



sixth street community center

REINVENTING COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS

Aligning the Community and Public Sectors through the Community Land Trust Model

A community land trust (CLT) is typically defined as a nonprofit organization that holds land on behalf of a community to promote affordable housing and sustainable development. The CLT is a form of shared ownership whereby land is held in perpetuity by the trust while buildings or improvements on the land are owned by individuals or other organizations. Through long-term ground leases to these other owners, the CLT ensures that any developments will remain committed to serving the needs of the broader community. The governing board of the CLT is generally composed of residents on trust land and a majority of non-resident community representatives

In recent years, CLTs have gained in popularity in New York City and around the country as housing has become increasingly unaffordable for the majority. After a long period of quiescence, it is useful to reexamine this model in light of the experiences of earlier efforts beginning in the 1980s. What we have learned is that to endure, the CLT must represent more than a sophisticated development scheme for coop housing and storefront rentals.

Today, **Sixth Street Community Center** and its community partners, **Cooper Square Committee** and the newly formed **THIS LAND IS OURS CLT**, with support from our elected officials and residents of surrounding New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments, are proposing to develop a community land trust on land to be secured from NYCHA on East 6th Street. The proposed CLT will address critical issues around food, energy and labor together with the construction of permanently affordable housing for low-income and working class people. Along with 65 units of housing – organized as a Mutual Housing Association (MHA) – we will also develop a Workers Center, Food Coop, and Clean Energy Coop and provide dedicated meeting and event space for local NYCHA tenant associations. Through this model, the CLT becomes a geopolitical foundation for building community power through this multi-sector approach.

Given the power of the financial, insurance and real estate or "FIRE" industry in New York, the challenges we face in community-building in the Lower East Side and citywide are daunting. A multi-sector community land trust movement will serve as an effective counterforce to this power by creating an enduring nexus for community-labor collaboration. Further, the participation of NYCHA residents together with representatives of these other sectors on the CLT and MHA boards of directors offers a new more expansive model for community organization. Critically, the development of our proposed site on East 6 Street on an underutilized NYCHA parking lot, also brings into focus the central importance of connecting our work with the struggle to save and maintain public housing and oppose its privatization.

In terms of numbers of units, community land trusts represent a small part of the overall housing landscape in NYC. NYCHA, on the other hand, comprises 187,000 units housing about 1/2 million people or 1 in 15 NYC residents. While significant in numbers, a large resident body in itself, however, does not guarantee community or political power. The structure and governance of that housing together with the degree of engagement of its residents are critical factors in achieving that goal.

So how does the community land trust come into this picture?

With funds unavailable for new public housing, this innovative use of NYCHA property will further contribute to building a broader and more cohesive social movement by aligning community constructed housing and organizing space with public housing. By sharing their strengths, community and public housing can together mitigate their respective weaknesses:

- NYCHA has an unmatched 90-year history in creating and maintaining affordable housing, but residents are often powerless with no formal representation in management or on the NYCHA board of directors
- CLTs offer new ideas for engagement through resident and community participation on CLT boards, but too often adopt cooperative housing models unavailable to low-income and working class households, especially after the first generation when new coop members are responsible for equity payments to departing members.

While the MHA preserves a key feature of cooperative housing by providing resident participation in governance (with resident majority on the MHA board of directors), the emphasis of the MHA, unlike a coop, is not on personal equity and wealth accumulation through ownership, but rather on "social equity," that is, maintaining affordable rents and fighting together for collective security around essential needs such as free universal health insurance and childcare, higher wages, student debt forgiveness and low-cost non-polluting energy.

To build a culture and structure of inclusivity, both the CLT and MHA boards for the East 6 Street site will include residents of the adjacent NYCHA developments. To the extent possible, NYCHA residents needing larger units will be given priority for available units in the MHA, and individuals and families on the NYCHA waiting list will also be given consideration.

Since the CLT and NYCHA will remain separate legal entities, their fundamental alignment will be on a non-bureaucratic grassroots level. If successful, our larger goal will be to promote the multi-sector CLT as a model for available NYCHA land throughout New York City and thereby contribute to building a stronger intersectional movement for fundamental change.

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