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Securing a Right to the City: Cooper Square and the

Community Land Trust (CLT) Movement

**Introduction**

Urban researches define gentrification as the process in which affluent or artistic individuals, usually White, move into low-income or previously disinvested neighborhoods of primarily people of color that are renovated and revitalized, making neighborhoods more appealing to developers and well-off people (Boyd, 2008; Krisel, 2015; Zuk et al., 2015). This transformation comes with an increase in housing prices, new businesses and developments, and the displacement of old residents. Although real estate developers, planners, and government officials make positive changes to low-income neighborhoods, such as environmentally greening them and adding shopping centers, better housing, healthy supermarkets, public transit, and more to make profit and allure newcomers, these developments have a negative effect on longtime residents. These drastic changes do not benefit old residents but rather take away their neighborhoods and homes, their sense of community, and the use-value they hold in their neighborhood, despite low-income areas previously looking unappealing to the eyes of developers and the wealthy.

I feel as though the sense of community and value many low-income residents have in their neighborhood is substantial and real estate developers, speculators, politicians, and landlords do take these factors into consideration. Developers, planners, and wealthier newcomers exclude poor long-time residents from redevelopment plans and from their neighborhood itself. From the destruction of longtime residents' small businesses to the appropriation of their public spaces, gentrification causes a deep sense of loss in many people. Affordable housing is a crucial element to reducing gentrification and preserving communities.

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) guarantee long term affordable housing as the case of Cooper Square demonstrates in Lower Manhattan, New York City, where the community's voices were heard. In this paper, I will highlight the grave impacts gentrification has on low-income and minority communities and a solution to this problem with the example of the CLT in Cooper Square. It is important to give consideration to these matters in order to guarantee a sustainable living for people who are continuously disregarded by neo-liberal practices and well-to-do individuals and corporations.

### **Literature Review**

Jason Hackworth (2002) defines gentrification as “the production of urban space for progressively more affluent users” (p. 815). This definition, as Hackworth explains, illustrates that gentrification is not usually instant or a “direct displacement of the working class from residential quarters” but a gradual process that begins with different people who add aesthetic moving into a neighborhood, such as artists, but are not necessarily affluent (2002). With these newcomers, aesthetic developments and renovations, and time, however, the neighborhood is transformed into an appealing and upscale place that is exclusive and no longer affordable. I feel

that this definition accurately encapsulates the ways gentrification can play out, whether it starts with real estate investors and developers investing in disinvested neighborhoods and luring artists with the intention of gentrifying it or with artists moving in looking for cheap housing without the intention of gentrifying the neighborhood, but eventually it becomes gentrified.

Some authors classify gentrification as “urban regeneration” or as an “emancipatory practice,” stressing a “cultural” influence (Caulfield, 1989; Montgomery, 2003). Caulfield (1989) explains that first-wave gentrifiers, who are usually a diverse and marginalized group of middle-class people, like gays, feminists, and bohemians, resettled from the suburbs to older cities because they “desire” a way out of the “blandness and standardization of the suburbs” (p. 622). These people are motivated by culture and “use-values,” precisely, spaces that allow for freedom of expression, deviations from social norms, subverting capitalism, political, economic, and social struggles, and “turning oppression into creation,” which are not found in the suburbs and “current-day city building” (Caulfield, 1989, pp. 622-623). Essentially, the motive for first-wave gentrification is a “resistance to domination” and moving into neighborhoods with character and interacting with different people is emancipating (Caulfield, 1989, p. 625). Caulfield (1989) argues that these gentrifiers are not the actual gentrifiers, that is, they are not the wealthy who move in with the intention to dominate and are “usually happy to live side-by-side with older residents and often acting as a bulwark against eradication of old neighborhoods” (p. 627). Rather, first-wave resettlers make way for developers and affluent people who use the old-city lifestyle for their capitalistic motives, or later-phase gentrification. For Caulfield (1989), first-wave gentrifiers are not to blame for the displacement of low-income residents, but are searching for “control over their lives” and end up being displaced as well due to “entrepreneurial interests” (p. 627).

Lees (2000) counters Caulfield's view on gentrification, saying that he does not consider the conflicting values of gentrifiers with longtime working class residents and immigrants of different cultural backgrounds. Lees also points out that the struggles over the "exchange relationship" during gentrification is always there, denoting that if "particular desires" of gentrifiers are executed in neighborhoods, that is because gentrifiers have economic, social, or political privileges and capital to make changes that longtime resident do not have (p. 394). She says, "...the rhetoric of the emancipatory city tends to conceal the brutal inequalities of fortune and economic circumstance that are produced through the process of gentrification" (Lees, 2000, p. 394).

Montgomery (2003) promotes "urban regeneration" for "declining urban areas" through the making of "cultural quarters," giving the example of the alluring Lower East Side (p. 294). The purpose of cultural quarters is to encourage a vibrant streetlife with an agreeable relationship between spaces and buildings, economic, social, and cultural activity with features like cinemas, gardens, and street markets, and meaningful spaces with history and culture. The argument that cultural quarters raise housing prices to further gentrify neighborhoods is "specious" to Montgomery because the intentions behind policy makers establishing cultural quarters earlier, like in the 1980s, are not always bad or known and their outcomes are not always controllable (2003, p. 294). Montgomery advances mixed-use developments to allow for self-sustaining growth with private and public features. He says in order to boost a city's economy, "There must be a ready supply or a potential supply of skilled, educated and creative people willing to set up in business for themselves," which is largely made up of "university graduates" who are "the best prospect for business creation in the creative industries" (2003, p. 299). Although the idea of cultural quarters sounds appealing, they evidently exclude longtime residents who are mostly

low-income and people of color. The emancipatory city and cultural quarter concept call for a certain group of people that are not deprived of financial and social resources like working class minorities in disinvested communities who do not have access to quality education.

Gentrifiers, politicians, planners, and developers have a habit of viewing pre-gentrified neighborhoods as unsanitary and dangerous, along with the people living in them who are habitually stereotyped as lazy, unclean, “uneducated,” or “destined to become single mothers,” even though longtime residents feel the opposite knowing they are hardworking and caring people at home and at work (Cahill, 2006, p. 337; T. Smith, 2002, p. 61). Caitlin Cahill examines the “geography of gentrification,” as Loretta Less suggested researchers do, in the Lower East Side, so that the connection of race and gentrification is better understood in disinvested communities (Cahill, 2006, p. 336; Lees, 2000). These areas are usually made up of tight-knit communities of color, such as the Lower East Side in the 1970s, which experienced a third wave gentrification in the 1980s and 1990s as it was seen as something to “clean up” (Cahill, 2007, p. 206). Cultural influences and events from immigrant communities, small businesses, and people’s homes were sabotaged and forgotten due to the ever-changing real estate market and desires of wealthier newcomers who are looking for new “trendy” places to reside (Cahill, 2006, 10-16, T. Smith, 2002, p. 58). Leaving many feeling powerless and disregarded with nowhere to go as their neighborhoods are no longer recognizable or affordable, the negative effects of gentrification are substantial. One woman from the Lower East Side says, “We never had a place of our own. To begin with it wasn’t our own. We don’t own it, we never own anything” (Cahill, 2007, p. 217). T. Smith, in her essay, says “I realize that women of color may never have a place to truly call our own” (2002, p. 65). Both these articles argue that low-income women of color feel insignificant and hopeless as the new people moving in take their homes and are hostile to

them because of their lower socioeconomic status. Do working class people and people of color not have any right to the city? Unfortunately, many longtime residents in gentrified neighborhoods stay and pay about 61% of their incomes for rent, as there are very limited options for affordable housing and many hold “place attachment” and do not want to lose “rich networks of social capital” (Cahill, 2007, p. 219). Cahill adds that this means neighborhoods should not merely be viewed as real estate commodities as people have deep relationships with their communities and gentrification causes instability and lack of security and control in their livelihoods.

George Lipsitz states, “...inner-city residents do not and cannot control the uses to which their neighborhoods are put by the rest of the city, nor can they secure increases in the *exchange value* of their homes” (2007, p. 11). Exchange-value is how the open market works. It is when commodities are exchanged to produce profit, such as when housing is rented or sold for high prices at the expense of low-income communities. The neighborhoods of many low-income people are seen as commodities and are assessed by their exchange value, or how much money they can accrue when revitalized. When the neighborhoods of low-income people are disinvested and then landlords and real estate developers see their potential, homeowners and renters do not reap the benefits of the exchange value received for their homes. This is due to discriminatory housing practices, corrupt landlords, and a lack of support from the city (Lipsitz, 2007). The improvements to neighborhoods that come with gentrification are meant for wealthy people to enjoy, not longtime residents who cannot afford the costs. Landlords, developers, and real estate speculators are the winners in this process. Use value, “turning ‘segregation into congregation’” is crucial as people help each other and form alliances, and is the means residents use to meet their everyday needs and goals of building a potent community (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 11). Use-value,

as Lipsitz explains, is a concept that conveys a community's formation of attachments to a place, which leads to community members helping each other with their everyday needs, producing a sense of solidarity and fulfillment. Use-value is a crucial aspect of neighborhoods of poor people and immigrants as they benefit greatly from social capital, which gives them security and allows them to maintain their culture. As spaces are seen as "investments that appreciate in value over time" instead of spaces where people can congregate, prosper, and have rights in their neighborhoods, gentrification becomes a never ending cycle that breaks communities and livelihoods apart (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 15). Lipsitz suggests that urban planners, designers, and architects should imagine and develop spaces differently than the "white spatial imaginary" which has taken over (2007, p. 15, 20). Communities should also have an active role in the decision-making process and plans of their neighborhoods as a step towards changing the prevailing view of spaces. CLTs provide a way to change this prevailing view.

Gentrification is a calculated phenomenon. Real estate developers, landlords, politicians, and city residents all play an active role in its occurrence. The potential of a disinvested neighborhood is seen by these actors who realize a gap in potential rent prices and current rent prices if they were to displace residents by evicting them, demolish and renovate spaces and properties, and redevelop the neighborhood, an occurrence called the *rent gap* (Stein, 2019). Samuel Stein states about gentrification, "It requires investors, developers, and landlords—the 'producers' of gentrification— to buy and sell land and buildings at ever higher costs. It also requires wealthier homebuyers, renters and shoppers—the 'consumers' of gentrification—to valorize areas they would have previously ignored" (2019, p. 43). When wealthy people can accumulate more money, poor people are dispossessed of their properties and possessions.

Hackworth and N. Smith (2001) contend that without the local government's intervention and willingness to compromise the regulations of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and zoning requirements, which sought to maintain affordable housing, to yield to the objectives of the private market and real estate developers seeking to gentrify neighborhoods, gentrification in now prominent New York City neighborhoods would not have escalated as it did in the 1990s. In the 1970s, the state also provided block grants and enterprise zones through federal programs. The local government's determination, programs, such as HOPE IV, and support for private investors to increase inner-city reinvestment in neighborhoods, like the Lower East Side, to reverse economic decline in the 1970s and the recession in the 1990s and boost the allure of a promising city, New York City, makes the state an active participant in the occurrence of gentrification. As Hackworth reiterates, the government has strayed away from Keynesian Economics which encourages lowering taxes and government spending on job benefits and education to grow consumer demand and employment rates.

In the case of the Lower East Side, like many other neighborhoods in New York City, its potential to be a valuable area was seen and opportunities were taken at the cost of residents already living there. The Lower East Side was rebranded as "The East Village" by real estate and cultural actors in the 1990s who wanted to change its image and boost its value, which worked (N. Smith & Defilippis, 1999, p. 648). With its new and approved name and the renovation of Tompkins Square Park in 1991 with the aim of increasing adjacent housing prices, gentrification was bound to happen, just like when Prospect Park was renovated in Brooklyn, resulting in Park Slope's gentrification (Gould & Lewis, 2017; N. Smith & Defilippis, 1999). Stein points to the fact that parks are constructed or fixed because they "result in increased property values for the surrounding areas, which in turn deliver higher property tax revenues," and therefore, "the



benefit of the park is not measured by its use and enjoyment, but by its value as a real estate amenity” (2019, p. 66). This is a clear example of favoring exchange value over use value.

Before Tompkins Square Park was completely renovated, the City evicted homeless people from it and other spaces to renovate them with public funds, making the park “a much sanitized, high surveillance space,” resulting in “neighborhood rebirth” (N. Smith & Defilippis, 1999, p. 640). Additionally, landlords who saw the potential of the area would increase rent for commercial spaces which already lured many artists who needed them for galleries, when they were cheap, as there was no rent control in the City to regulate rent increases (N. Smith & Defilippis, 1999). Another unfortunate undertaking by the City and real estate actors is the confiscation of public amenities and lots, such as gardens, for private development to further accumulate profits from upscale housing and establishments (N. Smith & Defilippis, 1999). Essentially, lower prices for spaces due to the economic recession post-1989, landlords renting spaces cheaply, real estate actors demolishing and renovating spaces, the privatization of public spaces, and the City not using tax delinquent properties for the public good, which lead to property owners reinvesting in them, all led to gentrification (N. Smith & Defilippis, 1999). Community Land Trusts, on the other hand, take on a different approach to viewing neighborhoods, as they value *all* people’s needs by guaranteeing affordable housing and preserving communities for a long time to come.

### **Community Land Trusts (CLTs)**

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are private, non-profit organizations that secure land in a specific area and grant people residency on the land in rented or owned affordable housing,

ensuring affordable housing long-term (Angotti, 2015).<sup>1</sup> The community-based trusts own the acquired land legally and lease it to non-profit housing corporations which rent to lower-income tenants or sole owners. 99-year renewable lease agreements with restrictions in place keep owners and renters from selling to private developers, gaining individual ownership of the land, or benefitting greatly from equity gains (Angotti, 2015; Greenstein and Sungu-Eryilmaz, 2007). CLTs also work to ensure affordable commercial spaces for the benefit of low-income communities who can own and manage their commercial real estate rather than careless landlords or investment companies, like the community-led trusts in Atlanta and Philadelphia (Ionescu, 2022). Community Land Trusts are unique and significant as community leaders, public officials, and housing advocates manage them, a group that usually has no say in the housing market (Angotti, 2015). Instead of viewing housing as just a commodity, CLTs support the idea of viewing housing as a verb, in a collective sense, as Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern state, “Thus as verb, housing ideology and struggle echo through the co-operative and shared ownership movement, particularly in the discourse of economic recovery post-financial crisis” (2016b, p. 2). As CLTs came about due to community struggles and activism against capitalist practices and gains, disadvantaged groups and housing advocates started to view housing not as a product used for its exchange value, but rather used for its use value, which is crucial in overcoming gentrification and understanding its impacts (Engelsman et al., 2016c; Angotti, 2015). Community empowerment, political, social, and economic struggles, self-governance, and long term affordability for future residents are aspects of the use value present in neighborhoods (Engelsman et al., 2016c).

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<sup>1</sup> Non-residential CLTs also exist to benefit low-income communities with community-led businesses and recreational spaces and are becoming more common in cities, see Abello (2022).

There are three important elements that make CLTs pivotal and allow them to thrive: the community, land, and trust elements. The community element comes about from historic struggles, prominently the Civil Rights Movement, that brought people in communities together to fight for their rights to resources, specifically land, and democratic jurisdiction over neighborhood goods (Engelsman et al., 2016c; Engelsman et al., 2016a). Self-help, participation, and cooperation are features of the community element which increase the effectiveness of CLTs, rather than merely the same geographic area or demographics. Tom Angotti, an emeritus professor at Hunter College and an avid contributor to the literature on community land trusts, illustrates that social justice causes and political issues have brought about solidarity in communities and shared objectives that do not merely focus on capital gains, which is what makes CLTs truly effective (Angotti, 2015; Greenstein and Sungu-Eryilmaz, 2007). Angotti states, “Broad community support and vigilance is the only guarantee that the trustees will not sell out” (2015, p. 11). *Community* is important because without this greater cause for affordable housing, the community land trust is just a legal mechanism that would be motivated by private and capital interests (Angotti, 2007). Fundamentally, CLTs are inspired by both reformists and radicals who demand to have their needs and concerns heard, portraying how use value brings people together to fight for their needs and rights.

The land element draws upon the CLTs ownership of land that makes affordability, sustainability, and allocation possible due to subsidies being used with the adherence to rules and regulations regarding the purchasing, renting, and selling of the land, which ultimately guarantees security (Engelsman et al., 2016c, a). Community land is not land up for sale in the real estate markets; It is land that holds historical significance as disadvantaged groups had their land dispossessed by private and state interests that saw working-class occupied land as

unsanitary, which was the case in Cooper Square (Angotti, 2015; Le Rouzic, 2020). However, pre-capitalist societies viewed land as a vital part of life, not governed by private institutions, which CLTs today support (Angotti, 2015). The land aspect also includes expansion, as the CLT wants to grow and achieve revolutionary aims for the social welfare of communities who are not able to afford homes on the open market.

The trust element is based on the importance and principles people hold within their land; this is where the real value lies (Engelsman et al., 2016c). Value is not held in the commoditization of the land, but in the use of the land as a place for people's voices and efforts to be demonstrated in the social, economic, and physical spheres of life (Engelsman et al., 2016c, a). This portrays a rejection of capitalism and exchange value when viewing housing and land. Participants in the CLT are trusted and also obligated to keep homes they purchase from being used as a means of profit due to the legal rules and regulations that come with CLT ground leases, which do not allow residents to benefit from a potential increase in land prices, maintaining affordability and local community jurisdiction (Engelsman et al., 2016c). The community-owned subsidies used in CLTs remain there when the homes are sold, keeping the land in the ownership of the CLT (Engelsman et al., 2016c; Greenstein and Yesim Sungu-Eryilmaz, 2007). Therefore, CLTs do not allow equity gains like the standard real estate markets do. This avoids gentrification and continuous seclusion (Engelsman et al., 2016c; Greenstein and Yesim Sungu-Eryilmaz, 2007). Thus, self-gain is relinquished in the CLT process for the greater good and stewardship in the community.

What makes CLTs special? Many factors make CLTs special, from their historical motivations, like racial and social justice, to their set of objectives, to their actual success in decreasing gentrification and benefiting residents, contrary to the belief that home ownership is

the best and only means of increasing financial wellness. One important benefit of CLTs is not making people spend over 30% of their incomes for housing on the open market because homes are below market prices (Angotti, 2015). CLTs use public funds in ways that many other corporations that benefit the public do not, the main difference being CLTs' goal to keep housing affordable forever and support community efforts and values. While CLTs keep low-income tenants and homeowners from gaining as much equity if they were to resell their homes on the open market with no restrictions, leading people to believe they are putting low-income people at a disadvantage, this is not the case. The goal of CLTs is to fight the ongoing problem of inequity in the U.S. and keep communities together, uplifting them and securing their rights to the city, and also the problem of gentrification (Angotti, 2015). By having a system that includes both renting and home ownership, CLTs preserve community, something priceless not guaranteed in homeownership which in turn creates organizations of people that continue to challenge and overcome issues related to housing and gentrification (Angotti, 2015).

Additionally, the makeup of the committee in a CLT is unlike other non-profit housing co-ops to ensure fairness, as only one-third of the board of directors are residents whose role are to speak for the needs of leaseholders, one-third is elected by CLT members who are not leaseholders, and the remaining third are people, usually local government representatives, private lenders, or different community-focused groups (Angotti, 2015; Engelsman et al., 2016b). This composition of members is to ensure there is attention given to the needs of existing residents and potential future residents (Engesman et al., 2016b). For instance, being that only one-third of the members are residents, the whole committee is significantly less likely to vote to turn into a private firm and give in to the tempting high prices for their land, which “tens of thousands of limited equity housing coop members in New York City did in the last two

decades” (Angotti, 2015, p. 12). The most unique and substantial feature of CLTs is the unity among people, their striving to gain social and political rights, and their organizing as a radical movement to approach housing in a non-commercial way, aspects that the “average private cooperative, homeowners association, or charitable non-profit” do not have (Angotti, 2015, p. 13; Engelsman et al., 2016b).

Unlike other affordable housing enterprises and strategies, CLTs have shown to guarantee affordable housing while benefiting and protecting residents in many ways. For example, CLTs have helped homeowners prevent foreclosures and predatory lending, practices that exacerbate gentrification. The Dudley Street neighborhood in Boston is a great example of a neighborhood that was positively affected by CLTs as it was enduring havoc in the 1950s with arson, destruction, and racist and negligent government policies (Sklar, 2008). Rather than allowing city planners and developers control how the community’s vacant land is used, which would have gone to the wealthy with private and expensive developments, the residents formed the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), an organization that established a restorative community land trust. Because of the long term lease agreements and subsidies in CLTs and their guarantee to provide affordable housing for future homeowners, along with financial assistance and lower taxes from the government, foreclosures are extremely rare (Sklar, 2008). Sklar notes, “There were 713 foreclosures in the city of Boston in the first seven months of 2008, but none in the Dudley land trust” (2008). This is also the case with Cooper Square in the Lower East Side, a neighborhood that once endured many foreclosures (Mironova, 2014).

### **Cooper Square CLT: The Successful Community Struggle**

The Cooper Square CLT symbolizes a significant struggle in New York City for people of color who are low-income: their right to the city (Le Rouzic, 2020). The Lower East Side (LES) in Manhattan was home to mixed-income immigrants, poor people, and people of color from the early 19th century to mid- to late twentieth century, where people held strong community ties (Le Rouzic, 2020). The documentary *Rabble Rousers* by Kelly Anderson and Ryan Joseph highlights the early ethnic community on the Lower East Side and how Cooper Square came to be. Francis Goldin, the lead organizer of the Cooper Square movement, says about LES, “It was amazing to be in a community of mixed ethnic people. Black, white, Hispanic, Jewish, Italian, Ukrainian—you name it...” (Anderson & Joseph, 2023). The whole neighborhood was full of the life and culture of working class people who would help each other despite language barriers, different ethnic backgrounds, or conflicting political views. Poor writers and people pursuing careers in arts, culture, and entertainment occupied the LES, adding to its vibrancy. Hispanics also had a large presence in the area as there were many Hispanic bodegas and businesses. Throughout the documentary, Goldin reiterates how strong-willed she and the LES residents were when it came to protecting their community.

The documentary shows the LES’ history of community organizing, such as the tenant movement, the communist party, which Goldin was a part of, the socialist party, and the International Ladies Garment Worker Union. Accordingly, there were many movements against greedy landlords, maintaining rent control, and obtaining equitable housing. If marshalls forcefully evicted families out of their apartments, other LES residents would also use physical force to get families back in their homes. Even though housing conditions were not the best, Cooper Square tenants’ true home was with their community. Affordable housing is what initiated the Cooper Square movement, but Cooper Square’s sense of culture and togetherness is

what made residents feel truly fortunate and content, creating a strong community. The social capital and use-value gained from living in the LES was significant and residents would not let anyone take that away.

Unfortunately, disinvestment and then the displacement of residents occurred in the 60s and 70s, causing residents to rightfully protest and demand more deliberation be given to them and their neighborhood (Angotti, 2007; Cahill, 2006). The roots of the Cooper Square Community Land Trust officially began earlier, on March 17, 1959, when the Cooper Square Committee (CSC) united to protest the plan of Robert Moses, an infamous and powerful urban planner, which called for leveling 12 blocks in the LES to develop middle-income housing using eminent domain, government acquisition of private property for public use (Angotti, 2007; Engelsman et al., 2016b; Thabit, 2005). This urban renewal and slum clearance project would have destroyed almost every residential building from 9th Street to Delancey Street and from 2nd Avenue to the Bowery, displacing “2,400 tenants, 450 furnished room occupants, and 4,000 beds used by homeless men and over 500 businesses” (Cooper Square Community, 1961, p. 1). A survey showed 93% of residents would not have been able to afford the new housing put forward and the proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway would have eliminated prominent areas existing in Manhattan today (Anderson & Joseph, 2023). Robert Moses did not care for the well-being of working class individuals, but rather viewed them as an obstacle to achieving his goals. He wanted to improve arterial roads and develop expensive housing as he did with the Cross Bronx Expressway which displaced over 30,000 low-income residents who were not compensated. Cooper Square, an area between the civic center and the 14th Street Commercial District, was an appealing choice for urban renewal since people working on Wall Street would have easy access to their jobs from there.



Frances Goldin was not going to stand for a damaging urban renewal proposal that was not for the benefit of longtime residents but would displace them. Valerio Orselli, a former director of the Cooper Square Committee, learned urban renewal meant “urban removal” and that the goal was to “replace poor people with a higher economic class of people,” as did other residents (Anderson & Joseph, 2023). Goldin and additional Cooper Square residents realized they could not just flat out refuse urban renewal plans because the City would not take that demand seriously, so they had to propose alternative plans that tenants and politicians would appreciate. They began to view their neighborhood as land that they had a right to and envisioned prospective features it should have. Cooper Square residents came together to establish the Cooper Square Community Development Committee (now the CSC) and Businessmen’s Association to make plans for the future of their community. A notable member of the CSC was Urban (and Community) Planner Walter Thabit who added expertise and credibility to the Cooper Square movement. The CSC would only accumulate one dollar annually and it still does from members, but when Thabit joined, the City began funding what became the official organization of Cooper Square.

Goldin and others including Thelma Burdick, Esther Rand, Staughton Lynd, Jane Jacobs, and Walter Thabit, proposed the Alternate Plan in July 1961 in which the CSC sought to be “the beneficiaries and not the victims of urban renewal,” demanding permanent affordable housing to benefit the inhabitants (Angotti, 2005; Thabit, 2005). This plan took a year to complete after over 100 intense CSC meetings. Even though Thabit was the actual urban planner of the group, CSC members did not let his expertise override or belittle their suggestions and approach to planning their community (Engelsman et al., 2016c). The documentary shows how CSC members pursued a vacant parking lot on Houston Street, between 2nd avenue and the Bowery, which was initially

part of the urban renewal project, for public housing. Their idea was to build new housing on that spacious lot, let people from adjacent streets in older tenements move into the new housing, and then demolish the older buildings people moved out of and build newer and still affordable housing. After all the hard work and dedication into making the Alternate Plan and a resident biking to deliver it to important offices, from the City officials, people and organizations, and the press who finally read it, there was initially no support or response from City officials, the media, or the planning commission (Thabit, 2005).

For the CSC to be taken seriously and succeed, the whole community had to get involved and voice their concerns and push for reform in their neighborhood. In this regard, Goldin and other key members of the CSC persuaded discouraged Cooper Square residents to attend important church meetings and City Planning Commission meetings and demonstrations with different signs, some written in Spanish, and shirts saying “Save Our Homes.” If residents did not show up, Goldin says she and the rest of the CSC would have knocked on everyone’s doors and held a meeting in the lobby of their building. Goldin inspired many people to join Cooper Square's cause, such as Willie Arroyo, who says he got involved because Goldin “touched” him with her passion for social justice (Arroyo, Willie. Personal interview. 28 April 2023).

Throughout this process, the CSC executed many radical actions, including picket-lines, rent strikes, sleep-ins, and demonstrations, resulting in arrests of Cooper Square activists as they would do whatever it took to get the “professionals” to listen (Engelsman et al., 2016b, p. 14). They glued the lock of the City office door so employees were not able to get in, forcing workers to remove the door, piled their trash in front of the City office, and placed dead rodents in front of City Hall. This is how the Cooper Square movement received lots of press and attention. The Cooper Square community took matters into their own hands as their neighborhood was

“devastated” with arson and disinvestment, and they acquired vacant lots and squatted buildings to fix them (Engelsman et al., 2016c, p. 606).

When Robert Moses offered the vacant lot on Houston Street, which was the foundation of the Alternate Plan, to Louis DeSalvio, an assemblyman representing the LES, and his Catholic organization, the San Gennaro Association, to build middle-income housing instead of the CSC’s proposed public housing in 1965, Cooper Square residents were furious (Anderson & Joseph, 2023). In exchange for giving DeSalvio the land, Moses wanted DeSalvio’s support for the expressway he planned to build. DeSalvio agreed even though he initially publicly opposed Moses’ plan, making him a sell out. In late 1969, Goldin and other CSC members went to the Board of Estimate every month and insisted that they return their block. At one meeting, Don Elliot, the chairman of the NYC Planning Commission, tried to get Goldin to sit down after she reiterated the CSC’s demands, but she would not budge. When she was asked to leave and refused, police officers forcibly arrested her as she held on to the lectern stand and microphone which tumbled while supporters tried to protect her. After Goldin was taken into custody, a community organizer named Ernesto Martinez stood up in favor of giving the land back to Cooper Square, voicing his support for their cause, which resulted in his arrest and the arrest of eight Cooper Square advocates who came to his defense. Supporters of Cooper Square’s Alternate Plan did not voluntarily leave until their land was retrieved. After witnessing all the commotion and objections, another man who was called to speak but did not know anything about the CSC’s mission, said “I yield to Cooper Square” as he saw their commitment (Anderson & Joseph, 2023). By the beginning of the new year, in 1970, their land was in their possession again. Arroyo, who joined the CSC in 1974, jokes “Sometimes when we used to go down to City Hall with Frances Goldin, our bark was bigger than our bite, but they thought we had tremendous

power” (Person interview. 28 April 2023). He adds, “which we did, the people do have the power, but it has to be used in the right way.” Arroyo explains how dedication, advocacy, and the right motives helped the CSC achieve their goals even if they could not actually do all the actions they said they would while at City Hall.

On February 13, 1970, Urban Planner Walter Thabit’s Early Action Plan, constructed from the Alternate Plan, was approved by the Board of Estimate, which would develop more than 300 apartments of affordable public housing, middle-income housing, an artists’ residence, and commercial and community areas in Cooper Square (Dentel-Post, 2007; Richards, 2015). The Alternate Plan was a revised plan that took into consideration many income levels, accommodated the elderly, modified the heights of buildings, and kept perishable buildings intact, to allow as much integration as possible while adhering to the views of critics and other bodies, which is how Walter Thabit and the working community got support from groups like the Citizen’s Housing and Planning Council to make their plans reality (Reaven, 2020). Although it was difficult to gain this approval, the struggle still did not end there as there were many delays, specifically the City’s embargo on new government-funded housing plans because of the fiscal crisis (Angotti, 2007; Dentel-Post, 2007; Mironova, 2014). Richard Nixon, in the late 1960s, cut many programs aimed at reducing poverty and increasing public housing. So, even though the City obtained properties to carry out the plan, Nixon’s moratorium on public housing in 1973 prohibited them from using federal subsidies, leading to the CSC relying on state funding. However, the City was nearly bankrupt and underwent planned shrinkage, a policy under President Nixon and Mayor John Lindsay. Under this policy, the NYC-Rand Institute cut back imperative firefighting services in the 1970s, such as fire-protection programs and firefighting units, targeting poor neighborhoods and people of color (Wallace & Wallace, 2011).

The planned shrinkage policy discharged 25% of the fire control units and police officers in old neighborhoods with overcrowded apartments where fires are more likely to occur and amplify. Additionally, the Nixon Administration administered the Benign Neglect policy, which ignored poor communities of color instead of acknowledging a concern about fires and providing them with needed resources for fire safety (Wallace & Wallace, 2011). This policy exacerbated fires in low-income neighborhoods, leading to more than 50% of housing loss due to insufficient responses to fires, along with landlords not maintaining buildings and abandoning them. This, in turn, left tenants without housing. Low-income neighborhoods were neglected and became unsanitary. As fires made poor communities more vulnerable and unstable, there was a loss of community control and a lack of healthy youth socialization, trust in the government, and resilience, leading to youth violence, increased crime, excessive drug use, arson and chronic stress. Wallace (2001) emphasizes that New York City policymakers could have prevented residential fires and their grave impacts if they maintained residential stability in neighborhoods. She says that low-income people often lived in overcrowded public housing that got worse as fires increased and destroyed more homes and the City tore down more buildings than what the City was building for people. Over 30,000 apartments were lost in a year (Anderson & Joseph, 2023). In 1978, Ed Koch was elected mayor of New York and he did not help Cooper Square's cause either. Since the City owned all the abandoned buildings, Koch's policy was to offer the vacant buildings and land to developers who were waiting for land values to increase.

In the 1980s, gentrification was prevalent in the Lower East Side because students and artists needed affordable housing, so art galleries took the place of small businesses. By the 1990s, however, art galleries and longtime small and family businesses, like restaurants, could not persevere due to higher rents as a result of the revival of the real estate market, increasing

gentrification. The intentions of the Cooper Square residents were to keep congregation and unity strong while safeguarding their community from private interests and real estate speculation. In 1984, the first affordable Cooper Square apartments were built in dedication to Thelma Burdick using project-based Section 8 subsidies (Angotti, 2007; Dentel-Post, 2007). Still, the entire plan was not implemented. The Cooper Square community prevailed over many unfavorable proposals and programs, such as the proposed demolition of vacant buildings in 1982, and the Tenant Interim Lease (TIL) program that permitted tenants to institute limited-equity cooperatives in their buildings but did not guarantee long-term affordability (many tenants could not afford to pay a down payment and TIL did not fully pay for the renovation of a building). They also denied the cross subsidy plan in 1984 that would allow vacant buildings to go to private developers while also funding some low-income housing renovations (Angotti, 2008; Engelsman et al., 2016a; Mironova, 2014). The goal of the cross subsidy plan was to enter new markets to increase revenue from selling market-rate housing, which the Cooper Square community did not support. TIL buildings do not have the same resale restrictions as CLT and are not reliable (Angotti, 2007). Many buildings have not been able to get out of the TIL program after one or two decades as there is mismanagement, a lack of accountability, limited reserves, and dishonest members, deceiving many residents and leaving them without proper housing (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023).

Cooper Square residents continued to demonstrate and refuse to give up their land, but they needed funding. That is when they shifted their objective from creating public housing to establishing affordable housing for their community. Over the course of seven years consisting of many meetings, the CSC revised their Alternate Plan again which had to include luxury housing for it to be accepted. Their revised plan with the New York City Department of Housing

Preservation and Development (HPD) in 1986 compromised on their initial demands, letting the City sell two vacant lots of the north and south sides of Houston street to developers who planned to build market-rate housing. In return, the CSC would have 20 to 25% low-income housing on those lots and funding to rehabilitate the old law tenements Cooper Square residents were living in with three-piece bathrooms, hardwood floors, and modern kitchens (Anderson & Joseph, 2023; Thabit, 2005).

Not only did the Cooper Square residents work extremely hard to achieve affordable housing units, they also set out goals to create jobs and a cultural district, along with nearby food production and green spaces (Engelsman et al., 2016c). Marty Berger, the Committee's lawyer, gave them the idea of a community land trust for permanent affordability. After years of studying different housing models, the CSC established the Cooper Square CLT in 1994 and the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association (MHA) was initiated in 1991, which is supervised by the CLT, and as opposed to the TIL, it is a "Community Management-like" program (Angotti, 2007; Thabit, 2005, p. 35). The Cooper Square CLT board is made up of about 15 members, including a couple residents and people who are passionate about its cause, such as community residents or housing advocates, like Tom Angotti (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). Since the CLT owns the right to the land, it prevents wealthy developers from using eminent domain or other policies to take it away. Both Housing Development Finance Corporation (HDFC) coops and CLTs fall under the Article XI Tax Incentive which lowers the amount of property taxes owed to the City or gives complete exemption of taxes for affordable housing (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). But, CLTs differ from Mitchell-Lama cooperatives and HDFC cooperatives as CLTs are not allowed to be sold on the open market like HDFC coops and they are not only temporarily affordable like Mitchell-Lama coops due to their strict formula.

The MHA is a cooperative and the owner of the Cooper Square buildings, made up of two-thirds tenants and one-third CLT members, people who vowed to never sell the buildings for profit. The MHA takes care of maintenance, bookkeeping, budgeting, and other technical responsibilities (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). The land and property are separately owned—the land is owned by the Cooper Square CLT and the housing is run by the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association (CSMHA) (Engelsman et al., 2016c). Since the CLT owns the land, the MHA is not able to sell the buildings if they wished to anyway. To become a member of the MHA in 2013, tenants had to pay \$250 dollars for a share and accept the resale restrictions of the trust (Engelsman et al., 2016c). \$250 is what the tenants will get back if they move out of their building. Now, the cost is around \$1500-\$1800 to become a shareholder in the MHA because of the increase of living expenses over the years, which is still extremely affordable (Arroyo, Willie. Personal interview. 28 April 2023). Arroyo, who is a shareholder, says, “For 18 years—I’m almost embarrassed to say this—my rent was \$55 a month through HPD” and he currently pays around \$600 for rent while other people in New York City pay over \$3000 for the same size apartment. Every year, the maintenance fees increase by a small percentage, around two to three percent, because the law requires it (Arroyo, Willie. Personal interview. 28 April 2023). Having two board structures ensures that malicious activities will not be overlooked. Even though the Cooper Square CLT provides people with secure housing, at times, shareholders may try to illegally sublet their apartments or sell their shares against the rules of the trust, which the boards are aware of and take measures to stop it (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023; Arroyo, Willie. Personal interview. 28 April 2023). As one of the building captains of his building who values his and other tenants’ safety, Arroyo encountered someone who was not a legal resident in the CLT before, so this issue worries him a bit. A tenant



is able to sublease their apartment for a time period, but they need to let the MHA know before doing so (Arroyo, Willie. Personal interview. 28 April 2023).

The election of David Dinkins, the first African American mayor and the fifth mayor the CSC encountered, made the Cooper Square CLT and MHA possible as he strongly supported community jurisdiction over land (Angotti, 2007). Dinkins signed a Memorandum of Understanding in October 1990 transferring city-owned buildings to MHA and CLT ownership for one dollar each. He devoted \$32.8 million for Cooper Square's revitalization, costing about \$50,000 for each apartment and taking about 12 years to complete. Half the buildings have a storefront business so the commercial income made from the businesses goes towards the maintenance of all the buildings. The commercial spaces under the Cooper Square CLT makes it possible for small businesses to exist and thrive because of the low rents as opposed to other commercial spaces in gentrified neighborhoods (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). It is vital that the Cooper Square CLT has many buildings to achieve economies of scale as it makes the trust more secure with a large reserve fund that can be used to fix any issue occurring in one of the buildings without draining the reserves (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). The CLT now owns 23 buildings with over 350 apartments with 21 of those buildings and 328 low-income apartments renting to people who make 50% less than the median income. Another important aspect that made the CLT possible was free and very cheap land that was readily accessible (Angotti, 2007). The CSC also offers other programs like, "tenant counseling and social service referrals, the Senior Health, Advocacy and Recreation Program (SHARP), and a Streetscape Project on East 4th Street" (Mironova, 2014). Most original tenants of the Cooper Square CLT still live there either alone or with their children, who usually acquire their apartments as adults, and feel there is no reason to move out as they feel secure and comfortable

(Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023; Arroyo, Willie. Personal interview. 28 April 2023). The Cooper Square CLT spends money mindfully and has sufficient reserves for repairs and maintenance (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). One flaw with the buildings in the MHA is that they do not have an elevator and many of the residents are old and struggle walking up the stairs, so some may want to relocate because of this, but the benefits of the CLT outweigh this flaw and the MHA board is aware of this and hopes to plan their future projects better for tenants (Arroyo, Willie. Personal interview 28 April 2023; Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023).

Tom Angotti states Cooper Square is an example of community-based planning which “proves that gentrification can be beat if it’s confronted before it starts” (2005). CLTs, such as the Cooper Square CLT, have indeed shown and have been proven to protect low-income residents from gentrification (Choi et al., 2017). As one resident of Cooper Square said, “gentrification takes an insidious form,” so the CLT protects the whole community from residents who might sell their property to more affluent people (Engelsman et al., 2016b, p. 11). Even though the Lower East Side has gentrified, “the Cooper Square units are undoubtedly among the lowest cost housing in what is now a partially gentrifying neighborhood” (Angotti, 2007, p. 7). People pay below 25% of the Area Median Income on housing (Angotti, 2007). The coveted land in the Lower East Side is protected indefinitely for the betterment of the CLT members (Lartey, 2015). Frances Goldin does not regret having an arrest record as Allison Richards states in her interview with her because the whole plan was finally achieved in 2008 with a 53-unit apartment building that offers services for the diverse residents, senior housing, and the Cooper Square Urban Renewal Area (2015). The Cooper Square CLT is currently acquiring two more buildings, not as part of the MHA but rent regulated (Angotti, Tom. Manhattan CLA Town Hall. 25 January

2023). Goldin reiterates that having “troops” and not just organizers was an essential aspect of Cooper Square’s success, as they took risks and remained dedicated (Richard, 2015; Zapol, 2014, p. 13). Arroyo, a retiree of the Board of Education, says he can afford living in a city he would never leave, telling people, “It’s going to take The National Guard to get me out of here” and if it were not for Cooper Square’s CLT, he would not be able to (Personal interview. 28 April 2023). The Cooper Square residents secured their right to the city, a right usually left for the more affluent.

### **Moving Forward: Problems & Proposals**

Today, there are many people advocating for CLTs in New York City neighborhoods, as only the Cooper Square CLT is fully established. The de Blasio administration and the City Council have made efforts to expand the CLT movement. Enterprise was tapped to distribute funds from a bond settlement with the state attorney general for CLTs (Savitch-Lew, 2018). Advocates support taking land off the speculative market to slow gentrification and preserve communities (Savitch-Lew, 2018). As the Cooper Square CLT wants to expand, evidently, however, it is not easy as funds, land, and strong community support are needed, which are all scarce these days (Mironova, 2019; Savitch-Lew, 2018; Williams, 2019a). So, people are calling for special government funding focused on affordable housing, raising taxes on high-end apartments and tax exemption for CLTs (Savitch-Lew, 2018). There is also the fear that CLTs are not enough to fix the housing problems for low-income people, that they have lost their foundational motives, and that they are not working enough with other nonprofit sectors to secure housing while also keeping the “community” element strong in CLTs (Savitch-Lew, 2018; Williams, 2019a).

I gather that the most important step in preserving CLTs and establishing more is persistent community efforts and alliances between different non-profit organizations to tackle the rising problem of gentrification. Olivia Williams, a researcher in equity housing cooperatives, argues that external funding and excessively strict requirements from funders have made CLTs more and more professionalized and caused them to stray away from community enhancement (Williams, 2019a). Further, to obtain the funding they need from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), CLTs have to keep acquiring land and end up focusing on housing development instead of community development (Williams, 2019b). Thus, to avoid this, CLTs can work cooperatively with other NGOs, like food cooperatives, to secure land for the betterment of the community so that land is community-financed with sincere motives and CLT funders can work to benefit communities by bringing in community organizers and investors, as well as being more lenient with stipulations (Williams, 2019a, b). Advocacy, cooperation, and assembly are key features needed to make CLTs work to acquire policies that assist low-income people with paying rent, rent control, and tax breaks, so that CLTs can be further maintained and supported (Mironova, 2019; Williams, 2019a).

Alex Lee, a housing organizer who joined the the CSC seven years ago as the Weatherization Project Coordinator says the “only way a CLT is going to thrive and survive in this very Capitalistic market of sorts,” which he clarifies he is not against, is if there are “collective roles, people looking out for one another, and healthy boards that both run the CLT and the management entity that oversees the 21 or so buildings” so that it also may expand (Personal interview. 24 March 2023). People might argue that CLTs do not produce tax revenue for the City, but Lee says he wonders where half of the tax revenue is going anyway as many commercial and residential buildings are tax burdened and many people are homeless or

struggling. He says the most important elements a CLT should have to succeed are responsibility, a healthy board, transparency, people thinking collectively, people who have connections to elected city and state officials and attorneys and knowledge of financial practices, a system of checks and balances so people do not take advantage of the trust, and a cluster of buildings for economies of scale, which boils down to strong leadership, structure, and accountability. He also adds that “once people stop thinking collectively and one person is running the show—probably not going to be the best outcome” (Personal interview. 24 March 2023). Arroyo also says that the way to keep CLTs affordable in perpetuity is to acquire more buildings, for example, if one building needs a new boiler or roof, all 22 buildings would pool their funds to help the building that needs it, alleviating financial burdens (Personal interview. 28 April 2023). Also, low-income tenants may be eligible for subsidies which would further help with lowering the costs of improvements or additions to buildings (Lee, Alex. Personal Interview. 24 March 2023). Therefore, the professionalization of CLTs will not reap beneficial results. It is crucial to keep communities engaged and educated about CLTs if they are to be sustained with the right intentions. Recent city funding has gone to community engagement and education efforts (Spivack, 2019; Williams, 2019a).

The New York City Community Land Initiative (NYCCLI), a union of affordable housing organizations that promote CLTs, and other advocates and politicians have proposed that NYC abolish its tax lien sale, which allows properties that have unpaid debt to be taken by the city and sold to buyers in the form of liens (the legal right to sell someone’s property to a buyer to collect the amount of money owed). Buyers of liens are also able to increase fees and interest and foreclose on the properties if owners don’t pay within a certain time frame. Although this policy is established to encourage homeowners to pay their taxes and utility bills, it has harmful

effects on communities. The NYCCLI states, “But the practice of selling municipal debt to a private, investor-backed trust fuels speculation and displacement in Black and brown neighborhoods, and siphons wealth from communities already disproportionately harmed by historic inequities like redlining and disinvestment” (2020, p. 2). The tax lien sale has targeted communities of color disproportionately and caused them to endure higher debts and pressures to sell their homes (Brand, 2022; NYCCLI, 2020). Supporters of abolishing the sale propose that these properties and vacant lots, which would otherwise be foreclosed and sold to the private market, instead be transferred to CLTs where the owner has more affordable housing options and follows the CLTs’ guidelines (NYCCLI, 2020).

As it is already, many owners do not pay what they owe with the tax lien sale in place and landlords end up benefiting from increased market prices while not maintaining their buildings (NYCCLI, 2020). A similar approach as *In rem* foreclosure, which is when properties are sold or transferred to owners, such as nonprofit organizations, who take care of the debts and renovate properties for affordable housing, it is a more sustainable way of creating better housing for low-income people because CLTs can acquire ownership of foreclosed properties (NYCCLI, 2020; TAKEROOT JUSTICE, 2021). The City can modify their current tax system by increasing taxes on vacant land (something the previous mayor, Bill de Blasio, proposed) to push owners to sell their unused lots in order to develop affordable housing and the City can establish a land bank (Mironova, 2014; NYCCLI, 2020). If the owner does not agree to give their property to a CLT, they do still face foreclosure, but instead, the City would be managing the house rather than a private trust or buyer (Brand, 2022; TAKEROOT JUSTICE, 2021). Land banks are a great way to help communities secure affordable housing and control over their buildings if there is an honest board that is passionate about CLTs and a strong financial structure because some people

involved may be ill-intentioned, so land banks need to be vetted (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). There is currently a bill for creating land banks that may pass next year.

Abolishing the tax lien sale would stop the privatization of property taxes and make better use of available properties. TakeRoot Justice, a community-based organization, asserts that getting rid of the tax lien sale will not harm New York City as the sale does not currently generate significant revenue (2021). The option to have a tax-delinquent home enter a CLT instead will protect communities for a long time to come, which is a huge step towards decreasing gentrification.

During the Manhattan Community Land Act (CLA) town hall meeting a few months ago, the Cooper Square Committee, City Council Members Carlina Rivera and Erik Bottcher, and organizations, including the NYC Community Land Initiative, The Economy Project, East Harlem/El Barrio CLT, This Land is Ours CLT, and Cooper Square CLT introduced and discussed legislation that will support the establishment of CLTs across the City. The set of bills in the Community Land Act (CLA) reinforce community stewardship and CLTs' role in housing. Council Members Rivera and Bottcher are sponsoring the Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (COPA), Int 0637, which gives CLTs and mission-driven nonprofits the right of first refusal to buy multifamily buildings before any other developer or purchaser. Another act in the CLA package, sponsored by New York State Senator Zellnor Myrie, is the NYS Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA), Int 0038, which allows tenants to purchase the building they live in. Then, as I mentioned, legislation legitimizing the tax lien sale expired in February 2022 and CLT advocates want to abolish it. Bottcher says members of the Progressive Caucus and other council members are hoping to obtain three million dollars to fund CLTs this year and he wants to make CLTs a priority in the council (Manhattan CLA Town Hall. 25 January 2023). Comptroller Brad

Lander was also at the town hall meeting and said that currently 80% of subsidies meant for affordable housing, city-owned land, and money from tax breaks actually go to for-profit private developers to develop unaffordable housing (Manhattan CLA Town Hall. 25 January 2023). He was a previous sponsor of the Public Land for Public Good Bill, Int 0196, also in the CLA package, and now Council Member Lincoln Restler sponsors it, which would transfer city-owned land to CLTs and not-for-profit developers for affordable housing.

### **Conclusion: CLTs As a Solution to Gentrification & the NYC Housing Crisis**

As I mentioned, CLTs are proposed all around the City, for example, the East Harlem/El Barrio Land Trust, which acquired four buildings for one dollar each with residential and commercial space, the Chhaya CDC in Queens, and more in Manhattan, making 14. The former Cooper Square MHA director, Valerio Orselli, founded This Land is Ours, a new CLT in Lower Manhattan that is part of the Sixth Street Community Center (SSCC) which provides low to no cost after school programs for kids and has a food kitchen (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). This Land is Ours seeks to convert two underutilized NYCHA parking lots, which it has air rights to, into affordable housing with 50% community preference to residents and 76 units for low-income senior housing with features that older buildings lack, such as elevators, energy efficient rooftops, community spaces on the ground floor, making it ADA compliant (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). There is currently a lack of government funding, but there is hope that with other streams of funding from government structures, more community support for CLTs, the passing of legislation, and more meetings with elected officials, This Land is Ours will happen (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). As they bring in more buildings, This Land is Ours will also help the Cooper Square CLT with finances.



Outreach, like town hall meetings and doorknocking, has helped the CLT cause substantially with council members, state senators, and assembly members joining their mission.

There is hope for all CLTs in New York City as a CLT in the South Bronx was able to acquire forgivable loans for affordable housing through land banking (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). Lee does not think the CLT movement “is anywhere near its climax,” adding, “I am pleased to say, in 2023, we are only moving forward” and that in other states, like California, there is a strong movement to expand CLTs (Personal interview. 24 March 2023). The CLTs are gaining more traction and deliberation especially since the amount of homeless people, overcrowded homes, displacement, and people unable to pay their debts and rents have increased during the Covid-19 Pandemic, a time in which the housing crisis became more evident and serious (NYCCLI). Public housing in NYC has been taken for private gain and people want to change that by establishing more CLTs as the benefits outweigh the extra costs the city would have to invest in them, as many poor and working class New Yorkers are continuously disregarded (NYCCLI). CLTs also keep locals in place and relieve them from the stress of having to move far away to find affordable housing. CLTs give them an opportunity to build community wealth. Activists are taking radical measures similar to the approaches of Cooper Square residents, like participating in “squats, tent occupations, eviction blockades, and tenant organizing,” changing the way community organizers have previously been dismissed because they are not the actual planners (Cahen et al., 2019, p. 2).

Rather than funding affordable housing on vacant lots and properties, New York City spends over \$1.8 billion a year to put homeless people in shelters with horrible conditions to subdue housing activists (Cahen et al., 2019; NYCCLI). Public housing is also very poorly maintained (Cahen et al., 2019; NYCCLI). As opposed to New York City Housing Authority

(NYCHA) buildings, the Cooper Square CLT and other CLT buildings do not have recurring issues such as paint chipping, bad smells, broken radiators, or a lack of hot water, cooking gas, and heat, even though the cost of living is about the same in NYCHA and the Cooper Square CLT (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). CLTs have become the method in NYC of fighting for community control and achieving it, especially when it comes to gentrification (Cahen et al., 2019). The City can allocate funds better to house low-income people in CLTs where they are protected and supported, instead of heavily funding unmaintained shelters. CLTs keep people from being homeless and save the City money from having to provide people with inadequate homeless shelters and hotel rooms and there is substantially less turnover, vacancies, and foreclosures (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023).

There are many progressive and community planners, housing advocates, and community members out there who have been putting in the effort needed to make CLTs work and with more funding going towards education on CLTs, only more people will join their mission. Arroyo takes measures to get as many people involved as he can. He plays music on his block and holds a sign that reads “Housing is a Human Right” while giving out candy to little kids, hands out fliers for NYCCLI meetings and the Cooper Square community’s frequent block parties which he initiates sometimes, and has collected signatures to rename West Fourth Street “Frances Goldin Way,” which the City approved and will be official by the end of the year, as a way to captivate people’s attention as he hopes people passing by the block will be curious about an unfamiliar name and inquire about it. The goal is that “people need to realize equity, self-determination, and the right to sell your apartment for a huge profit—this is not the right world for that” because CLTs provide long term affordable housing with extremely low maintenance costs so “somebody making close to nothing can pretty much survive” (Lee, Alex.

Personal interview. 24 March 2023). Not all people view housing as a commodity or an investment and CLTs provide low income people with a disposable income that they can use for many things, such as traveling, starting a business, healthcare, or sending their kids to college, so long term affordability and living comfortability is worth the trade-off to build social equity (Lee, Alex. Personal interview. 24 March 2023). Angotti says he is optimistic about the future of CLTs as there were only a handful of people talking about CLTs 20 years ago and now four, soon to be five, out of the five boroughs are advocating for them (Manhattan CLA Town Hall. 25 January 2023). Arroyo reiterates “The City does not want to be a landlord” and “What took us 50 years is not taking 50 years today” because over “130 organizations” around the City, like NYCCLI, are inquiring about CLTs and more people are pushing for them and making deals with the City to take full responsibility of them (Personal interview. 28 April 2023).

CLTs give communities a right to the city, a right that has been and continues to be left for the more well-off. Having a right to the city means having a secure place to live with your voice heard and your concerns addressed, as all people deserve. Cities are made up of people who make them what they are. New York City is incredibly diverse—its culture and vibrance would not be possible without the immigrants, poor people, and people of color who contribute to the appeal of it. Would New York City be the same without all the bodegas, food stands and carts, buskers, or taxi drivers, etc.? All of these NYC trademarks are typically run by poor people, ethnic minorities, and immigrants, so I think not. These attributes are what make use-value substantial and people’s right to the city important. It is time to prioritize people’s well-being and ensure security and affordability long-term by establishing more CLTs.

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