TIME

A Look at Community Land Trusts and How They Work

by Rebecca Schneid, February 10, 2025

When Christin Carter found out she was becoming a mother in 2002, she decided it was time to buy a home. While many families make the same calculation, Carter was particularly determined: she wanted to make sure that her children would not know the kind of housing instability that she experienced growing up in Southern California.

“The poverty that I come from was catastrophic, to be honest, and I knew that I had to break this cycle. I didn’t know how, but I had to break it,” Carter says.

She was priced out of the regular market, and as a single parent, she knew she needed help. Eventually, Carter’s Section 8 housing—a federal government program that provides rental assistance to low-income families—case manager sent her to an information session with Proud Ground, a Pacific Northwest nonprofit designated as a Community Land Trust (CLT).

The typical CLT model relies on the nonprofit buying and developing plots of land. Individual buyers or renters then buy a house or unit on that land at an affordable price and in a long-term (often 99-year) renewable lease. CLTs like Proud Ground often provide other services that differ from the typical landlord-renter relationship.

Proud Ground gave Carter the guidance she was missing without a family member who had bought a home, informing her and communicating with her about the process. The typical CLT leadership style is a tripartite board: One third is made up of professionals, including lawyers and business people who can provide financial and legal insight. Another third is made up of community members, and the final third is made up of leaseholders, who are people living on or using CLT land. In this way, leaseholders are ingrained in the decisionmaking of what happens to the land that they are on.

“I love that the community and homeowners have a role in the organization, because who's more of an expert on housing than the person who's going to live there, right?” says Kristin King-Ries, an attorney who represents CLTs, and is currently organizing a CLT legal collaborative on behalf of the International Center for CLTs.

Carter, 42, bought her home in Portland with Proud Ground in 2011, and as a first-generation homeowner, she says the impact it has had on her family’s life goes far beyond finances.. “Being a part of the community has just been so beneficial,” Carter told TIME. “Being able to draw tick marks up the wall as my kids get taller… the gift of stability and pride is just something that I could never repay.”

Proud Ground is just one example of CLT models in America. According to a report from the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, there are 308 CLTs in 48 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico as of January 2024—as opposed to 289 in 2021, 225 in 2018, and 162 in 2006. (The report was co-written by King-Ries.) Though CLTs are still relatively rare, King-Ries says there's been an "explosion" of interest in the model since she started the work in 2017, with larger cities beginning to get involved in creating CLTs and providing funding and grants to the nonprofits in their area.

"I hear so much interest from people all over the country wanting to use the legal tools for a variety of things, not just housing, but community, businesses and farmland and green space," she says.

She sees the CLT model of housing as a way to address the mounting affordable housing crisis, which received significant attention in the lead-up to the 2024 election.

While CLTs are growing in popularity, the model isn't new. CLTs' roots can be traced back to the Civil Rights Movement in the South, as a response "to our country's long history of racist housing policy and social and economic injustice," according to Christie Peale, CEO and Board Chair of the Interboro Community Land Trust in New York City.

The grassroots organization New Communities in Albany, Georgia, founded in 1969 as a collective farm to prevent displacement of Black communities through community-owned land, is often credited as the original model for CLTs. Though CLTS have evolved, Peale says "community control and empowerment" continue to be central to the system.

"It provides stability. It's mine. I'm a homeowner. I can pass it to my children," Carter says. "Before we closed on the house, we would drive through the neighborhood, and I would just cry that my kids were growing up in this neighborhood."

How could CLTs address the affordable housing crisis?

Many federal programs used to incentivize building low-income housing "time out." Many affordable housing developments financed using the Low Income Housing Tax Credit have a 30-year affordability window—a window that is closing for many low income developments. In fact, the National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that nearly 500,000 LIHTC-financed units, representing nearly a quarter of all such units in place, will reach the end of their 30-year limit by the end of the decade. Once those affordability windows time out, King-Ries says: "The people who've been living there and built a life and a community… Suddenly they're not welcome anymore. They can't afford to live there."

With CLTs, long-term affordability is ingrained in the DNA of the model, with their long-term leasing structure the leadership model embedded within the structure of the nonprofit.
CLTS also preserve affordability through their community ownership model: instead of determining affordability as a fraction of the market rate, CLTs sell units to owners at a rate equivalent to one-third of the local median income, ensuring that they will remain accessible to low-income residents. And when a CLT owner sells their unit, the owner must follow the same

pricing principle to ensure the unit is kept affordable. “It doesn't mean that your home can't be a source of wealth building, but it means it's not a stock," King-Ries says. “It's not an investment for somebody from another part of the country or another part of the world.”

According to the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, home ownership is the “most robust explanatory factor” of wealth in low-income and minority households. Many studies also show the mental and financial benefits of homeownership, including increased household wealth, greater financial stability, increased job participation, greater involvement in political and social activities, and health benefits.

Peale says the CLT model allows for much lower rates of foreclosures, because the tenants are a part of decision making, and work closely with the CLTs who own their land to ensure that they can be guided through the housing process. “During the 2008 foreclosure crisis, homeowners on CLTs had much lower rates of delinquency and foreclosures than others, because CLTs not only provide good quality homes that are responsibly underwritten, but also because CLTs have a unique role as stewards, and build and maintain relationships with residents,” Peale says.
The close relationship the nonprofit has with the tenants allows for more personal communication: a resident misses a housing payment, the CLT is able to catch that problem early on, step in, and provide the resident with access to housing counseling and other services to stabilize the homeowner and head off foreclosure.

CLT homeownership can be a stepping stone; according to a report published by the Lincoln Institute in 2021, 60% of people who were CLT homeowners were then able to buy a market-rate home.

CLTs give people the chance to put down roots

Proud Ground is an example of a more “typical structure”—single family ownership on a CLT—according to Peale, but in cities like New York City, the model can also be used for more community, co-op style facilities.

Brian H. is in his sixth year as a tenant at 248 Arlington Avenue in Brooklyn. The building with 21 units was officially purchased in March 2024 by the East New York Community Land Trust (ENYCLT). This property was ENYCLT’s first property, and Brian H. and his fellow tenants spent years working with the nonprofit to take the property from their previous landlord.

“There was a ground movement of residents saying, ‘Enough is enough; we don't have quality services. Our landlord is not present,’” says Boris Santos, President of the ENYCLT. “And then one of the tenant leaders was actually already a member of the Community Land Trust, so there was cross synergy there.”

Since they bought the property, ENYCLT is working with architects and engineers to fix up the building—they’ve cleaned the basement and lobby, added security cameras, and are “converting the property from a landlord rent rental model to a cooperative model,” says Santos.

Every decision made in 248 Arlington now includes every tenant—and building a community mindset among all those living in the building ensures that interpersonal battles don't get in the way of creating a space that everyone feels comfortable in. Santos says that ENYCLT works not only to change the physical living situation of tenants, but to involve them in the process, and empower them to make decisions.

"We're not taught how to have cooperative economics. We're taught that there is a person in charge, and then you are beholden to them," Santos says. "What if you were to do away with all of that? And instead, there's stakes for everybody, and you're all beholden to each other in a more equal sense."

Brian H. says the tenants of 248 Arlington are starting to "put roots down" in a building they can call home. "We've got something that is ours, now," he says. "And we all get credit because we all live here."

Contact us at letters@time.com.

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