Morales makes clear that the primary engagement to be nurtured in a CLT is with those living closest, or who are most impacted, by the topic of interest. By focusing first and foremost on those at the center—residents—trust can be built. But trust-building exercises are still needed, as Razia Khanom has indicated, if residents who are part of marginalized or traumatized communities are to be engaged in a CLT's activities.

An important part of effective CLTs' trust-building is their commitment to being representative and reflective of the communities they serve. As Ashley Allen describes the experience of her own CLT in Houston:

> It's very different for a person of color to highlight the history of the CLT model and to say where it came from and the significance of that. . . . Having leadership of color [has] made it a lot easier for us to go into a neighborhood. We can understand and relate to what's currently going on in the neighborhood and what people are trying to protect and preserve. . . . I think it was very important for people to hear a person of color explain that it's not about giving up your land, but about the kind of collectivism that is common in cultures of color (Chapter Seven).

Another ingredient in building trust is the set of interpersonal relationships that result from engagement and that can produce action. By engaging residents, often in a lighthearted and familial way as with Dudley Street's cookouts, residents are ready when action is needed. This is without having to be full-time organizers themselves. Tony Hernandez expresses it well in Chapter Three when he says, "Constant relationship building . . . is what's going to build trust; and that's what's ultimately going to build power." He describes how these relationships are formed:

> I don't want to run into Jason once a month for a check-in. But I do want to wish him a Merry Christmas. . . . 'What's going on in your life? What's new and exciting?' Let's build the relationship so that it doesn't feel like business every time we have an encounter. It feels like we're one big family. On occasion, yes, family business has to be handled. But on other occasions? Let's just be family. Let's have a cookout.

Ashley Allen says it's in community engagement and stewardship that the Houston CLT is currently investing, "because the best organizers . . . are happy homeowners." Consequently, if their CLT needs to organize, they "have an army ready."

Tony Hernandez summarizes in this way; he says that with the "triple E's"—engagement, education and empowerment—"the rest should fall into place." Echoing Ashley, he says that if collective action is later needed (such as when administrations change) the community can resume the fight.

All of the practitioners in the present book make clear, however, that fighting shouldn't be a constant in the process of building and sustaining a CLT. Every case cited a relationship to public authorities, whether passing a law (Brussels and San Juan), winning the respect of city officials (Houston), achieving eminent domain (Boston), or harnessing municipal resources (London and Houston). The

fight is framed as part and parcel of achieving those victories, but the primary focus should always be on resident engagement and responsiveness, investing in the virtuous process of community-building that produces a reservoir of power that can be drawn upon and applied when needed.

From grassroots to meta community-building: a virtuous, sustainable cycle

Though focused on addressing the basic need for housing locally, these practitioners are all working to build much more than housing and something much bigger than their local CLT. CLTs operate in *layers* of community. There are the residents, allies, and advocates within a neighborhood and across a city—and their partners. But there are also layers of community and CLTs across their nation and across the world. Because of the cooperative nature of CLTs, we naturally form a broader ecosystem of mutual support.

Mutual support starts within the CLT, as exemplified by Tony Hernandez's summary of his basic role: "How do we serve as a resource, and help [CLT homeowners] take advantage of being in the land trust? How do we educate and empower the people to be able to carry this forward and to help the CLT to grow?"

Ashley Allen and various contributors speak of the immediate community around their CLTs: "Even if you're not a CLT homeowner, you still have a vested interest in the community; you still care about affordable housing and housing development and about not driving people out of the community."

Then there are the outer layers of that community. Razia Khanom described this after participating in an online event with our Brazilian CLT movement: "That is also part of my community now. It's a movement that we've all started. Attending that discussion with Brazil left me feeling renewed in my energies. That's what we do in communities. We help each other. We support each other. And we're also inspiring each other."

Here in Rio de Janeiro, we saw this in the pre-Olympics period when communities were targeted with forced eviction and 80,000 lost their homes, even people in favelas who had land titles. This is what led us to look at CLTs. They had the potential of being a more empowering solution, as opposed to individual titles that promote a divisive, atomizing, and exploitative logic.

During this period, community organizers in the favela most famous for its resistance efforts, *Vila Autódromo* (which is today among those interested in piloting a CLT in Brazil), would speak of allies as critical to their resistance efforts, for providing the energy and inspiration that helped them maintain their commitment to resist what felt like overwhelming pressure, as they were left living amidst the debris of forced evictions all around them.

Yet their allies felt the same: *Vila Autódromo's* organizers inspired us to keep fighting alongside them. Their determination and "not everyone has a price" mindset was palpable and gave us a sense of hope that all was not lost in this world. What was established was a virtuous cycle of mutual empowerment, inspiration and support. A determined local community inspired a broader community that was determined to support them, which in turn reinforced residents' conviction and commitment. The result: a self-sustaining system of mutual empowerment.

These meta communities, these ecosystems of civil society with mutually interdependent and supportive niches, these are community too! All with a broader collective and ultimate goal of realized human beings and a healthy, abundant planet.

Seven generations thinking

Community land trusts are complex. It is no accident that it has taken five decades for the model to begin obtaining global recognition. There's still a long road ahead. Highly-effective CLTs are not easy to set up, precisely because they're not just about physical structures: they are about building trusting relationships, collective

decision-making, ongoing education, and taking the time to bring everyone along for the ride. And this is on top of the financial cost of acquiring access to land, constructing housing and other community elements, establishing supportive legal instruments and, perhaps most difficult of all, achieving the structural shift from an *individualistic* logic model to a *collective* one that a CLT requires and inspires.

It is a wonder so many CLTs have been created. At the same time, now that we know their transformative potential, it is paramount that the model gains massive traction. Dave Smith reflects:

> I don't think there's ever a business or a system where autocracy doesn't move things forward quicker. But you've got to ask yourselves about what it is, ultimately, that you value coming out the end of it. We could probably knock our houses up cheaper and quicker if we didn't involve people in the process.

But what if the equation takes into account all of the human needs that can ultimately be addressed through the scaffolding of a highly effective CLT? Does the cost-benefit ratio shift? Isn't it more efficient than a hodgepodge of on-again, off-again policies addressing one need at a time and then stumbling and unraveling one solution as we address another need?

What if we take a step back and view CLTs—and our world—through a sustainability lens? What if we apply seven generations thinking, a stewardship approach that suggests we live and work for the benefit of the next seven generations?

Our animal minds have trouble with long-game calculations. If our goal is quickly putting up lots of houses, then autocracy is king. But if our goal is self-actualized humans thriving in societies and on a healthy planet, where housing is but one of many interdependent needs that need to be met in reaching that goal, then a more robust scaffolding is needed.

Which brings us back to the CLT as a practical, beautifully-designed scaffolding tool to realize this potential. Ingredients of this scaffolding have been described or alluded to throughout this chapter, but there were also others mentioned in the previous chapters, such as the right to the city, asset-based community development (ABCD), nonviolent communication (NVC), and the productive role of conflict.

Ultimately, there is a simple, elegant, and more to-the-point way to describe this same possibility: the Reverend John Whitfield's vision for a "Be-love Community."

Sadly, the Reverend John passed away prior to the publication of *Community Matters*. Fortunately, we still have his opening meditation in Chapter One on "building the beloved community" where he made clear for us the direction in which he hoped the CLT movement is headed:

> I submit to you this morning that the CLT movement of the 21st Century and beyond must strive to take the beloved community to the next level and work towards creating and maintaining "Be-love Communities" . . . that . . . would not only simply represent bricks and mortar, . . . but would be a catalyst that will move this world toward a place of realizing that we must crucially come together in the spirit of unity . . . where individuals know without a shadow of a doubt that what they're doing is not simply a matter of providing housing with affordability in perpetuity. We're creating an atmosphere of love.

May we continue organizing, relating, and engaging together, bringing everyone into the fold, charging forward to realize the Reverend John Whitfield's inspiring vision.

Community land trusts are distinguished from many other nonprofit housing developers by the degree to which residents of the places served by a CLT are woven into the culture, structure, and operation of the organization itself. This participatory element—the "C" in CLT—is just as important to what a CLT *is* and *does* as its distinctive approach to the ownership of land and the stewardship of housing.

Participation is sometimes overshadowed by other organizational priorities, especially when a CLT is rapidly expanding its holdings of land and housing. Yet most CLT practitioners remain passionately committed to involving local residents in their work. For them, *community matters* as much as ever—although the manner in which "community" is conceived, purposed, and practiced has become increasingly complex.

The practitioners featured in the present volume epitomize the persistence of this commitment to community—and its complexity. Working with CLTs in Boston, Brussels, Houston, London, and San Juan, they have championed a variety of strategies for giving residents an active voice in planning and development. They have also changed strategies when needed. The stories of these experienced practitioners explore the whys and ways of keeping "community" alive in organizations like theirs. They offer a virtual master class in resilient resident engagement.

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