

Championing Community Landownership: An Introduction



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A larger-than-life hero of my childhood was Johnny Appleseed. Like many kids, I was introduced to that familiar figure of American folklore through a Disney cartoon. I knew him only as a fictional animation, rendered in technicolor and surrounded by singing birds. He loped merrily across the landscape with a cookpot on his head, planting seeds that magically sprouted into blossoming trees.

I didn't realize until much later that he had actually been a real person. John Chapman was a rather eccentric fellow who had earned his nurseryman nickname while trudging barefooted through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana in the 1800s. As he wandered hither and yon, he gratuitously sowed the seeds of many varieties of apples in fields he didn't own.

My daughter had a similar encounter with a fictional character. In her case, the heroine who captured her imagination was Miss Rumphius. As portrayed in a charming children's book by that title, published in 1982, Alice Rumphius is known to her neighbors as the "Lupine Lady." It is a nickname bestowed on her because of her endearing practice of quietly scattering lupine seeds along seaside roads and meadows in Maine.¹

It was a story that I read to my young daughter many times. Only later did I learn that Miss Rumphius, like Johnny Appleseed, was based on a real person. Hilda Edwards Hamlin immigrated to coastal Maine in 1904. In her 60s, she began planting lupine seeds imported

from her native England. She would carry a handful of seeds in her pocket whenever she walked to the post office or general store and secretly scatter them along the roadside. She couldn't drive a car. When friends would give her a ride, they'd catch her throwing lupine seeds out the window.

What do two stories for children have to do with the eight conversations collected in the chapters that follow? Quite simply, the individuals featured here are cut from the same bolt of cloth as Chapman and Hamlin. Each has played a different role in supporting the global growth of community land trusts; each has brought a different set of sensibilities and skills to that endeavor. But the most consequential role played by all of them has been the sowing of seeds in multiple places. They have taken seminal ideas imported from elsewhere and scattered them across an ever-widening geography. Without their efforts, the hundreds of CLTs now springing up in a dozen different countries might not have happened. Without their advocacy for community ownership of land, moreover, championed by them as a core commitment of the CLT, the model now spreading across the world might have looked very different.

By the early 1980s, the disparate strands of organization (community), ownership (land), and operation (trust) had been woven together into a coherent strategy of affordable housing and community development known as the "classic CLT."² Within a very short time, however, that model of tenure began to be modified in countless ways—often for better, sometimes for worse.

Most practitioners who adopted the model left intact the basic fabric of the CLT, even as they added textures and colors of their own. They made only those changes that allowed the CLT to be a more compatible fit with local preferences, circumstances, customs, or laws. There were others, however, across a broad spectrum of nonprofit practitioners, public officials, and private developers, who disliked the CLT from the very beginning. They picked at the

multi-hued strands that held the model together, threatening to pull them apart.

Some disliked the idea of opening the process of development to the scrutiny and direction of residents who lived in or around what was being built. They picked at the “C” in CLT, insisting that development would be faster and cheaper without a CLT’s commitment to giving voice to members of its chosen community.

Some disliked the idea of imposing controls on the use and resale of homes and enterprises entrusted into a CLT’s care, which happened to be a rather radical idea in the 1980s and 1990s.³ They picked at the “T” in CLT, insisting that the model’s commitment to permanent affordability was contrary to the “America Dream.”

What many critics liked least of all, however, was the “L” in CLT. They bristled at the CLT’s commitment to removing land from the stream of commerce, taking a valuable commodity normally used for private gain and converting it into a nonmarket resource for the common good. They were quick to challenge the CLT’s form of tenure, insisting it was better to put land into private hands, better to sell land than to lease it, better to combine land and buildings into a single real estate package instead of separating community ownership of the land and individual ownership of the structural improvements. Even public officials and nonprofit practitioners who were supportive of the CLT’s other features were sometimes skeptical of community-owned land and long-term ground leasing, believing them to be too difficult to explain, too cumbersome to implement, or too difficult to finance.

Rather than repeat arguments I’ve previously made in response to critics and skeptics like these,⁴ I shall yield the stage to eight individuals whose words and deeds offer a more eloquent rebuttal. During their storied careers, they have made a compelling case for retaining and combining *community*, *land*, and *trust*, although community-owned land has been given pride of place. To be sure, they

have supported the participation of residents in the CLT's affairs and the lasting affordability of housing (and other buildings) for which a CLT is responsible. But listen closely to the interviews that follow. Tenure is the melodic refrain running through them all. These eight elders of the CLT movement remind us that "land" is not only the model's middle name; it is the model's organizational and operational imperative. The distinctive manner in which a CLT's land is owned and used is the foundation for everything else that a CLT is and does.

A number of years ago, I had a colleague who was visiting a community land trust in New England which has a dual mission of promoting affordable housing *and* urban agriculture. An elderly member of the CLT's board volunteered to show my colleague around. As they toured the CLT's holdings, the old lady paused for a moment. She looked around to make sure they were alone and then confided in a conspiratorial whisper, "You know, dear, what we are really about is land reform. But we hide behind the tomatoes."

The individuals who take us on a tour of their lives and labors in the present book tell a similar tale, although *their* agenda is hardly hidden. They may point with pride to CLT projects involving affordably-priced homes, community gardens, neighborhood shops, cultural spaces, forests, and farms, but of paramount importance is what lies beneath. What CLTs are "really about" in the eyes of these long-time veterans of the CLT movement is reforming the way that land is owned, enabling a place-based community to determine the trajectory of its own development. As Mtamanika Youngblood used to say, when talking to groups hoping to revitalize their neighborhoods, "You have to control the dirt. If you don't control the dirt, you don't control anything."

I have referred to these eight individuals as "elders" of the CLT movement. To call them such is not to overlook the creativity, courage, and conviction of the previous generation of thinkers and activists on whose shoulders they stand.⁵ Nor is it to belittle the

accomplishments of the present generation of reflective practitioners who are expanding the portfolio of resale-restricted homes on community-owned land and extending the reach of CLTs into new countries and new applications. Years from now, some of them will be venerated as “elders” in their own right, having enabled the movement’s vigorous, variegated growth in the 21st Century.⁶

The people featured in the present book occupy a special place in the movement’s history, however, a result of both the longevity of their commitment and the pivotal contributions made by each of them in pioneering, refining, or promoting this unusual model of tenure. Significantly, they are also a bridge between the trailblazers who assembled the raw materials of the “classic” CLT and today’s practitioners who are turning that homespun model into a global movement.

That gives our elders a unique vantage point from which to trace the CLT’s early development and from which to anticipate opportunities for the movement’s continued growth. There is a lot we can learn from them. Historical details and future projections are definitely a part of it, but so are larger lessons of resilience and mission. They teach those who would build on their legacy how to keep going and how to stay grounded.

CLTs go against the grain. They remove valuable real estate from the speculative market. They prevent the displacement of vulnerable people and essential jobs, shops, and services from areas buffeted by successive waves of disinvestment and gentrification. They attempt to improve the lives of people who have been marginalized because of their race, class, religion, or immigration, legal or otherwise.

None of that happens easily. Or quickly. Or without mistakes. Martin Luther King Jr. would often remind audiences of his day that “change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.”⁷ A similar message is to be found in the stories told by the people featured in the chapters that follow. During their long careers, they have preached an unpopular

message that challenges the dominant ideology of property. They have struggled to sustain organizations in the face of active opposition or passive resistance. They have experienced setbacks. They have made mistakes. But they have persevered and, little by little, they have moved the needle and made a difference.

Just knowing that people like these, some of whom we may have put on a pedestal, have frailties like our own and have surmounted losses often greater than ours can help us to accept our personal limitations and inevitable setbacks—and to push on despite them. It can help us to learn the fine art of resiliency.

We are taught by these same people not to put the CLT itself on a pedestal, which might seem a somewhat ironic message coming from individuals whom I've dubbed "elders of the CLT movement." As much as they may individually value this unconventional form of tenure, however, and as much as they may have collectively done to scatter its seeds and to enable its growth, their eyes have been fixed on a larger prize. They each regard the CLT—and the lands entrusted to it—as a means to an end. For all of them, the CLT is less an object of veneration than a tool of transformation in pursuit of loftier goals, whether securing power and dignity for a racially oppressed people (Shirley Sherrod), revitalizing neighborhoods without removing low-income and moderate-income families (Mtamanika Youngblood), addressing deep-seated problems of dispossession and poverty (Kirby White), crafting a "human-scaled economic system" (Susan Witt), creating "workable communities" (Gus Newport), gaining agency for people and communities in the development of affordable housing (Stephen Hill), achieving security of tenure for the residents of informal settlements (María Hernández Torrales), or building a pathway to an alternative society (Yves Cabannes).

Even as they have defended and promoted the CLT's core commitment to community-owned land, therefore, they have not forgotten *for whom* this land is being held, developed, and stewarded. A long-departed CLT colleague of ours, Chuck Matthei, was fond

of chiding his peers to ask themselves constantly, “Who sits at your table? Whose faces do you see when you’re doing your work?” What we discover in the words of the elders interviewed here is a daily mindfulness of the people being served in the present, while keeping in mind those for whom homes and enterprises are being kept affordable in the future. They remind us of values of equity and sustainability and inclusion that attracted us to this work in the first place. They keep us grounded.

Like John Chapman and Hilda Hamlin, each of these elders has spent a lifetime quietly, generously making small improvements in whatever landscape they traversed, plantings which have prospered and proliferated in their wake. Johnny Appleseed made his world more bountiful. The Lupine Lady made her world more beautiful. The heroes and heroines of the present publication, by ensuring access to spaces and places from which people of modest means are regularly excluded, have made the world a bit more just.

Notes

1. Barbara Cooney, *Miss Rumphius* (New York NY: Viking Press, 1982).
2. For a detailed description of the three components of the “classic CLT,” see: John Emmeus Davis, “In Land We Trust: Key Features and Common Variations of Community Land Trusts in the USA,” Chapter One, *On Common Ground: International Perspectives on the Community Land Trust*, J.E. Davis, L. Algoed, M.E. Hernandez-Torrales, eds. (Madison WI: Terra Nostra Press, 2020).
3. In the first two or three decades of the CLT’s appearance in American cities, the CLT’s commitment to the lasting affordability of publicly subsidized, privately owned housing could be described as a “hard sell.” The CLT’s insistence on imposing limited-equity resale controls on *owner-occupied* housing, in particular, was met with indignant resistance by many public officials and nonprofit housing providers. The interviews with Kirby White and Gus Newport in the present

volume speak to the initial unpopularity of this idea, which today has become a widely accepted goal of public policy.

4. See, for example: “Ground Leasing Without Tears,” *Shelterforce* (January 29, 2014); “Common Ground: Community-Owned Land as a Platform for Equitable and Sustainable Development,” *University of San Francisco Law Journal* 51 (1), 2017; and “Better Together: The Challenging, Transformative Complexity of Community, Land, and Trust.” Chapter Twenty-six, *On Common Ground*, op cit., 2020.
5. This “previous generation of thinkers and activists” who laid the foundation for the modern-day CLT includes Henry George, Ebenezer Howard, Vinoba Bhave, Ralph Borsodi, Mildred Loomis, Arthur Morgan, Slater King, Fay Bennett, Albert J. McKnight, Bob Swann, Charles Sherrod, Lucy Poulin, Marie Cirillo, and Chuck Matthei, among others. See: John Emmeus Davis, “Origins and Evolution of the Community Land Trust in the United States,” *The Community Land Trust Reader*, J.E. Davis, ed. (Cambridge MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2010). More information on the “Roots of the CLT,” including a timeline of CLT development, can be found on the website of the Center for CLT Innovation (<https://cltweb.org>).
6. A number of today’s leading CLT practitioners were interviewed in *Community Matters: Conversations with Reflective Practitioners about the Value & Variety of Resident Engagement in Community Land Trusts* (Madison WI: Terra Nostra Press, 2022).
7. The first reported use of this phrase, which Martin Luther King Jr. later repeated a number of times, appeared in a sermon he delivered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, 1956.