

ON COMMON GROUND

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON
THE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST



John Emmeus Davis, Line Algoed,
María E. Hernández-Torrales

EDITORS

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Take a Stand, Own the Land

Dudley Neighbors Inc., a Community Land Trust
in Boston, Massachusetts



Harry Smith and Tony Hernandez

Dudley Neighbors Inc. (DNI) is the community land trust formed in 1988 to serve the Roxbury-North Dorchester area of Boston, Massachusetts. DNI was an outgrowth of years of grassroots organizing and participatory planning by the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI). These two organizations remain tightly intertwined, sharing staff, resources, and a corporate umbrella. More importantly, they share a mission and vision of comprehensive neighborhood revitalization in which community ownership of land and community empowerment of the area's residents go hand-in-hand.

This chapter details the conditions in the Dudley neighborhood that led to the creation of DSNI and the launch of the “Don’t Dump on Us” campaign to address blighted vacant lots in the area. The success of those early anti-dumping campaigns led to a new campaign, “Take a Stand, Own the Land,” and formation of the DNI community land trust. The chapter will describe how the community came together to create a comprehensive revitalization plan and to win eminent domain power from the City of Boston for vacant, blighted land in the Dudley Triangle. The authors will describe the strategies DSNI/DNI used to deeply engage residents in and around DNI’s housing and will explain how the community-owned land in the DNI portfolio leverages the neighborhood’s influence over public and private development throughout the neighborhood.

The chapter will conclude by detailing current efforts to acquire land outside of the original target area, partnering with the City of Boston and others to acquire private land and buildings to turn into mixed-use, affordable developments. DSNI is also playing a key role in supporting the formation of new CLTs in the Boston area and in helping to create a new city-wide organization to promote cooperation and coordination among all of Boston’s CLTs, young and old: the Greater Boston CLT Network.

By sharing the lessons learned from thirty-five years of community organizing, planning, and development, the authors hope to contribute to the growth of the global CLT movement by highlighting the benefits of community control over land.

BACKGROUND

“Affordable housing in perpetuity through Dudley Neighbors Inc. is the gift that keeps on giving for families in our community. The land trust is a powerful tool guided by the voices of residents in low-income communities to ensure that housing is forever affordable and that land is used for the public good.”—Sister Margaret Leonard, long-time DSNI board member

Located less than two miles from downtown Boston, the Dudley area of Roxbury-North Dorchester is a tri-lingual neighborhood of more than 25,000 African-American, Latin American, Cape Verdean, and White residents where English, Spanish and Cape Verdean Creole is spoken.

Dudley’s population is among the poorest and youngest in Boston. Approximately 27% of the area’s population falls below the poverty line, as defined by the federal government. More than 40% of the neighborhood’s households earn less than \$25,000 annually and the neighborhood’s high unemployment rate of 15% is more than twice the city-wide average. A few other statistics set the stage for our story: 18% of Dudley’s residents are 14–24 years of age; 40% of the neighborhood’s households contain children who are younger than 18 years; 26% of adults in the neighborhood do not have a high school degree; and 62% of Dudley’s households are considered “cost burdened” by virtue of spending more than 30% of their household’s income for the housing they occupy.

THE BIRTH OF DSNI: “DON’T DUMP ON US!”

By the 1980s, Dudley contained a staggering amount of vacant land — a total of 1300 parcels — representing nearly a third of the acreage of the entire neighborhood. This was a consequence of three decades of disinvestment, redlining, abandonment, poorly planned urban renewal, and arson-for-profit. The neighborhood had also become an illegal dumping ground for trash from around the city and state. In the dead of night and in broad daylight, trucks would roll into the neighborhood and deposit on the neighborhood’s vacant lots old cars, old refrigerators, rotten meat, toxic chemicals, and debris from construction sites.

“When I first came here, all I remember is trash and vacant lots and house fires,” says Evelyn Correa, a current DSNI board member. “All of a sudden you would see a home go up in flames and we would say, ‘That must have been for the insurance.’”

In 1984, the Riley Foundation, one of the larger charitable foundations in Massachusetts, decided to focus on the revitalization of Dudley after touring the neighborhood's most blighted sections with leaders of local nonprofit organizations. The Dudley Advisory Group was created, made up mostly of community development corporations and social services organizations doing work in the area. On October 15, 1984, with 22 people in attendance, the group voted unanimously to establish a new organization. Three months later, it was given the name of the "Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative."

When the grand plans envisioned by this new initiative were first presented to the neighborhood, however, "all hell broke loose," as one of the participants in that roll-out meeting later described it. Neighborhood residents challenged the Advisory Group's assertion that this was to be an initiative of, by, and for the community. Local resident Che Madyun asked the Advisory Group, "How many of you people up there live in this neighborhood?" When only one hand was raised, there was an angry demand from the floor for resident control of the planning process — and of the organization itself.

This triggered a fundamental reconsideration of the assumptions behind DSNI, forcing the Dudley Advisory Group to go back to the drawing board. The Riley Foundation and the nonprofit organizations that had backed the original approach were quick to accept the demand for resident control. They immediately began weaving this principle into the bylaws being drafted for the new organization. A governing board with thirty-one members (later expanded to thirty-five) would have a resident majority. Minimum representation would be guaranteed for each of the neighborhood's four major cultures: African-American, Cape Verdean, Latino, and White.

The election of the inaugural board of directors occurred on April 27, 1985. More than 100 people were in attendance, filling the front pews of St. Patrick's Church. Local resident leaders were elected as the co-chairs. The following year, the board unanimously approved a new slate of officers, with Che Madyun being named DSNI's president.

In 1986, DSNI hired Peter Medoff, a veteran community organizer, as its first executive director. He won the job at DSNI because he emphasized the need for community organizing and community empowerment to remain at the center of the new organization's plans for the neighborhood's physical, social, and economic revitalization.

As the organization completed its initial process of extensive door knocking and surveying of local residents and merchants, it became clear that the issue of illegal dumping and blight was the issue where DSNI would need to start. The "Don't Dump on Us" campaign was created to clean up vacant lots, to stop illegal dumping, and to force government oversight of the large number of poorly regulated trash-transfer stations in the neighborhood. Residents organized their own clean-up efforts, while pushing the City of Boston to take greater responsibility for removing garbage, construction debris, and abandoned cars from City-owned and privately owned vacant lots.

TAKE A STAND, OWN THE LAND: THE CREATION OF DUDLEY NEIGHBORS INC.

“DNI was created to carry out the neighborhood’s redevelopment strategy. Instead of simply responding to plans created by private developers or the City, we created the community land trust as the vehicle to exercise community control over our land. The land trust helps us sustain our vision and make it a reality.”—Bob Haas, long-time DSNI leader

By 1987, DSNI had successfully pressured the City to close three illegal trash-transfer stations and had made progress in cleaning up vacant lots. Leaders came to understand that in order to realize the dream of community revitalization, DSNI would need to move from organizing against harmful practices such as dumping to planning proactively for future development of the neighborhood. Only in this way would the community be able to break out of the deadly cycle of real estate speculation followed by disinvestment that had plagued the area for decades. After an intensive process of bottom-up participatory planning, DSNI completed The Dudley Street Neighborhood Comprehensive Revitalization Plan, which laid out a blueprint for rebuilding the neighborhood. At its center was an overall commitment to development without displacement. DSNI then wielded the community power it had built over the course of earlier organizing campaigns to convince the City of Boston to abandon the master plan that had been drafted by city officials and to adopt DSNI’s community-generated plan as its own.

Two years later, DSNI made history by becoming the first and only community-based organization in the United States to win the power of eminent domain. DSNI had begun assembling the funds to implement its Comprehensive Revitalization Plan, including the promise of a \$2 million Program Related Investment from the Ford Foundation. But absentee owners of the neighborhood’s vacant parcels were reluctant to sell their land to DSNI. They had caught the scent of potential profits in the air. The City of Boston was in the process of rebuilding the subway line on the neighborhood’s western edge, a massive investment in public infrastructure. Private speculators had taken note and begun to buy up lands and buildings in the neighborhood.

In 1988 when the DNI community land trust was formed, approximately thirty of the sixty-four acres of land in the Dudley Triangle consisted of blighted, vacant lots, with fifteen acres owned by the City of Boston and fifteen acres owned by private individuals or corporations. Because of the organizing and advocacy of DSNI, city officials were willing to transfer the fifteen acres of City-owned land to DNI. However, because the City-owned land was scattered among the privately-owned lots, DSNI’s leaders realized that it would be a nearly impossible task to assemble enough contiguous land to carry out the community’s development vision. The majority of the private holdings were tax

delinquent, but given the length of the tax foreclosure process, it would take years to acquire these parcels. In order to more quickly achieve a critical mass of land for development, the organization decided that acquiring the privately-owned land by eminent domain was the only way to accomplish their ambitious urban village plan.

DSNI's leaders began a new campaign of grassroots organizing in 1989, as they lobbied Mayor Flynn and the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) to grant DSNI the power to assemble contiguous sites that were large enough for building the affordable housing contemplated in the Comprehensive Revitalization Plan. "Take a Stand, Own the Land" was the campaign button that was distributed throughout the neighborhood. Residents were asking for the legal right to compel the absentee owners of vacant land in the central part of the neighborhood, the 64-acre Dudley Triangle, to sell their land for a fair price to DSNI. On November 10, 1989, the BRA board voted unanimously to grant the power of eminent domain to DSNI.

On the advice of DSNI's attorney, David Abromowitz, who was made available on a *pro bono* basis by one of Boston's most prestigious law firms, DSNI established a subsidiary corporation in 1988, Dudley Neighbors Inc. Structured and operated as a community

How do you avoid
displacing the very people
you are trying to help?

land trust, DNI was set up not only to exercise the power of eminent domain in acquiring land within the Dudley Triangle; it was also established to retain ownership of land forever, holding it in trust for present and future generations.

By holding onto the land — and by employing long-lasting ground leases to control the use and resale of whatever was built on its land — DNI positioned itself to be the permanent steward of affordable housing, commercial space, and other buildings that, in time, were to be constructed on its parcels. The goal, in every case, was to maintain the affordability of these buildings forever, while also preventing foreclosures during downturns in the local economy.

Community-owned land was to be an antidote to the ultimate dilemma of community development: How do you avoid displacing the very people you are trying to help? In the words of Paul Yelder, the first director of Dudley Neighbors Inc., "How do you improve a neighborhood, but still make it accessible, make it affordable?"

Placing the community land trust within a subsidiary corporation allowed DSNI to maintain its focus on community organizing and participatory planning, while ensuring that the community's vision and plans were carried out. In 1990, as a new decade began, DSNI adopted a new slogan, "Building Houses and People Too," highlighting its commitment to a holistic approach to Dudley's revitalization. The construction of affordable housing, parks, and playgrounds was a priority; but community organizing was deemed to be just as important.

BUILDING AN URBAN VILLAGE IN THE DUDLEY TRIANGLE AND BEYOND

“I’m a city girl. I appreciate having a house in Boston that I can afford. And especially with the prices of houses now, I don’t know how people could afford it. The fact that I got my house is a blessing.”—Diane Dujon, DNI homeowner

Through the use of eminent domain and a deep partnership with the City of Boston, DNI had managed to acquire nearly all of the public and private vacant lots in the Dudley Triangle by 2019, giving the land trust control of more than thirty of the sixty-four acres in the Triangle. These vacant lots have been transformed into 227 high-quality, permanently affordable homes — including owner-occupied houses, cooperatives, and nonprofit rentals. The land trust’s holdings also include two acres of community farms, a greenhouse, and neighborhood parks, playgrounds, gardens, commercial space, and other amenities of the urban village that Dudley residents had envisioned as they were organizing to clean up vacant lots.

The creation of hundreds of new, permanently affordable homes over the last 25 years on the sites of formerly abandoned, blighted lots has had an incredible impact on the Dudley community. The homes include ninety-seven homeownership units, seventy-seven limited-equity cooperative units, and fifty-three rental units, reflecting the desire to provide housing opportunities to families with a broad range of incomes. In accordance with the neighborhood plan, the majority of rental, cooperative, and ownership units have three bedrooms and are targeted to families earning between 30%–60% of Area Median Income, approximately \$30,000–\$60,000 for a family of four. In fact, recent surveys of families living in DNI homeownership units show that more than half of the families earn less than \$40,000/year, and yet are able to enjoy the benefits of owning their own homes.

The resale formula employed by DNI on homeownership units places an emphasis on stability and long-term ownership, with an owner’s equity increasing each year that the owner stays in the home.

The positive impact of the revitalization of the Dudley Triangle can be measured in many ways: improved public safety; higher rates of homeownership, compared with the surrounding community; and a high level of resident satisfaction, as reported in the regular quality-of-life surveys that DSNI conducts.

“My dream was always to own my own home, but with the housing situation in Boston, everything was always so expensive,” says Evelyn Correa, who was able to buy a home on the land trust in 2010 and has served as president of the Dudley Neighbors Inc. board for the past five years. “Now I just love having my little house. I hope to hand it down to my kids.”



Figs. 16.1. Neighborhood revitalization, Dennis Street to Winthrop Street, before and after.

Diane Dujon, another homeowner in the land trust who has lived in Roxbury and Dorchester her whole life, says that one of the most important things to her about the land trust is that “it stabilizes the neighborhood. Once people move into their home, they don’t leave, so I know my neighbors. We watch out for each other and help each other out.”

Stabilization is a consequence of stewardship. DNI is able to preserve the affordability of any homes that are built on its land, no matter how hot Boston’s real estate market may become. But there is also stability that comes from DNI’s ongoing support for its homeowners and renters, helping them to stay in their homes, even when the economy goes bad. DNI staff build trusting relationships with residents and lenders. When necessary, DNI will invoke its power of “Consent to Mortgage” to prevent predatory lenders from

marketing a destabilizing mortgage product in the Dudley neighborhood. The impact of this level of engagement and oversight is dramatic: while the larger neighborhood suffered more than two hundred foreclosures during the Great Recession, 2008–2013, there were no foreclosures of DNI homes over the same span of time. The entire portfolio has had only four foreclosures in 25 years, making the land trust an island of stability in a volatile real estate market. This is consistent with the performance of CLT homes across the nation. From 2008–2010, during the height of the foreclosure crisis, fewer than 1% of CLT homes across the country were foreclosed on, compared to 5% of total mortgage loans.

In keeping with the community's vision of an urban village, DNI has also stepped up efforts to develop retail and commercial spaces on land that it owns. DNI is currently partnering with a local community development corporation to build a commercial building on one of the last vacant lots in the Triangle. This project will fill a large gap in the business district and provide opportunities for new retail spaces to meet the needs of local residents.

As the final vacant lots in the Dudley Triangle have been developed and as the red-hot Boston real estate market has brought new threats to the stability of the Dudley neighborhood, DNI leaders have developed new strategies to add housing and commercial spaces to the land trust's portfolio. The most dramatic step was taken in 2017 when DNI acquired a former bank building in nearby Upham's Corner, with acquisition funds and technical support provided by the City of Boston. It was an historic move for the land trust, as it marked the first significant purchase of a property by DNI in many years and the first major acquisition of property outside of the Dudley Triangle. The goal of the project is to develop a mixed-use building that will include affordable housing, some of which will be reserved for artists, commercial space, and cultural spaces. This project will further the community's vision to transform Upham's Corner into an "Arts Innovation District" that will include the revitalization of the Strand Theater and the creation of a new public library. Because of DNI's successful track record, residents are hopeful that it will be possible to improve neighborhood arts amenities without raising rents and without displacing local families, businesses, and artists who have built the culture of Upham's Corner for generations.

In addition to pursuing new housing and commercial development opportunities, DNI is also utilizing the land trust model to promote community development through urban agriculture. Urban farms and gardens have always been a part of the vision and plan for revitalizing the Dudley neighborhood, a strategy to increase access to local food and to create open spaces that benefit the community. In 2004, DNI built a 10,000 square-foot community greenhouse on the site of a former auto body shop. DNI owns the underlying land and leases out the greenhouse to a local nonprofit partner, The Food Project, along with nearly two acres of urban farmland. The Food Project trains young people to operate

farms and to organize farmers' markets serving neighborhood residents. DNI has also partnered with the Urban Farming Institute (UFI) to develop new neighborhood farms that will be managed by local residents who have graduated from UFI's farmer training program. The land trust model provides long-term stability to groups leading the urban farming movement in Boston and helps to fulfill the community's desire for open space and access to healthier food.

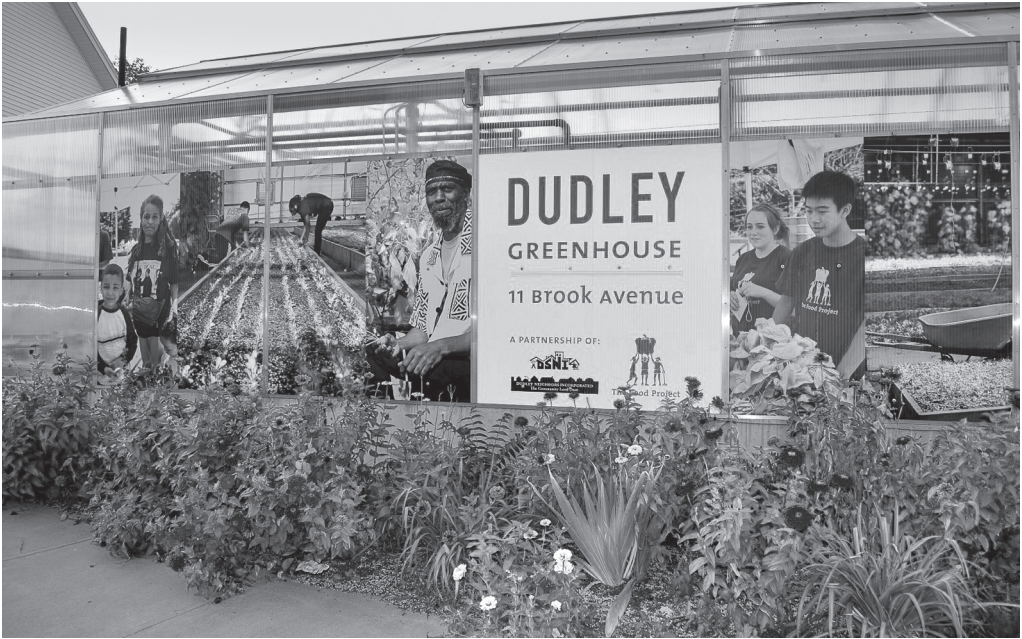


Fig. 16.2. Greenhouses operated by The Food Project on land leased from Dudley Neighbors Inc.

PUTTING THE “C” IN COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

“Many scholars and housing activists view market forces and housing affordability as mutually antagonistic: either a community remains affordable for its low-income residents, or it attracts capital investment, development and growth. If there is a way out of this fundamental contradiction, Boston’s Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) has found it. . . . The strong organizing base of the DSNI has created a unique resident-driven model of planning. This is in stark contrast to the conventional path by which city government develops a master plan before seeking community input.”

—Fannie Mae Foundation, “Just-Right Neighborhoods” (2000)

From the founding of the organization, DSNI leaders realized that cleaning up lots and stopping illegal dumping were not enough. Without community control over planning and land use decisions, the neighborhood’s residents would just continue to react to the next threat that came down the road. During that time, the City of Boston had in

Intensive focus on community engagement and leadership development is the key to DSNI’s long-term success.

fact developed a master plan for the Dudley neighborhood, but they had neglected to involve community residents in their planning process. DSNI’s “Take a Stand, Own the Land” campaign and the planning that accompanied it resulted in the City tearing

up its plan and endorsing the DSNI vision. For the first time in Boston, residents, merchants, and youth — most of whom had never been engaged in urban planning — were able to come together to develop a plan that incorporated the principle of “development without displacement” into a City-approved master plan.

Thirty-five years later, DSNI and its community land trust are still organizing and involving both the people who live in DNI’s housing and the people who live in the surrounding neighborhood. This intensive focus on community engagement and leadership development is the key to DSNI’s long-term success and highlights one of the biggest impacts of successful CLTs. Rather than focusing only on the success and maintenance of CLT properties, DSNI integrates CLT residents into its organizing and planning initiatives to build community power and to improve the quality of life for the whole neighborhood.

DSNI’s leaders view the CLT model as one of a number of tools they use to ensure strong resident engagement in land use decisions over the long-term. Through its Sustainable Development Committee, which reviews all private development projects to assess their adherence to the neighborhood’s development vision, DSNI has been able to organize residents to shape private development in the neighborhood, ensuring that projects meet the standards established in DSNI’s community plans, including affordable housing and access to local jobs.

“In addition to getting involved in CLT activities, land trust residents also serve on the board and committees of DSNI and play leadership roles on issues across the neighborhood,” according to Tony Hernandez, Director of Dudley Neighbors Inc. “In this way, the CLT is able to be an effective steward of the land, while remaining in service to DSNI’s larger vision of development without displacement and community control of the land.”

Although winning eminent domain authority by the City has been rightly viewed as one of the major accomplishments of DSNI, there have been other lesser-known mechanisms that have sustained DSNI’s power over private development in Dudley. For example, in 1999, DSNI and the City’s Department of Neighborhood Development signed a Memorandum of Understanding that stipulated that DSNI would conduct the community planning process for City-owned land in the Dudley neighborhood. In the Dudley neighborhood, DSNI and the City continue to jointly convene community land use and housing design meetings, issue requests for proposals, and designate developers.

The combination of DSNI’s role as community planner and DNI’s stewardship of land means that residents are fully engaged in land use decisions in a large portion of the neighborhood. In the words of a long-time DSNI board member, “Developing a shared vision is absolutely crucial. By developing a shared vision, people come to sense that anything is possible. People really come to believe that.” The results of this deep engagement are clear: in addition to the 227 homes that have been built on DNI’s land, nearly 1,000 affordable homes have been produced or preserved elsewhere in the neighborhood by other nonprofit and for-profit developers because of DSNI’s organizing and advocacy, an effort led by the organization’s Sustainable Development Committee. This is a reflection of DSNI’s power to affect land uses throughout the neighborhood.

SUPPORTING THE CITY-WIDE GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF CLTs

Despite the successes of the community in creating and preserving affordable housing through the land trust and larger advocacy efforts, the Dudley neighborhood is dealing with new threats as the development boom in Boston intensifies. Resident-led improvements have led to the neighborhood facing outside investors seeking opportunities for development and new, wealthier residents moving in. The opportunity for DNI to acquire vacant parcels of land at little or no cost is a thing of the past, as private developers move into sections of the neighborhood they would not have touched a decade ago. These circumstances are not unique to Dudley; similar patterns are apparent across Boston and neighboring towns. In response, DSNI and ten neighborhood groups from across the city launched the Greater Boston Community Land Trust Network in 2015. The goal of this regional effort is to expand the CLT model and to work with allies to make a city-wide push for the kind of community control over land disposition, ownership, and development that has been won in the Dudley neighborhood.

“This launch is coming at a critical moment in Boston history,” said Harry Smith, DSNI’s former Director of Sustainable Economic Development, speaking at the press conference announcing the Network’s creation. “As one of the fastest-gentrifying cities in the United States, we’re here to either claim the future of our neighborhoods . . . or risk losing them to gentrification and displacement.”

With the formation of the Greater Boston Community Land Trust Network, DSNI is working towards its goal of building the capacity of partners in other neighborhoods to develop resident-led plans, to control land-use decisions, and to take ownership of land in their own communities. Over the past year, several new CLTs have formed in the Boston area with the Network’s support and assistance, including the Chinatown CLT, Somerville CLT, Boston Neighborhood CLT, and the Urban Farming CLT, creating a sense of momentum and solidarity across multiple neighborhoods. With a growing membership, the Network is also serving as a vehicle to advocate for municipal policies and public resources that will promote development without displacement across the entire city.

CONCLUSION

In the documentary film, *Arc of Justice*, Charles Sherrod, one of the founders of New Communities Inc., the nation’s first CLT, says, “All power comes from the land.” This is undoubtedly true. At the same time, the experience of DSNI and the DNI bears witness to the political reality that the reverse is true as well: “All land comes from community power.” The leaders of DSNI and DNI have come to believe that the only way to realize the community’s vision over the long-term is to meld the community ownership and governance features of the CLT with sustained organizing and planning in order to get land and to use it wisely for the benefit of the entire community.

As DNI’s Director, Tony Hernandez says, “Without a clear vision and development plan that has been created by neighborhood residents and without structures in place to monitor and to oversee the development of that vision, the CLT will not be effective in the long run.” Or, in the words of a long-time community leader, “Usually we, the community, are fighting to have a seat at the table to fight for affordability and avoid displacement. But because of the land trust, I’m proud to say that we not only have a seat at the table, we *own* the table.”

