

# Grounding Transformation

Possibilities for  
Community Land Trusts

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by Kuni Kamizaki



Inclusive Local Economies

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# SECTION ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*How do we not replicate the problems that we came in to solve, such as evictions? [We are] grappling with complex identity issues from fighting landlords, to being a landlord (int-01).*

When the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT)<sup>1</sup> had to deal with evictions of their own tenants, a tension inherent in the Community Land Trust (CLT) model became destabilizing. Here is the story of what happened.

### Evictions force an unsettling moment

The year 2022 marked the successful transfer of eighty-four scattered homes from Toronto Community Housing (TCH) — a transfer that helped PNLT “get to scale.” When PNLT started in 2012, many thought that it would be next to impossible to build a CLT in Toronto, let alone acquire any buildings in the expensive real estate market. No wonder this considerable organizational and asset growth generated excitement among PNLT members and CLT supporters in Toronto. With this transfer PNLT showed that the CLT model is not only possible, but also scalable.

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At the same time, the transfer came with a great deal of responsibility for social housing management and state-of-good-repair work. PNLT staff and board members had anticipated this challenge when they prepared an RFP response to the City of Toronto’s call for the transfer of TCH scattered homes. Nonetheless, a range of unanticipated challenges started to loom. In the words of one staff member: “Bringing the land under community ownership is the first step on a staircase that is very large. It’s almost like we opened the door at the bottom of the staircase” (int-27).

As PNLT planned and undertook the transfer, board members learned about persistent rent arrears of tenants living in one of the rooming houses PNLT had acquired. According to the staff report, the issue of rent arrears had contributed

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<sup>1</sup> The Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT) is a non-profit membership-based organization that acquires, owns, and stewards land for community benefits. The Neighbourhood Land Trust (NLT) is the charitable arm of PNLT, which owns and stewards lands that are provided to charitable operating partners to provide affordable housing, supportive housing, and community economic development. In this report, I use PNLT to refer to both organizations unless otherwise specified.

to worsening building financial health, while conflicts with other tenants in the building resulted in safety issues. PNLT staff tried reaching out to the tenants but to no avail. A board member points out that the crux of the problem was not so much non-rent payment, as the tenants' refusal to work things out with staff.

In these situations there are predetermined procedures, including eviction, that conventional non-profit housing providers follow to ensure their fiduciary duty as a landlord. In contrast, PNLT is a community land trust with a commitment to community governance, so the circumstances presented an ethical dilemma to board members. Some board members, with personal experience of homelessness, insisted on no eviction at any cost. Others, with non-profit management experience, argued for prioritizing financial health and tenant safety. Some advocated for providing continued support by exploring alternative housing options in order to mitigate the impacts of eviction. After much discussion, PNLT made the difficult decision to proceed with evictions.

This decision called into question foundational principles such as anti-displacement and community control that PNLT had strived for since its establishment. As board and staff members observed, becoming a landlord was accompanied by a pressing need to stabilize the increased housing portfolio and ensure financial health. Some board members saw growing pressures from the fiduciary responsibilities of being a landlord and PNLT's persistent entanglement with the regime of property ownership, as complicating its commitment to social transformation.

In Part One, ***From the Ground Up: History of the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust***, we explored the historical timeline of PNLT. Part Two, ***Grounding Transformation: Possibilities for Community Land Trusts***, builds on the storyline of Part One with a deeper dive into the transformative potential of CLTs — including enabling conditions and structural constraints — through the experience of PNLT. This reflection is timely and important. At present, a range of CLTs are being launched across Canada. Although they are considerably different to PNLT in terms of geographic scope, political goals, and commitment to community governance, I would like this report to contribute to clarifying what it takes for a CLT to pursue social transformation.

## Transformative potential of CLTs

There is a difference between “transformative” and “alternative.” As CLT scholar James DeFilippis claims, it is necessary to identify “the distinction between a practice that simply happens to be alternative and one that is consciously and reflexively oppositional.”<sup>2</sup> The CLT form of organization and alternative land

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<sup>2</sup> James DeFilippis, *Unmaking Goliath*.

ownership do not guarantee transformative contents.<sup>3</sup> The latter has to be achieved through an intentional practice.

Both academic and movement-based literatures have discussed a range of features that make CLTs transformative.<sup>4</sup> They can be grouped into the following:

- **Political action:** CLTs enable progressive political orientations for social justice through shared values, while building and transforming the political subjectivity of those who get involved be they staff, board directors, or community members. CLTs can also act as a vehicle for grassroots planning, movement building, and policy campaigns.
- **Community governance:** Through an open membership-based model to community governance, CLTs enable lower-income and racialized communities — historically excluded and disempowered from decision-making over how land should be used — to be directly involved. CLTs can help transform unequal power relations and build a community's power to exercise community control and economic democracy.<sup>5</sup>
- **Decommodification:** At the heart of the workings of capitalism is the transformation of land into private property that can be sold and bought as a market commodity. CLTs have the potential to challenge the capitalist system by bringing land under community control and collective stewardship to ensure permanent affordability and social use.
- **Decolonization:** The origin of the CLT model is rooted in restoring collective land stewardship practice for racial justice and economic transformation. At the current moment, the CLT model is increasingly mobilized by Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities as a tangible platform through which to address intergenerational harms from structural racism and colonial dispossession.<sup>6</sup>

Social transformation does not happen overnight and these features should serve as principles to guide, rather than outcomes to evaluate, the work of CLTs

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<sup>3</sup> James DeFilippis et al., "On the Transformative Potential of Community Land Trusts in the United States," 795-817.

<sup>4</sup> James DeFilippis et al., "On the Transformative Potential;" James Meehan, "Reinventing Real Estate," 113-133; Peter Marcuse, "Blog #38 – Community Land Trusts: Empty, Moderate, and Full-bodied;" Gianpaolo Baiocchi, *Communities over Commodities*.

<sup>5</sup> For CLTs, community governance is usually understood to be ethical and democratic decision-making over the use of land under the CLT's stewardship. It is a concrete mechanism for exercising "economic democracy" by extending democratic decision making and participation beyond a political domain (e.g. election) into an economic domain.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Swan et al., *The Community Land Trust*; Margaret M. Ramírez, "Take the House Back/Take the Land Back," 682-693; Margaret Low and Tiana Lewis, *More than Just Affordable Housing*.

for transformative demands.<sup>7</sup> These features are not discrete categories but are interdependent and influence each other. They are also shaped by historical and geographical conditions of the place where a CLT is embedded.

### Structure and framing of the paper

This paper is structured to correspond to the four features outlined above. In the next section, I describe the historical and geographical context of Parkdale as a **political space**. This section is followed by discussion of **community governance**. Then I interrogate the importance and limits to **decommodification** alone. In the next section, I examine the imperative to seek housing justice and social transformation in a more **decolonizing** direction. In the final section, I conclude with a discussion on the process of **scaling as political mobilization**.

The ideas in *Grounding Transformation* are informed by twenty-seven interviews and two focus groups with PNLT staff, past and present board members, and local stakeholders.<sup>8</sup> They are also influenced by my ongoing relationship building and learning from PNLT and a number of grassroots CLTs, in particular the Downtown Eastside CLT in Vancouver. These CLTs have provided me with a space of collective reflection on the importance and limits of community ownership in relation to decolonization.

The story of evictions at PNLT — referred to throughout this paper — complicates a seemingly linear process of organizational growth and scaling. The story reveals that removing land from the market is not enough for pursuing social transformation. It is just a beginning that unearths larger questions about property and land that PNLT has to confront. I believe that CLTs need to grapple with an ever-present risk that “struggles against dispossession too easily become struggles for possession” (i.e. more acquisition) as planning scholar Libby Porter warns.<sup>9</sup>

This critique is not to refute CLT’s transformative potential. But it is an invitation to consider what the opposite of dispossession means to CLTs beyond possession and accumulation, in a more decolonizing direction. This reflection further prompts me to rethink the meaning of scaling which is often measured by number of units and properties. PNLT’s experience shows it can be a basis of political mobilization and movement building.

...removing land from the market is not enough for pursuing social transformation.

<sup>7</sup> David Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing*, 200. It is important to note CLT’s pursuit of these principles can be characterized as a non-reformist reform or transformative demands that Marcuse and Madden characterize as systems-challenging initiatives “that improve present conditions while also progressively enabling the building of a different world.”

<sup>8</sup> The parenthetical in-text citations within the paper identify individual interviewees or focus groups.

<sup>9</sup> Libby Porter, “Possessory Politics and the Conceit of Procedure,” 389.

## SECTION TWO

### PARKDALE AS A POLITICAL SPACE

*... inside of that mess of oppression ... there are many survivors in South Parkdale ... there is a strong will to ... go on with the support of their friends, their peers, or certain staff (int-23).*

Parkdale is one of the few remaining affordable neighbourhoods in Toronto's downtown. The neighbourhood has been shaped by various historical events, including land dispossession of Indigenous peoples, construction of the Gardiner Expressway accompanied with high-rise apartment development, deinstitutionalization and the proliferation of rooming houses, the influx of newcomers from Caribbean and Asian countries after the immigration policy shift to a points-based system, and community conflicts over gentrification in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup>

Since the 1990s, Parkdale has faced further displacement pressures, impacts of housing financialization, and deepening social inequality along Queen Street West. Particularly, in South Parkdale, over 85% of residents are tenants. It is still home to people with experience of mental health, addiction and homelessness, low-income tenants, racialized immigrant communities, and one of the largest Tibetan diasporas thanks to a cluster of community support and services.

Importantly, Parkdale has been a site of community activism against poor housing conditions, stigmatization attached to mental health and homelessness, and gentrification. There is a shared sense of place in Parkdale shaped not only by material conditions of systemic challenges, but also by the neighbourhood's organized base for mutual care. These experiences have motivated people to take collective action.<sup>11</sup> A range of community-based organizations and initiatives have flourished.<sup>12</sup> This convergence has furnished a strong social infrastructure

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Slater, "Municipally Managed Gentrification in South Parkdale Toronto," 303-325.

<sup>11</sup> Deborah Martin, "'Place-Framing' as Place-Making," 730-750.

<sup>12</sup> One notable example is Working for Change (previously the Ontario Council of Alternative Business) that "owns and operates several Work Integration Social Enterprises that provide supportive, stable, trauma informed employment for people with lived experience of mental health, addiction, homelessness, trauma, gender-based violence, incarceration, and refugee histories." Working for Change, "Our Social Enterprises."

of support, active interdependence, and community development. Parkdale is more than a place of residence; it is a political space.<sup>13</sup>

### PNLT as a people's organization

This collective experience with political action cultivated a fertile ground for the development of the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust. Indeed, it congealed into an “organization of organizations” at the early stage of PNLT. In turn, PNLT offered a renewed platform of collaboration for social change over service delivery. Parkdale is not a simple backdrop to PNLT’s place-based approach, but an essential building block.

Combined with active grassroots organizing efforts such as Parkdale Organize and Parkdale People’s Economy, PNLT’s practice of building and demonstrating the potential of the CLT model has contributed to reinforcing Parkdale as a site of push-back, resistance, and alternatives. This framing is evident in news headlines from the mainstream media: “How a non-profit is tackling the housing crisis in this Toronto neighbourhood” (TVO, 2020);<sup>14</sup> “Community fights back against Parkdale’s rooming house crisis” (*NOW Magazine*, 2017).<sup>15</sup>

As a long-time local organizer characterizes, PNLT has become a people’s organization that embodies values and aspirations of community members for social change (int-23). PNLT board members who are also tenants emphasize that they can pursue their political values and ask difficult questions. They do not have to worry about losing their home, unlike their experiences with private landlords who would threaten eviction if they took a political stance (int-10; int-26).

The process of building PNLT has attracted a wide array of people in Parkdale with different backgrounds, life experiences, and professional expertise. Concerned about ongoing processes of gentrification, financialization, and growing inequality in Parkdale, they join PNLT. They bring technical expertise, resources, and social capital that are all essential to PNLT. In this way, PNLT has built a broad-based alliance of people who respond to the demands of those deprived as well as the aspirations of those discontent with existing systems and structures, to borrow a formulation from Peter Marcuse.<sup>16</sup>

...PNLT's practice of building and demonstrating the potential of the CLT model has contributed to reinforcing Parkdale as a site of push-back, resistance, and alternatives.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffery R. Masuda, Aaron Franks, Audrey Kobayashi, and Trevor Wideman, “After Dispossession,” 229-247. See similar discussion on Downtown Eastside in Vancouver.

<sup>14</sup> Josh Sherman, “How a non-profit is tackling the housing crisis in this Toronto neighbourhood.”

<sup>15</sup> Lisa Ferguson, “Community Fights Back against Parkdale’s Rooming House Crisis.”

<sup>16</sup> Peter Marcuse, “From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City,” 185-197.

## SECTION THREE

# COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AT THE HEART OF PNLT'S PLACE-BASED APPROACH

*Do we make the [community] control reflective of the power balances or the power distribution that we want to have, like having all of the different tenant groups and the community members? ... I think that there's this kind of constant reflection (int-06).*

PNLT's ability to hold on to transformative principles has required a commitment to both community governance and community-based planning.

### **A two-tier board structure with multiple entry points for community governance**

As described in *From the Ground Up*, PNLT has a unique “two-tier” community governance model. This model resulted from PNLT's need to work on activities — such as cooperative housing and community-based planning — that are difficult to pursue within the (limited) scope of charitable activities of poverty reduction.<sup>17</sup> A non-profit arm (the **Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust**) was created separate from the charitable organization (the **Neighbourhood Land Trust**).

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<sup>17</sup> A charity is restricted from allocating revenues in non-charitable activities so, as a non-profit, PNLT can continue important activities such as community-based planning.

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## PNLT Governance Model

PNLT's membership is open to anyone who lives and works in Parkdale and shares the mission and values of PNLT. With a maximum of fifteen seats, PNLT's non-profit board takes a classic tripartite governance model: one-third of board directors are elected from the core members who are tenants and users (i.e. gardeners in the case of the Milky Way Garden), one-third are neighbourhood residents with relevant skills and experience, and one-third from community organizations in Parkdale. The board addresses issues through lived experience and knowledge of community members. The non-profit board appoints five board directors for the charitable Neighbourhood Land Trust (NLT). These five seats are usually — if not always — filled by those who gain experience at the PNLT board. This creates a path from the community board to the more technical board. It is NLT that owns assets and makes decisions about real estate, procurement, and financial matters.

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This two-tier model has, in an unanticipated way, brought out the strength of diverse board members. Although the separation between the non-profit board and the charitable board is not exclusive, the distinction supports the unique contributions of each board. As one staff member explains, “the boards are concerned with different things — PNLT with value alignment and NLT with fiduciary responsibility” (int-25).

The two boards share responsibilities and hold joint board meetings regularly. When there is disagreement, both boards discuss until consensus is reached. It is important to emphasize that disagreements typically reflect different accountabilities to different considerations of fiduciary duty versus community control (int-01).

The two-tier board structure is supported by various mechanisms of decentralized participation, such as advisory committees for core members (Milky Way gardeners, Maynard tenants, and scattered home tenants)<sup>18</sup> and board committees (Governance, Acquisition, Community Engagement, and Fundraising) that enable wider participation of PNLT members. As one staff member reflects, these community governance mechanisms make PNLT different from other non-profit organizations (int-24).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> An advisory committee helps promote collaboration and communication among tenant representations, PNLT, and housing providers to address issues specific to building operation. This function ensures board meetings focus on broader organizational matters and community priorities.

<sup>19</sup> The interviewee further notes that despite its centrality to the CLT model, community governance and member engagement do not get sufficient funding support from funders.

## The bench is deep

PNLT's community governance structure has enabled it to build and maintain a web of extended relationships with diverse communities. Furthermore, having Indigenous, Black, and other racialized and equity-seeking communities in leadership positions ensures PNLT's commitment to addressing structural racism. This is an intentional practice of board recruitment (int-04).

Thanks to the Milky Way Garden, PNLT has been able to build a strong relationship with the Tibetan community in Parkdale, including their leadership on the board and on committees. A member of the Milky Way Garden remembers the day when PNLT staff came to talk about the CLT model at the ESL class (fg-01). What motivated her to join the board was the opportunity to engage in democratic governance despite her refugee status that could limit formal political participation.

Another former board member echoes the importance of diverse perspectives including those who have experienced the trauma of eviction, to professionals in social housing, to someone suffering from building safety issues, to long-time PNLT members with institutional memories (int-02). These experiences and differences matter when discussing issues that demand ethical decision making.

PNLT's community governance creates a structure that can put a set of values at the forefront, while members enshrine the commitment to these values (int-14). This combination has allowed the "depth of the bench in PNLT," as a representative of a Toronto-based CLT highlights. It demonstrates diversity as being "in a room where people are speaking in really really different ways ... different from each other" (fg-02).

Of course, diversity and inclusion are not always enough as it has become clear that equal participation (or equal number of seats on the board) does not necessarily ensure equitable decision making. To break down barriers and power imbalances, PNLT has adopted a number of practices. For example, PNLT ensures that an interpreter is present in board meetings where Tibetan core members have limited English skills. For those who have technology accessibility issues, volunteers bring a laptop or a tablet to aid participation. PNLT staff have learned to discuss complex technical matters, such as real estate acquisitions, in accessible ways to remove any potential barriers to understanding among board members.

As a long-term board member stresses, PNLT has created unconventional opportunities for community members through advocacy campaigns, communal meals, and community education (int-05). These forms of participation often go unnoticed. Yet, they are indispensable for opening up PNLT to people with different strengths and ways of contributing and participating.

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## Going beyond organizational boundaries

Community governance and a non-profit tripartite board are central to CLTs. But this structure alone is insufficient to pursue social transformation.<sup>20</sup> If the broader goals of PNLT are anti-displacement and equitable development, then how can PNLT increase and exercise community influence to guide neighbourhood change over land they do not own?<sup>21</sup>

Community-based planning and research is one way to build community power to influence and guide neighbourhood change and development. PNLT has been able to harness its formal community governance (i.e. a non-profit board) as well as a neighbourhood-wide open membership base to act as a grassroots planning body.

First and foremost, community-based planning has served as a counterpoint to real estate-driven statutory planning. As detailed in *From the Ground Up*, statutory planning — such as with the King-Dufferin redevelopment — tends to bracket the issue of ownership, unequal power, and historical events by emphasizing technical requirements such as density and height over political issues of gentrification and displacement.<sup>22</sup>

...community-based planning has served as a counterpoint to real estate-driven statutory planning.

A critical example is the Justice for Queen's Hotel (J4QH) campaign in collaboration with the Parkdale People's Economy. The J4QH campaign was organized to challenge a redevelopment application at the former Queen's Hotel where a mass eviction took place. Gentrification and displacement can make people vulnerable to premature death, and in the case of the Queen's Hotel, two tenants died after the eviction and many ended up in an overcrowded shelter system, homeless, or couch-surfing. The proposed redevelopment project would have simply erased the violence that had transpired.

Members of the J4QH coalition, an independent activist coalition, were not allowed to attend the planning process (i.e. a mediation) at the tribunal. In response to this, PNLT was directed by the board to attend the planning process on behalf of the neighbourhood — representing their membership and the board — in solidarity with the coalition (int-12). Importantly, PNLT included in the mediation team their own member who was evicted from the Queen's Hotel. In this way, PNLT was able to act as a mediator of statutory planning and grassroots planning.

<sup>20</sup> Olivia Williams, "Community Control as a Relationship Between a Place-Based Population and Institution," 459-476; Jeffrey Lowe and Emily Thaden, "Deepening Stewardship," 611-628.

<sup>21</sup> Based on the experience of cooperatives, planning scholar Peter Marcuse raises a caution that as economic alternatives grow to focus on organizational survival, "they easily tend to become insulated and small defensive towers in a landscape not changed by their presence." CLTs could run a risk of this inward-looking tendency with limited commitment to local politics and action.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Blomley, "Land Use, Planning and the 'Difficult Character of Property'," 351-364.

As one of the key organizers behind the campaign explains:

*Because of their role in the neighborhood and because of the direction that the board [gave to] staff, [PNLT was] able to support this....They don't own that land, but they felt that the campaign was aligned with the values of the organization, and ... a benefit to the community to organize around it [even though there's no] direct benefit to the organization (int-12).*

PNLT's involvement in the campaign exemplifies its commitment to place (i.e. Parkdale) by playing a role in influencing neighbourhood development to be more equitable.<sup>23</sup>

### Community-based planning and action research

Central to PNLT's approach is participatory community action research as a form of planning and organizing.<sup>24</sup> It is also informed by the naming-the-moment approach — an engaged practice of understanding the present condition historically, identifying current possibilities and structural constraints, anticipating what may come, and acting on opportunities to influence future outcomes.<sup>25</sup> For example, PNLT's rooming house study adopted this approach.<sup>26</sup> PNLT also co-led the eighteen-month neighbourhood planning project whose design was based on community-based action research. Through action research, PNLT emphasizes working with community members who are affected by the issues being researched.

Community-based planning has kept PNLT accountable to neighbourhood-wide priorities and needs...

Community-based planning has kept PNLT accountable to neighbourhood-wide priorities and needs, helping align organizational decision making with community decision making. This way, PNLT as an alternative institution has been embedded in a local place and a web of connections with other community groups. In turn, PNLT's work has started to influence other community partners. For example, in the case of the Rooming House Preservation Strategy, not only PNLT but also other community housing organizations began to work on rooming house acquisition.

While the Parkdale Neighbourhood Plan did not have a legal power of enforcement that the city's detailed local plan would have, it offered a platform for building community power while outlining a shared framework of promising

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that PNLT also undertook the distribution of financial compensations to tenants after the tribunal process.

<sup>24</sup> Research for Organizing, *Research for Organizing Toolkit*.

<sup>25</sup> The Naming-the-Moment is a popular-education approach to political analysis for social action that revolves around the idea of "conjunctural analysis." The approach informed PNLT organizational action and initiatives. Please refer to 4.3. in ***From the Ground Up***.

<sup>26</sup> Neighbourhood Land Trust, *No Room for Unkept Promises*.

future directions for Parkdale.<sup>27</sup> Rooming house preservation was one such direction that came out of the plan. Equally important, the plan proposed the community-driven revitalization of publicly-held properties around Queen Street West and Cowan Avenue into affordable housing. The local councillor and city staff took this vision and now the planning process is underway for the Parkdale Hub, which will include affordable housing units, a renovated library space, and spaces for community programs and non-profit organizations.<sup>28</sup>

For PNLT, community-based planning has been indispensable because it responds directly to the question of who gets to have a vision for the future of Parkdale. It often comes down to those who have resources and time to come out to public consultations. Neighbourhood change happens, but ways neighbourhood change happens are not inevitable. The ability to anticipate what's to come and how to develop strategic responses and community-led visions is important to help put community at the forefront of deciding a future. Community-based planning that revolves around the CLT model has been a powerful tool for reimagining a more equitable future for Parkdale.

This work has demonstrated the importance of advancing a more expanded understanding of community control. It is through community-based planning that PNLT has foregrounded a place-based approach, rather than a property-based approach, which tends to focus on real estate acquisition and organizational performance with limited participation in a neighbourhood's political issues. In other words, community control hinges on an iterative relationship between PNLT and a place-based community.<sup>29</sup>

A key condition that led to this expanded notion of community control was that PNLT did not own assets for the first five years. Instead, PNLT focused extensively on community organizing, planning, research, policy advocacy, and neighbourhood visioning. Moreover, PNLT emerged from a wider social-solidarity economy initiative of the original Parkdale People's Economy project. A staff member claims that this time of base building prior to property ownership — setting up a value-driven organizational framework, a place-based commitment to transformative principles, and neighbourhood-wide engagement — contributed to a solid foundation for scaling (int-12).

It is through community-based planning that PNLT has foregrounded a place-based approach, rather than a property-based approach...

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<sup>27</sup> Kuni Kamizaki, *Parkdale Community Planning Study*.

<sup>28</sup> At the time of writing, PNLT has submitted an RFP response proposal for building a sixteen-storey building with 175 units.

<sup>29</sup> For more details see Kuni Kamizaki, *A Case for CLTs in Canada*, and Neighbourhood Land Trust, *Scaling the Community-Based CLT*.

## SECTION FOUR

### DECOMMODIFICATION: REMOVING LAND FROM THE MARKET IS NOT ENOUGH

*I think [there's] the deep discomfort of knowing how expensive it is to actually own and operate buildings.... We're in so much debt. And yet we have all these commitments to community that, from a values perspective, supersede our commitments to ... banks and funding bodies.... Now when we're actually doing the work, we realize what kind of extensive support people need [and] how little money there is (int-01).*

It is a major achievement for CLTs to remove land and homes from the speculative market. Yet, PNLT's experiences as a landlord highlight how property ownership is accompanied by structural constraints.

#### Benefits and limits of the partnership approach

At the early stage, PNLT benefited greatly from its partnership with Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC), who offered organizational infrastructures and connections in the social housing and community development fields in Toronto. As well, various community partners brought expertise and experience in housing operation and support. These partnerships were essential when PNLT did not have a track record of real estate acquisition and management. As some board members attest, partnering with experienced housing organizations and financial institutions such as Vancity Community Investment Bank (VCIB) proved crucial to working with government staff who can be risk-averse when it comes to real estate. Importantly, given the focus on affordable rental housing, this partnership approach illuminated PNLT's important role in responsible asset management.<sup>30</sup>

...partnerships were essential when PNLT did not have a track record of real estate acquisition and management.

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<sup>30</sup> For more details see Kuni Kamizaki, *A Case for CLTs in Canada*, and Neighbourhood Land Trust, *Scaling the Community-Based CLT*.

While a partnership model has many benefits for organizational growth, it poses challenges to exercising the priorities of community development, participatory planning, and tenant leadership. As one staff shares:

*Because we have tried to build an area of specialization around acquisitions, we have relied on operating partners to do the day-to-day management.... I have seen that for the long term there is a contradiction ... between our model of engaging with tenants and the property operator's model ... it's like [a relationship between] a service provider and a service recipient ... that doesn't align with our model of more participatory decision making (int-08).*

A drawback to this partnership approach is that PNLТ has limited opportunities for relationship building with core members. As a staff member succinctly points out, an alignment of values (e.g. social justice) is not necessarily the same as an alignment of organizational practice (int-25). Operating partners have their own systems and day-to-day practices of rent management, tenant outreach, and eviction procedures that may not be compatible with PNLТ's approaches and practices.

However minute these differences in day-to-day practices may be, interviewees observed unresolved disconnections between PNLТ and operating partners. Ambiguities have resulted in miscommunication, lagging-behind maintenance, unintended vacancies, and distrusts among core members. Where operating partners' practices and policies tend to reflect conventional non-profit structures, PNLТ, as one board member put it, "recognizes these imbalances and seeks to create processes, structures, and an environment that mitigates [imbalances and is] more equitable and horizontal" (int-26). The question becomes: if PNLТ and operating partners have a different set of standards as to tenant engagement, then whose view and practice prevail? This question figured in the case of evictions, as described in the Introduction.

### **Becoming a landlord: How the CLТ is governed by regulations**

One systemic issue that the evictions brought to light is the difficulty of operating social housing for vulnerable communities. If someone is not able to pay rent, it becomes an issue of organizational financial health that constrains the ability to pay for necessary repairs and service debt. If someone has disruptive behaviours toward neighbours in the same building, it destabilizes the security and safety of other tenants and the building operation. If someone refuses to have communication and receive support, what options are there?

If someone refuses to have communication and receive support, what options are there?

As a community partner laments, in non-profit housing “there are very few alternative tools” to deal with these challenges (int-03). This is complex for core member tenants in the building who feel the need for safety and security. In these difficult situations, the non-profit sector’s practice becomes eviction as risk mitigation:

*We would love to say there’s just no justification for any eviction at all, because we provide affordable housing.... But we’re a registered charity, and we hold these assets and trust, and we’re by law prohibited from making decisions that risk our ability to hold this asset and trust. We can’t actually adopt this [no eviction] policy currently ... because it would tie our hands with respect to fiduciary responsibilities (int-04).*

It should be noted that the nature of eviction in the context of non-profit housing is not the same as eviction that private landlords deploy to extract more economic returns. For non-profits, issuing an eviction notice is seen as a way to address problems with housing operation such as rent arrears.<sup>31</sup>

PNLT had envisioned housing people that are often seen by other non-profits as hard to house...

Some PNLТ staff and board members thought that PNLТ could challenge this non-profit practice that would resort to eviction. PNLТ had envisioned housing people that are often seen by other non-profits as hard to house due to a range of challenges such as mental health, poverty, trauma, and substance use to name a few. One board member recalls wondering what would happen to those who even PNLТ found difficult to house (int-01).

...the identity of PNLТ was called into question given its origins in anti-displacement, eviction prevention, and housing justice.

As a CLТ that strives for social transformation, it is important to grapple with these systemic issues. As a landlord, it is necessary to consider building-wide management, tenant safety, and obligations to maintain financial health. As a staff member remembers, PNLТ had to grapple with ethically challenging questions such as whether it should compromise housing security for individuals to ensure safety for community (int-27). It was a difficult decision because if tenants were evicted, they could face risks of housing insecurity, displacement, and possibly homelessness. Other board members stress this time as the moment when the identity of PNLТ was called into question given its origins in anti-displacement, eviction prevention, and housing justice.

### Entanglement with the property regime

PNLT staff and board members looked for ways to minimize disruptive impacts on tenants who had to be evicted. They tried helping them transition to another

<sup>31</sup> Among non-profit housing providers, issuing an eviction notice is not uncommon. It is used as a method of communication and outreach to tenants so that housing providers can address issues early and prevent evictions.

home in Parkdale through a network of supportive housing options.

Unfortunately, PNLT was unable to pursue this option because other housing providers have their own access plans with the City of Toronto.

This constraint in supporting tenants represents another systemic issue that the case of evictions exposed — that is, how government rules regulate the social housing system and relationships with community housing organizations. In this web of rules in which PNLT has to operate, PNLT needs to develop a different tenant access plan (i.e. a vacancy management policy) as part of their funding and operating agreements with the City and non-profit housing partners. For example, PNLT uses the Centralized Waiting List for the scattered homes portfolio. Coordinated Access (for people experiencing homelessness) is used for one of the Maynard buildings, while the operating partner's internal referral process is used for the other Maynard building.

Perhaps an even larger question is: who can access community-owned homes under PNLT stewardship? This is not determined through community governance and local autonomy.

...who can access community-owned homes under PNLT stewardship?

One challenge is that tenants from the government-regulated waiting lists may have a difficulty with maintaining their tenancy due to experiences with homelessness, mental health, and addiction. This can affect building operation. From the city-wide equity perspective, creating housing opportunities to vulnerable and equity-seeking community members, no matter where they live, is critical. And yet, from the neighbourhood goal of equitable development and anti-displacement, if PNLT has to use arrangements with operating partners and government mechanisms, then PNLT cannot prioritize Parkdale's own community members who face threats of eviction and homelessness on a day-to-day basis. In addition, although PNLT prioritizes housing access to Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities to advance racial equity, the current vacancy management procedure does not have a mechanism to guarantee this prioritization (int-01).

PNLT's financial health is also constrained by regulations placed through the agreement with the City of Toronto. Government funding for acquisitions, such as the Multi-Unit Residential Acquisition (MURA) Program, is given as a grant by way of a forgivable loan. This arrangement is used as a government mechanism for the enforcement of long-term affordability. Nevertheless, it has created a number of unintended challenges and undesirable obstacles for PNLT. For example, forgivable loans are listed as liabilities, not an asset, which negatively impacts a CLT's balance sheet, especially in the eyes of lenders. It has constrained PNLT's ability to build equity and to access financing.

In the current housing system, property rights prevail over human rights.

Property-based relations are a conduit through which government and non-profit regulatory practices penetrate PNLT's day-to-day practice. In the current housing system, property rights prevail over human rights.<sup>32</sup> Low-income and racialized communities are historically deprived of basic decision-making power over their homes and lives. The CLT model aims to challenge these systemic issues by removing land from speculative real estate markets, bringing it into community stewardship, and centering the voice and experience of historically marginalized and oppressed communities. These forms of decommodification, coupled with community governance, are indeed promising.

PNLT was created out of a struggle against displacement and dispossession. PNLT strives to challenge a property system that structures unequal landlord-tenant relationships. Nevertheless, PNLT maintains and participates in a system of property ownership built on unequal power relations which were manifested in the case of evictions. The right to exclude is central to property relations.<sup>33</sup> What the evictions revealed above all is that PNLT remains entangled within the property regime.

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<sup>32</sup> David Harvey, "The Right to the City," 23-40.

<sup>33</sup> Nick Blomley, *Territory: New Trajectories in Law*.

## SECTION FIVE

### MOVING PNLT IN A DECOLONIZING DIRECTION

*As planning scholar Libby Porter warns: “struggles against dispossession too easily become struggles for possession” (i.e. more acquisition and ownership).<sup>34</sup>*

As we explored in the previous section, however transformative they aspire to be, CLTs are not autonomous from capitalist markets and governmental institutions.<sup>35</sup> Rather, CLTs engage with them to remove and protect land from the speculative market. To this end, a majority of them use a (colonial) tool of property ownership in the context of historical and ongoing processes of settler colonialism.<sup>36</sup> PNLT uses the conventional model of social housing operation that maintains a (legal) category of a landlord, which in turn constrains the CLT model for transformative changes.

Of course, this paradox is readily recognized. As a former board member recalls:

*PNLT acknowledges that it’s engaging in a colonial system of land ownership and in order to be a player, it has to play the existing game and participate in the system. But it does so in a reflective way, like, there’s this kind of constant self-reflection and awareness (int-06).*

This awareness is a necessary first step in acknowledging that to pursue housing justice and social transformation, particularly in a decolonizing direction, removing property from the real estate market and changing ownership is not enough. The question then becomes: if decommodification of land is necessary but insufficient for social transformation, what can be done to

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<sup>34</sup> Libby Porter, “Possessory Politics and the Conceit of Procedure,” 389.

<sup>35</sup> James DeFilippis, *Unmaking Goliath*; Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History*.

<sup>36</sup> Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property*, 3. Brenna Bhandar argues that property (law) is central to settler colonialism because it is “a primary means of realizing the colonial desire for the possession of land.”

address the entanglement with the regime of property ownership, while changing our relationship to land in service of decolonization and racial justice?

### **A community land trust without property?**

"...the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual attachment."

For CLTs, the question is: what is a community land trust without property?

Libby Porter's quote above is a cautionary call for CLTs. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson also suggests that "the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual attachment."<sup>37</sup> This insight prompts us to ask what the opposite of dispossession means to CLTs, beyond more possession and accumulation.

A question raised by Anishinaabe planning scholar Heather Dorries in her essay: *What is Planning Without Property?* is relevant. Namely, is it possible to pursue "practices that affirm connections to place and modes of belonging in ways that do not rely on private property?" For CLTs, the question is: what is a community land trust without property?<sup>38</sup> CLT's efforts for social transformation have to entail the commitment to reparation and decolonization by addressing intergenerational harms of dispossession and displacement caused by property regime and government policies that enshrine it.

### **A decolonizing framework for actions**

In the CLT guide written by those who developed the very first CLT, New Communities Inc., the problems in treating land as a commodity under a property ownership regime, was a significant point of motivation to create a new land tenure model. They claimed that "the goal is to 'restore' the land trust concept rather than initiate it."<sup>39</sup> This claim derives from their understanding of various inspirational examples behind CLT model building — such as Indigenous land stewardship — that existed for a long time but had been ignored or marginalized.

Heeding this call for restoration, I also take inspiration from the "decolonizing governance framework" by the Downtown Eastside Community Land Trust in Vancouver, a newly established grassroots CLT working to acquire and renew Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels through tenant-based initiatives. As outlined in the framework:

*We use 'decolonizing' rather than 'decolonized' because no one today knows what a fully decolonized model looks like, as colonization has so deeply separated all people from their*

<sup>37</sup> Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 43. I would like to emphasize I came across this via Heather Dorries.

<sup>38</sup> Heather Dorries, "What is Planning Without Property?" Also, thanks to members of the Toronto Chinatown Land Trust and Heather Dorries to generate this question together through a dialogue held in 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Swann et al., *The Community Land Trust*, xiii.

*original collective practices. Instead, we use ‘decolonizing’ to mean ‘moving away from colonized ways of thinking’ with the understanding that that is an ongoing process.<sup>40</sup>*

This framework is a useful guide. It helps us see how CLT’s practices of land stewardship and ownership are on a spectrum from the colonized to the decolonized or from colonial practices toward practices that emphasize connection with land, healing, and responsibility of caring. As a PNLT board member reflects:

*I truly believe that PNLT is a steward for positive change ... in moving towards decolonizing our land. Because as an Indigenous person, it’s still an organization owning the land which doesn’t fully align with Indigenous ideas of how the land should work. But ... we’ll say it’s a step in the right direction insofar as more respect is being paid ... to the land, more attention is being placed on the ways in which the people [are] on that land, and not just on the built environment (int-19).*

### **Relationship-based response**

Although evictions called into question core principles of PNLT, they were dealt with in a more democratic, community-based fashion than most non-profit agencies would be able to. This difference is largely thanks to the community governance structure. As one board member remembers:

*[The NLT charitable board] went from saying “Okay, we’ve tried ten attempts to reach so and so person, it just makes sense to issue an eviction notice.” But the [PNLT non-profit] board instead voted like “no, actually, we’re going to do this. And we’re going to do that. And there’s going to be a [eviction] committee.” ... that’s the value of community-based governance, because you have all those people shaping the institution to be different than how they’ve traditionally been, [and shaping] the relationship between landlord and tenant to be not a mercenary one.... Let’s redefine what that looks like, and let PNLT be the trailblazer ... we want to be a different kind of landlord (int-01).*

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<sup>40</sup> DTES CLT, *Decolonizing Governance Framework*. This work on the decolonizing governance framework has been spearheaded by Norm Leech, President of the DTES CLT board, as well as the Elders + Tenants committee that includes tenant members and elders from host nations and other Indigenous communities in BC and from the Japanese Canadian community.

PNLT can strive...by having a more explicit intention and mission of social transformation and community democratic governance.

...PNLT was able to avoid several potential cases of eviction through approaches that center on relationship building...

PNLT can strive to be different from other non-profit landlords by having a more explicit intention and mission of social transformation and community democratic governance. The quote above illustrates PNLT's commitment to the process of community democratic control as well as to moving away from conventional institutionalized non-profit practices that maintain unequal power relations.

I should emphasize that PNLT was able to avoid several potential cases of eviction through approaches that center on relationship building to ease power relations. This approach proved crucial, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some tenants had trouble paying rent. Tenants, who had had traumatizing experiences with former landlords, refused to have contact with PNLT out of fear. This challenge was not easy to address due to the partnership model requiring PNLT staff to work through an operating partner.

A staff member stresses the importance of building trust with tenants however long it may take, because “people have experienced ... horrific, traumatizing moments in their life where landlords or people in power have caused them harm, and where systems have failed them” (int-27). It was after PNLT staff offered support in the form of rent relief and worked to build connections and trust, that tenants started to understand that PNLT is a different kind of landlord and wants to support and keep them housed. PNLT has since worked with the city to secure long-term affordability through Rent-Geared-Income subsidies.

I think that issues of eviction could be reframed from one of tenant management, to one of member engagement. This is not straightforward, because PNLT acquires buildings with existing tenants who can automatically become core members without explicitly endorsing organizational mission and values.<sup>41</sup> As a CLT, however, eviction is exclusion of someone from the membership and its benefits. If eviction is a matter of denying access to membership, then it comes with a different set of ethical considerations and responsibilities for PNLT to assume. As a staff member acknowledges, while it is crucial to strive for no eviction in principle, “there is a point where an individual ... member’s actions can put other people ... [and] the sustainability of building at risk, [PNLT] has a responsibility to intervene ... on behalf of other tenants and the community” (int-27).

### **Transforming how we live, not just how we own**

Through their connection with the Milky Way Garden, Milky Way gardeners — many of whom are Tibetan refugees — affirm the importance of a sense of

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<sup>41</sup> As the research by DeFilippis et al (2019) reveals, just because residents become CLT members, it does not mean they understand the political objectives of CLTs. It is important to engage members in popular education and leadership development opportunities.

connection with land for their experience of self-determination. As one gardener looks back on her journey:

*We've been exiled many times, from Tibet to Nepal to India and then having to move again. With that experience of going through multiple displacements, we feel grateful [to have a relationship to the land] because we didn't have a land. Elders would say there is a reason for everything that happens and there is a karmic relationship that I feel for myself and others to have this relationship to PNLT. That's also one of the reasons that we are motivated to keep being engaged with the land (fg-01).<sup>42</sup>*

Stewarding the Milky Way Garden has given them a sense of belonging. Tibetan gardeners have started to strengthen relationships with other communities and actively participate in neighbourhood planning and housing activism. Now, as the garden adds more capacity in production and programming through investment, they envision the use of space for inter-generational learning on food and cultural practices.

PNLT has supported tenant leadership in animating a backyard space for community building. A core member tenant contrasts this experience with a former private landlord:

*I, initially living here, felt very unwanted and unwelcome on this property, because the [previous] owner still saw like "this is our backyard." And when the PNLT took over, I felt like "Oh, we can utilize the [backyard] space now, and do good things."... I think it goes beyond just providing housing for people. It's like you're trying to create communities. And I think that ... for me, part of utilizing that outdoor space is what makes the community (int-13).*

It is important that she points out the work of PNLT beyond the provision of housing. It is through the process of community involvement that she has been able to experience a greater sense of control over her life and home. Her leadership has inspired others. Another core member explains:

*I would say [a change in the relationship] with the building because we had the tenant who spearheaded the garden outside.... She's helped me redefine my relationship to the property.... I feel responsible that I need to take care of this*

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<sup>42</sup> This quote is based on the simultaneous interpretation.

*specific task.... And in the same way, you feel a certain responsibility to the property, because you're living here (int-10).*

For one member, PNLT's responsible asset management has helped change a relationship with home after decades of disinvestment:

*It really changed my sense of how my home could be treated, because up until then I really felt like myself and my family were the ones who ... had the responsibility to do all of the maintenance that had to be done, even if we didn't have the expertise. [Major building issues] just got left.... Definitely, with the shift in things actually being fixed, my home actually is starting to feel like a home ... I can grow further in it. And you know it makes me want to make my own improvements (int-19).*

Responsible asset management, coupled with dedicated staff's relationship building work, has a qualitative impact on tenants. And community land stewardship has enabled core members to experience how alternatives can positively alter everyday life.

These everyday experiences of transformation are of vital importance. The CLT Summit in Vancouver in 2024 — particularly learning from DTES CLT and Indigenous women-led Sogorea Te' Land Trust — helped PNLT staff and members reflect how PNLT's work embodies an important commitment to decolonization. A staff member offers a critical reflection on the complexity and potential of the CLT model:

*We only own the land a little bit. There's all these rules and regulations from the city and government that also control and have ownership on it.... I find it interesting to be acting as...an organization that can make categorical decisions about these properties.... It's a fallacy for even us to think that we own the land. Personally, I try to ... think ... [that] we are at the moment ... stewarding ... hopefully ... in a way that will allow it to continue to be beneficial to the community as much as possible now and in the long term, in some ways ... [we] try to work towards returning it to something that's not a colonial idea of property ownership (int-23).*

The CLT can be a step in the long-term process of social transformation in a decolonizing direction. As a response to the question of what community control means, one core member suggests:

*[PNLT is] giving the land back to the people, making it more fair for everyone, [and] making a situation where rent prices don't get out of control ... pushing people out of their neighbourhoods ... But I think with that also comes a responsibility [for] ... taking care of that land ... making it beautiful ... making it enjoyable for everyone (int-13).*

These experiences show that land is more than a parcel of lot or a box of shelter. It is embedded in community relations around land stewardship. Community land stewardship is not simply asset management performed on discrete property boundaries but in relation to broader views on the wellbeing of the neighbourhood. As some core members have demonstrated, a different land stewardship approach is possible where tenants are trusted to take leadership in mutual care and basic building maintenance. Social transformation is not just about transforming how we own buildings, but transforming how we live.<sup>43</sup> This calls for the constant organizational practice of stewardship, popular education, and leadership development support.

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<sup>43</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of the Everyday Life*.

## SECTION SIX

# SCALABILITY AND POSSIBILITY GROUNDED IN PRACTICE

...what if scaling is measured in relation to political mobilization and community power?

*We need not resign ourselves to be like helpless bystanders, or, you know, recipients of whatever is handed down to us. That we can effect change is a powerful lesson all by itself (int-02).*

Scaling CLTs is often discussed as a technical issue regarding number of units and properties brought into CLT ownership. Instead, what if scaling is measured in relation to political mobilization and community power?<sup>44</sup>

### Scaling as political mobilization

Politically-engaged CLTs in California are rethinking the practice and meaning of scaling:

*CLT 'scale' is about more than numbers. Grassroots CLTs are part of a racial and economic justice movement, and should be understood as one tool that can be used to address the toxic dynamic between the speculative market and its extraction of wealth from Indigenous land, Black and brown bodies, immigrant workers, and from poor and working-class neighborhoods.<sup>45</sup>*

This statement is particularly salient for opening up a debate on the meaning of scale for grassroots CLTs from the standpoint of movement building.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. The question is inspired by Anna Tsing's discussion on scaling.

<sup>45</sup> Ashley C. Hernandez, Sandra McNeill, and Yasmin Tong, *Increasing Community Power and Health Through Community Land Trusts*.

<sup>46</sup> While this section focuses on political meanings of scaling, PNL T emphasizes the importance of technical capacity in acquisition, financing, asset management, and development for the process of scaling. PNL T also experienced growth of its staff team. While staff members bring different expertise and experience, as some interviewees note, they also have a personal commitment to Parkdale.

### Three political dimensions to scaling

PNLT's experience demonstrates three dimensions to scaling as political mobilization. First, PNLТ has harnessed the increased scale of housing portfolio for **community wealth building**. Possessing more units does not need to be the goal in itself, but a means to achieve broader social goals and organizational missions. For example, PNLТ has used its role as a social landlord to forge a social procurement partnership with Building Up. As one interviewee put it, PNLТ has used its scale of assets as a "big runway" for value-based partnership building and long-term social learning (int-14). Equally important, this community wealth building strategy has opened up the opportunity to position PNLТ as a key base of building a solidarity economy in which struggles over land figure centrally.

...community wealth building strategy has opened up...PNLT as a key base of building a solidarity economy...

Second, PNLТ has pursued **community-driven public policy making**. A place-based approach is integral to PNLТ. Yet, the housing crisis and gentrification are not just local issues, but part of broader public policy issues of growing social and racial inequality. In this sense, pursuing a diversity of multi-scalar strategies that aim to transform connections with extra-local forces and institutional frameworks is critical. Illustrative of this is PNLТ's policy work for the creation of the MURA Program through community-based research and advocacy that translated local issues into public policy issues.

...PNLT's policy work for...the MURA Program through community-based research and advocacy...translated local issues into public policy issues.

This policy work has increased PNLТ's ability to preserve at-risk housing locally while also leveling the playing field for other CLTs and community housing organizations in Toronto. As a participant of the Toronto Community Land Trust Network focus group attests, PNLТ's contribution to the development of MURA benefits not just a few CLTs in Toronto but also the entire community housing sector because it demonstrates the importance of community-led acquisition (fg-02). A local stakeholder testifies wider impacts of PNLТ's acquisition and policy work:

*[The creation of MURA] was a really exciting moment. And ... this whole idea of acquisition funds expanded tremendously in Toronto [and] in a number of provinces. The federal government is giving us direct funding for it, and considering their own version of it. All out of this little thing that was trying to solve a very specific problem in a very specific [place]... I would go so far as to say the City of Toronto's entire approach to affordable housing now centers acquisition as the first choice (int-17).*

Two recent reports from the City of Toronto do in fact position community-led acquisition as a pillar of municipal housing policy.<sup>47,48</sup>

Third, PNLT has played a leadership role in **CLT movement building** at the urban and national scale. Representatives from Toronto-based CLTs emphasize that PNLT has offered a boundless amount of staff time toward capacity building and support for grassroots groups and emerging CLTs in Toronto (fg-02). For example, PNLT supported Kensington Market Community Land Trust's first housing preservation through knowledge sharing and staff mentorship. PNLT staff went to meetings to share their work with other Toronto CLTs including: Circle Community Land Trust, Little Jamaica Community Land Trust, and the Toronto Chinatown Land Trust. Moreover, PNLT has been spearheading the process of network building and its infrastructure support through the Toronto Community Land Trust Network.

Some critics regard the growth of neighbourhood-based CLTs in Toronto as a sign of inefficiency and dispersion, and favour one large-scale CLT. However, PNLT's commitment to support other CLTs helps achieve scaling collectively through the aggregate land holdings of multiple grassroots CLTs — a similar vision to the New York City Community Land Initiative.<sup>49</sup> PNLT's scaling is not driven by competition and funding pressures, but is grounded in active interdependence among CLTs for community control to reshape power relations at multiple scales. PNLT has become part of a broader movement by playing the role of a central server or a backbone organization — similar to the role played by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative for the Greater Boston CLT Network.

Also important is the establishment and facilitation of the Canadian Network of Community Land Trusts (CNCLT) through leadership development, grant writing, and administrative support. Through CNCLT, PNLT's experience — as templates and tools for community governance, housing acquisition, and strategic planning — has been shared beyond Toronto. For example, PNLT pioneered with VCIB to create a community-led investment model for bridge financing. This paved the way for the Ottawa Community Land Trust to build their partnership with VCIB, which enabled their first successful housing preservation.

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<sup>47</sup> Canada, Ontario, City of Toronto. *Generational Transformation of Toronto's Housing System to Urgently Build More Affordable Homes*.

<sup>48</sup> Canada, Ontario, City of Toronto. *Multi-Unit Residential Acquisition (MURA) Program Update*. Under the mayor Olivia Chow, the City of Toronto expanded the MURA Program from \$20-\$40 million annually to \$102 million in 2024. Over the last few years, the MURA program enabled the preservation of over 1,000 affordable rental units (City of Toronto, 2025). In Parkdale alone, six other non-profit housing organizations used MURA to preserve at-risk affordable housing.

<sup>49</sup> Sylvia Morse, *CLTs Gaining Ground in NYC*.

## The process of scaling as the transformation of political action

The process of building and scaling PNLT has served as a collective transformative experience that embodies what social transformation can look like.<sup>50</sup> One core member explains how he got inspired:

*PNLT ... was the first group that I've personally heard of that's involved with bringing land ... buildings and dwellings into community ownership.... Initially when I heard of the PNLT, it was through the Milky Way Garden project.... And to see how that one small project of taking a tiny strip of land and building a community garden, and how it's progressed into taking ownership of small apartment buildings, is a really positive step.... And it's important, because there has to be some kind of counterpoint to ... profit-motivated building (int-10).*

This member followed the growth of PNLT by attending community events, reading articles about PNLT in local magazines, and eventually becoming a core member attending board meetings. It is the process of experiencing the scaling, not just outcomes of scaling per se, that has given him a sense of possibility.

What is equally important is that the process of scaling — building community governance, developing an alternative neighbourhood vision, creating community-owned homes, stewarding a large housing portfolio, and changing public policies — has given those involved the opportunity to experience the political potential of the CLT model through learning-by-doing.

Some core members have started to build a new political subjectivity through engaging in PNLT and taking community action. A long-term board member connects the motivation behind her active leadership in the Milky Way Garden with her understanding of broader impacts PNLT has brought to Parkdale (fg-01). She's seen the difference that's been made by PNLT, not just through the garden but also through the housing advocacy work in Parkdale. Because of these achievements, she feels more empowered to speak out.

As I have emphasized throughout this report, the process of PNLT's scaling has been embedded in community-based planning, policy advocacy, and movement building. This approach has enabled PNLT to conceive political meanings of scaling beyond quantitative growth. The political process of figuring out how a progressive alternative can work is not an abstract exercise but is grounded in neighbourhood experience. It has contributed to challenging the prevailing sense that gentrification is natural and inevitable, and helped people realize that equitable forms of neighbourhood change are possible. One core

...PNLT's scaling has been embedded in community-based planning, policy advocacy, and movement building.

<sup>50</sup> James Meehan, "Reinventing Real Estate," 113-133.

member attests to the experience of political empowerment from his involvement in community organizing at PNLТ as “it offers some sort of a framework...showing that there are alternatives,”(int-10). A staff member summarizes transformative impacts at multiple scales:

*At the micro level, if you look at the community, the transformation is that the community has seen ... they can be agents of change and participate in change.... It’s transformative at the municipal level [because] we’ve done the work on the rooming house preservation policy which led to this new funding program.... Then at the larger systems level ... we’ve seen that the model itself is transforming the idea that ... communities can have a solution (int-08).*

### Reimagining what’s possible

*[PNLT] nourish[es] the imagination because if we can’t imagine solutions or directions ... we just talk about what’s wrong all the time ... [and] we’re not going to get anywhere (int-23).*

As encapsulated in the quote above from a long-term organizer in Parkdale, PNLТ’s work offers progressive reimaginings grounded in actual existing practices to push the boundaries of what we think is possible. As in the case of the Milky Way Garden, PNLТ prioritized defending community-benefiting land use which may not be considered “highest-and-best use.” This enabled the reimagining of what counts as community values. A community partner summarizes the significance of preservation through the CLТ model that enabled “the unimaginable by our typical society:”

*PNLT team made it possible to have a language and a lens and an alternative way of purchasing a piece of land that we never would have been able to even imagine ...The person who bought the residential building [near the garden] wanted to purchase the land so he could have a driveway and a parking garage. ... PNLТ being part of [gardeners and Greenest City stewarding the land for many years] created something that’s completely alternative (int-05).*

...PNLT’s work offers progressive reimaginings grounded in actual existing practices to push the boundaries of what we think is possible.

Similarly, PNLT's rooming house acquisition contributed to the revaluation and reimagining of that housing stock given the history of government abandonment after deinstitutionalization in the 1970s:

*[Rooming house] owners made a profit off the backs of the most vulnerable people because the government abandoned their promises to build supportive housing. [When the government] discharged them from the hospitals ... they re-institutionalized [former patients] in privately owned incarcerated situations.... It's been used as a substitute for what is needed, which is the investment in a stock of social housing (int-23).*

For a long time, rooming houses were considered a politically challenging topic for politicians in Toronto. PNLT has been able to redefine the political meaning of rooming houses by transforming privately-owned rooming houses into community-owned, permanently affordable housing. There are political and cultural meanings that are often suppressed under the pressure of market prices and efficient land use. PNLT's acquisition thus has generated, retained, and expanded the community's shared wealth beyond the accumulation and possession of assets.

PNLT's work has become a reference point for the effectiveness of the non-market, social ownership model. A local stakeholder suggests "PNLT was the straw that broke the back of this notion that only the private market can contribute to housing. It's the pebble that causes the landslide" (int-17). These grounded practices provide a compelling counter-narrative against the mainstream market-led supply approach to urban development and housing.<sup>51</sup>

PNLT has been taking a financial and political risk experimenting with complex housing acquisition, sharing resources, advocating to governments for change, and paving the way for others to follow rather than seeking dominance. Not only analyzing root causes of problems, but also proposing community-driven solutions to local councillors and city staff, is seen by other CLTs in Toronto as pushing the boundaries of what's possible:

*The power of figuring out what the problem is, coming up with the solution, piloting it, and showing it works [built] a track ... we were able to use. The possibility that ... as a community you can propose a solution to the problem you analyze was huge (fg-02).*

PNLT's acquisition... generated, retained, and expanded the community's shared wealth beyond the accumulation and possession of assets.

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<sup>51</sup> John E. Davis, "Common Ground."

PNLT is driven by a long-term vision as well as rooted in people's everyday challenges and pragmatic practices...

Possibility is grounded in PNLT's concrete practice as well as community aspiration for change. This description was echoed during the Toronto CLT Network focus group as one participant maintained that PNLT has helped by "knowing what is the realm of possibilities, and extending that further than what we thought was [possible]" (fg-02). Several other community stakeholders relate this multi-scalar commitment to PNLT's "ability to touch on both systems and on-the-ground work" through community-based planning, research, and project development (int-09). PNLT is driven by a long-term vision as well as rooted in people's everyday challenges and pragmatic practices:

*There's a whole lot of people who are coming up with wonderful visions for the future and [not] having a clue [about] how you actually make them happen in a practical sense. And PNLT has been very interesting, because both of those things have been present at the same time: a vision, but also specific steps and a strategy to get it done (int-17).*

PNLT builds collective initiatives to meet people's everyday needs (e.g. housing) as well as develop people's power, enabling conditions, and long-term strategies for social transformation. This ability is a unique strength "to straddle both the tangible and the transformational," as one stakeholder emphasizes (int-15).

What PNLT has been able to achieve through the process of scaling is to build the CLT movement from the ground up, demonstrating a practice of pushing the boundaries of what is possible, and going through the collective process of reimagining what can be achieved through the CLT model. It demonstrates that scale can be a qualitative difference PNLT members experience in their everyday life and political subjectivity.

### **What comes next?**

If the process of scaling has brought people together to practice and learn PNLT's transformative potential, then what can be a collective experience at the current moment in the post-scaling phase? I believe such a process can be the further exploration of the meaning of "the opposite of dispossession" beyond more possession.

As a local stakeholder in the public sector notes, "we have a lot fewer living models and laboratory for social control of housing" of a sufficient scale to counter the argument of "there is no alternative" to private market-led solutions (int-17). Expectation for PNLT is high. Yet, systemic challenges remain. As examined in the case of evictions and landlord-tenant relationships, a constant pressure of cooptation exists. It is crucial to explore how PNLT can foreground

community governance to steward a scale of assets without becoming an institutionalized landlord.

Despite the expanded service area, PNLТ has reaffirmed its place-based commitment to Parkdale, not a property-based approach to asset management and non-profit governance. This commitment to the “community” in the CLТ — and a more expanded view on community control that goes beyond organizational boundaries — has been a necessary (pre)condition for PNLТ to hold on to transformative principles throughout scaling. This commitment will remain as the most important condition of possibility for PNLТ.

The experience of PNLТ also helps reveal the need to envision CLТs beyond the property regime that is often taken for granted. Decommodification under a different ownership structure is crucial but insufficient for pursuing social transformation in the context of settler colonialism. I have come to see that CLТ’s transformative potential lies not only in transforming how we own land and property but also in transforming how we live and relate to land and home, in a decolonizing direction.

There are already existing tenant-led practices that PNLТ can harness. Popular education and experiential learning opportunities to help resettle the idea of land and property may be important as part of member engagement. In addition, PNLТ can strengthen ongoing learning exchange and informal collaboration with Downtown Eastside CLТ, who has been implementing tenant-led initiatives in SRO building management and mutual support as part of their decolonizing governance framework building.

The current housing operation may have to focus on providing services and supports to respond to individual’s crises and prevent eviction. PNLТ can move away from treating housing simply as dwelling units but promote a holistic view of what constitutes a home in relation to other community resources and connections. As one PNLТ staff envisions, a community-controlled home under CLТ stewardship can prompt people to live differently and support each other in a more cooperative way “when people have safe, secure housing where their soulful interest in living well manifests in new social forms” (int-27). To put it differently, it is critical to explore how PNLТ can contribute to supporting the production of a different collective form of everyday life and a solidarity economy.

It is crucial to explore how PNLТ can foreground community governance to steward...assets without becoming an institutionalized landlord.

CLТ’s transformative potential lies not only in transforming how we own land and property but also in transforming how we live and relate to land and home...

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