



# Community Land Trusts (CLTs) as a strategy to promote affordable housing in California

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## **Abstract**

In an effort to combat systemic racism in land use planning and inequitable real estate investment activities that have oppressed the working class, low-income communities are finding creative ways to build community wealth. As exorbitant rents push families out of their homes and neighborhoods, grassroots groups and communities of color are pursuing Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to promote community stewardship of the land and to create access to permanently affordable housing. While a majority of CLTs focus on fostering permanently affordable housing, there is great flexibility in the kinds of land uses that CLTs can pursue, including for instance, agricultural projects. In California, grassroots organizations such as THRIVE Santa Ana and the Oakland Community Land Trust (OakCLT) are putting the CLT model into practice to respond to communities' needs and pave the way for disinvested communities to secure housing access.

## **Keywords**

Community Land Trusts, community-control, stewardship, equitable-development

Decades after its inception during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the Community Land Trust (CLT) model has increasingly gained traction across the country. Historically marginalized communities have turned to CLTs as a vehicle for collective land ownership to address the disinvestment these groups experience today. Black, Indigenous, and communities of color are employing the CLT model as a strategy to ensure



that people who would otherwise be forced out of their homes have access to permanently affordable housing.

The CLT model originated in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement in Albany, Georgia. The first CLT, New Communities Inc., was formed in 1969 by civil rights activists as a mechanism to build economic empowerment among impoverished Black farmers (Davis, 2010). New Communities Inc. land trust "consisted of more than 5,000 acres of farmland where African-American families, many poor farmers from the South, could affordably access, build on, and farm land at a time when the community faced significant obstacles to land ownership and financing" (The Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.). The CLT model has significantly expanded since then. According to the Global CLT map and directory, there are an estimated 277 CLTs across the United States (Center for Community Land Trust Innovation, 2020).

CLTs are community-based, nonprofit organizations dedicated to obtaining and managing land in trust for local needs (Lowe & Thaden, 2014). According to Gray (2008), a CLTs' primary concern "is ownership for the common good, rather than what's best for individuals. A CLT is a legal entity chartered to hold land in stewardship for the [benefit of the] community" (p. 69). Most CLTs focus on providing permanently affordable housing. Other CLTs develop parks, community gardens, urban agriculture projects, locally-needed commercial spaces, and conserve land and urban green areas (Lowe & Thaden, 2014). In marginalized communities, people experiencing profound disinvestment are taking land back through CLTs and placing it in the hands of the community to address housing struggles around rent-burden, displacement, and lack of green open space.

A CLT is a valuable, effective tool to address housing struggles, and inaccessibility to green open space, as well as to counter development that prioritizes a "private market approach to property ownership" over people (Lowe & Thaden, 2014, p. 611). Specifically, CLTs ensure community stewardship of the land by acquiring land and seeking to provide equitable development that meets the needs of local residents (ibid.). Most CLTs operate as

### **Figure 1**

Santa Ana Prospera  
Event and March to  
Walnut and Daisy in  
Santa Ana, California,  
May 2017. Source:  
**THRIVE**  
Santa Ana Inc.



a 501 (c)(3) organization, a nonprofit exempted from federal income taxes under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code in the United States, and their structure is based on nonprofit governance with a specific focus on residents, allowing for direct grassroots involvement in decision-making and community land control (Lowe & Thaden, 2014). In particular, a classic CLT utilizes a tripartite board of directors, where one-third represents the leaseholders who lease land from the CLT; one-third represents residents who live in the surrounding areas where the CLT operates but do not lease CLT land; and one-third is made up of public members such as community leaders, nonprofit representatives, public officials, local funders, and others interested in the CLTs' efforts (Davis & Jacobus, 2008).

Through its unique land tenure system, a CLT permanently removes land from the private market through the purchase of land, using public sources of funding, crowdfunding or private loans. In some cases, CLTs also acquire land from a private donor or the city as a donation (Davis, 2010). Ultimately, the obtained land can never be sold and must be held in trust for the community by the CLT. A dual-ownership feature is what makes CLTs unique, where "land and property ownership are separate" (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2018). The CLT retains ownership of land, while any improvements on top of the land (i.e., a home) are sold at an affordable rate.

As of 2020, there were over 32 established CLTs in California (Hernandez et al., 2020). Among them, and founded in 2016 by residents and nonprofit representatives who work in affordable housing, community development, and engagement, THRIVE Santa Ana is the first CLT in this City. THRIVE was created as a platform for residents to pursue and implement equitable development that meets Santa Ana residents' needs, especially those of underserved neighborhoods (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2020). THRIVE's mission is to build "community wealth and healthy neighborhoods through land stewardship and multi-generational resident leadership" (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2020).

THRIVE is working to ensure that residents are involved in land development decisions that promote equitable growth based on local needs (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2020), and to secure community-controlled land for public and communal use. These uses include affordable housing, open space, parks, micro-farms, community gardens, and commercial areas for small community businesses (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2018). Community-control is defined as a population's decision-making power regarding resources such as land through interactions within the CLT (Kruger et al., 2018).

As a newly-formed CLT, THRIVE has not yet purchased or developed land, and it is building up its finances to be able to do so. Yet on May 1, 2018, THRIVE entered into an Exclusive Negotiating Agreement (ENA) with the City of Santa Ana for its first parcel of community-controlled land at the corner of Walnut and Daisy streets in central Santa Ana, California (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2020). On March 3, 2020, the City of Santa Ana approved an agreement with THRIVE Santa Ana to develop THRIVE's first community project on such public land (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2020). This agreement includes a 99-year lease for a 0.38 ( $\frac{1}{3}$ ) acre city-owned vacant parcel for one dollar (\$1) per month to develop the Walnut and Daisy Community Micro-farm located at 1901 West Walnut Street, Santa Ana, CA 92703 (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2020). Although this first piece of

community land remains the city's property, THRIVE will be leasing the parcel at a very low cost with the opportunity to purchase at any time.

The micro-farm will provide access to open space, healthy food systems, opportunities for physical activity, and economic justice (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2020). Gathering spaces aim to promote farmer markets, community events, workshops, and meetings, thus promoting economic and community self-empowerment, healthier neighborhoods, and gardening/farming opportunities (THRIVE Santa Ana Inc., 2018, p. 3). As THRIVE builds up its capacity and finances, THRIVE hopes to shift from leasing the parcel to buying the land for the residents' permanent benefit. Nonetheless, this agreement is a historic achievement. THRIVE sees this community win as a significant step forward towards community land stewardship with the goal of acquiring more land and developing affordable housing.

The Oakland CLT (OakCLT) offers a close example of an established CLT that has effectively combatted displacement from real estate market pressures. OakCLT was founded in January 2009 through the "mobilization of residents and a local community organization, Urban Strategies Council, to acquire and rehabilitate properties in foreclosure" after Oakland was ravaged by the foreclosure crisis (Grannis, 2020). Oakland's mission is "to expand and preserve housing and economic development opportunities for Black, Indigenous, other communities of color, and low-income residents of Oakland" (OakCLT, n.d.). OakCLT's director, Steve King, shares that during the foreclosure crisis, most foreclosed properties were bought by large investors who turned them over to the rental market and made these homes available at high, unaffordable prices inaccessible to low-income communities (S. King, January 18, 2021: personal interview). Thus, OakCLT was created to confront the subprime lending that led to tens of thousands of foreclosures in predominantly Black and Latinx communities. Speculators scooped up tens of thousands of foreclosed properties, predominantly inhabited by households of color, between 2007 and 2011.

Most recently, OakCLT purchased a vacant West Oakland home from a large corporation for Moms for Housing, "a collective of homeless and marginally housed mothers coming together to reclaim vacant, investor-owned properties" (Moms for Housing, 2020). The mothers who occupied the West Oakland vacant home in late 2019, were forcefully evicted early 2020 (J, Collins. January 18, 2021: personal interview). However, in "late May 2020, OakCLT successfully purchased Mom's House, demonstrating that OakCLT can be used as a powerful tool to put properties back into community hands" (Oakland CLT, 2020). This effort with Moms for Housing received significant media coverage nationwide, resulting in CLTs gaining popularity across the nation.

With the CLT movement growing in the United States, more and more people are taking their neighborhood's future into their own hands. Over the years, CLTs such as THRIVE and OakCLT are emerging to make front to the affordability housing crisis and provide Black, Indigenous, and communities of color with affordable homeownership opportunities.

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