A Radical Journal of Geography

ANTIPODE

On the Transformative Potential of Community Land Trusts in the United States

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Abstract: Growing interest in non-capitalist ownership models raises empirical questions about the political implications of such models. In this paper we ask: are non-capitalist property ownership models inherently politically transformative? A study of community land trusts (CLTs) based in Minnesota illustrates that alternative property models do not necessarily produce transformative political outcomes. Interviews of those involved in CLTs revealed that they most often engage in affirmative politics, rather than challenging structural problems. Seeds of transformation were evident in these CLTs as well, however, and we explore these moments through four lenses of transformation in order to see the potential building blocks toward other worlds. To this end, we highlight changes in participant subjectivities, collective relationship building, the cultivation of community control, and the subversion of power hierarchies. While these moments offer pathways toward greater transformation, this study reveals the necessity of intentionally transformative practice in alternative ownership models.

Keywords: diverse economies, community land trusts, transformative politics, affordable housing

Antipode Vol. 51 No. 3 2019 ISSN 0066-4812, pp. 795–817 doi: 10.1111/anti.12509

Introduction

Community land trusts (CLTs) have grown in number, size, and visibility in the last quarter century. To a large degree this growth in interest in CLTs has come from their utility as enablers of affordable housing construction and preservation. But it has also overlapped and intersected with other non-capitalist forms of ownership being promoted by those who argue that such forms of ownership can transform societies and make them more equitable and just. In the words of some high-profile advocate-researchers, the goal of these diverse economies is to "make other worlds possible" (Roelvink et al. 2015). But the transformative political potential of these diverse or alternative forms of ownership depends very much on understanding how they work, what they do or could do, and their current forms and impacts.

One could be forgiven for presuming a transformative political content when what is being reconfigured is the basic form of property and land ownership. Property relations represent a key, pivotal role in the ideological, material, and discursive production of the capitalist political economy (Blomley 2004). This is particularly true when the property in question is land. From Locke to Polanyi to De Soto, observers have long noted that the production of land as property—that is, as a commodity ("fictitious" or otherwise)—is a vital political economic project for capitalist development and expansion. If capitalist development has required the transformation of land into the commodity of property, then forms of ownership that remove land from the market, and thereby *de-commodify* it—as CLTs seem to do—could be read as having *ipso facto* politically transformative content.

CLTs are a model of property ownership in which land is legally separated from improvements (e.g. structures) upon the land (Davis 2010). In a CLT, an entity (typically a not-for-profit corporation) owns the land in trust, while improvements on that land are owned by another entity holding a land-lease agreement with the landowner. This ownership structure, which effectively reserves land held in trust and thus excludes it from the speculative market, allows the not-for-profit corporation to control the uses that are able to take place on it. In the classic CLT governance structure, the community controls the non-profit land-owner by constituting two-thirds of the board (one-third for leaseholders on the land; one-third for non-leaseholding residents within the CLT service area). Thus a CLT is a vehicle to simultaneously remove the land from the speculative market and allow a community to control what occurs on that land. The most common uses of CLT lands are for permanently affordable housing, but CLT lands are also used for community gardens, retail and commercial spaces, community facilities, land conservation, and other purposes.

This article uses the case of CLTs to ask two key questions: what is the political content of alternative forms of ownership such as CLTs; and what theoretical lenses help us identify their political potential? We begin by describing the CLT form and the literature that has grown around it, with particular attention paid to the political content of this work. We then describe how we follow Nancy Fraser (1995) in discussing these experiences of CLTs as offering both *affirmative* and *transformative* politics. After presenting the context and methods of our work in Minnesota, the bulk of the article describes the ways in which different actors

involved in CLTs talk about and understand the politics of CLTs. We rely on the voices of those involved to allow these actors' thoughts, experiences, and perspectives to come through. We do this because we believe that if we want to understand the political content of CLTs, the experiences of those involved with actually existing CLTs are as significant as their stated goals and formal legal structures.

In general, we find the political content of CLTs to be variable and far from uniform. We have found most of the politics of CLTs to be affirmative, in that they do not challenge the larger relations, processes, or institutions of society. But we also find "moments" of politically transformative content which we describe and explore. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings both for scholars and for those practitioners or activists who seek to develop a more egalitarian and just society, and who seek to use alternative or diverse forms of ownership to achieve it. For scholars, our findings complicate past narratives about the transformative impacts not only of CLTs but, potentially, of other unusual arrangements for owning urban property. For practitioners—those working in and with affordable housing or community development organisations—this work might prompt self-reflection about the precise nature of the match between their goals and their organisational methods. For activists and those who more explicitly seek to transform society, this work points toward wider questions about whether, and in what instances, it is useful to engage with "the non-profit machine" around housing and property.

On the History and Politics of CLTs

CLTs were created with the explicit intention of transforming the understandings and practices of property ownership in society. John Davis (2010, 2017), one of the most influential writers and advocates for the CLT model, roots the CLT very clearly and unambiguously in the long history of using property reform for politically transformative ends. With conceptual origins in the writing of Henry George (1997) and the social-transformation-seeking component of Ebenezer Howard's (1965) Garden Cities framework,[1] the first CLT was created in Albany, Georgia in 1969 by social movement organisers connected to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other groups. As they put it, they developed the model so that "a legitimate alternative institutional expression of land ownership may be found, thereby contributing to the much-needed social and economic reconstruction of America" (Swann et al. 1972:xvi). Thus CLTs were borne out of the civil rights and Black Power movements and were based on the aforementioned recognition that control over land, and the meanings of land as either something to be valued for its uses or something to be valued for its price, were vital political economic questions.

The CLT model was brought into the American urban context in the 1980s with a couple of influential CLTs (particularly in Burlington, VT and Boston, MA) emerging in this period. It was then that it was realised that CLTs could be a useful way to structure the provision of permanently affordable housing. This brought the CLT form into contact with the much larger community

development industry system in the United States. Community development, like CLTs, had emerged from the political and community organising that occurred in the 1960s. Unlike CLTs, however, community development very quickly—by the end of the 1960s—was more about bricks and mortar development in poor neighbourhoods (by integrating those neighbourhoods into larger capital markets) than about larger scale social change (see, for instance, DeFilippis 2004).

By the turn of the century, CLTs had become increasingly bundled into that industry system (Davis 2010; DeFilippis et al. 2018; Moore and McKee 2012), and it is in this century when CLTs have grown the most. As of the summer of 2018, of the CLTs that are members of Grounded Solutions Network (the successor organisation to the National Community Land Trust Network),[2] more than 71% had been created since 2000 (Wang 2018). The success of CLTs in weathering the foreclosure crisis (Thaden 2011) has further solidified the appeal of CLTs as an affordable housing tool. And the growing interest in, and creation of, CLTs outside the United States this century has added to the proliferation of academic, advocacy, policy and planning literature on CLTs.

Some years ago, in the context of the "CLT as a tool in the [affordable housing] toolkit" approach to CLTs, Davis (2010:38) spoke for some of the long-time CLT advocates when he almost wistfully said that "a contest for the soul of the community land trust" is underway. The literature on CLTs is divided in ways that seem to mirror Davis's observation. On the one hand, the majority of the scholarship on CLTs takes a technocratic approach to analysis, evaluating the assessment of CLT home values (West 2011), mechanisms for financing CLT mortgages (Stein 2011), foreclosure rates of CLT homes (Thaden 2011), individual wealth accumulation (Temkin et al. 2010) or housing resale formulas (Girga et al. 2002). This is particularly true in the American context where the CLT form is established and part of mainstream policy discussions. These studies emphasise practical considerations for CLT implementation as a policy tool, demonstrating CLT successes in fostering low-income households' access to, and stability in, housing.

On the other hand, we see a growing set of debates about how to understand the political potential of CLTs. Many scholars see CLTs as a vanguard of changing notions of private property, a critical first step in fostering social change (Engelsman et al. 2016; Meehan 2014; Thompson 2015). Meehan (2014: 115), for instance, refers to CLTs as an example of a "social market … that is conceptually different from either the capitalist profit market or the bureaucratic state", although he would go on to argue that they are best understood as (using the famous framework from Gorz) "partial non-reformist reform[s]" (Meehan 2014:131). Engelsman et al. (2016) concur, arguing that although CLTs offer important opportunities for community mobilisation around de-commodifying (some) land, they also note that CLTs do not explicitly question the *need* for affordable housing.

Other scholars have additionally used the framework of commoning to describe CLTs. The urban commons is both an institutional object that allows for shared ownership and/or management of scarce resources in cities, as well as a process of creating and enacting the commons through social interaction (Card forthcoming; Huron 2015). The literature on CLTs as urban commons tends to focus on

the dynamics of participatory decision-making and alliances between residents, the state, and other actors like private developers (Aernouts and Rychewaert 2017; Bunce 2016; Engelsman et al. 2016; Midheme and Moulaert 2013; Thompson 2015). Thompson (2015) sees the governing structure of CLTs, which requires non-residents to sit on the board, as part of what enables them to be seen as "common" resources, where the focus on stewardship and maintenance of property for the broader good is a fundamental component of the CLT model. Yet Midheme and Moulaert (2013) see this complex institutional structure as also part of what makes the implementation of CLTs difficult. They call CLTs a "modern commons" due to this bureaucratic structure; in this sense, CLTs are not a "pure commons" or "actually existing commons" (Thompson 2015:1025) like housing cooperatives (see Huron 2015) are, precisely because their boards involve decision-makers who are not residents, and they often involve collaboration with the state or other actors rather than bounding their property to residents only.

Aernouts and Rychewaert (2017) celebrate the interactions of multiple parties in the planning stages of a new CLT in Brussels, and use the word "transformative" to describe how the model is changing the way the state and private housing developers think about housing options (as they now see the value in long-term affordability and participatory governance). Some scholars are less optimistic, warning that the model can easily be co-opted, as the grassroots, organic practice of commoning comes into tension with processes of privatisation, enclosure, and professionalisation (Engelsman et al. 2016; Thompson 2015). Still, Thompson (2015:1038) calls these contradictions—the model's "flexibility in face of hegemony"—a strength, if they can be utilised as such.

An important link in the critical CLT literature is between CLTs and resistance or community organising (e.g. Bunce 2016; Engelsman et al. 2016; Hoover 2015; Midheme and Moulaert 2013; Thompson 2015). Neighbourhood mobilisation and agitation led to the development of some of the most highly documented and celebrated CLTs, like Dudley Neighbors Incorporated in Boston (Engelsman et al. 2016), Cooper Square CLT in New York City (Angotti and Marcuse 2008), Sawmill CLT in Albuquerque (Axel-Lute and Hawkins-Simons 2015; Stromberg 2016), along with other CLTs like East London CLT (Bunce 2016) and West Atlanta CLT (Franklin-Mitchell 2017). In a few cases, the formation of a CLT adds strength to community mobilisation against the state or other powerful actors (Thompson 2015).

Of course, the formal institutionalisation of a grassroots initiative can also limit mobilisation (Piven and Cloward 1977), and much of the literature on the radical potential of CLTs has been about CLTs in formation, not about established CLTs. As Gray and Galande (2016) emphasise, maintaining a focus on community mobilisation almost *requires* a paid community organiser, which is rare in CLTs. In spite of this rareness, community remains (nominally, if nothing else) at the heart of the CLT form, and Davis (2017), for one, remains convinced of the empowering potential of CLTs in low-income communities; precisely because it allows for community control. But even in his most impassioned justification for CLTs as politically empowering for low-income communities, Davis (2017:17–22) essentially makes the arguments at the level of theory or as testable hypotheses, rather

than making the empirical case for their actually existing political content. The empirical scholarship about CLTs, as noted above, primarily argues that their most transformative outcomes occur through community organising or governance structure, but these studies tend to focus on the most politicised examples of CLTs or emergent CLTs being created now as a result of such organising. The political meanings of mature and less widely celebrated CLTs (that is, the bulk of CLTs in the United States) remain under-explored and poorly understood.

Lenses of Transformation

To analyse the political potential of CLTs, we adopt a framework articulated by Nancy Fraser. Fraser (1995:82) describes two types of remedies to injustices, "affirmative" and "transformative":

> [B]y affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework. The nub of the contrast is end-state outcomes versus the processes that produce them.

In further illustrating the differences between affirmative and transformative, Fraser uses the difference between gay identity politics and queer theory. As she puts it, "[w]hereas gay-identity politics tends to enhance existing sexual group differentiation, queer-theory politics tends to destabilize it" (Fraser 1995:83). Similarly, she describes liberal welfare states as affirmative and socialist programs as transformative. There is, of course, much more to be said about this distinction, but space constraints prevent a full exploration in this article. We tend to use this distinction more as a heuristic than anything else; and whether or not solutions are affirmative or transformative is best observed empirically rather than theorised a priori. Nonetheless, this framework provides a useful guideline for asking how much structural change occurs with an innovation or alternative property arrangement such as a CLT.

When we use this heuristic to examine CLTs we see "affirmative" political moments when actors emphasise the inclusion of previously alienated and disempowered people into the institutions which previously excluded them, i.e. individual homeownership and the mortgage credit system. Affirmative remedies are beneficial in that they create more equitable outcomes within existing structures; those of us centrally concerned with issues of social justice should not minimise the importance of getting low-income people into decent, stable housing when they would otherwise be excluded from it. But we are most interested in exploring if there are moments of transformation, which we see as building blocks toward other worlds.

There are, of course, many ways people have thought about transformation, and it has been articulated as pathways leading in multiple directions through an array of different means, changing the path-dependencies of existing processes. While we cannot engage in a detailed literature review of transformative political

theory, we introduce a few theoretical lenses we find most relevant to this study below. These lenses represent a variety of pathways toward new paradigms and political realities. We note that these lenses may overlap or even contradict one another at times. Rather than prematurely advocating for one pathway to transformation over others, we present these lenses as ways to *see* the potential of the CLT form to part of making "other worlds possible".

First, an important element in linking discourses to processes is in perception and understanding of the meanings of experience; these are anchored in individuals' subjectivities. Roelvink et al. (2015:10–11; see also Gibson-Graham 2006: chapter 2) make this point forcefully when they argue:

> ... the process of subject formation is key to any political project, especially if collective action is to take place. The challenge is to initiate processes by which subjects are released from their allegiance to capitalist identities as individuated entrepreneurs/workers, employees/unemployed, property owners/renters, and consumers/producers and encourage identification with other economic subject positions that allow for a wider range of identities within community economies focused on the well-being of people and the planet.

The transformation of subjectivities occurs when people imagine themselves as actors not primarily driven by economic motives and rationalities. In the case of housing, it may also occur when they imagine their households as part of a broader polity or community, one framed around housing and locale. Our emphasis on the subjectivities of the participants being central to social transformation is reflected in our methodological choices in this article. We are, in short, documenting the meanings of the CLTs for the subjectivities of the participants.

Second, and related to how changed subjectivities are a component of social transformation, there is the issue of collective understanding of injustices and the solutions to such injustices. An essential step in efforts for social change is changing people's understandings of injustices from individualised to collective; that is, injustices happen to groups, not individuals as such.[3] Changing people's perceptions of injustices—to see them as collectively experienced—is therefore necessary to challenge the injustices. Social movement activists and researchers have long recognised this (for a useful summary, see Snow and Soule 2009: chapter 2). So too have community organisers (Alinsky 1971:98–124). Often, however, in communities that haven't gone through the process of defining themselves as a collective, the first step is building community relationships; and "community building" is a standard part of the repertoires of community development and community organising (see Traynor 2012). The community that is constructed then becomes the foundation from which to make demands on the state or actors in the market—demands based on the recognition of the collective character of injustices.[4]

Third, in some cases in the building of community, *community control* emerges as the goal. Historically, community control has been an aspiration for a myriad of different social movements.[5] The meaning of community control has included the election of people of colour to local government positions (Altshuler 1970; Navarro 1998), the development of intermediate governance entities like

community police advisory councils, and the creation of new alternative institutions for and by disadvantaged populations that have been ill-served by the market and state (DeFilippis 2004; Gordon Nembhard 2014). As Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014) details in her book *Collective Courage*, cooperatives and mutual aid societies have long been part of the tradition of Black freedom and self-determination movements. Importantly for our story here, the Black Power movement advocated community control as a political goal and rallying cry, in the face of oppressive policies and markets (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). That rallying cry was not only part of the forming of the first CLT, but also one that has recurrent (if too sporadic; DeFilippis et al. 2018) saliency in CLT thinking and practices today; as we will see with the Rondo case discussed below. Analytically, Williams (2018) defines community control as a relationship between a place-based population and a governing institution with authority over a resource. She illustrates how community control exists on a spectrum of interactions, highlighting the ways that different methods and institutions have been utilised to work toward the goal of community control.

Finally, we can articulate pathways to political transformation as through *subversion* as described by Pierce and Williams (2016). They conceptualise power as a relational force allowing one to constrain the actions of another. In the contemporary socio-political economy, relationships of power are vastly unequal, and power is accumulated by some at the expense of many. Subversion, then, is the evacuation of power, or the alteration of power relationships to be more even, just, non-hierarchical, and consensual. Subversion can include methods of destroying power by cutting ties and escaping systems of oppression and also the manifestation of new institutions that structurally limit power accumulation.

Below, we introduce our research on CLTs before providing some examples of moments where CLTs can be seen as having affirmative political content, grounded in their function and focus on affordable housing provision. Then we explore the potentially transformative impacts of these CLTs by identifying the lenses through which transformations seem to be occurring; particularly in terms of individual subjectivity and community control.

CLTs in Minnesota

This paper emerges from a much larger project examining CLTs in Minnesota. We decided to explore the politics and practices of CLTs in Minnesota because there are six CLTs in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and one each in the cities of Duluth and Rochester. While other states have multiple CLTs, the density and diversity of six organisations across a variety of city and county jurisdictions in one metropolitan area provided a particularly fruitful case study site. This density of CLT activity makes Minnesota a key context for examining the diversity of CLT approaches in similar social and regulatory contexts: these CLTs vary in geographic size from neighbourhood focused to citywide to larger than a county; and they also vary in amount of land in their portfolios from fewer than a dozen in the smallest instance to more than 200 properties in the largest. Because these CLTs are all in the same state, many of the enabling laws and funding

mechanisms (such as the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency) are the same for all of them; and thus the larger contexts of their work is significantly controlled for. Aside from the number and size of the CLTs in Minnesota, one thing that is of note for this article is that the CLTs are thus far almost entirely devoted to owner-occupied homes. This is not the norm for CLTs, and the bulk of residential properties in CLTs nationwide are rentals, rather than owner-occupied (Ciardullo 2013). Because of the individualised and inward-looking meanings attached to home-ownership in the United States (see, for instance, McCabe 2016), this is a contextual factor that certainly shapes how the politics of the CLTs in this study are viewed by those involved with them.

Over the course of multiple site visits from 2014 to 2016, including two full months during the summers of 2015 and 2016, the authors conducted 124 interviews, with 112 different people (some subjects were interviewed more than once) involved in CLTs in Minnesota. Of these 112 participants, 18 were current or former CLT staff, 22 were current or former CLT board members, 26 were CLT residents (some of whom were also board members), 23 were public officials, and the remainder were tied to the CLT field in some way (as funders, lenders, related non-profits, etc.). We accumulated roughly 250 hours of interview transcripts from semi-structured interviews, which addressed the role and specific functions of the CLTs, the state regulatory and funding context, and the meanings and experiences of CLTs for interviewees. We also attended trainings and information sessions for several of the CLTs, did tours of CLT properties, and went to several events that the CLTs hosted in the summers we were there. There is little empirical work that goes beyond the level of interviews with staff members of the CLTs in much of the existing qualitative studies of CLTs (Saegert [2013] is a significant exception), so we thought it necessary to explore the political content for multiple actors (including leaseholders) involved in CLTs.

The Politics and Meanings of CLTs to Those Involved in Them

In this section, we identify moments where we see the political meanings of CLTs in our study most clearly. We begin by identifying the ways the CLTs were used and discussed as affirmative remedies to injustice, and then articulate some lenses through which CLTs might be seen as transformative, by changing the subjectivity of those involved, subverting prior power dynamics, facilitating community-building, and cultivating community control.

Affirmative Political Content in CLTs

Most of the people involved in our study simply did not see CLTs as being part of an effort for transformative social change. They did, however, see themselves involved in (per Fraser) an affirmative project to give more people access to stable homeownership. The empirical content of these limited political agendas varies, and it was expressed in different ways by staff members than by homeowners, for instance. We will organise this section by the various ways in which the

stakeholders tend to refer to the affirmative political content of the CLT with which they were involved.

Staff and board members actively downplay any overt political content of their work. Staff and board members by and large saw the CLT as a decent way to bring stability and a form of homeownership to a group of people that wouldn't otherwise have it. A typical comment from a CLT executive director (ED) (when asked about whether or not they did anything to promote "a community" among households in the CLT) was:

> we are not a social service agency … most of our homeowners don't want that. This is the vehicle to buy a home and integrate into the neighbourhood … when you look at our priorities, our priority is to help them find a home, and to continue to be homeowners. And we do that.

This is, to be sure, a political goal—working to enable housing stability for low-income people in the US is work that cuts against the dominant frameworks and policy regimes in the US. But it is a goal with a clearly affirmative political content which individualises remedies at the household scale and reaffirms the existing model of homeownership as a (perhaps *the*) strategy for improving the lives of poor people. The intervention then becomes about individual and family autonomy, rather than anything more collective or community based. While it could be argued that the strict limiting of equity is transforming homeownership, these CLTs demonstrate that you can re-affirm the normative goal of homeownership even as you change—in meaningful ways—the specific content of homeownership.

The CLT staff and board members even often actively pushed back against the idea that there is anything political about their work. This is a classically political rhetorical move, of course, often characterised as a technocratic approach. One CLT ED stated bluntly (referencing the old-time radicals at the National CLT Network conferences[6]):

> This is a business, this is about economic sense, I'm not drinking the Kool-Aid, you can't make me, I think you're all nuts. That you're taking the commune kind of approach to life. That's not what we're about. We're about getting people into homeownership.

We also attended staff-run orientations for potential homebuyers at a few of the CLTs in the region. These too adopted a depoliticised rhetoric in information sessions on how to buy a home on CLT land. Even "the community"—a term that is part of the CLT name and is regarded with almost preternatural warmth in American political culture—was barely mentioned or discussed. Thus the CLTs were presenting themselves to their potential members in ways that stripped away any latent political content, and reduced the CLT to individualised and transactional terms. The CLTs, in these sessions, were essentially benign non-profit real estate developers/agents, and nothing more.

CLTs as a source of workforce housing. In some contexts, CLT staff saw a need to build subsidy-efficient affordable housing because the lack of such housing options was a barrier to economic development, since necessary workforces could not find places to live nearby. One ED said straightforwardly: "there are multiple reasons for the land trust but the bottom line is affordability for essential workers". The workforce housing discourse evident in these CLTs acknowledges the humanity of the working class, but it fails to challenge structural causes of inequality (like stagnating wages from large employers) that are often exacerbated by local economic growth. A typical line from a CLT staffmember was: "Whether it is a teacher, or manager of a retail, or nurse—first time homes are out of price of those entry level jobs". Another CLT staff member (when asked the generic question of, "why do a CLT?") stated:

> we need workforce housing to get people to live in the same communities where they are working and not have to be driving 45 minutes to get to work or an hour or whatever it is and you know recognising that people have families and it is expensive to live here.

One public official who has worked closely and intimately with a CLT echoed these comments: "we had this issue about attractive and high value homes, but for employees that work at Target or work at Starbucks [they are] out of reach".

An extreme example of a workforce housing-oriented CLT can be found in Rochester, MN. First Homes CLT in Rochester was created and funded by the Mayo Clinic and the Rochester Area Foundation (itself largely a product of Mayo) because the price of housing within 30 miles of Mayo was getting too expensive for their staff to find places to live. Coordinating with other non-profits and developers, First Homes CLT has worked to create over 1000 affordable single- and multi-family housing units. At the time of this study, they had 209 single-family homes in their $8 million portfolio as one of the largest and most productive CLTs in Minnesota. Their explicit ties to Mayo Clinic shape their mission and goals to be nearly entirely focused on providing workforce housing in an increasingly exclusive and expensive property market.

When CLTs orient their missions to affordable workforce housing purposes, they fit extremely well with the politically mainstream promotion of local economic development and urban entrepreneurialism (see Harvey 1989). This use of CLTs is far from politically transformative in its goals or impacts, despite affirmative outcomes for individual households.

Public, private, and non-profit funders emphasise housing units and efficiency. The focus by CLT staff on programmatic details of providing and obtaining affordable housing was echoed in how funders and public sector actors (often one-in-the-same) discussed CLTs. For them, the CLTs were measured in how efficiently they built, provided, and maintained affordable units. To some extent that is to be expected for the public sector funders. Local governments do not often embrace community organising that is politically threatening, even if those local governments themselves emerged with the support of community organising (Clavel 2010). The same is true for bank lenders and funders, who could hardly be expected

to embrace social transformation as the goal of their lending portfolio or their community development funding. This attitude was also evident in some of the private foundations that provide some financial support to the CLTs in Minnesota.

CLTs were viewed through the lens of efficiency of subsidy utilisation, and how well they ran their programs. One foundation lender whose organisation has given a lot to a CLT stated (in response to a question of why a CLT, as opposed to other kinds of non-profits):

> [T]hey've been successful with the grants that we have awarded them and so we have confidence in their ability to perform; to achieve their mission. I don't think there's ever really been a question about—a philosophical discussion about—maybe long before I was there might have been. But I don't think there is any philosophical discussion about is this the right model or anything.

One public official described his thinking about CLTs as:

> I look at it very pragmatically, and I sort of see CLTs as being a tool in a toolbox, and that, given the circumstances, different tools work better. When I see applications for CLTs, it's an area with really high land prices or rapid appreciation of value, I think, oh, that's an area where CLTs would work well. I get a little more sceptical when you have CLTs moving into areas where there is not value appreciation. Houses are cheap, and you sort of—preserving long-term affordability doesn't seem to be as critical of an issue. I'm sceptical of why that tool has been used in that place.

These quotes represent a particularly truncated view of CLTs. Not only has any transformative political content been stripped from the model, but its application as (just) a housing tool is reduced to only its utility in keeping prices down. Affordability is thus the crucial (only) goal in this perspective. There is no recognition that a CLT can be useful to improve neighbourhoods, shelter properties from disinvestment and further decline, or provide a mechanism of community control of neighbourhood development.

A particularly big selling point with both public and private funders was the retention of the subsidy that comes with the CLT's structure. One foundation lender put it this way:

> the part that really kind of hooked me was that, you know, this is different than building a home and selling it to someone at an affordable price. This is guaranteeing that it's going to remain affordable and in good condition going forward.

Public officials expressed similar comments, with one being blunt and saying:

> [x CLT] score pretty high in our RFP because of the fact that they keep it affordable long term which is what we want. We want one investment and be done. We don't want to have to sit and do it again, and again, and again and then costs just go up and up and up.

Homeowners on the acquisition and meanings of home ownership. Homeowners in our study typically did not characterise the CLT form as politically transformative either (though some did, and we will turn to them shortly). For most

homeowners it was primarily a way to get a decent home that they could afford to buy: it enables access and affirms the importance and relevance of owning one's own home. One homeowner (when asked what he thought of the structure of the CLT) said: "oh, it's just a way to keep property affordable … you know I've read about other land trusts like one in Boston that you know has actual land that they're develop[ing] and whatnot. [It's] not like it's collective ownership … " Another one put it (when asked what the idea of community in the CLT meant to them):

> This idea of community meant there's some kind of collaboration. Somehow they'd be able to make your dream of homeownership possible … they knew how to make it happen; how to help us realise that dream. They knew the ins and outs about the bureaucracy so they can make this happen.

This desire to just live their lives was expressed by one homeowner who (when asked about any involvement with the CLT) stated:

> They tried to generate a homeowners kind of committee, and people just don't want to do it. I feel like there's—and I get it because the goal isn't to be on the committee. It's to have your home, and once you have your home you're done and so why would you do something more?

Homeowner perspectives such as these reflect the individual character of CLTs that focus on single family homes; while people are grateful, they fundamentally enrolled in a homeowner identity, rather than a particular kind of community identity, per se. In this way, CLTs in our study reinforce and make accessible a subjectivity of the individual homeowner. For many individuals who buy CLT homes, the identity of a homeowner offers a transformed subjectivity—they could not buy a home otherwise—but not one that denotes or enacts any sort of political agenda, other than one of participation in the existing system in a subjectivity of "homeowner". These homeowner subjectivities are thus primarily affirmative.

Potentially Transformative Moments in CLTs

Having articulated the ways the CLTs in our study demonstrate affirmative politics, we now turn to the transformative potential in CLTs. Rather than just asserting that CLTs are primarily affirmative, and therefore closed off to transformative possibilities, we see them as multi-faceted institutions offering affirmative and transformative moments simultaneously. By analysing the potentially transformative moments through a variety of theoretical lenses, we shed light on the ways CLTs offer some building blocks toward a more transformative politics.

CLTs and the shifting meanings of homeownership. The potentially transformative politics of CLTs came through in a few different ways in conversations with participants regarding CLT homeownership. One recurring theme in our discussions with CLT homeowners was a language of "pay it forward", that is, one generation getting the affordability subsidy and then passing that on to the next

generation to reside in that home via the CLT resale requirements. One CLT homeowner put it:

> I am happy to be participating in something that—if we do ever sell the house, which we're not necessarily planning on doing, if we do I'd be giving it to somebody else who would be benefitting in the way that I did. So, that's just—it's like a win–win.

The willingness of homeowners to forgo some of their own appreciation of wealth to pass on the subsidy to the next homeowner shows their embrace of the subversive (in the sense we defined above) economics of the CLT model. Rather than seeking to accumulate individual economic power relative to non-homeowners, CLT homeowners only gain a portion of the increase in value of the house upon selling, giving the next buyer an opportunity to own the home affordably as well.

Additionally, for some CLT homeowners there was a clear emphasis on the use interests of property (Davis 1991), rather than their exchange interests. As one CLT homeowner (when asked about ownership in a CLT) put it:

> [A]ctually living your life in the first place and not just making money … that's what owning a house means; where you live and not, you know, as an investment. It's not as easily transferrable as, like, bouillon or whatever. That it's—that's the primary thing. The primary thing is having a life and being there.

Thus there is a modest, but nonetheless real, shifting in the subjectivities of some of the homeowners as their perspective on being a homeowner is not the same as a homeowner in fee simple housing would normally be.

Another homeowner took these concepts to another level, contemplating the larger political potential of the model:

> the fact that, like, that lack of appreciation, in a way, means, the next person gets an even better deal … It's like, you can't quite wrap your head around what that means, but it's, *I mean, imagine if everything worked that way* …

This homeowner points to the ways the resale formula in CLTs reduces the cost of CLT homes (relative to their appraised value) with each subsequent resale, siphoning value from the speculative market in perpetuity. *Everything working that way*, as the participant begins to imagine, would entail a large-scale societal shift in systemic power dynamics and the wholesale subversion of capitalist market relations. This homeowner was clear that their experience within the CLT shifted their imagination toward transformative and subversive thinking, changing their political subjectivity.

Just as some homeowners discussed the meanings of homeownership in non-canonical ways, so too did some CLT staff members. One CLT ED stated:

> the reality is that we treat housing like a commodity instead of shelter more in this country than other places do and when you do that you're going to get this what we have now I mean and so here we said we definitely see it as shelter first …

Another former ED of a suburban CLT (in a lengthy answer when asked about how she has talked about CLTs to political actors) concurred with this emphasis on use values; and added a transformed understanding of "workforce" housing:

> [P]eople would get stuck [on the equity limitations in CLTs], they would say for our case 25%, "boy, that's not very much" and we would remind people that without access to CLTs people would have no equity. They wouldn't own houses. And a lot of people who are low-income people in this area, it wasn't about equity, it was about having a place to raise their family. And [it was] really trying to get people to change their value system on what homeownership is because we were in that era that all housing was about investment … [W]e want our workforce in the community which they work because they have value. If you think they're important enough to work at Home Depot, and give you a sandwich, and take care of your mother when she is elderly, then they need to live here too.

This is not just an assertion of the importance of use values in homeownership, but a transformation of community identity at work. She is claiming a place within the community for low-income people—a claim that many suburban leaders in Minnesota and around the country have long disputed in both words and deeds. This leads her to embrace an idea of workforce housing that is rather different from those discussed in the affirmative politics section above. Instead of local economic development, the motivation is about issues of access, justice, and fair housing. It is also worth noting that the jobs she is describing here are jobs that are coded as filled by people of colour in American metropolitan labour markets. It is not "the retail manager" or "teacher" she is describing (categories that we heard from CLT staff who mentioned workforce housing); it is the home health aide or front-line retail worker.

As all of these quotes demonstrate, a variety of actors in the CLT field choose not to emphasise the marketised aspects of the model (i.e. the way it allows low-income people to enter the homeownership market and gain individual wealth). Instead, they articulate changing subjectivities and ideologies around the meaning of home and the subversion of the wealth and power inequalities perpetuated by traditional housing markets. Rather than seeing CLT homeownership as an investment, these participants emphasised the use value of the houses and the desire to give that opportunity to future CLT homeowners by paying it forward and giving up some of their own ability to accrue wealth. While changing subjectivities and piecemeal subversion of economic power are not in themselves transformative enough to cultivate wholly new worlds, we see these moments as necessary building blocks toward a horizon of political transformation. To think of a major aspect of contemporary (American) social life, the individually owned single family home, in terms of, variously: an opportunity to benefit from a system and then embrace passing that benefit on to some unknown "community" member; a focus on shelter over building wealth; fostering subjectivities or modes of thought that challenge dominant norms and discourses. They are building blocks of different ways of thinking, doing, valuing, and acting.

This House is Not For Sale, a CLT art project. Another example of the latent (if not fully expressed or articulated) transformative politics of CLTs was an art project started by CLT homeowners called "This House is Not for Sale". One of the homeowners of the City of Lakes Community Land Trust (CLCLT) in Minneapolis acquired her home after its prior homeowner had gone through foreclosure.

When she moved in, the house was still filled with the previous owner's physical belongings: school books, cooking utensils, toys, mattresses, photographs, etc. It was filled, in short, with mementos of lives. And this new homeowner, who is a poet, was moved by these physical reminders of the past occupants who had lost their home, while she had the opportunity to become a homeowner through the CLT; when that was not something she imagined she could be. In recognition of her own fortune, and the misfortune of those who came before her, she worked with a friend who is a visual artist to construct a public art installation called, "This House is Not For Sale". This public art installation took place in the form of community picnics at the homes of eight different CLCLT homeowners. The stories of the homeowners, and what it means to be a homeowner and what "home" means to them, were expressed through poetry and interwoven with visual art prints. This art, in turn, was hung from wooden signposts, emulating realty advertisements for homes that are for sale.

We were able to attend two of these installation openings in 2015 during our time there, and the events involved poetry readings, music, food, and purposeful community-building activities (for both the "community" of CLT homeowners from around the city and the "community" of those living near the home).[7] Both installation openings had between 20 and 30 people at them, and their moods were festive and celebratory. The events were in some ways a "coming out" party for CLT homeowners with the signs that displayed their status as CLT homeowners, expressing their different subjectivity in the housing market than some of their neighbours. Importantly, the staff of CLCLT was supportive of this effort, facilitated it, and also had key staff members come to every installation opening. The events were mostly community building and, simply, fun events, and the expression of "being a CLT homeowner" in the community was not overtly political. But through the explicit claiming that, "This House is Not For Sale" there was a real critique, and the public rejection of the normal workings of the real estate market is not without meaning or political significance.

CLTs as transformative for those who want them to be. While the transformed subjectivities, ideologies and community identities above are indications of the latent transformative potential of CLTs, there are some involved in the CLTs that are even more explicit in their views of the CLT as a vehicle through which to pursue a more sweeping and transformative political project. These participants were drawn to the CLT model for the way it restructures social and economic relationships around property, in ways that fit well with their *already-established* political and cultural understandings. While our participants rarely linked CLTs to a larger resistive struggle, the quotes in this section demonstrate an attraction to the subversive potential of the CLT model: the way it limits an individual's ability to benefit from private property ownership. One (former, and founding) CLT board member (when asked what he thought of the CLT model when he first heard of it) stated:

> It was intriguing in part because it broke out of a model of individual isolation, that it really looked like—it looked like socialism that you could sell to the world … I'm being

> a little flip, but hey wait a minute this sounds an awful lot like some other things and those other things don't fly very well for United States folks, but maybe this will.

One CLT member, who lives in a neighbourhood with a significant Native American population, also talked about the inherent appeal of CLTs being linked to non-ownership of land, stating:

> The model is really resonant with Native communities 'cause it's saying you don't own the land. You're kind of just renting it, more or less. Long term! 99 year leases, which are the land trust. But that is really in tune with our traditional cultural understanding of the earth. We don't own Mother Earth. We're just here for a short time.

This participant, however, was discussing the CLT more in an abstracted and idealised sense than he was describing the actual operations of the CLT. This participant was celebrating the politically transformative goal of the lack of land ownership. But in a CLT, the defining characteristic is not the lack of land ownership, but land ownership by a community-controlled non-profit. This may be recognised as a "next best" solution, but the gap between what is celebrated and what in practice is occurring is still worth noting.

Another participant, a CLT homeowner, saw an explicit politically resistive role being played by CLTs, explaining:

> I guess when I really think about true resistance, sort of beyond protest … it's like, what are the new institutions or what are the new models that offer an alternative vision in terms of going against the grain of thinking about capitalism … so I think what's really exciting to me, to sort of expand versions of normal and create a new narrative around what's possible, you know?

This framing of the CLT represents the generative or prefigurative role that community economies like CLTs are believed to play by scholars like Gibson-Graham (2006). Another homeowner was similarly purposeful in her reasons for choosing to live in a CLT, if not as politically explicit. When asked about initial reactions to the CLT concept, she said:

> I think right away both of us [she and her partner] were, like, "Oh, this makes a lot of sense. This is, this is a good fit." Because I think it was important for us to try to do the least harm … I guess, in terms of, looking at, like, neither of us really wanted to, we weren't looking at buying a house in terms of, profiting from it, or becoming a landlord, or even particularly liking the idea of owning land that really isn't ours. You know, really isn't ours.

She later went on to embrace the community control potential of the CLT form in a way that was rare in our interviews (and therefore worth quoting at length) when she stated:

> I'm interested in the community land trust because it, you know, affords people a lot of their own agency to do what they want, while also, having some structures that are held in kind of the confidence; a larger group can be making decisions about how the land is going to be managed. Maybe we decide that it's not going to have certain chemicals on it, ever. And, it's going to have this amount of, you know, protective naturalised space on it. It's going to have this area that's for public use. And these

> areas that can be rented for individual businesses. Or you're going to have this part that's run by a non-profit group …

This perspective on the community control component of CLTs was mostly absent from our other interviews, but it is clear that it was an appealing/motivating factor for this homeowner. It is notable, however, that what this homeowner was discussing was the ideal type of CLT—one in which the decisions over what to do with the community's land are debated and discussed and the subject of the community's control. For most of the CLTs in Minnesota that was simply not the case; the use of the CLTs was for affordable housing, and any potential debates over other uses of the land seemingly (from our interviews) did not occur. In one of the CLTs in Minnesota, however, alternate land uses that served the surrounding community did become a topic of discussion, and eventually, a primary goal.

Rondo CLT's commercial land trust project. While the notion of community control was absent in most of our participants' discussions of CLTs, Rondo CLT explicitly adopted a goal of community control in its development of a commercial land trust project. Rondo CLT is rooted in the historically Black core of St Paul, a neighbourhood that has seen displacement from interstate construction and urban renewal projects, disinvestment and crime, and now gentrification due to rising property values. Of all of the CLTs in our case, Rondo CLT exhibits the most direct line from the origins of the CLT movement (especially its Black Power and community control motivations), through its motivations for, and the development of, its commercial land trust project. This CLT emerged in the early 1990s out of the area's district planning council[8] and a concern for blight and predatory rental practices in the neighbourhood. The name of the CLT intentionally invoked the "lost" business district of the Black neighbourhood before the highway construction, and thus signalled concern for St Paul's Black community. Although Rondo CLT eventually grew to serve areas of St Paul beyond the original neighbourhood, its staff and board members maintained its historical ties to Rondo neighbourhood institutions like churches, other non-profits, and the small business association. When concerns about commercial gentrification began surfacing among Black business owners in the neighbourhood, the CLT's board began envisioning the development of a mixed-use project involving a commercial land trust that would provide affordable retail space for small Black-owned businesses (which, as of this writing, is in construction).

The desire to provide space for Black-owned businesses and protect the affordability of that space in the face of rising property values stemmed from an imagination of Black community control of neighbourhood development from neighbourhood leaders and business owners. Some of the CLT's funders and partners urged them to work toward developing the commercial land trust in a different neighbourhood in St Paul (which would have been clearly inside of the CLT's service area), but the CLT's board and staff were adamant about developing the project in their original neighbourhood to serve the Black population, risking a loss of economic and moral support of some of their funders and city-wide

partners. According to the staff: "the key … is really community control; it's really about the folks in this neighbourhood". Ultimately, this CLT's concern for Black control of development led them to make intentional choices about their organisational focus at the expense of other opportunities (see Williams 2018 for a longer discussion). Within the broader CLT landscape, decisions to work toward greater community control are few and far between because the institutional and financial incentives are not there. Those incentives are geared towards property acquisition for single family homeownership, rather than other forms of intervention (DeFilippis et al. 2018). What Rondo CLT demonstrates is that community control of development can be an organisational priority, but the economic incentives are often antithetical to community control efforts. Therefore, CLTs that foreground community control may have to push against structural incentives to achieve it, and risk being perceived as somehow less successful as a CLT among peers and funders in pursuing agendas that work against dominant measures of success (that is, having large numbers of properties for single family home ownership).

Conclusions

This article examined the political content of CLTs, and the extent to which CLTs are politically transformative. The work of the CLTs as providers of good, stable, and supported homeownership for low-income people who would otherwise be renters at the whims of the market should not be discounted or downplayed. Yet the political content of CLTs for most of those involved was definitely affirmative rather than transformative. The story is a bit more complicated than that, however, and we used a variety of lenses in which to see paths toward potential political transformation and pulled them through a few relevant examples. There were certainly people involved in the CLTs who had their political subjectivities transformed through their participation. The limiting of financial equity that comes with CLT homeownership makes CLT homeowners think about property and wealth in different ways. There were also important and potentially transformative ways in which communities were being constructed around these altered subjectivities, as was evident in "This House is Not For Sale" and in the discussions of some of the CLT staff members and homeowners. A few participants grabbed onto the idea of community control, and one of the CLTs even took community control seriously enough to shift its focus and concentrate on a development project that was outside of its housing-centred work, despite it being risky for them organisationally.

But these examples of transformative politics were mostly at the level of potential, rather than *actually existing*. Those who seek social transformations by virtue of changing the forms of ownership in society must recognise that these forms of ownership—on their own—are not anywhere near enough. Politically transformative content does not automatically inhere in the form of ownership. Our empirical evidence shows that the exact same form of ownership, in the same state (with its legal and institutional structures), and within the same larger political culture can still have very different political meanings and implications for those

involved. The political content of work in communities comes from a myriad of sources, of which the form of ownership is just one. A transformed political economy requires a transformed set of understandings of society; not (just) a transformed set of organisational forms in society. And while there are moments of this in the CLTs we studied—and there are certainly political openings that may be enabled by the CLT form—for the most part they remained as momentary openings or hints rather than anything more.

This raises the question of what lessons about political mobilisation can be drawn from the CLT model for theorisations of critical property interventions more generally? Property relations are at the heart of contemporary processes of wealth accumulation and concentration of power; thus, structurally troubling conventional property often seems to be an obvious, direct intervention toward more politically activated, transformation-oriented subjectivities. But the case of CLTs in Minnesota clouds this certainty. Conventional property is powerfully hegemonic, and it may be that some efforts to trouble property ultimately reinforce the central importance of property—including conventional property—for people who participate. This sharpens the line of inquiry we identify moving forward. Beyond the immediate question of whether or not a specific refiguring of property relations helps particular individuals is the rather different question about whether such a refiguring is able to trouble or break the centring of conventional property in political subjectivities. And to this question, the answer seems to be decidedly mixed.

Acknowledgements

The authors greatly appreciate the comments from Kevin St Martin, John Emmeus Davis, and three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of the paper. Any problems or omissions are our own. This research was funded by the National Science Foundation BCS-GSS, grant # 1359826.

Endnotes

[1] These two thinkers were not the only influences, and a set of land reform movements around the world played important roles in the thinking of the early organisers. There is not adequate space here to describe them all; see Davis (2010) for a more detailed discussion of this history.

[2] The National CLT Network merged with Cornerstone Partnerships in 2015 as part of an effort to further cement the place of CLTs within the community development/affordable housing industry/movement. Thereafter the National CLT Network became "Grounded Solutions".

[3] In the social movement literature, this consciousness is fundamental to action and part of "framing" the movement and its actions (Snow and Benford 1988).

[4] Too often, however, community building becomes the end in-and-of-itself, rather than a means to an end, and the community building becomes de-politicised and divorced from more challenging or confrontational organising (see DeFilippis et al. [2010] for this critique).

[5] We recognise that community control has no specific political content (DeFilippis et al. 2010) and can be—and has been—used for all kinds of reactionary and racist politics and policies. We are, however, focusing on the ways in which enabling poor and people of

colour to have greater control over the political economy is an inherently transformative thing in the United States.

[6] The National CLT Network, and now Grounded Solutions, conferences include people with different political goals for the CLT model, and those differences are often pronounced. This is part of what Davis was alluding to in the aforementioned line from him about the "contest for the soul" of the CLT.

[7] While we attended two different installation events, we did not conduct interviews on site. Our impressions of these events are therefore our own and those that emerged from informal conversations, rather than the result of formal interviews with participants.

[8] Saint Paul has a formal citizen-advisory planning system allowing locally elected boards to influence the city council's development and zoning decisions regarding their neighbourhood-based jurisdictions (see Martin 2004).

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