

Multi-sectoral Partnerships for Social and Affordable Housing: The Community Land Trust Portfolio Model

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The crisis that started in the U.S. mortgage markets in 2007-2008 exposed the vulnerabilities of housing markets, especially for low-income households and people marginalized by race and ethnicity. Subsequently, interest has grown¹ for initiatives that encourage cross-sector efforts to create affordable and mixed-income housing that minimizes “poverty traps.”² Governments have used public-private partnerships (PPPs) to leverage the private sector’s financial resources and expertise, and these efforts have succeeded in achieving economies of scale and scope (although there are concerns that PPPs will increasingly lead to the privatization of government responsibilities). Consensus has been growing in North America and elsewhere, however, that a broader multi-sectoral approach is needed—one that includes the for-profit and nonprofit sectors³ and community involvement. Through jointly determined goals and consensus-based decision making, these partnerships deliver housing, provide governance, and build the relationships needed for sustainability. This essay focuses on portfolio community land trusts (CLTs), in which multiple sites are owned by a single, multi-sectoral development partnership, as a model for achieving both mixed-income and affordable housing options that include a range of housing types and income groups.

What Are Community Land Trusts?

Community land trusts, which began in the state of Georgia in the late 1960s, are locally based nonprofit organizations that acquire and hold land for the benefit of communities. The intention is to provide land that can be perpetually available for affordable housing. By holding the land for community interests, CLTs separate the value of the land (usually the most expensive component) from the buildings developed on the land, effectively removing the land from the real estate market. A typical CLT is registered as a nonprofit organization, formed at the grassroots level and controlled by its members through a board of directors that comprises residents and community representatives. The CLT retains ownership of the land, grants the

¹ Kathleen Scanlon, Christine Whitehead, and Melissa F. Arrigoitia, eds., *Social Housing in Europe*. (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

² A poverty trap is a self-reinforcing mechanism that causes poverty to persist.

³ Nonprofit housing is rental housing that is owned and operated by community-based, nonprofit organizations or by governments to serve households with low to moderate incomes. Most nonprofit housing agencies receive some form of financial assistance from government to enable them to offer affordable rents.

rights to use that land through long-term leases, and ensures perpetual affordability by setting limits to resale values and/or controlling rents.

Because the land value is not part of the costs of CLTs, secure and affordable housing can be realized for a range of income levels. CLTs' flexibility allows for diverse tenures and mixed incomes in a project that can include home ownership, co-operative housing membership,⁴ and rental units for households from low to middle incomes. CLTs can level the playing field for low-income, marginalized individuals to access and sustain affordable housing in the face of market pressure.

CLTs vary widely in their organizational structure and purpose, but they all share these features: nonprofit status, community leadership, multiple ownership partners, and perpetual affordability. CLTs do not focus on a single project located on a single parcel of land; they are committed to actively acquiring and developing land holdings to increase the supply of affordable housing under their stewardship. Because CLTs provide housing for low-income people and often redevelop blighted neighborhoods, in the United States they are eligible to receive a charitable designation from the Internal Revenue Service.

CLTs in Canada

While CLTs have a long-standing tradition in Europe,⁵ the United States, and other places,⁶ they are less established in Canada, with only a handful operating across the country. In Canada, there is no federal legal framework for CLTs as in the United States, where the conditions and defining features of CLTs are enshrined in law.⁷ Lacking government oversight, the community land trust model evolved into a flexible approach to providing affordable housing using different housing strategies to meet a variety of community needs and goals. This flexibility makes the Canadian context a particularly promising opportunity for innovation around using CLTs to promote more inclusive and equitable mixed-income communities.

Thus far, two CLT models have been advanced in Canada:

- Co-operative CLTs ensure the long-term affordability of co-op housing, a form of housing membership based on a share purchase, which grants members the right to occupy a housing unit within a jointly owned complex.
- Lease-to-own CLTs enable low-income households to become homeowners by counting their rent toward a down payment, while the land is held as a CLT through a long-term leasehold agreement.

⁴ Co-operative housing offers a mix of market-value units and geared-to-income units in a fixed ratio or funded from a subsidy pool. Subsidies vary, annually based on a household's income.

⁵ Including planned communities on leased land, such as the Garden City movement in the United Kingdom

⁶ Such as "moshav" communities on lands owned by the Jewish National Fund in Israel

⁷ Section 213 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1992 governs CLTs.

After World War II, the Canadian government had a robust housing agenda that included building social⁸ and co-operative housing and providing tax incentives for the development of rental housing. After the mid-1990s, federal policies focused on encouraging home ownership. Until recently, however, federal intervention was largely absent from the housing market,⁹ and responsibility for addressing the housing needs of low-income households fell to provincial governments and nonprofit housing organizations.

In British Columbia, this situation resulted in the formation of a variety of provincial, municipal, and nonprofit partnerships to deliver housing. In cities such as Vancouver, where the lack of affordable housing is so acute it affects all segments of the population, these partnerships explored solutions to keep the cost of land low and ensure perpetual affordability. One example, described in the case that follows, was the first co-operative CLT in North America, and its innovations are applicable to many other locales. In particular, the multi-site portfolio approach enables this CLT to be self-sustaining because it allows the development partnership to build market-rate housing that can be used to cross-subsidize the affordable housing.

Case Study of a Portfolio CLT in Vancouver, British Columbia¹⁰

The Starting Point. Planning for the [Vancouver Community Land Trust Foundation](#) (Land Trust)¹¹ project began in 2012. Because city leaders and policymakers viewed the lack of affordable housing as a priority in Vancouver, they convened a task force to develop recommendations; members include policymakers, housing association leaders, private developers, and academic experts. The task force focused on affordability solutions for moderate-income households earning between \$21,500 CAD¹² (single) and \$86,500 CAD (combined) annually. A key recommendation proposed leveraging the city's considerable land assets by leasing land at a nominal rate to create new social and affordable rental housing. The

⁸ "Social housing" refers to rental housing that may be owned and managed by the state, by nonprofit organizations, or by a combination of the two, with the aim of providing affordable housing for low-income citizens such as seniors, disabled individuals, and single-parent families.

⁹ The federal ruling party elected in 2015 won on a platform to develop a national housing strategy and to work with the provincial governments to address homelessness and lack of affordable housing.

¹⁰ The case study research was conducted by Kristin Patten as part of her Master's degree coursework at the School of Community and Regional Planning, under the guidance of a Steering Committee composed of Penny Gurstein, School of Community and Regional Planning (supervisor); Thom Armstrong, the Co-operative Federation of B.C.; Jill Atkey, the B.C. Non-profit Housing Association; Mike Lewis, Canadian Centre for Community Renewal; and the B.C.-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance (BALTA). See: Kristin Patten, *Vancouver Community Land Trust Foundation: Examining a model for long-term housing affordability*. (Vancouver, BC: UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, 2015), <http://scarp-hrg.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2018/09/Vancouver-Community-Land-Trust-Case-Study-April-2015.pdf>.

¹¹ The idea for the Land Trust Foundation was modeled on an Australian co-operative housing initiative, Common Equity Housing Ltd.: <https://www.cehl.com.au>.

¹² Canadian dollars

task force's report also identified community land trusts as a potential vehicle for creating affordable rental and ownership options.

The study and recommendations prompted city government, in August 2012, to issue a call for proposals to create new affordable housing on six city-owned sites. The Land Trust,¹³ three nonprofit housing organizations (one subsequently dropped out), and a co-operative housing society, supported by two social finance institutions,¹⁴ submitted a successful multi-sectoral partnership proposal; [B.C. Housing](#), the provincial housing agency, joined the partnership later to provide direct funding.¹⁵ In June 2019, along with the federal government renewing subsidies for existing nonprofit and co-operative housing in BC, they also committed funds for subsidies for low-income residents of the Land Trust.¹⁶

Project Design. The Land Trust is a nonprofit organization established by the [Co-op Housing Federation of BC](#) (CHF BC). The two nonprofit housing organizations that are involved participate as corporate members of the Land Trust. The Land Trust is the lead decision maker for the consortium of partners that negotiated agreements with the city and is taking the lead in matters of governance.

The partnership's design centers around a multisite portfolio approach that will provide 358 units of subsidized rental townhomes and co-operative apartment units on four sites. All of the sites are on the east side of Vancouver, with three clustered together close to the Fraser River. Nonprofit and co-operative housing organizations will operate the units for a diverse array of tenants, with each site housing different resident populations:

- The first site, managed by a nonprofit housing organization, will provide 48 one-bedroom units with support services for people with mental illness and/or addiction. About half of the units will rent for \$571 USD, the provincial shelter rate, and the other half will rent at the low end of market rate, for an average of \$740 USD per unit.
- The second and third sites will offer two types of housing: 32 two- and three-bedroom townhouses and 188 one- to three-bedroom apartments for low- to moderate-income

¹³ The Land Trust was formed in 1993 by the Co-operative Housing Federation of B.C. The first properties were co-operatives, operating on lands owned by the provincial government that were transferred to the Land Trust.

¹⁴ Social finance is an approach that mobilizes private capital to deliver a social dividend and an economic return. See: "Social Finance," Government of Canada, accessed October 19, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/social-finance.html>.

¹⁵ The Land Trust comprises Fraserview Housing Co-op, for low- to moderate-income families; Sanford Housing Society, providing supportive housing for those with mental health and substance abuse issues; and Tikva Housing Society, primarily for Jewish low- to moderate-income adults and families. VanCity Credit Union, New Market Funds, and B.C. Housing provided funds, and the City of Vancouver provided the land.

¹⁶ This now ensures that half of the homes will be affordable to households with \$60,000 CAD income or less. Before the subsidies, only a quarter of the units were affordable to these households. See: Frances Bula, "Experts question funding levels, rollout of federal housing announcements," *The Globe and Mail*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/british-columbia/article-experts-question-rollout-of-federal-housing-funds/>.

adults and families, half of which will receive some form of subsidy. Some of these units will be managed by a nonprofit housing organization, and others by a cooperative housing organization. Target rents will start at the provincial shelter allowance rate of \$426 USD per month for a single-parent family, with an average rent of \$941 USD for a three-bedroom unit.

- At the fourth site, 90 one- to three-bedroom units renting at 90 percent of market rate will cross-subsidize the lower-priced units at other sites.

It is anticipated that the population of the project will be racially and ethnically diverse, given the diversity of Vancouver residents, who include recent immigrants from Southeast Asia (i.e., the Philippines) and South Asia (i.e., India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), and immigrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa.

Overall, the average cost to renters will be 76 percent of market rate, ranging from 23 percent of market rate for households receiving income assistance to 90 percent of market rate for moderate-income households. Commercial retail units will be sold with pre-paid, 99-year sub-leases, and the income generated will be used to reduce the amount required to finance the whole project. The CLT anticipates operating surpluses that can be used for future affordable housing projects. These surpluses will be split 50-50 between the community land trust and the City of Vancouver.

The design of the project raises questions about the extent to which a multisite portfolio model might be used to promote mixed-income housing. In this case, while the overall portfolio has units geared toward an array of income levels, the sites and buildings are segregated by income. Combining income levels on a single site greatly raises the financial and logistical complexity of any project but possibly increases the social and economic impact on residents and the surrounding neighborhood. This is a tradeoff that deserves more consideration from owners of multisite portfolios. What are the benefits and challenges of income mixing within sites in a portfolio model?

Governance. The Land Trust has the lead in decision making; the nonprofit partners have input into decisions but do not have as much autonomy as they would have in developing their own property. The project centralized control even more by shifting from the initial concept of a master land lease with sub-leases to nonprofit partners to a single-lease model. The single-lease model is advantageous to nonprofit housing organizations, because the Land Trust primarily holds the project's risks. However, the nonprofit housing organizations lose some degree of control over their units.

To accommodate this situation, the Land Trust and the nonprofit housing organizations created a Portfolio Administration Agreement that outlines how decisions will be made, specifies roles and responsibilities, and distinguishes between portfolio-level and partner-level responsibilities. The operating partners will be responsible for managing and operating their own housing, including repair, maintenance, capital replacement funds, utilities, insurance, etc.

Tenants will be selected by each nonprofit housing organization according to criteria outlined in the Agreement (for example, Vancouver residents have priority).

Partnership. The fact that the Land Trust could pull stakeholders together across sectors to create this project was due to a history of partnership-building efforts involving the Vancouver-area nonprofit housing sector and municipal and provincial governments spanning two decades, following the federal government’s drastic reduction in support for nonprofit housing. Stakeholders in the nonprofit housing sector realized they had to find new ways to deliver affordable housing, which led to social-public partnerships, collaborations between municipalities and social actors, and social-public-private partnerships as well as strong partnerships within the nonprofit community.¹⁷ By the time the Vancouver Land Trust project came about, the partners were all committed to collaborative endeavors and had sufficient capacity and mission to move the project forward.

Nonetheless, the complex nature of this project created delays in negotiations with city representatives who were concerned about the risks involved in partnering with such a venture. Numerous city departments—including planning, housing, legal, and real estate—were part of the negotiations, and when new representatives from these departments became involved they had to be brought “up to speed” on CLTs and the project.

Financing. Placing multiple sites under the umbrella of one CLT creates efficiencies in developing and operating the project and enables the higher-rent units to subsidize units on the lower end of market rents, thereby ensuring a mix of incomes among the tenants. The CLT gains further affordability through a discount arrangement with the City of Vancouver, which leases the land to the Land Trust for 99 years at a nominal rate.

The strong involvement of social finance institutions was critical to the Land Trust’s affordability. [VanCity Credit Union](#),¹⁸ the largest member-owned credit union in Canada, provided the impetus for the project to evolve from concept to feasibility. The community investment department of VanCity provided construction financing¹⁹ for the design and permitting phases. VanCity also brought [New Market Funds](#)²⁰ into the project, providing access to private capital from investors looking for competitive financial returns and community benefit. The continuum of social financing involved in this endeavor include grants from venture philanthropy partners that are tied to specific outcomes; “impact first” investments (e.g., partner

¹⁷ For example, the B.C. Non-profit Housing Association, the provincial umbrella organization for the nonprofit housing sector composed of over 600 member societies, and the Co-operative Housing Federation of B.C., made up of 260 housing co-ops and associated organizations across British Columbia, have partnered in forming Housing Central to coordinate their efforts. This has made it easier for nonprofit and co-operative housing societies to work together.

¹⁸ VanCity Credit Union has a social-purpose real estate fund that aims to build the capacity of organizations to undertake social purpose real estate projects. Social-purpose real estate encompasses property and facilities owned and operated by mission-based organizations and investors for the purpose of community benefit.

¹⁹ Estimated at \$57.34 million CAD

²⁰ New Market Funds’ mission is to deliver investment opportunities with lasting community benefit.

equity, co-investor equity) that prioritize community impacts; blended investments in which financial returns and community benefits share equal status; and mortgage financing from government or a social finance institution.

While this CLT has many features shared by other CLTs, there are some distinct differences. Instead of the land being owned by a community organization, the City of Vancouver retains ownership of the land over the long term. The city also is ensuring perpetual affordability within the lease agreement between the city and the Land Trust, something that CLTs usually ensure on their own.

Impact on Residents. The Land Trust project is scheduled for completion in 2019, and as of mid-2019 residents had not yet moved in. Thus, it is too early to determine how this type of mixed-income development will affect social relations across populations of residents. The co-operative and nonprofit organizations each have their own way of managing their existing projects. Nevertheless, each housing organization is developing plans to create social events and activities and is working with the other organizations to encourage mixing of residents. Except for the townhouses, all of the other buildings have common indoor and outdoor spaces where these activities can occur.

Next Steps. Already, the project is being lauded as an innovative approach in Canada to delivering affordable housing through the CLT model because it is ensuring that land in cities such as Vancouver, where rising costs are making housing unaffordable, will remain at a fixed price and serving the common good. The [Vancouver Affordable Housing Agency](#) (VAHA),²¹ a city agency, has announced that the Land Trust will develop seven more pieces of city-owned land, resulting in approximately 1,000 more affordable rental units by 2021. Continuing the mixed-income focus of the target population for the overall project, the new homes will be targeted to individuals and families earning between \$30,000 CAD and \$80,000 CAD annually.

The need to consider new partnership models for housing delivery has been increasingly evident in the nonprofit and co-op housing sectors. Although nonprofits and co-ops have expressed concern about their ability to retain autonomy and obtain value for equity that they bring into the partnerships, the Vancouver Land Trust model is appealing because it provides clarity around roles and responsibilities. Replication of the model will require commitment from government and social finance institutions in collaboration with nonprofit and co-operative housing organizations.

²¹ “VAHA and City announce Community Land Trust will build 1,000 units of affordable rental housing on City land,” City of Vancouver, accessed October 19, 2019, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/8849/20190105073730/https://vancouver.ca/news-calendar/vaha-and-city-announce-community-land-trust-will-build-1000-units-of-affordable-rental-housing-on-city-land.aspx>.

Lessons from the Vancouver Case Study

The Vancouver CLT model has many benefits. The portfolio approach enables economies of scale and cross-subsidization of units, which will allow for a mix of incomes in the housing and ensure that low-income residents have affordable units. The long-term lease provided by the city ensures affordability into perpetuity. The financing model allows the nonprofits involved to significantly leverage their equity through a variety of non-governmental financing products and sources. The relationships within the nonprofit sector, the public sector, and the social finance institutions that were built up over decades allowed for the confidence and trust needed to collaborate on this project and achieve its goals. Because the Land Trust will assume long-term stewardship of the project, the partners have confidence that the perpetuity of housing affordability will be ensured. These factors have resulted in a model that does not require ongoing operating subsidies from government, except for the very-low-income residents. In fact, the Land Trust anticipates having surpluses, half of which will be reinvested in developing more projects while the remainder goes to the City of Vancouver. The city also sees the ability to leverage their land asset as an opportunity to create new affordable units, within the initial project and over time through reinvestment of the operating surplus.

There are significant challenges in implementing such a project, too. Decision making in complex relationships can be difficult. Because the Co-operative Housing Federation of B.C. is the lead partner, the other nonprofits do not have the autonomy they would have in developing their own property. In addition, managing a mixed-income development requires ongoing monitoring by the housing organization to track fluctuating incomes. Because of the considerable challenges and risks in managing a CLT housing development, the organizations that govern the development require ongoing capacity building and resources for management and community development.

Another challenge lies in achieving housing affordability for very-low-income renters without relying on government funding as the primary source of capital. Moreover, current CLTs can do little to benefit the most impoverished segment of the Vancouver population, Indigenous people.^{22, 23} Due to the effects of colonization, members of this population often have multiple mental and physical barriers and substance abuse issues that prevent them from accessing market housing, and they would benefit greatly from affordable, supportive housing. However, the federal government's funding of support for Indigenous communities is exclusively targeted to

²² In Canada, the Indigenous populations are called First Nations or Aboriginal. In the United States, they are called Native Americans.

²³ In 2018, Indigenous people constituted 2.2 percent of the Vancouver population but 40 percent of its homeless population. See: Travis Lupick, "Vancouver's Indigenous people are again heavily overrepresented among the city's homeless, count finds," *Georgia Straight*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.straight.com/news/1068636/vancouver-indigenous-people-are-again-heavily-overrepresented-among-citys-homeless>.

Indigenous reservations, and the CLTs are located outside the reservations. A better solution would also require significant investment by both the federal and provincial governments in access to housing both on and off reservations.²⁴

The city's decision to take a portion of the operating surplus to use for new affordable rental housing also poses a challenge to the Vancouver Land Trust development, because it decreases the CLT's ability to increase affordability of existing units. There has been a change in political and administrative decision making within the city since the terms of the Land Trust were set, however, which is making it easier to negotiate more favorable terms for future CLT projects.

Conclusion and Implications for Action

Community land trusts as outlined in this case study can be adapted to diverse contexts. The approach allows for affordable mixed-income housing into perpetuity, not just affordable housing for the first residents to benefit. If scaled up, it can offer whole neighborhoods where stable housing prices will be ensured, allowing for thriving mixed-income communities. However, CLTs challenge the basic premises of the private real estate market, and without a supportive government regulatory framework and a collaborative working relationship between all levels of government and the housing providers, CLTs could become sidelined and underutilized. Full support for the implementation and durability of the CLT model will require a cultural change in citizens' attitudes towards housing, from housing as a commodity to housing as a social good that promotes local and national stability and prosperity. The implications that follow outline some actions that can help ensure CLTs' ability to produce affordable housing in perpetuity.

Implications for Policy.

- Build more specificity in CLT governance and operational agreements about the roles that all partners—government, the nonprofit sector, and financial institutions—have in decision making and implementation.
- Expand the amount and variety of subsidies available to help expand the ability of community land trusts to generate housing for the most low-income and marginalized populations.
- Develop policy that encourages or requires incorporation of Indigenous groups as a target population for mixed-income CLT developments.

²⁴ Since 2017, the provincial government has invested heavily in supportive modular housing for homeless people, providing 2,000 units across B.C. including 600 in Vancouver.

Implications for Research and Evaluation.

- There is a need to greatly expand research and evaluation on CLTs in Canada, including conduct pre- and post-development studies, post-occupancy evaluations and ongoing documentation to learn about the portfolio CLT model's strengths, and weaknesses and any emerging opportunities or threats to the model's viability.
- Conduct more comparative research on various models of CLTs, including evaluations of how well they meet the housing needs of the most low-income and marginalized populations. It is especially important to learn which elements of CLTs enable projects to successfully house the lowest-income populations. Include attention to levels and implications of racial and ethnic diversity as well.

Implications for Development and Investment.

- Involve innovative financial institutions in directing their financial resources toward the acquisition or construction of land and buildings for mixed-income housing to be developed and managed by nonprofit housing associations, thus building the nonprofit sector's capacity to advance a social mission through housing development.
- In negotiations with governments and other landholders, specify that the land used for CLTs must be used for affordable housing in perpetuity.
- Develop knowledge and capacities, such as organizational and financial management, within nonprofit organizations and co-ops so they can work effectively within CLT partnerships.
- Establish clear governance and management structures to facilitate partnership among a mixture of housing organizations, each of which serves different populations.

Implications for Residents and Community Members

- Where a CLT exists, make sure that residents and community members, across lines of income, tenure, race and ethnicity and other demographics, have formal roles in making decisions, monitoring implementation, and holding the CLT accountable.
- In communities where there is no CLT and community members are concerned about increasing development, rising rents, and the possibility of displacement, engage in collective action to approach local institutions and government representatives for support in establishing a local CLT.

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