Canadian Network of Community Land Trusts

Community Land Trusts in Canada:

Responses and Resistance to Gentrification

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Balanced Supply of Housing
Academic / Community Partnership

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Introduction

The processes of gentrification have been visible in Canadian communities and neighbourhoods for several decades (Ley, 1994; Walks & Maaranen, 2008): rising rents and housing prices, changes to residential and commercial landscapes that cater to more affluent residents, and the displacement of working people in affordable neighbourhoods are all key impacts of gentrification. Gentrification has been defined in various ways but largely functions as a concept that drives direct and indirect displacement and takes root in the everyday experiences of local places. In neighbourhoods, changes in housing landscapes and commercial spaces, influxes of wealthier residents, and unwanted changes to valued community places can often be felt by local residents without being named as gentrification. Gentrification does not always lead to the physical displacement of communities, but it can also create a feeling of being out of place. The impacts of these changes are plainly evident as communities and neighbourhoods undergo transformation and experience an emerging sense of loss and irreparable change. Community Land Trusts (CLTs) can act as a powerful organizational, housing, and land stewardship model to confront and mitigate these impacts.

This report explores how Canadian CLTs define, respond to, and mobilize to resist the impacts of localized gentrification. Guiding principles of the CLT model and its practices offer multiple ways to combat gentrification including the decommodification of property, cultivating social justice in practice, emphasis on community-oriented ownership and land stewardship, and the maintenance of affordability in perpetuity. The methods by which CLTs de-commodify housing and land play a key role in gentrification resistance.

If gentrification is commonly understood as a process that is driven by the needs of private owners who seek to make profits, then CLTs act in opposition to this by celebrating non-profit housing and collectivized land ownership, working against profit-making. By holding title to land on an indefinite basis with the objective of maintaining land affordability, separating ownership of land from building infrastructure, and preventing profits from resales through legal contracts, CLTs act as a land-value capture mechanism and emphasize the long-term stewardship of affordable land and buildings on that land for community purposes (Bunce, 2016; Crabtree, 2010, 2014; Davis, 2010, 2020; Gray, 2008; Meehan, 2014; Moore & McKee, 2012). These mechanisms have particular significance for Canadian CLTs, many of which have formed in response to for-profit development pressures and the increasingly unaffordable cost of housing and land inside and outside of cities (Bunce & Barndt, 2020), as well as struggles to protect inherent and historical land stewardship and rights of Indigenous and Black communities (see reports by Maggie Low and Nat Pace & Jane O'Brien-Davis in this CLT Policy Paper Series).

Methodology

To explore the role and impacts of gentrification in the development and everyday work of CLTs in Canada, in 2024, we conducted semi-structured interviews with staff members from nine CLT organizations based in Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia. Given their distinct identities and geographic scope, this research draws upon and centres the experiences of diverse Canadian CLTs to identify several relevant themes that situate gentrification as a problem that CLTs respond to and work to solve in explicit and inherent ways. During the interviews, we first inquired about the general relationship between CLTs and gentrification and then asked questions specifically related to each territory and CLT identity. We focused on understanding what the rationale for the creation of each CLT was, whether the CLT work had an explicit or more implicit anti-gentrification orientation, what the local specificities of gentrification were in each context, and how issues of indigenous sovereignty and racial justice are addressed and relate to processes of gentrification.

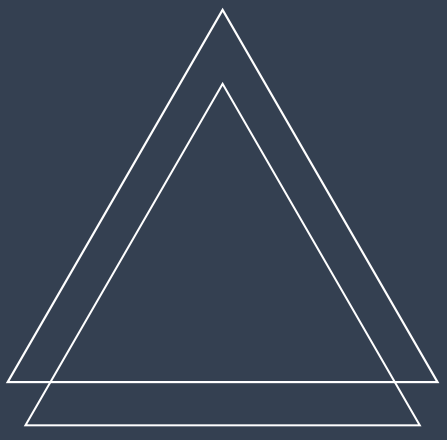
Motivating Factors for CLTs: Rising Costs of Housing and Development Pressures

The ongoing housing crisis in Canada and the struggle to preserve affordability have motivated recent CLT formation and influenced organizational practices. Many CLTs formed out of local pressures related to the rising cost of owning or renting a home and the presence of for-profit developments in their communities. The "accelerating pace of private market development applications" in the context of downtown Toronto (Interview with Chiyi Tam, Toronto Chinatown Land Trust) and "market-driven displacement" in Upper Hammonds Plain, Nova Scotia (Interview with Curtis Whiley, Founder of the Upper Hammonds Plains CLT) are clearly linked to affordability preservation challenges: a cornerstone of gentrification. In some cases, CLTs are a response to processes such as urban-rural migration stemming from affordability issues, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, which "led to an explosion of residents coming from Toronto, leading to a dramatic rise in home prices over a short period of time" (Interview with Sandi Martin, Muskoka CLT). Migration from big cities to smaller ones, as is the case in Hamilton, also illustrates this response to unaffordability: "[Hamilton is] a very, very working-class city, but obviously as prices rise in other places and people can't afford to live in Toronto anymore, … they move to Hamilton, and that drives up the prices" (Interview with Edith Wilson, Hamilton CLT). All interview responses pointed to rising housing costs across Canada, the struggles of unhoused and underhoused residents in securing affordable housing, and an increasing prevalence of middle-class residents facing housing affordability challenges.

CLTs have also formed because of specific housing challenges faced by Indigenous and other racialized communities, highlighting the idea that each CLT "has to fit [their] community and has to fit the people [they]'re serving" (Interview with Katelyn Lucas, Calgary Urban Indigenous Land Trust). For instance, the Timiskaming District Land Trust was formed to:

> ***"create Indigenous housing capabilities and Indigenous housing, to explore the possibility of creating Indigenous housing for Indigenous women by Indigenous women."***
> **—Lisa Neil, Timiskaming District Land Trust**

Similarly, the Upper Hammonds Plains CLT and Hogan's Alley CLT were formed to address the displacement of Black communities from rural and urban land and in response to a strong need to preserve housing for and in Black communities.



Gentrification: Use of the Term in Practice

Gentrification has largely been defined as an academic term adopted by popular media and organizations to describe the processes, impacts, and outcomes of housing and development pressures such as community displacement. Often the gentrification processes can be characterized implicitly through the identification of community transformations that negatively impact existing residents, create more stress on affordability, and produce concerns about irrevocable neighbourhood change. The usefulness of gentrification as a term and category here is important to consider: is it a relevant container term that allows CLTs to identify and address many of the processes that CLTs work to solve?

Several interviewees referred to gentrification as the original reason they established the CLT and how influential it was as a motivating factor for CLT organizing. The Kensington Market Community Land Trust (KMCLT) in Toronto notes that the "impetus for the land trust [KMCLT] was really directly connected to gentrification and displacement" (Interview with Dominique Russell, KMCLT). Chiyi Tam from Toronto Chinatown Land Trust (TCLT) recognizes the value of gentrification as a concept to understand and dissect the intersection of classism and racism in the particular context of Toronto's Chinatown:

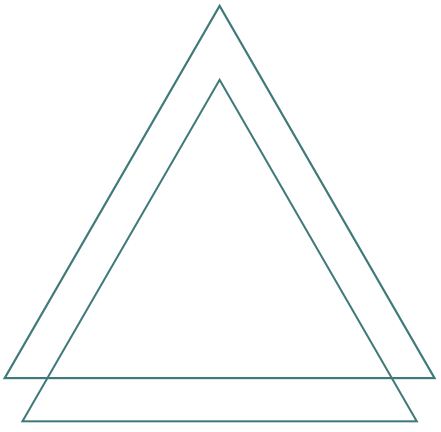
"And this is where the axis of gentrification is very important to insist on, because the word gentry really is fundamentally a term about class and that's very helpful in the Chinatown context... There are many people who will use the same words that we do: 'save Chinatown', 'protect our cultural assets', 'do culturally specific programming', 'fight anti-Asian racism'- whatever it is on those dimensions. And yet they will come to you with a completely capitalist proposal on how to operationalize those values."

—Chiyi Tam, Toronto Chinatown Land Trust

CLTs primarily frame their work as a way to counter and resist gentrification. However, they do so implicitly—meaning they don't always state it outright—and often in relation to other core principles of CLT organizing such as long-term affordability, land stewardship, community preservation, and social justice. Edith Wilson Sousa from Hamilton CLT explains that staff and members talk about gentrification within the CLT organization and about what it means, but that gentrification is really defined as being an overall policy failure on affordable housing. Russell from KMCLT also notes that, "our language isn't necessarily around gentrification, but it is around community for the community" (Interview with Dominique Russell, KMCLT).

A focus on communities often leads practitioners to move away from the term itself. Tam suggests that "in everyday conversation, I don't know that people need that word [gentrification] in order to feel motivated, to be part of the neighbourhood organizing" (Interview with Chiyi Tam, TCLT). Similarly, the Founder of Upper Hammonds Plains CLT, Curtis Whiley, notes that community members do not explicitly say that their work is anti-gentrification, "but it's this idea of protecting and preserving our community and being able to bring people back that have been displaced", that is integral to the mission of Upper Hammonds Plains CLT. Whiley suggests that conversations have moved beyond gentrification to focus on how development pressures – such as increased traffic and pedestrian safety concerns, a growing population, and insufficient public park space – are affecting individuals and the community. These pressures have altered the cultural context of the historically Black community in Upper Hammonds Plain. Whiley reflects that:

"People used that term [gentrification] a lot in the beginning. I feel like we don't use that term as much anymore to be honest with you. We used that term at the beginning for sure, because I felt like we had to advocate for this model [CLT] a lot. But I guess we just don't name it like that anymore. I can't explain why. I think we're talking about things on a much more personal level, and we're very, very on the ground with our community too, and they're not using that language, so I guess we're kind of mirroring what they're using."
—Curtis Whiley, Upper Hammonds Plains CLT



The use of gentrification as a term to encompass processes that CLTs mobilize against is also pointed to as more of an urban issue. Sandi Martin of Muskoka CLT, located in Ontario's highlands known as 'cottage country' where house prices have significantly increased due to property speculation by Toronto region residents, states that:

"The word gentrification feels like an urban word, even though it isn't of course, and displacement isn't an urban thing either. But it feels a little bit more like something relevant to a place that has had a longer history than some of our towns."
—Sandi Martin, Muskoka CLT

Djaka Blais from Hogan's Alley Society makes a connection between combatting gentrification and the CLT model itself, by defining the CLT as:

"A tool to prevent gentrification, because it is about community ownership of land and assets as opposed to the commodification of land and assets... removing land and housing or other of social infrastructure from the speculative real estate market and really having it entrenched in the purpose of keeping for whatever purpose you set out for it, but usually it's around affordability and community."
—Djaka Blais, Hogan's Alley Society

CLTs and Inherent Gentrification Resistance: De-commodification and De-colonization

While the CLTs that were interviewed do not tend to use the terms gentrification or anti-gentrification in an explicit way apart from initial organizing mobilizing efforts, their implicit emphasis on addressing and resisting processes such as neighbourhood change that excludes existing residents and causes displacement is central to their work. Several CLTs underline affordability and community preservation and empowerment as key pillars of their work, pointing to the inherent anti-gentrification and anti-displacement characteristics of the CLT model. Muskoka CLT emphasizes this by highlighting the importance of relationships within community as a way to resist gentrification. Sandi Martin notes that:

> ***"If we are learning from each other, if we really, genuinely, are sharing power with the affected people in the community, and not just saying that we are, that is always anti-gentrification... If on community land trust land, the decisions are made with the input of the community for the benefit of the community, or what we think is the benefit of the community at the time, even though we can't tell the future, then, no matter what happens there, it's happening because the community wants it. And I think that's again, the opposite, it's the antithesis of gentrification."***
>
> **—Sandi Martin, Muskoka CLT**

One major implicit anti-gentrification emphasis of CLT work is its focus on preserving affordability and countering displacement. The importance of sharing community-owned land is highlighted by KMCLT in relation to the connection of land with tenure security. KMCLT notes how the CLT model allows for a re-thinking of land and tenure (Interview with Dominique Russell). Sibyl Frei from Gabriola Island Land Stewards Society situates the CLT model as an implicit anti-gentrification strategy because of how it stops community displacement. She notes that:

"It's about holding space for people who are being displaced from communities by gentrification - by developing housing, acquiring housing that is affordable - ... directly combats gentrification. So, I think every effort around affordable housing is an effort around avoiding or combatting gentrification."

—Sibyl Frei, Gabriola Island Land Stewards Society

Similarly, Djaka Blais of Hogan's Alley Society in Vancouver notes that the protection of affordability for the Black community connected with Hogan's Alley is the CLT's implicit resistance against gentrification:

"To be honest, it's probably not as much of the language that we're using. But it's a key part. And I think we are intentionally trying to prevent that [gentrification]. So, we see our block that we're developing actually as a form of buffer against the gentrification that's happening around us. Because through this Land Trust we want to protect the affordability and the purpose of what the properties and the developments that will be held in the Land Trust."

—Djaka Blais, Hogan's Alley Society

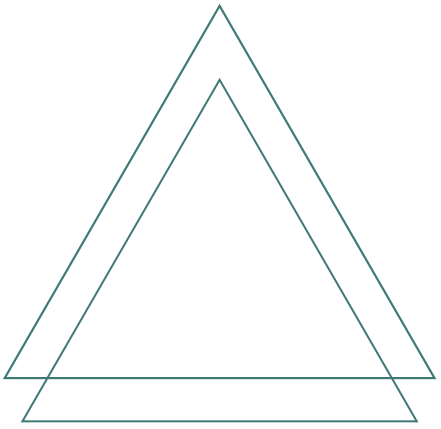
Dominique Russell points out that, "building [community] and putting back the people who were pushed out, that's a kind of anti-gentrification or de-gentrification process" (Interview with Dominique Russell). Using very similar words, Curtis Whiley explains that UHPCLT is motivated by the "idea of protecting and preserving community and being able to bring people back that have been displaced" (Interview with Curtis Whiley, Upper Hammonds Plains CLT).

A key component of the anti-gentrification focus of CLTs is the emphasis on strong community relationships to land, as well as the collective land ownership and stewardship in their work – relationships and practices central to many CLTs' work. In discussing the historical context of Black communities in Nova Scotia, Curtis Whiley of Upper Hammonds Plains CLT notes that community land ownership has significance for preserving historical and current Black sovereignty and relationship to land:

"The application in our specific communities is so profound. The opportunity for us and the scale - there are 50 African Nova Scotian communities. I'm only working in Upper Hammonds Plains. But if we could start building something that shows that..., you can go this way to get it [land] back for the community, the scalability here is substantial because we could have all the [African Nova Scotian] communities doing this. And when we think about the future, we could have a coalition... We could be one of the largest landholders in the province... liberating our people through this."
—Curtis Whiley, Upper Hammonds Plains CLT

Whiley expands on this to emphasize that:

"It's really about Black liberation, it's about finally putting something in place that we can have autonomy over, that can be self-determined, community-driven, and that put us in the driver's seat both in terms of planning and what happens in our community."
—Curtis Whiley, Upper Hammonds Plains CLT



Djaka Blais from Hogan's Alley Society similarly underlines the role of the CLT in furthering Black liberation and sovereignty over land by stating that:

> *"We're unapologetically focused on the well-being of people of African descent, more specifically Black people. And in doing that, that means that the work that we're doing through our Land Trust is to prioritize the unique needs and priorities of people of African descent, and we take an equity lens to really acknowledge the historical exclusion and displacement and erasure that our communities have experienced."*
> **—Djaka Blais, Hogan's Alley Society**

CLTs' role in supporting decolonization within Canadian settler-colonial society is also understood as a way to combat gentrification. Toronto Chinatown Land Trust emphasizes that their starting place for CLT work is plainly anti-colonial: "we're going right to anti-colonial. It is our first guiding value… and so, if you're anti-colonial, it should be subsumed [sic] and assumed that you are thereby anti-gentrification" (Interview with Chiyi Tam). Katelyn Lucas from Calgary Indigenous Land Trust also defines gentrification in relation to colonization:

"Colonization is what I would translate to the concept of gentrification, because overall we (Indigenous people) lost the viability of the relationship to the land, the way that it was lived upon, and the fact that as Indigenous people we did not destroy the land to repurpose it."
—Katelyn Lucas, Calgary Indigenous Land Trust

Some of the tensions between the emergence of the CLT model in settler-colonial contexts, with Indigenous knowledge and ways of being on land are pointed out by Indigenous-led CLTs. Lisa Neil from Temiskaming District CLT notes this tension underlining the historical dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land and the challenges of bringing together a partnership with a federal government agency in the development of the CLT:

> ***"To even explain the trust concept to the community was extremely difficult [...] something that came from that was that the concepts of trust and land do not go together for Indigenous people, and especially for those living on reserve and the band councils and chiefs, who because of the history of colonization and the resulting dispossession of their lands, always have a suspicion that government organizations do not have their best interest at heart."***
>
> **—Lisa Neil, Temiskaming District CLT**

Lisa Neil stresses the importance of demystifying the land trust as a Western legal concept and including, "Indigenous principles, language, like the two-eyed seeing approach"[1] into CLT practices (Interview with Lisa Neil). Katelyn Lucas from Calgary Urban Indigenous Land Trust points to land in relation to Indigenous worldviews and the entwined relationship of Indigenous community with land:

> ***"We're talking about it more being about stewardship, because a part of the Community Land Trust is not just about the buildings and where people live... it's about how the land interfaces with the people, and how we steward that land is the main priority. And even in terms of the governance model, the land is a part of the governance. They're part of the picture, which is very different than a colonial perspective of a community land trust. I think this is maybe a good point in terms of the comparison to an Indigenous worldview, that if we're looking at gentrification, we're talking about colonization, and we're talking about the land not being what it was before colonization."***
>
> **—Katelyn Lucas, Calgary Urban Indigenous Land Trust**

1 The two-eyed seeing approach refers to the idea of learning from and using both Western and Indigenous concepts and knowledges.

Stressing the need to think about the CLT model with an Indigenous worldview and a focus on land rematriation, Lucas continues, saying:

> ***"An Indigenous Community Land Trust is looking at the fact that as the original peoples of the land, this was our land, and that there are treaty agreements and reconciliation needs to be a top priority for all cities. They need to address what lands can be returned to Indigenous community, for those people living in urban centres, to address affordable housing, but also to work with the Indigenous community to emphasize the perspective of the land. There's historical knowledge in all of these lands."***
>
> **—Katelyn Lucas, Calgary Urban Indigenous Land Trust**

A focus on Indigenous worldviews and land rematriation is a vital way to resist and confront gentrification for the creation of socially-just community futures and continued reflexive community land trust practices.

Conclusion

According to prominent, emerging CLT leaders, the CLT model is being used to resist the effects of gentrification that is largely visible in the form for-profit development pressures and to address the intersections of displacement, colonialism, and racial injustice. With a strong focus on community-based land stewardship and affordability, the CLT model is rooted in the reclaiming of community spaces and aims to achieve forms of re-appropriation and liberation.

Even though CLTs respond to housing challenges and forms of displacement that are specific to each context and community, for-profit development pressures and the increasing unaffordability of land and housing, which are common manifestations of gentrification, were presented in most cases as the rationale for the creation of a CLT.

The CLTs that were interviewed tend to move away from referring to gentrification as a term in their daily work, to better reflect the experiences of and the terms used by the communities themselves, but also because the concept of 'gentrification' is not always perceived as an adequate way to talk about non-urban phenomena. Nonetheless, CLT practitioners view the CLT model as being inherently anti-gentrification as it is focused on defending land and housing as a "community asset for community benefit" (Interview with Sandi Martin, Muskoka CLT). This report has emphasized the importance of the local specificities and place-based histories of CLTs across Canada. Through a study of responses and resistance to gentrification in the work of Canadian CLTs, we highlight the different ways in which gentrification has been defined and an inherent desire to resist gentrification by the CLTs that were interviewed. These narratives offer strong pathways and opportunities for new and continued CLT responses to gentrification in the future.

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