

Ada Carr

7 June 2017

Building A Community The Land Trusts/ Final Draft

M.Feeley/ Eng 24 section 44/ SP 2017

Building A Community The Land Trusts

New York is famous for many reasons: big city lights, Times Square, high-end shopping, cuisine, fashion. However, it is infamous for many reasons as well. One of the most prominent is gentrification. The renovation of homes, businesses and buildings to appeal to the upper class has plagued New York for some time. This has raised the cost of living and led to the displacement of many low income families from their homes and neighborhoods. Recently, residents of Staten Island have developed concerns about gentrification currently occurring and anticipating that it will happen in the near future. With developments such as a new strip mall with upscale outlet stores, a Ferris wheel and expensive attractions built near the ferry and the general erection of new townhouse homes in neighborhoods, Staten Island is seeing an increase of new development. This is disconcerting its residents. The quality of housing and businesses is altering and while beneficial to tourism, big businesses and possibly the city government, people living in the city are not benefiting from these changes, and neither is the environment. This new development and industrialization is occurring without zoning deregulation. One home is knocked down with four townhouses erected in its place and now with no yard space. Therefore, both an affordable and eco-friendly solution to these issues would be, to introduce the non-profit, community-based operation of land trusts. By the development of the land purchased by a non profit corporation, being supervised and regulated by the people who live on it, the community would reap the benefits of significantly lowered and managed rent. In addition to granting funding to the organization, I propose a clause in the guidelines discussing pricing of rent, which

would be established based on the average income of the area, that requires all homes built on property of the land trust utilize at least one source of renewable energy. In tandem with lowered rent and housing prices, a clause declaring solar panels or another renewable source of energy be used, would ensure cheaper utility payments for residence in the green housing. Community land trusts composed of community members will conserve the land we have on Staten Island instead of capitalizing on it.

In my neighborhood alone, within a mile of my house, three houses have been under construction lately. However, one in particular was demolished completely and in its place, four two-family town houses now stand, ready to be rented out. The townhouse phenomena has become somewhat of a trend in my neighborhood. Two other developments have been erected and rented out in the time I have lived there. In these complexes high-end vehicles sit in the driveways and security cameras are perched in the front of every door. As Jane Jacobs would describe it, the community is developing. She defines development as differentiations emerging from generalities, "development is qualitative change." The quality of the houses, as well as the rent, in tandem with expansion are increasing in my neighborhood. However, this increase in quality isn't necessarily a positive change. Lower income families struggle to survive or are forced to move, which was the case for many people my family were cordial with. An affordable solution is possible that may also benefit the environment.

A trust, in legal terms is an arrangement in which one party holds property for another party's benefit. For the sake of my community, it can be used to prohibit the land from being built upon or sold. This would be key in land protection and preservation in the community. However, when it comes to land trusts, legalities can be highly complex, differing state by state and can

prove to be a challenge. Moreover, in terms of the preservation of areas of unprotected land, land trusts can benefit the goal of land acquisition, which is essential to the cause. According to a study, conducted by Louise Alexander and George R. Hess, of the purpose and effectiveness of our nation's local land trust preserves, “ Primarily land trusts purchase land, acquire easements that restrict the use of privately owned land, and promote continued environmental stewardship...” Therefore, with certain restrictions, such as the guidelines of my proposal, land trusts can greatly impact the environment and community by ensuring the land is used for the better, not monetary gain or industrialization.

Community land trusts, according to the nonprofit news outlet City Limits, are nonprofit organizations that focus on the oversight of land and making the buildings on the land they own permanently more affordable. Usually, governed by a board composed of residents and community stakeholders, they retain ownership land, then lease to tenants at affordable rates that cater to the middle or low income of homeowners in the area. Any selling of homeownership or land is regulated by stipulated price caps to maintain the affordability of the land. One of the aims of land trusts and specifically the mission of Land Trust Alliance is community conservation. This is the cultivation of a community in the image of the people who inhabit it. Using its strengths to meet the needs expressed by the people. This is a direct solution to the issue of gentrification. For my proposal to be ultimately successful both land and community land trusts would work in tandem towards the goal of proper allocation of land.

Community land trusts, while not abundant, can be found worldwide. The East Harlem Preservation is in close proximity to my community and extremely successful. According to their website, founded in 2005, their mission is “...to promote and preserve the neighborhood’s history

and diversity. EHP seeks to empower underserved low-income, and working families in East Harlem/El Barrio and surrounding areas...” This is a goal they have succeeded in reaching over the past twelve years. In 2015 the Historic Districts Council recognized the community as one of the “six to celebrate”. This accolade, according to the Historic District Council's website, “... annually identifies six historic New York City neighborhoods that merit preservation as priorities...” This recognition serves to show how with the need and proper backing, a community land trust can impact the surrounding area immensely. This constituent sustained way of life has proven successful in bettering not only the quality of life but the general environment in the area of the community for over a decade.

While Community Land Trust housing in low income areas, with rent geared toward the average income of the community will help ease monetary issues, there are some additional measures in my proposal to further lessen the strain. Green living is increasing in popularity throughout the country. With the increase in demand for sustainable building options, green construction has gradually become increasingly profitable and desirable. Therefore, it can be introduced into neighborhoods in Staten Island, where new living complexes are continuously being built. If the land trust housing and buildings are restricted to a set of green regulations the development of neighborhoods would be environmentally-friendly and there would be a substantial increase of wealth.

Contrary to popular belief, green building is not always extremely expensive. The majority of green buildings analyzed in the book *Greening Our Built World* by Greg Kats are “between 0–4% more expensive than conventional non-green buildings.” This is a rather small percentage , discrediting many common misconceptions. Not only are they cheaper to build than

anticipated, but with green building less money is also used by inhabitants for upkeep of the homes. In addition to these fund saving attributes, tenants have the option to contribute to the purchasing of solar panels installed on the buildings. This would then result in them holding a stake in the energy collected, so that they could sell it back to Con Edison or another energy company for their own profit.

Green buildings would also promote healthier living. A final stipulation of the housing and green terms would deal with zoning. Zoning, or the “language of the physical city”, according to the New York City government, “ aims to promote an orderly pattern of development and to separate incompatible land uses, such as industrial uses and homes, to ensure a pleasant environment.” For the purpose of my proposal, zoning regulations would aim to reduce the development footprint, ensuring there be allocated space for vegetated open space within the lands boundaries. There would be a clause in the proposal that ensured at least twenty percent of the land on the project's site area be dedicated to open vegetation. More specifically, this land would be allotted for the establishment of community or “kitchen” gardens. These are small scale raising of crops by members of the community. The crops planted and tended to by members of the community would then be harvested and distributed by the same people who contributed to their growth. This would serve as access to fresh produce for the low income families that inhabit the area. Thus, saving them money and creating wealth within the community.

The green plan would also promote expansion as defined by Jane Jacobs. She describes it as, "capturing and using transient energy." This green land trust plan would take the land that normal housing would be built on and turn it into useful land that will not only house families,

but also contribute by giving back to the environment. This expands the worth of what would have initially had only served the purpose of making money for the homeowner. By taking what already existed and applying energy to get multiple uses out of it we are seeing Jane Jacobs' idea of imports, exports and the conduit come to fruition.

The final component of this proposal is to identify where it will be introduced into the community on a small scale, before it can flourish throughout the island. I decided that its implementation would most benefit the Ocean Breeze Park area of Midland Beach. The entirety of Staten Island's East Shore was severely damaged, by superstorm Sandy in 2012 but hardest-hit was Midland Beach, a low-lying community of town-houses and bungalows. They suffered from crumbled buildings, lots that had eroded away to become deep pits, cars and trucks being scattered recklessly. The area resides in extremely close proximity to the shore line, thus most homeowners were in desperate need for affordable housing. Homes suffered severe damage yet some didn't reach the particular requirements of devastation for the government to perform demolitions. Therefore, residents were forced to pay out of pocket for the demolishing of their own homes, then struggle to find a way to fund the reconstruction of their home all while worrying about where they would reside. The introduction of my proposal into the Ocean Breeze Park area of my community would preserve land, provide affordable housing and locally sourced food while also taking precaution during construction to prepare land for future natural disasters, in light of we learned from the previous one.

Gentrification in New York maybe unavoidable, and for that reason it shouldn't have to always be a negative concept. Finding a compromise between development and expansion, economy and ecology in order to benefit us all would be the ideal solution. Community land

trusts build social capital, while strengthening the people's connections to their communities and environment. Social capital and interpersonal connections within the community helping to sustain it, resulting in a healthier and wealthier environment, would be the ultimate testament to its resiliency. Preserving the land and conserving the community simultaneously, through land trusts and green building, might be a step in that direction.

Works Cited

"About East Harlem Preservation." East Harlem Preservation. East Harlem Preservation, 2017.

Web. 05 June 2017.

"About Zoning." NYC Planning. City of New York, n.d. Web. 06 June 2017.

Alexander, Louise, and George R. Hess. "Land Trust Evaluation of Progress toward

Conservation Goals." *Conservation Biology*. Blackwell Publishing Inc, 01 Nov. 2011.

Web. 05 June 2017.

"Historic Districts Council's Six to Celebrate |." Historic Districts Councils Six to Celebrate.

Historic Districts Council, n.d. Web. 05 June 2017.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Nature of Economies*. New York: Vintage, 2001. Print.

Kats, Greg, Jon Braman, Michael James, and Kats Gregory James Michael Braman Jon ...

Greening Our Built World Costs, Benefits, and Strategies. Washington: Island, 2013.

Print.

Savitch-Lew, Abigail. "Council Bill Would Boost Land Trusts as Way to Keep Housing

Affordable." *City Limits*. City Limits, 06 Mar. 2017. Web. 15 May 2017.