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How One Boston Neighborhood Stopped Gentrification in Its Tracks

Community land trusts create housing that is permanently affordable. And they also help new city farmers get land.



The Food Project, which creates personal and social change through sustainable agriculture, has leased land from the DSNI community land trust for urban farming since 1995. Pictured are Kesiah Bascom, Jonathan Aldieri, and Danielle Andrews. Photo by Paul Dunn.



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[Penn Loh](#) posted Jan 28, 2015

Tony Hernandez remembers playing as a child on the vacant lots in the Dudley Street neighborhood of Boston. In the 1980s, white flight and disinvestment had so devastated this neighborhood that more than 20 percent of the land—1,300 lots—lay vacant. Today, Hernandez owns a home on this land, one of 225 units of permanently affordable housing. His home is surrounded by parks and gardens, a town common, community center, charter school, community greenhouse, and several urban farms. This transformation was led by residents of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, who in the late 1980s established a community land trust to take democratic ownership of the land and guide development.



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A community land trust (CLT) is a nonprofit organization governed by community members that stewards land for long-term public benefit. CLTs protect land from the pressures of the real estate market, as the land is never resold. It remains part of the commons. Under private ownership, land tends to go to the highest bidder and toward uses intended to generate the greatest market return. Cities have an incentive to build up the market value of land, as they rely so heavily on property taxes to fund schools and other services. That explains why too often high-end condos are preferred by developers and cities over affordable homes or urban farms.

Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative: A proven model

Though vacant land was plentiful and inexpensive in Dudley in the 1980s, residents were concerned not just about revitalization but also the city's redevelopment plans to gentrify the area into hotels and offices serving downtown Boston. Not only did they succeed in pressuring the city to adopt the community's plan, they also won the right to use the city's power of eminent domain in a 60-acre core area to take blighted land from private owners and redevelop it. The Dudley land trust, then, would own the land and realize a vision of development without displacement.

"It fosters a culture of neighbors actually knowing each other."

Hernandez has lived on the Dudley land trust for the past 12 years with his school-age daughter. He points out that with an affordable mortgage, "I was able to complete my master's degree in architecture and even set up a college savings account for my daughter. I felt secure, even with foreclosures happening left and right."

Indeed, a 2011 study of foreclosures on CLT housing found that only 0.46 percent of CLT owners were in foreclosure proceedings compared to 4.63 percent in the conventional market. These low rates are attributable not just to affordability but to the CLT's role in working with both the homeowner and banks to address issues as they arise.

Although the market value of homes in Boston has skyrocketed in recent years, Hernandez says he "can't flip the home," as the resale price is restricted to a one-half percent increase per year, capped at 5 percent after 10 years. He explains, "The purpose is to cap it so that affordability can be extended to another family." This continuing affordability is made possible because the land trust owns the land and leases it to the homeowner, who owns only the housing structure.

But for Hernandez, "it's not just about investing in the property but the neighborhood." Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative and its land trust are the "bridge between the homeowner and the neighborhood. We just had a great block party a month ago, with people coming out of their homes and hanging out. It fosters a culture of neighbors actually knowing each other. Now if you see my kid doing something they shouldn't, then you can watch out for them."

Through its governance structure, the land trust balances the varying interests of homeowners and the broader community in the land. Hernandez serves on the Dudley land trust board along with several leaseholders, other community members, and representatives of various elected officials. Ultimately, Hernandez sees the impact of the land trust as "not just on the leaseholders, but also the folks who have market value homes and the ma-and-pa stores."

Land trusts for urban farming

Though housing was its first priority, Dudley Street has also pioneered the use of the land trust for community and economic development, most notably urban farming. Urban agriculture has taken off in many cities as a way to improve health and access to local produce as well as to put vacant land back into productive use. Dudley Street built a community greenhouse in 2004 on the site of an abandoned auto garage. They also lease land to the nonprofit Food Project, which runs farms as youth development enterprises.

"There are so many competing uses for vacant land that its market value makes it unaffordable for farmers."

Despite these successes and Boston's recent legalization of commercial farming, the challenge of acquiring land still remains. According to Glynn Lloyd, co-founder of City Growers, a for-profit farming venture in Boston, "There are so many competing uses for vacant land that its market value makes it unaffordable for farmers." City Growers currently farms four sites in Roxbury and Dorchester, two adjoining lower income neighborhoods of color that include the Dudley neighborhood.

Meanwhile, the ranks of future farmers grow. The nonprofit Urban Farming Institute of Boston (UFIB) graduated seven farmers from its training program last year, four of whom are now apprenticing with City Growers. Eight more are completing the program this year. "Amassing land for our farmers is a first priority," says Executive Director Patricia Spence. That is why they have teamed up with several partners to develop three new farms that will be owned by the Dudley land trust. In July, ground was broken on the first of these in Roxbury, the Garrison Trotter farm, named after abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and civil rights activist William Monroe Trotter.

Through this partnership, the city of Boston will sell off some of its 2,600 vacant lots for urban farming. Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit, will raise the capital necessary to convert the lots into farmable land. Then the Dudley land trust will take legal ownership and lease the land to the Urban Farming Institute. Harry Smith, director of the Dudley land trust, says, "We want to promote the community land trust model but don't want to get into the nitty-gritty of farming." In turn, the farmers will get long-term access to the land. Urban Farming Institute's Spence says, "We look to get land for 10 years because it's such an investment in soil that

you don't want to just do it for two years.”



The nonprofit Urban Farming Institute of Boston graduated seven farmers from its training program last year. Eight more are graduating this year. "Amassing land for our farm is a first priority," says Executive Director Patricia Spence, far right. Photo by Paul Dunn.

The spread of the land trust model

Many communities beyond Dudley have adopted their own community land trusts in recent decades. The majority of CLTs have been established since the 1990s, with most focused on affordable housing and 60 percent serving urban areas. A 2011 survey of 96 CLTs found that they host almost 10,000 units of housing. The Champlain Housing Trust based in Burlington, Vt. is the nation's largest CLT, with more than 2,000 units of rental apartments, single-family homes, and condominiums. Like Dudley Street, other CLTs are also implementing urban agriculture along with housing:

- **Durham, N.C.** Durham Community Land Trustees was formed in 1987 to clean up abandoned homes that were attracting crime and to increase homeownership. Today, they have 200 units of housing and a community garden.
- **Madison, Wis.** Founded in 1991, the Madison Area Community Land Trust has 68 homes. In 2001, they purchased the 31-acre Troy Gardens, on which they developed 30 units of mixed income housing, 10 acres of agriculture (including a CSA and community gardens), and 5 acres of restored prairie.
- **Albuquerque, N.M.** The Sawmill Community Land Trust developed 27 acres into "Arbolera de Vida," a whole neighborhood with 93 affordable ownership homes, three apartment buildings, a playground, a plaza, and community gardens.

CLTs for Detroit?

As compelling as the previous cases are, CLTs are still at small scale. Many of the previous examples are in areas where the real estate market has heated up, raising concerns about gentrification. But how might CLTs work in cities with vast amounts of vacant land and a depressed real estate market, such as Detroit?

In 2009, John Hantz, a wealthy money manager, proposed investing \$30 million to farm up to 10,000 acres in Detroit, which would have been the world's largest urban farm. As Hantz explained in *The Wall Street Journal*, Detroit “cannot create value until we create scarcity. Large-scale farming could begin to take land out of circulation in a positive way.” Hantz’s proposal was received with alarm by many of Detroit’s grassroots farming advocates. The city eventually sold 150 acres to Hantz in 2012 for about \$300 per lot. Malik Yakini, Executive Director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, likened the proposal to a “land grab” that would continue “a centurylong phenomenon of wealthy white men owning huge amounts of land and the majority of people being landless.”

Eric Holt-Giménez, Executive Director of Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy, views the Hantz project as “creating wealth by appreciating real estate rather than creating value through productive activities.” Indeed, Hantz’s initial proposal to grow vegetables and fruit was changed to a tree farm when it became clear that farming produce was not feasible as a commercial operation.

For Yakini and other opponents, the issue is not the use of the land. Their coalition, the Community Trust, urged the city to reject the Hantz proposal and instead “explore Community Land Trusts as a way to protect public lands.”

“It’s really about engaging community to decide together what they want on their land.”

This case illustrates the deeper challenge that community land trusts address. The issue is not just whether land is scarce and expensive or plentiful and cheap. It’s whether land is treated as a commodity or part of the commons. According to Holt-Giménez, “Land—rural or urban—is more than just land; it is the space where social, economic, and community decisions are made, and it is the place of neighborhood, culture, and livelihoods.”

Philadelphia’s land bank and CLTs

In Philadelphia the story of a group trying to hold onto land they had been farming for more than 50 years also highlights the clash between commoditization of land and community interests. It points to a potential solution—a land bank—for scaling up the implementation of CLTs. Philadelphia has a thriving urban agriculture movement and recently passed an urban agricultural ordinance.

The Central Club for Boys and Girls started gardening on vacant parcels of land in their neighborhood in the mid-20th century, eventually taking over an entire city block. That Central Club held no legal rights to the land became evident in 2005, when two of the parcels they were farming were sold by the city to recover back taxes.

In 2011, another two parcels were put up for sale. Central Club eventually won ownership of the land, but it required intensive legal support from the Garden Justice Legal Initiative of the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia. In 2011, a coalition of community, labor, and faith groups formed the Campaign to Take Back Vacant Land to enable more community control over the city’s 40,000 vacant parcels and prevent the challenges that Central Club faced. They proposed establishing a city land bank that could assemble and manage vacant properties and prepare them for transfer to local CLTs.

In January 2014, the Campaign and the Philly Land Bank Alliance won passage of a city ordinance establishing a land bank. The bank will be the single owner of the city’s vacant properties, with a transparent and equitable process for managing and selling city-owned vacant land. It will clear land titles of any back taxes and liens. Most importantly, four of the 11 land bank board members will represent communities, and the land bank must “weigh community benefit, and not just price, when deciding between potential buyers.” If successful, the land bank could be a significant new source of land for CLTs.

A powerful tool

Whether the goal is affordability when real estate prices are high or community control over development when land is cheap, the community land trust has shown itself to be a potent tool. Across the country, communities are using this form of ownership to make collective decisions about a common good—the land. In a way the CLT is a return to more traditional and indigenous ideas about land as commons—that it cannot be owned solely for individual benefit.

The model is continuing to evolve and adapt to new situations and uses. More CLTs are being used for holistic community development, and not just housing. There are CLTs that are now serving entire regions (such as statewide CLTs in Delaware and Rhode Island) and some that have been created by cities themselves, as in Chicago and Irvine, Calif. As CLTs diversify, each community will need to figure out how best to use this tool. As Dudley Street’s Harry Smith says, “the land trust doesn’t exist just to acquire and manage land. It’s really about engaging community to decide together what they want on their land.”



Penn Loh wrote this article for [Cities Are Now](#), the Winter 2015 issue of [YES! Magazine](#). Penn is a Lecturer and Director of Community Practice at Tufts Urban & Environmental Policy and Planning, where he coordinates the Practical Visionaries Workshop. He thanks Caitlin Hachmyer, whose 2013 master’s thesis on the role of land rights and the food movement was a primary resource for the cases in Boston, Detroit, and Philadelphia.



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