

Recommoning Ground: Community Land Trusts and Urban Commons

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Abstract

Recommending Ground:
Community Land Trusts and Urban Commons

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The most pressing problems facing cities are rooted in the relationship between people and commodified lands. Community Land Trusts (CLT) are models that have potential to not only address these issues, but also the urban housing affordability crisis by cultivating a more enriching and life-affirming urban fabric. CLTs decommodify land, removing it from private property regimes. In so doing, CLTs disrupt capitalist dynamics and present favorable opportunities for the emergence of urban commons. Urban commons promote the wellbeing and uplift of people and places through organization around shared resources (Kornberger and Borch, 2015; Stavrides, 2016). This thesis examines private property ownership and alternative land relations, recapitulates the history and theory of CLTs and urban commons, examines the housing affordability crisis, identifies urban typologies where a CLT-as-urban-commons model could be applied, and provides a design strategy for the cultivation of this model. It asks: can CLT models open up pathways toward more resilient urban futures? Can CLT models be a basis for urban commons? What happens when we shift our relationship with landscape from one based on exchange value to one based on the cultivation of community? I investigate these questions using methods of literature review, historical research, mapping, and speculative visioning. I draw together scholarship on alternative land tenure models, housing affordability and displacement, and the urban commons, and synthesize these theories with landscape architectural design practices. I conclude that (1) CLTs have great potential as sites of urban commons, (2) that landscape architecture has a critical role to play in the cultivation of CLTs-as-urban-commons, and (3) that urban commons have the power to transform community members' relations with each other, with the urban environment, and with landscape itself.

RECOMMONING GROUND

COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS AND URBAN COMMONS

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Lastly, this thesis is an expression of the joy and gratitude I feel sharing this Earth with all beings, human and non-human. Thanks to everyone who has helped me discover my sense of place and belonging on this planet.

May all beings be happy, peaceful, and liberated.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis questions the fundamental medium of landscape architecture: land itself. The project reconsiders human relations with land, from private property to alternative ways of relating to land as containing shared resources. I begin by considering land relations, exploring private property ownership as a type of land relation, as well as alternative framings. These include the use-value land relation, the notion of landscape citizenships, and the kinship relations rooted in North American Indigenous cultures. I go on to examine the urban housing affordability crisis, access to affordable housing, alternative models of land tenure, community land trusts (CLTs), and urban commoning. CLTs are explored as a model of decommodifying land, creating affordable housing and transitioning away from speculative market regimes and the private property land relationship. More importantly, I ask how CLTs might serve as a basis for the physical manifestation of urban commons and commoning practices. Crucially, I consider the role landscape architecture can play in cultivating the urban commons, and propose an urban commons design strategy for CLTs. The following questions guide this project:

1. Can CLT models not only create pockets of sustained affordability in the city, but also open up other pathways toward more resilient urban futures?
2. Can CLT models be a basis for urban commons?
3. What happens when we radically shift our relationship with landscape from one based on exchange value to one based on the cultivation of community?

I conclude that (1) CLTs have great potential as sites of urban commons, (2) that landscape architecture has a critical role to play in the cultivation of urban commons, and (3) that urban commons have the power to transform not only community members' relations with each other and with the urban environment, but with landscape itself.

QUESTIONING LAND RELATIONS

In the United States (US) (as well as in other societies, especially to the extent that each was subject to European colonization), land is treated as a commodity (Linklater, 2013). This frames land as an externalized object whose value is determined by market exchange. I term this land relation the private property ownership land relation, or simply private property ownership. Where it is introduced, this relation tends to outcompete and supplant other forms of land relations (Linklater, 2013). Private property ownership shapes how those enmeshed in its logic relate to land. In reference to landscape architecture, it shapes the landscape itself (Blomley, 2004), and constrains how landscape architects think about designing landscapes.

What are the implications of this way of relating to land for the built environment and for communities? What if we related to land differently, not as a commodity in the marketplace but as a common resource that supports the vitality of local communities? How would landscape design change if land were understood to be a subject in a reciprocal relationship of nurturing and cultivation, rather than an object whose primary value is monetary? How would experiences of urban life change if urban land became the basis for a culture of mutual support and access to the necessities of life?

Figure 1.1 illustrates the conceptual framework developed in this thesis in response to these questions. I argue that decommodifying land has the potential to radically transform urban environments by fundamentally changing how community members relate to land. In recent years, CLTs have gained recognition as promising tools to create long-term housing affordability and counteract gentrification and displacement (DeFilippis et al., 2018; Ehlenz, 2019; Greenstein and Sungu-Eryilmaz, 2007). The creation of housing conditions that allow community members to stay in place as a primary feature of CLTs is an important facet of the community conditions that enable a robust urban commons (Choi et al., 2018). However, the act of decommodifying land that leads to housing affordability is in itself a radical move, one that begins to depart from the private property paradigm and lays the foundation for communities of urban commoning (Bunce, 2016; DeFilippis et al., 2019).

CLT models share qualities with urban commons. Urban commons are urban conditions that differ from both public and private lands, and are characterized by shared use of resources, access to space, and relationships of interdependence (Kornberger and Borch, 2015; Stavrides, 2016). Both CLTs and urban commons are centered on the decommodification of shared resources, and draw participants into novel social relations that fall outside existing categories of public and private. I argue that intentional landscape design can reinforce these shared qualities and allow CLTs to function more effectively as urban commons,

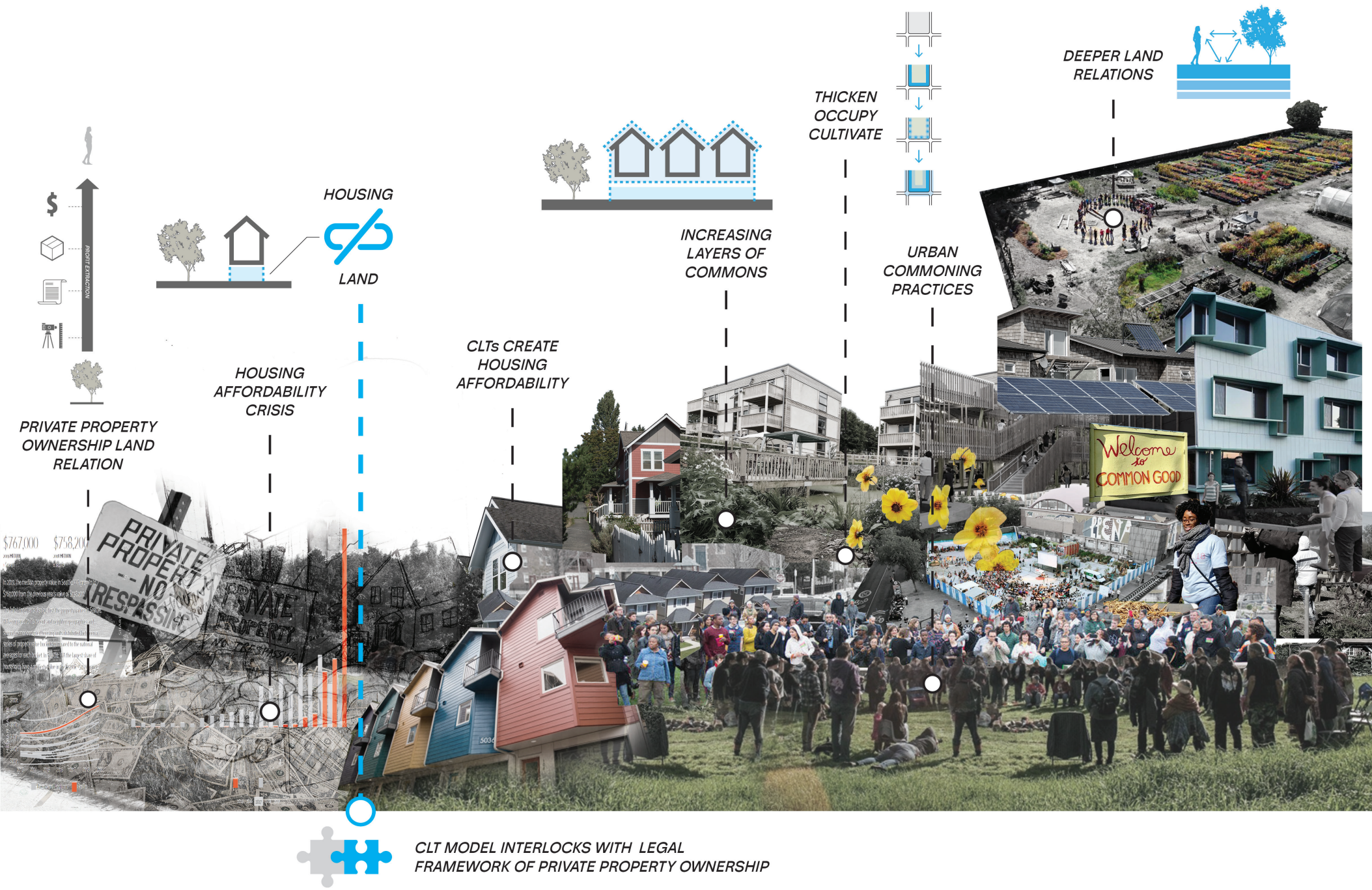


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework. CLTs interlock with the legal framework of private property ownership, but open the door to decommodified futures of urban commoning, and prosocial land relations.

becoming dynamic nodes of rupture with the surrounding urban fabric. Urban commons grounded in the decommodification of land change the way that community members relate to one another and to the land. My fascination with this potential serves as the basis for this thesis.

WHY ME?

I agree with scholars such as DeFilippis, Stromberg, and Williams who argue that the radical potential of CLT models is underexplored, both in theory and practice (DeFilippis et al. 2018; DeFilippis et al., 2019). Many CLTs operate narrowly as mere purveyors of affordable housing and downplay the transformative potential embedded in the model. However, the decommodification of land represents a fundamental rupture with the economic logic that underpins society. While this rupture does not necessarily imply revolution, it does point toward futures that are difficult to imagine within the prevailing economic order.

Why is land treated as a commodity? I have always been skeptical of the notion that a parcel of land, a place with its own thick histories, relationships, dynamic communities of organisms, and connections far and near can be arrogated to an individual. What sense is there in making such richly complex networks of life, built up over uncountable lifetimes, subject to the whims of one short-lived human? How can the value of

land be reduced to a dollar amount? In other words, private property ownership of land has always felt a bit absurd to me. On the one hand, it's clear that we as a species are deeply interdependent with land. On the other, the full depth of this interdependency remains beyond our ways of knowing. This way of thinking about and experiencing land is at the base of my fascination with and love for landscape and why I chose to pursue landscape architecture.

I connect the private property ownership land relation to the crises evident in urban areas today, particularly the connected crises of housing affordability and homelessness. Framing land as a commodity within a market regime creates the economic imperative to extract value from it (Linklater, 2013). The urban crisis of housing affordability follows from land development policies and patterns that are rooted in market dynamics (Colburn and Aldern, 2022). I believe that private property ownership is a flawed way of relating to land. Land represents a rich complexity of biological and material processes and relationships unfolding across multiple scales of space and time. Private property ownership reduces all of this into a tidy package that gets labeled with an exchange value: it thus utterly fails to capture the depth of human interdependence with land. As a result, land use decisions founded within regimes of private property ownership are bound to produce outcomes with serious negative consequences for the health of the land and the wellbeing of people.

To offer a balanced view, I strive here to be critical of both capitalist economic practices and proposed alternatives. I respect that all systems have benefits as well as drawbacks. It is important to avoid the pitfall of knee-jerk criticism of capitalism, mostly because alternative systems and practices often get cast as panaceas. Additionally, I approach these topics from a highly privileged position. As a white, upper-middle-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual male, I am a beneficiary of many of the advantages that our systemically inequitable society bestows. Conscientious of my positionality, my aim is to undertake the work of criticizing the status quo with humility.

REALIGNING LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

This thesis has relevance to landscape architecture in two ways. First, as designers of the built environment, landscape architects must question how land itself is conceptualized and treated, not only through the lens of design, but also through the lenses of culture, policy, and economics. These lenses shape the incentives, constraints, needs, and desires that precede site design. In fact, the reconceptualization of land not as a commodity but as a nexus of reciprocal relationships has ramifications for the notion of “site” itself. How does the conceptualization of a site change if the frame of ownership over the land is removed? Second, landscape design changes as a result of land decommodification.

Decommodification and urban commons imply a markedly different set of incentives, constraints, needs and desires in comparison to private property ownership (Stavrvides, 2016). With this thesis, I offer a design strategy that aims to embody and cultivate these dynamics. Porosity, malleability, and openness characterize an urban fabric that operates according to this strategy.

STRUCTURE AND SCOPE

In Chapter 1, “Land Relations,” I consider four types of land relations, exploring the private property ownership land relation, the use-value land relation, the notion of landscape citizenships, and the kinship relations rooted in North American Indigenous cultures. The question of how these different relations are manifested in policies that shape built environments is foundational to the project. The historical research on which this chapter draws is important to understand the connections between cultural understanding of land relations, its registrations in built form, and how these change over time

In Chapter 2, “The Crisis of Housing Affordability and Affordable Alternatives,” I discuss the urban housing affordability crisis. I look at its causes and consequences. I focus on the important connection to private ownership of land, asking how the proximal causes of the crisis

are fundamentally related to private property ownership land relation. I also consider affordable housing alternatives including public housing and limited equity housing cooperatives (LIHC). I use market research to ground my understanding of the causes and manifestations of the housing affordability crisis. This research also informs my approach to imagining the impacts of non-market land tenure on surrounding urban fabric.

Chapter 3, “Community Land Trusts,” is a detailed look at the history, structure, function, neighborhood effects, and psychosocial dynamics of CLTs. I pay particular attention to CLT models as tools for decommodifying land, and the land relations embedded in this strategy. I consider potentials for CLTs to diverge from private property ownership and the land relation it supports.

In Chapter 4, “Urban Commoning: Practices and Thresholds,” I explore urban commons and urban commoning. I first provide an overview of common-property theory, of which urban commons theory is an outgrowth. The chapter goes on to explore urban commons, urban commoning, and commoning practices. The notion of urban commons as threshold spaces emerges as a concept of central importance, bridging the highly conceptual and often amorphous theorization of urban commons with spatial design considerations. Finally, I discuss the connections between urban commons and CLT models, and focus on how CLTs can serve as

the basis for the dynamic, fluctuating set of actions and relationships that compose urban commoning.

After discussing the concepts and inner-workings of CLT models and the urban commons, in Chapter 5, “Landing,” I synthesize these into a design strategy for CLTs called “Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate.” This three-pronged strategy aims to foster practices of urban commoning that in turn cultivate a network of novel social relations and actions that can be called urban commons. I then turn to a real-world example to ground test how the design strategy might play out in space. I focus on Bellingham, Washington, a mid-sized city experiencing housing affordability challenges. I map housing prices, development zones, and measures of housing pressure to identify neighborhoods where my design strategy might be effectively applied. I home in on the Sehome neighborhood, and use mapping and on-the-ground investigation to identify an advantageous site within Sehome. Employing a practice of speculative visioning, I imagine the site’s acquisition and development under the CLT model, and utilize the “Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate” strategy to intervene in the urban landscape and offer a vision of the CLT-as-urban-commons.

Finally, the thesis concludes by offering a summation and reflection on the role of landscape architects within a cycle of human experience of place, theory, policy, and design.

2. LAND RELATIONS

Landscape architecture is not an art; aesthetics is not its sole concern. Neither is it a science; ecological function is one of many considerations, and design does not operate according to mechanistic principles. Instead, the discipline lies somewhere in between, or perhaps tangent to, art and science. As in art, landscape architecture plays with the human experiences of beauty and meaning. As in science, it deals with observable, measurable natural processes and relationships. Landscape architecture, then, is concerned with the relationships of humans to landscape. These relationships, or what I will refer to as land relations, are mediated by a kaleidoscope of factors, including institutions of culture, politics, and economics, as well as landscape design. This chapter examines a range of land relations and asks: how do different land relations manifest in the built environment? What happens to the built environment when the land relations that undergird a particular urban fabric are transformed? Conversely, how are land relations affected by changes in the built environment?

The land relation that dominates in Western societies is that of individual, private property ownership. This relation, however, is a recent innovation in the long *durée* of human history. As historian Andro Linklater posits in *Owning the Earth: The Transforming History of Land Ownership* (2013), the reconceptualization of land as a resource that can be owned by a single person has been “the most creative and destructive cultural force in written history” (Linklater, 2013: 5). Linklater argues that private property ownership of land unlocked economic potential that made the modern world possible. By the same token, he argues, the ascendancy of this land relation caused mass displacement of human populations and drastic shifts in land use, upheavals with ramifications for social patterns and ecological function at the global scale that continue to affect our lives today (Linklater, 2013).

Alternatives to private property ownership have existed, and indeed have been the norm for most of human history

(Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). Is it plausible for such alternative land relations to be integrated into the contemporary urban fabric? Substituting these for the private property ownership of land provides the basis for new forms of urban space and community. Such alternative land relations can be described as “prosocial,” in the sense that they promote social cohesion, individual wellbeing, and integrity between humans and land. I will argue in later chapters that prosocial land relations can be cultivated through the design of built environments, and that these land relations can be expressed in built environments as urban commons. For this transformation of the urban fabric to be more than superficial, however, changes in the legal status of land are also required. As long as land is legally framed as a commodity, more enriching and life-affirming land relations cannot take root. That is where CLTs come in.

As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, CLTs decommodify land, ultimately removing it from the market. This chapter is intended to establish why decommodification is important. To do so, I first examine the structure of private property ownership of land, drawing especially on the work of Edella Schlager and Elinor Ostrom (1992). I also provide a brief history of private property ownership of land, from its emergence in England in the 14th and 15th centuries, to its eventual transference and evolution in North America during the 17th century. Understanding these roots helps explain the transformative power of private property ownership and its deleterious effects. Next, I explore three prosocial land relations that are made possible by land decommodification. I look at the use-value land relation, especially through the work of twentieth-century Austro-Hungarian political economist Karl Polanyi. Specifically, I draw on his notions of land as a fictitious commodity to highlight the benefits of the use-value land relation. I go on to look at the notion of landscape citizenships or “landships” (Olwig, 2021). This body of theory of land relations focuses on the dynamic, contextual nature of human identity formation and belonging in relation to landscape. Contrasting with both

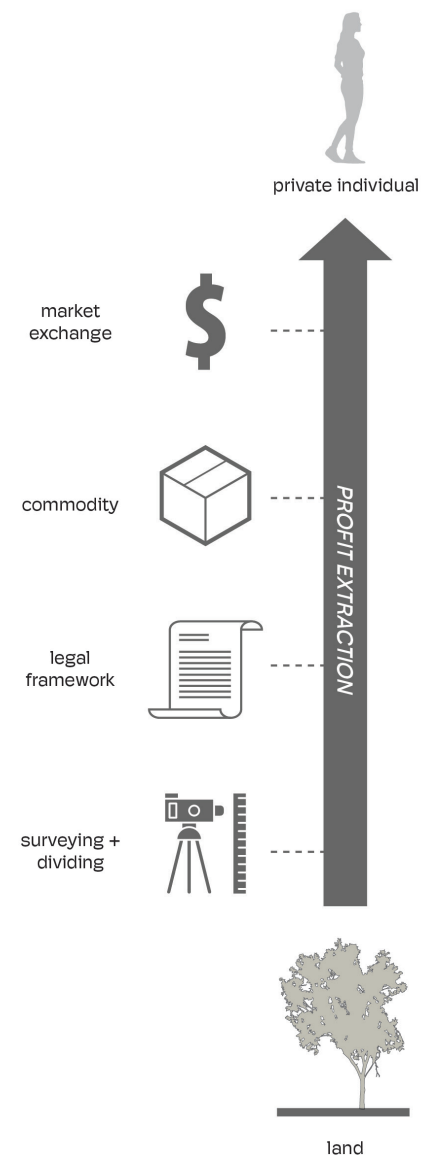


Figure 2.1: Profit extraction in the private property ownership land relation.

the private property land relation and with the use-value land relation, economic processes are one of many factors informing these negotiated, ever-fluid land relations. Finally, drawing on the work of Indigenous scholars Kyle Whyte and Max Liboiron, I explore the kinship relations that characterize many Indigenous land relations in North America, with a particular focus on the concept of reciprocity.

Land relations are the conceptual bridge that links my discussion of CLTs, concerned primarily with policy, legal norms, and governance, with landscape architecture. The alternative land relations I discuss here each have relevance for understanding the radical implications of CLT models. By shielding land from market forces and shrugging off the private property ownership land relation, CLTs have the potential to resurface other land relations that promote social and ecological health and urban vitality. I will also argue in Chapter 4 that important aspects of the prosocial land relations presented in this chapter are resurfaced in the urban commons. Before tackling that argument, however, it is important to understand the land relation that is currently dominant in the context of the US and with which this thesis proposes a rupture: private property ownership of land.

PRIVATE PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

What are the distinguishing features of the private property ownership land relation? In brief, this land relation: (1) confers upon a landowner a set of rights in relation to land, (2) defines land as a commodity, and (3) establishes profit extraction as the purpose of land ownership. **Figure 2.1** illustrates the process that facilitates the flow of profits from land to the private individual. I begin this section by examining the historical roots of private property ownership of land, so that the economic values and imperatives that lie at the heart of this land relation can be better understood. Next, I explore the rights that compose private property ownership of land in order to clearly define this land relation. Finally, I look at what it means to define land as a commodity. I compare the notions of exchange value and use value to argue that the commodification of land diminishes the rich and complex interdependence of humans and landscape (Schlager and Ostrom, 1992).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LAND AS PRIVATE PROPERTY

The roots of private property ownership of land are extremely complex and extend backward in time up to and perhaps beyond the advent of settled agriculture millennia ago (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021). An

exhaustive discussion of this history would detour into the roots of the legal system, the role of individualism in Western culture, and theories of political liberty. This is all far beyond the scope of, although ultimately not irrelevant to, this thesis. For my purposes here, I trace the consolidation of a form of private property ownership of land that developed due to a particular set of historical circumstances in early modern England and was later imported to North America via the system of settler colonialism (Linklater, 2013). I provide this historical context in order to emphasize the centrality of profit extraction to private property ownership and to illustrate the profound reordering of the landscape that accompanied the rise and spread of this land relation. For this section, I rely heavily on Andro Linklater's *Owning the Earth: The Transforming History of Land Ownership* (2013).

The modern conception of land as private property is a relatively recent innovation. It emerged in England in the 14th century and culminated in a series of Enclosure Acts that were still being passed by the United Kingdom's Parliament in the 19th and even early 20th centuries. This legislation, and the transformation of English society and the English landscape that accompanied it, are today called the Enclosure Movement.

Under the feudal system, agricultural land that was held by local lords was used in common by peasants, or "commoners." Everyone had rights of access to and withdrawal from "the commons." However, the historically

high price of wool in European markets starting in about 1450 led to a reorientation of agricultural production in England away from subsistence farming, which was supported by the commons, and toward the production of wool for profit. There was pressure to increase the efficiency of grazing on the commons, which incentivized the consolidation of scattered parcels of arable land into contiguous pasturage, a process known as amalgamation. Next, this land was physically enclosed with walls and fences. Enclosure of the commons required legal definitions of who had access to the land and who did not. Enclosure also reflected a fundamental change in how people related to land: rather than a basis for community vitality and the lynchpin of a system of mutual rights and obligations, land became a vehicle for the extraction of value to enrich individuals.

The change eroded the foundation of the feudal social order. Farming the commons for subsistence was much more labor intensive than grazing sheep on enclosed land. As the English countryside was converted more and more to the latter use from 1450 to 1530, peasant farmers were increasingly uprooted from their agricultural communities and found themselves landless and without work. The bonds of rights and obligations that had connected lords and commoners together frayed, giving way to competition for land that was now sought after as a profit-making vehicle.

Although the institution of private land ownership was well established in

the English countryside by the time of Britain’s colonial expansion into North America in the 16th and 17th centuries, its introduction to the colonies was not obvious or uncomplicated. The particular path of grafting the private property land relationship onto the American context caused it to evolve in significant ways. Contemporary American culture has inherited this land relation.

As the British established colonies on North America’s eastern seaboard and in the Caribbean, land was understood as being granted by the authority of the monarch. Access to land was derived from the legal system rooted in the monarch’s authority. However, in the Puritan colony in what is today the northeastern US, a different standard prevailed. The Puritan colonists asserted that a natural right to land ownership was established through toil rather than through law. By working the land, making it “productive,” an individual made a claim of ownership over that resource (Linklater, 2013). This theory

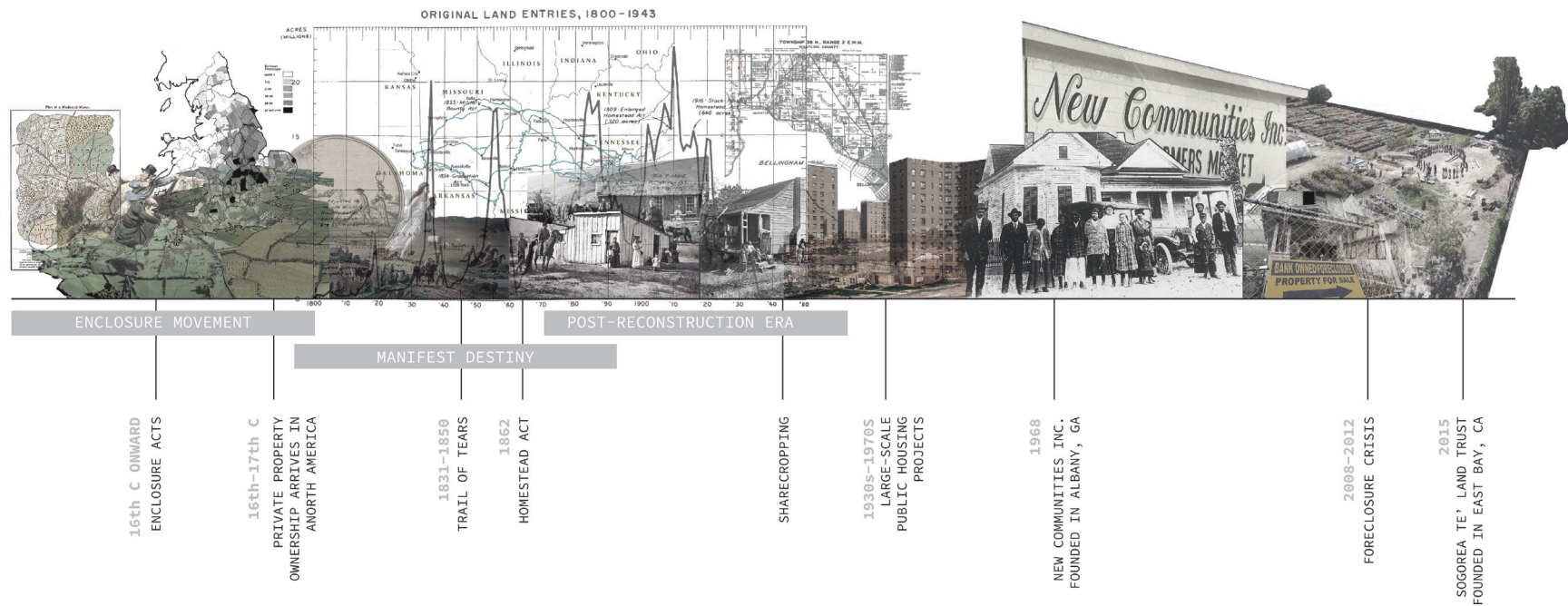


Figure 2.2: A timeline of private property ownership of land in England and North America.

of natural law was rooted in the Puritan's Biblical understanding. This understanding of land as private property then had two implications. First, private property ownership of land was linked not to a particular system of civil rights but to a notion of natural rights. Second, it sanctioned the dispossession of the Indigenous inhabitants of the land, who (according to the Puritan colonists) did not make maximum productive use of the land and had therefore forfeited any claims to ownership. In fact, this conceptualization of the settler's right to colonize Indigenous land was the fuel for Manifest Destiny, the notion that the US, once it had been founded, was foreordained to expand its territory across North America (Linklater, 2013).

This history (**Figure 2.2**) illustrates three important aspects of the private property ownership land relation: (1) that private property ownership of land is inextricably linked to the extraction of profit from land; (2) that this extraction is understood, particularly in the North American context, to be the moral basis of land ownership; (3) that the adoption of private property ownership of land has been accompanied by drastic changes in the ordering of the landscape. With a better understanding of the economic and moral imperatives that undergird the private property land relation, we'll now examine its legal structure.

PROPERTY RIGHTS

Private property ownership bundles rights that pertain to the use and disposal of an object (Schlager and Ostrom, 1992). Schlager and Ostrom describe the private property ownership of land as consisting of five rights: access, withdrawal, management, exclusion, and alienation (1992). These can be summarized as the right to enter, extract resources from, make changes to, build on, bar others from, and sell or lease land. What is key here is that land is understood as an inert object to be acted upon (Linklater, 2013). The landowner exercises rights over the land. The relation is one of domination rather than interdependence; in fact, a reciprocal relation to land is precluded by the property rights frame. The property rights enumerated by Schlager and Ostrom frame the value of land and the resources contained in it, things like water, minerals, timber, and soil, as measurable, fixed, and existing in order to be extracted as wealth for the landowner. In other words, private property ownership reduces the many values of land to an exchange value. Let's look more closely at what that means

EXCHANGE VALUE

As with any commodity in a market-based economic system, land as private property derives its value from market exchange. The value of

land is not intrinsic to the land itself. Rather, in the market context its value is made relative, determined in comparison with other parcels. These relative values are quantified monetarily. In other words, the land is assigned an exchange value based on the forces of free market supply and demand, and this value is measured in dollars. Both the resources that can be extracted from land (again, natural material goods such as minerals or timber) and the bundle of property rights conferred by land ownership are commodities with exchange value. The important points here are twofold. First, the exchange value of land compresses all of the complex ecological relationships, dynamic communities of organisms, and layers of human and natural history that a particular parcel of land contains to a number of monetary units. Second, this exchange value is determined not in relation to any particular intrinsic quality of the land in question but rather in relation to other commodities. One place becomes exchangeable for any other commodity with an equivalent monetary value. For both these reasons, assigning land an exchange value obscures the particularities of place-based land relations.

THE USE-VALUE LAND RELATION

In contrast to exchange value, we can also speak of the use value of land. Use value refers to benefits derived from the human activities that occur in a particular place. This includes intangible uses such as spiritual

nourishment, social connection, and sense of belonging alongside more tangible uses like habitation (Polanyi, 1944). This is exactly the land relation that prevailed in England among commoners prior to enclosure. In the private property ownership land relation, the use values of land are subsumed under the exchange value, which captures none of the specificity of how people relate to place. CLT models decommodify land (using a legal mechanism that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3), allowing community members to relate to land for its use values rather than for its exchange value. I term this land relation the use-value land relation.

To explore this land relation in more detail, in this section I draw on the work of political economist Karl Polanyi, the scholarship of Ana Maria Peredo and Murdith McLean, and the collection *Land Fictions: The Commodification of Land in City and Country* (2021) edited by D. Asher Ghertner and Robert W. Lake. These works problematize the private property ownership land relation, pointing out the many use values of land that cannot be expressed as exchange value. In particular, I highlight Polanyi's concept of "fictitious commodities," a term he used for resources, including land, which by their essential qualities resist commodification. Polanyi held that treating such resources as commodities had negative impacts on human society and the natural environment (1944).

In his magnum opus, *The Great Transformation: The Political and*

Economic Origins of Our Times (1944), Polanyi argued that the logic of commodification had grown to encompass resources that could not rightly be called commodities at all, pointing to three examples: land, labor, and money. These commodities are “fictitious” in three ways that build on each other. First, although land, labor, and money are essential to economic activity, they are not “produced” in the sense that commodities are the results of economic activity (Polanyi, 1944). Instead, they exist independent of the market economy. Land in particular precedes economic activity, and is in fact the necessary condition of human subsistence (Ghertner and Lake, 2021). To this point, Polanyi wrote that “[w]hat we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man’s [sic] institutions. To isolate it and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors” (187). Second, because land precedes

and exists outside of markets, it has essential life-giving use values (such as habitation and natural resources) that cannot be captured or expressed monetarily. Third, framing land as a commodity is actually a danger to society because doing so subordinates land’s use values to the fluctuations of markets, which have at best an imperfect correlation with the maximization of these values (Peredo and McLean, 2020; Polanyi, 1944). In sum, land precedes the market economy and has use-values that are the foundation of human subsistence. Commodifying land and subjecting its management to the imperative of profit maximization distorts this relationship and results in social and environmental degradation (Dale, 2010; Gerber and Gerber, 2017). If we take the inverse of this formulation, we get the use-value land relation. Decommodifying land and decoupling its management from the imperative of profit maximization affirms its life-giving use values and results in social and environmental benefits. In this vein, Peredo and McLean argue for the decommodification of land and labor to reorient the allocation and management of these resources in a prosocial direction (2021). Specifically, they focus on CLTs as a means of recovering the prosocial function of land as human habitat. In essence, they argue for CLTs as mechanisms that resurface the use values of land. By drawing land out of its status as a fictitious commodity, the values of habitation and sustenance, as well as intangible qualities such as spiritual connection and sense of place (Polanyi, 1944; Ghertner and Lake, 2021), return to the center of how humans relate to land.

Although the use value land relation goes further in representing the

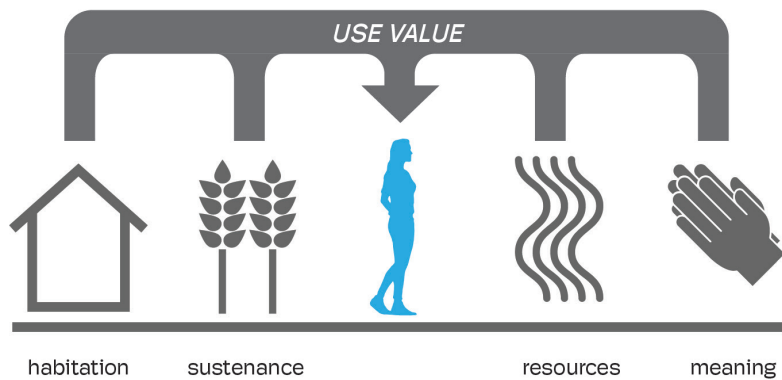


Figure 2.3: *The use-value land relation.*

richness and complexity of human interdependence with land than the private property ownership land relation, it too has limitations. In this relation, land is still framed as a resource to be extracted from, even if this extraction is not profit-motivated. The relation remains a one-way flow of value from land to people, as illustrated in **Figure 2.3**. Next, I look at land relations that capture more complex and multi-directional flows of value and meaning.

LANDSCAPE CITIZENSHIPS

An emerging body of scholarship challenges static understandings of land ownership, and even the right to land itself, represented by the extractive private property ownership land relation and the unidirectional use-value land relation. This literature focuses on the notion of “landscape citizenships,” the multiple layers of identity and meaning that emerge from the interaction between people and place (Olwig, 2019; Waterman, 2021). In contrast to the land relationships discussed thus far, landscape citizenships de-centers the economic function of land. Instead, other factors such as “topography, culture, work, play, ecology, climate, and politics” (Waterman, 2021) are the important mediators of human relations to landscapes.

Landscape citizenships emphasizes the dynamic, negotiated nature of

belonging to land. Kenneth Olwig (2005) coined the term “landships” to refer to these processes of identity formation, arguing that the degree to which individual and cultural identities are intertwined with landscapes means that, properly understood, people belong to land. **Figure 2.4** illustrates the multidirectional influence of these factors. In the landscape citizenships frame, people, politics, culture, and landscape are seen as

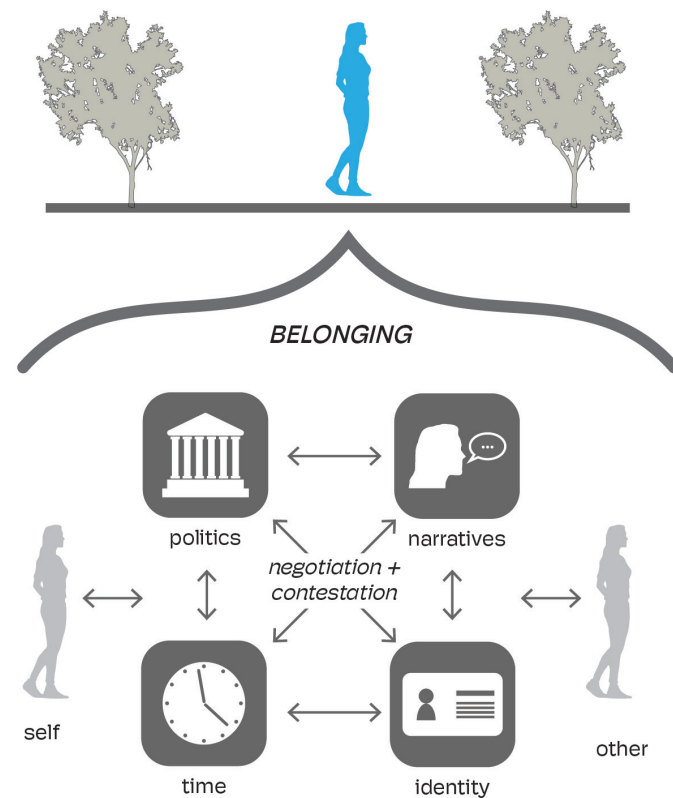


Figure 2.4: Landscape citizenships describes dynamic processes of identity-formation and belonging in relation to place.

being in a process of continual, mutual redefinition (Waterman, 2021). The private property ownership land relation uses a legal framework to fix statuses of belonging and grant or deny the right to place. In contrast, landscape citizenships understands belonging and the right to place to be contextual, disputed, and politically mediated. These land relations are something practiced and continually re-verified. Notions of landscape citizenships provide a helpful contrast with the static, bounded legal categories that underlie the private property ownership land relation. By

acknowledging land as a co-agent and participant in processes of human identity formation, culture, and politics, landscape citizenships also contrast with the use-value land relation. In the following section, I focus on kinship relations, a land relation that extends this sense of agency and interconnection even further.

KINSHIP RELATIONS

Private property ownership poses land as an object from which to extract wealth. The use-value framing centers the wide range of economic and social benefits that land affords to humans. Landscape citizenships sees humans as in conversation with land. What if land was regarded as a family member, as kin? North American Indigenous perspectives on land relations take this view, emphasizing familial ties of generosity and obligation with land and with all beings, human and non-human, that dwell within and upon it (Liboiron, 2021; Whyte, 2020). This circular network of relations is illustrated in **Figure 2.5**, where humans, animals, plants, water, and elements of the landscape are all connected to each other by ties of kinship.

To me, the kinship land relation represents an ideal, a way of relating to land that acknowledges the depth, richness, and complexity of the interdependence between humans and land. Private property ownership

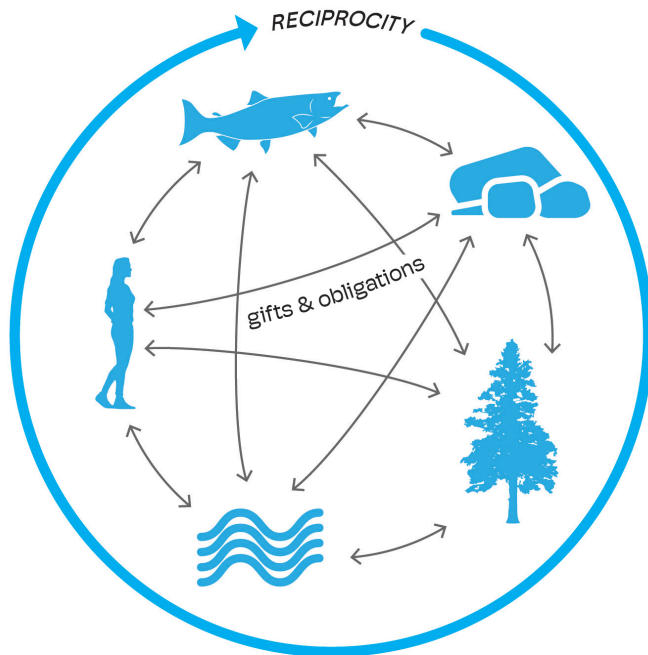


Figure 2.5: *Kinship relations - a web of reciprocal gifts and obligations between humans and non-humans.*

is an extreme departure from this ideal, and the other land relations I've discussed up to this point are steps back toward it. With this thesis, I propose a perspective on CLTs and a landscape design approach that aims at regrounding the contemporary urban landscape in this ideal. In this section, I draw on the work of Kyle Powys Whyte and Max Liboiron to unpack kinship relations, with a particular focus on the central role of reciprocity in this land relation.

As in the notion of landscape citizenships, the kinship land relation is dynamic and mutualistic rather than static and one-way. However, the active, multidirectional nature of kinship relations is based in practices of gift exchange between humans and non-humans, rather than in negotiation, contestation, or conflict (Whyte, 2020b).

In *Pollution is Colonialism* (2021), Liboiron insists on the active nature of kinship relations. "Land is a verb," they write, "... Land never settles. It is about relations between the material aspects some people might think of as landscapes — water, soil, air, plants, stars — and histories, spirits, events, kinships, accountabilities, and other people that aren't human" (43). Such dynamic land relations are always highly specific because they arise out of particular, unique qualities of place and time. These cyclical linkages are an acknowledgement and reinforcement of the relatedness and interdependence of people and land. Kinship relations are further characterized by trust, consensuality, transparency, reciprocity, and

accountability (Whyte, "Indigenous Environmental Justice," 2020).

I want to home in on reciprocity because this quality most differentiates kinship relations from the other land relations I have looked at so far. Kinship relations are based on mutual support, and rooted in the understanding that humans rely on the actions of other beings for physical and spiritual sustenance, and that they rely on ours. Land relations are not merely multidirectional but circular, mutually beneficial, and grounded in emotional qualities of trust and respect. Observance of interdependence is both an obligation and an expression of generosity (Whyte, 2020). Of reciprocity, Whyte writes

... each [human and more-than-human] relative respects the gifts that they can give to others in the kinship group to support their well-being... . Reciprocity is a kinship quality and, whenever it is present in a relationship, the relatives or friends in the relationship are in a better position to live interdependently. (2020b: 268)

In his work, Whyte suggests reassertion of kinship relations as a solution to issues of environmental justice such as degradation caused by extractive industry (2020a). I think this healing framework can be applied to the urban context as well. The reciprocity with land at the heart of kinship relations is key to addressing urban injustices.

LAND RELATIONS AND LANDSCAPE

This chapter established land relations as the primary concept at the heart of this thesis. In the next chapter, I discuss how the private property ownership land relation has manifested as a crisis of housing affordability, and later chapters deal with how prosocial land relations may be resurfaced and cultivated through policy and design interventions. I focused here on three alternatives to the private property ownership land relation: the use-value land relation, landscape citizenships, and kinship relations. What are the important qualities of each that I propose to reintroduce to the urban fabric? The use-value land relation is focused on sustenance, on drawing from land material resources and human experiences that are necessary for human wellbeing. Landscape citizenships captures the dynamism of human meaning-making in relation to landscape and elevates land to the status of an interlocutor. Kinship relations makes reciprocal action, imbued with an attitude of generosity, a central driver of the web of interdependence between humans and non-humans. Sustenance, wellbeing, dynamism, agency, reciprocity, and interdependence: these are the kinds of qualities that I will argue in Chapter 4 are resurfaced in the urban commons. But that is jumping ahead. Before projecting toward a better urban future, we need to look at the crisis conditions of the urban present.

3. THE HOUSING CRISIS AND AFFORDABLE ALTERNATIVES

Just as there are alternatives to the private property ownership land relation, there are models of housing and land use that are alternatives to private property ownership. I begin this chapter by examining the housing affordability crisis as an outgrowth of private property ownership. Establishing some understanding of the housing affordability crisis is important because CLT models are currently viewed primarily through the lens of addressing the need for affordable housing (Ehlenz, 2018). Thus, it provides context for understanding where and how CLT models are applied. I also touch on two other models of affordable housing with an eye to the benefits and drawbacks of each. Publicly subsidized housing is a model of state-provisioned affordable housing, while limited equity housing cooperatives (LEHCs) are models of community-led shared-equity housing. I highlight these alternatives in order to give context to the subject of affordable housing, and to introduce the concept of shared-equity housing, which will get much more attention in the next chapter on CLTs. I also note the degree to which land relations are affected in each case.

THE HOUSING AFFORDABILITY CRISIS

The dynamics that drive rising prices are complicated. There is complexity, variability, and fluctuation in how and why land and housing prices rise in particular locations at particular times. This project is not an attempt to explain market dynamics, nor is it meant to reduce the many causes of the housing affordability crisis, much less displacement and homelessness, to a facile anti-capitalist argument. However, in my view it is clear that the economic and political complexities that produce the affordability crisis are predicated on the framing of land as a commodity, as I described in Chapter 2. Flows of capital, financialization of land and housing, the interaction

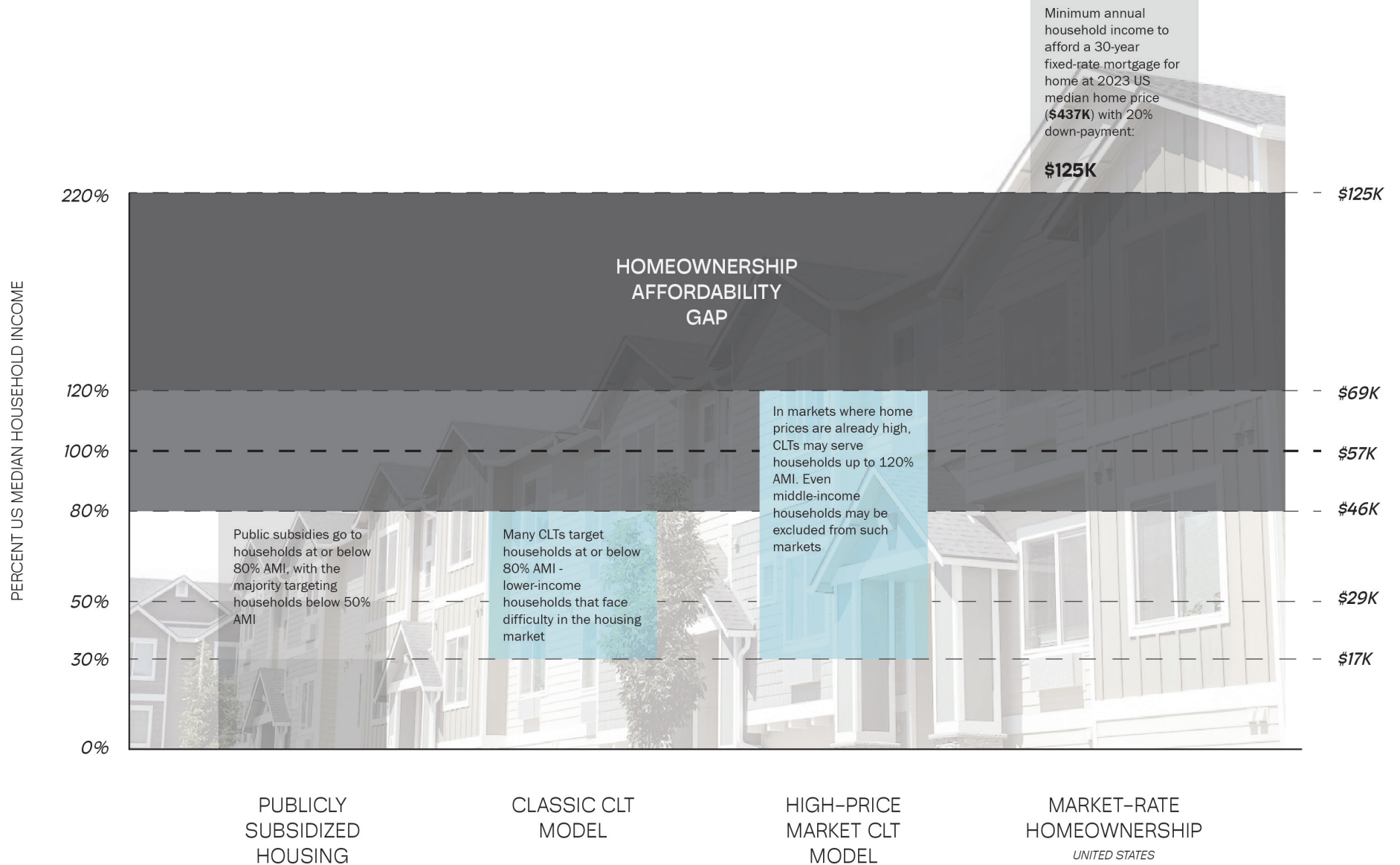


Figure 3.1: The housing affordability crisis at the national level. The affordability gap shows the distance between the typical income level below which households qualify for both public housing subsidies and participation in standard CLT homeownership programs and the minimum income needed to qualify for a standard mortgage at the 2023 national median home price. Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2023

of supply and demand: all these are literally and figuratively built on top of land as private property. CLTs show that it is possible to create affordable housing by moving beyond this framing. This thesis argues that the decommodification of land has implications far beyond housing affordability as well.

Cities in the US are shaped by private property land ownership. The influence of this regime is evident in the crisis of housing affordability that afflicts metropolitan areas across the US, particularly cities along the West Coast (State of the Nation's Housing, 2019). The incentives of the private market have often failed to align with the human need for shelter (Colburn and Aldern, 2022). The market prioritizes profit maximization, which does not always translate into the provision of adequate housing where and when it is needed. Instead, a housing policy beholden to the imperative of profit maximization caters to the highest income households. On the one hand, such a political economy prioritizes the production of luxury housing, which is out of reach for middle- and low-income households. On the other hand, the political power of high-income households is often wielded to restrict the stock of land available for new construction, stunting the growth of housing stock and raising prices (Mallach, 2012).

One of the primary elements of the cost of housing is the cost of the land on which it is located. A national study by Redfin that analyzed the proportion of home prices made up by the cost of land found that, in the



Figure 3.2: *The housing affordability crisis: development, displacement, and homelessness.*

20 metropolitan areas where land's share of home values was highest, the cost of land accounted for between 40% and 60% of a home's value (Bokhari, 2020). Whether driving up the cost of a single-family dwelling, trickling down into elevated rents, or skewing the production of housing stock toward luxury homes, rising land values help to push access to housing out of reach for an increasing proportion of the US population (Haffner and Hulse, 2019).

Figure 3.2 depicts the current state of the city as shaped by private property ownership. The pressure of rising land values and housing costs leads to redevelopment and the creation of luxury housing aimed at high-income households, and to the displacement of middle- and low-income households, appearing most gravely as a growing crisis of homelessness. The high demand for and relative scarcity of land drives its cost higher and higher. The city increasingly becomes a reflection of income inequality. The contrast between ostentatious wealth and dispossession sharpens, and the precarity and unsustainability of urban life accelerate.

The current dynamics of the housing affordability crisis are particular to the 21st century, having become especially acute in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and the ensuing foreclosure crisis of 2008-2012 (Theurillat et al., 2015). However, the need for affordable housing is not new. For decades, attempts have been made to provide affordable housing through the state, through the market, and through parallel legal-

economic institutions. I briefly summarize these below.

PUBLIC HOUSING

Public housing has a long and checkered history in the US, throughout which the notion of state support for affordable housing has been attacked and undermined by generations of free-market ideologues (Schwartz, 2014). The federal government began directly providing housing with some short-lived experiments in the 1910s (Fairbanks, 2020), but it was not until the Great Depression of the 1930s that public housing programs

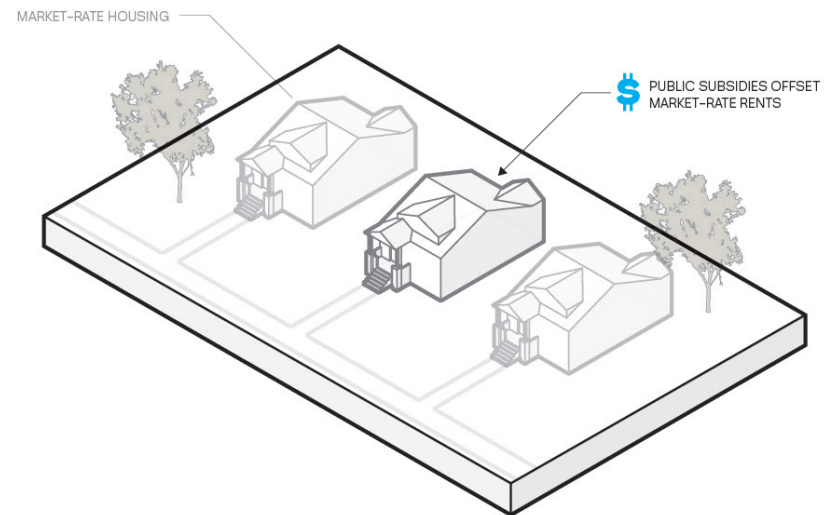


Figure 3.3: Public subsidies support rental housing.

were implemented at a larger scale (Karolak, 2000; Hutchison, 2000, Radford, 2000). The ensuing decades saw both the construction of iconic (and later infamous) public housing projects such as St. Louis' Pruitt-Igoe complex, as well as a constant battle over the proper role of government in building and administering housing (Von Hoffman, 2012). With the advent of neoliberal capitalist economic policies in the US the 1970s, there was a turn away from public housing projects and toward more market-oriented approaches (Orlebeke, 2000). Instead of building and administering housing directly, emphasis shifted to subsidizing low-income households in the private market through tools like housing vouchers. Even today, the vast majority of federal dollars spent on publicly subsidized housing goes toward voucher programs (Keightley 2009, Oxley 2012). In theory, housing vouchers give households more choice, encourage mixed-income neighborhoods, and lead to the deconcentration of poverty. Evidence for the reality of these outcomes is mixed, and suggests that vouchers may instead entrench patterns of socio-economic segregation (Goering 2012). The 1990s saw further erosion of support for public housing, a wave of demolition of public housing projects, and little sustained enthusiasm for adequately funding or maintaining the remaining public housing stock in the decades since (Schwartz, 2014).

In its early history, public housing showed great promise, and I would argue that public housing policies could play an important role in the US' housing landscape given proper funding and political support. However,

the reputation of public housing in the US is dismal. This is due primarily to perceptions of failure that are the result of chronic underfunding and political neglect or malice, but also in part to a piecemeal and ad hoc bureaucratic apparatus, and to a real history of mismanagement on the part of some public housing administrators. Public housing programs of all varieties are intended to serve low-income households, and are primarily targeted at very- and extremely-low-income households. Middle-income households are not currently served by public housing, even as the conditions of the housing affordability crisis push market-rate housing out of reach for people in higher and higher income brackets.

SHARED-EQUITY HOUSING

A limited equity housing cooperative (LEHC) is a type of shared-equity housing. LEHCs are nonprofit organizations that create and maintain affordable housing. An LEHC acquires property at a below-market rate through a combination of government subsidies, grants, or donations (Levy et al., 2006). This allows the LEHC to offer homeownership at relatively affordable prices. The logic of an LEHC is similar to that of a market-rate condominium. The LEHC takes out a blanket mortgage covering multiple properties. Residents cooperatively own shares in the mortgage. A share entitles the holder to the occupancy of one of the properties covered by the blanket mortgage. Unlike a market-rate condominium, the LEHC

limits the amount of equity that can be extracted by a resident if they sell the property. This equity cap keeps share prices below market-rate and ensures that housing remains affordable for the next buyer. In addition to cooperative ownership, two other characteristics distinguish LEHCs: democratic governance of the cooperative; and limitations on residents' income to ensure that affordability is targeted to moderate- and low-income households (Soifer, 2012).

Pioneered in the late 19th century, LEHCs grew in number as the federal government divested itself of public housing projects in the years after WWII (Green, 2018). Existing housing projects were rehabbed and converted to cooperative ownership and management. LEHCs thus represent a bridge

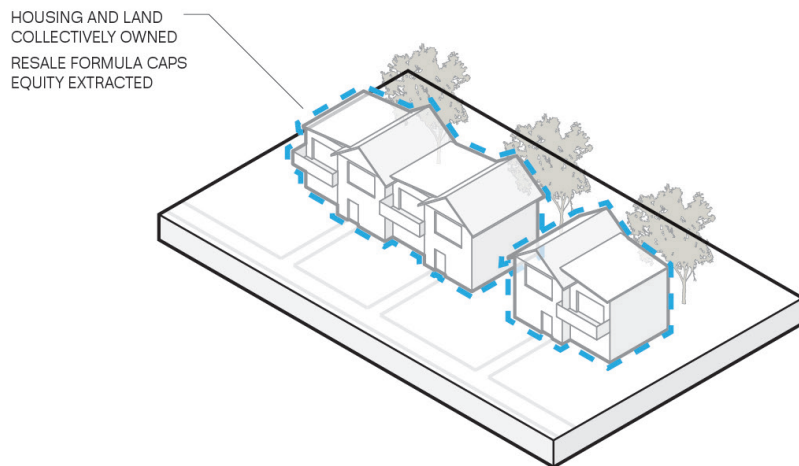


Figure 3.4: *The LEHC model.*

from state-owned public housing to a model of community control. Today, there are around 500,000 LEHCs nationally (Soifer, 2012).

While the potential for wealth-building is limited, LEHCs offer a greater measure of security than market-rate housing. Because the equity that accrues to an individual shareholder is capped, the LEHC is not an ideal tool for building private wealth. By the same token, the equity cap protects shareholders from significant financial loss associated with downturns in the housing market (Soifer, 2012). The financial arrangements of the LEHC are partially removed from the market and collectivized.

TOWARD MORE THAN AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The crisis of housing affordability is tearing at the seams of urban life. Displacement and homelessness immiserate a growing number of city dwellers, while economic inequality and its physical manifestations become ever more apparent. Public housing policy, once a promising source of large-scale affordable housing, has been hollowed out by decades of abuse, neglect, and policy sabotage. Meanwhile, alternative housing tenancy models such as LEHCs offer intriguing departures from the financial structures of private property ownership. However, even LEHCs, which decommodify housing, leave the critical question of land relations more or less untouched. The crisis of housing affordability is

fundamentally connected to the persistence of the private property land relation. Addressing the crisis requires solutions that alter this land relation. CLTs are one powerful tool for doing so, and it is to CLTs that I now turn.

4. COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS

What differentiates CLTs from other innovative housing forms, and why do I contend that CLTs have a particularly transformative potential for the urban landscape? CLTs are unique in addressing the private property ownership land relation head-on by decoupling ownership of land from ownership of housing. CLTs disaggregate the bundle of property rights associated with land. These rights are dispersed and divided in ways that do not conform to any conception of private property ownership (Pierce et al., 2019). In short, CLTs decommodify land, allowing prosocial land relations to flourish (Peredo et al., 2021).

In this chapter, I look at CLTs in detail and from different angles. First, I offer a brief overview of the history of CLTs, with a look at their antecedents and the social conditions that motivated the first CLT founders. Next, I discuss what is often described as the “classic” CLT model, that is, the legal arrangements and governance structures that characterize a typical affordable-housing oriented CLT (Davis, 2010). I go on to examine how the classic CLT model generates housing affordability, and discuss variations on the classic CLT model in order to illustrate how the model is adapted in different situations. Finally, I take a closer look at CLT models’ transformative potential. Specifically, I examine how CLTs disaggregate property rights (Pierce et al., 2019), and review literature on the social experiences of CLT leaseholders and community members.

ORIGINS OF THE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

CLTs arose in the US in the mid-20th century. The purpose of the early CLTs was to allow marginalized communities to access land on which to establish autonomous self-sufficiency (Miller, 2015). They were rural and focused on



Figure 4.1: A community member tending crops at New Communities Inc. in Albany, GA, often identified as the nation's first CLT. (Center for Community Land Trust Innovation)

agricultural production. New Communities, Inc. (**Figure 4.1**) was founded in Albany, Georgia in 1969 and was the first CLT in the nation. The founders of New Communities, Inc. were veterans of the Civil Rights Movement and the National Sharecroppers Fund. They were interested in establishing a collective ownership structure that would allow Black sharecroppers in the rural South to resist displacement (Davis, 2010).

The innovators of the CLT model drew on antecedents in US history and other land experiments around the world. The ideas of American writer and politician Henry George and English planner Ebenezer Howard were inspirations, as were practical experiments in collective agriculture and

ground leasing such as the Gramdan Movement in India and especially the cooperative agricultural settlements of Israel (Davis, 2010). New Communities, Inc. was operational until 1985, when it closed as a result of opposition from White neighbors and unsustainable debt servicing on inequitable USDA loans.

Housing affordability was not the main focus of the early CLTs (Miller, 2015). Indeed, the transformation of land relations was more central to early CLT experiments than the provision of affordable housing (Meehan, 2014; DeFilippis et al., 2019). It was not until the CLT model was adapted to the urban context that it became closely associated with affordable housing. The Community Land Cooperative of Cincinnati (CCLC), founded in 1980, was the first urban CLT (Davis, 2010). CCLC addressed the need for permanently affordable housing by innovating a resale formula for its single family homes that capped the equity that could be extracted from the home, much as in the case of LEHCs. The notion of a resale formula subsequently became a key feature of the CLT model.

CLTs remained rare throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, with no more than a few dozen across the country. Interest in the CLT model grew exponentially in the wake of the 2008-2012 foreclosure crisis (Theurillat et al., 2015). Interest in alternative housing models of all types grew as many people became disillusioned with the ideal of single-family homeownership. Contributing to the positive perception and subsequent

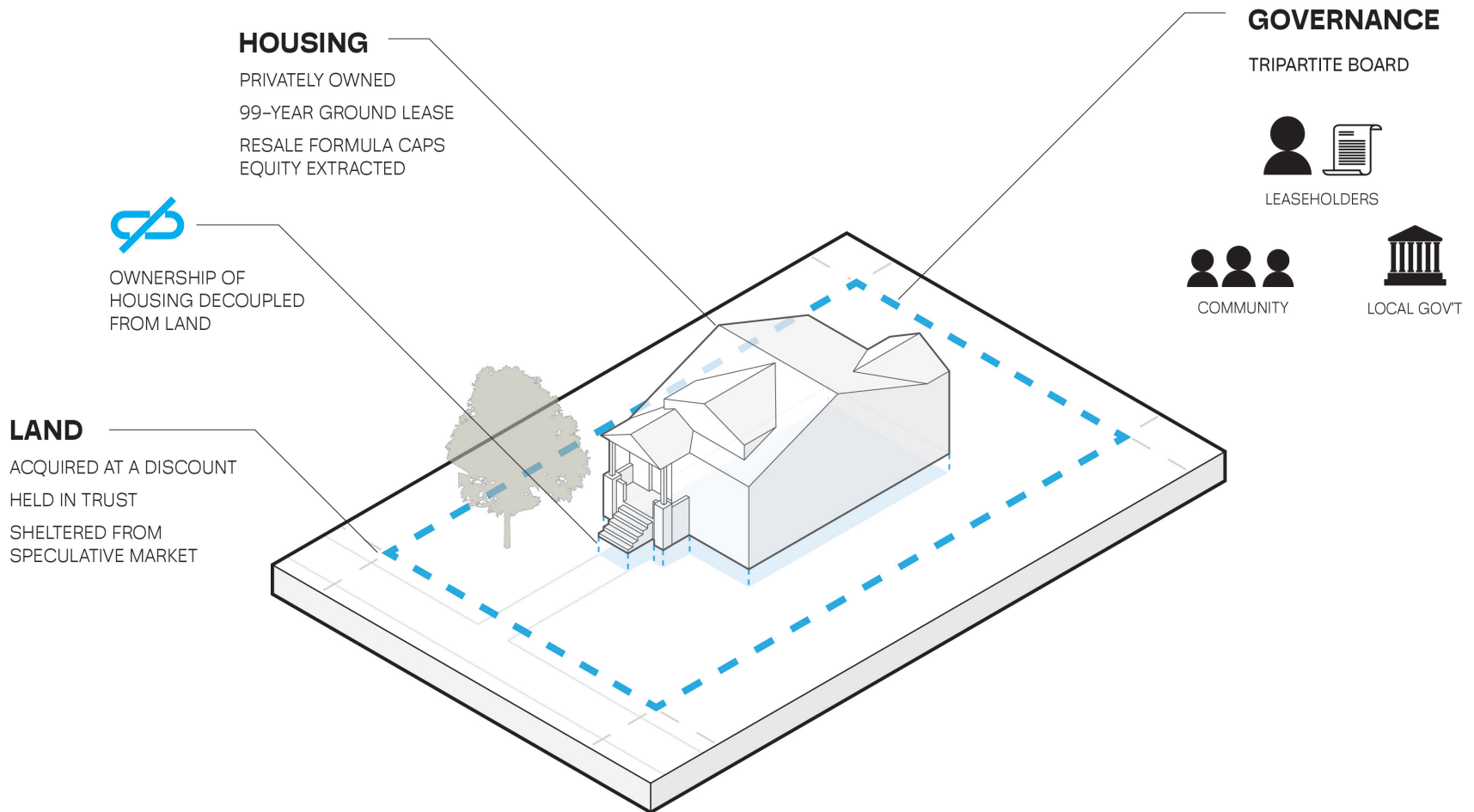


Figure 4.2: The “classic” CLT model. A structure of dual ownership separates ownership of housing from land tenancy and subtracts the cost of land from the overall cost of housing. Land is decommodified, held in trust, and leased to homeowners. The CLT is governed by a tripartite board of leaseholders, community members, and representatives of local government.

interest in CLT models, CLT-associated homes were about one-eighth as likely to be foreclosed on as conventional home mortgages during the foreclosure crisis (Soifer, 2012a). Today there are approximately 290 CLTs in operation across the country (Choi et al., 2018).

THE CLASSIC CLT MODEL: GENERATING HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

CLTs across the country operate on the same general principles, often referred to as the “classic” CLT model. For this section, I rely heavily on the work of CLT scholar John Emmeus Davis, as well as that of Michael Brown of the Burlington Community Development Association. There are several elements of this classic model. The CLT, typically a non-profit organization, acquires land at below-market rates. The CLT is governed by a tripartite board of leaseholders, community members, and representatives of the public interest, most often officials of local government or members of other community development organizations. The CLT establishes a dual ownership structure, whereby the ownership of the land is legally separated from the ownership of built improvements (such as houses) located on the land. The CLT holds the land in trust for perpetuity, effectively removing the land from the market, i.e. decommodifying it. Buildings, most often housing, are owned separately from the land. Classically, housing takes the form of single-family homes, but CLTs may host other forms of

housing. Homes are owned either individually or collectively, while the land beneath is leased from the CLT. The classic ground lease is a 99-year inheritable lease that includes an equity-capping resale formula. **Figure 4.2** illustrates the elements of the classic CLT model.

The classic CLT model generates affordability in two ways. First, by acquiring property at below-market rates. A newly-formed CLT raises funds from government subsidies, tax-incentives, or grants; through private grants and other donations; or through the mechanism of bargain sale, wherein a seller sells property to the CLT at a discounted price and is able to deduct the remainder of the fair market price from their taxes (Brown, 2007). Acquisition of property at below-market rates creates the initial seed of affordability. This is passed along to households that purchase homes from the CLT. Second, the dual-ownership structure separates ownership of housing from ownership of the land. This subtracts the cost of land from the purchase-price of a home, which as I have showed is often a substantial proportion of a home’s value, especially in tight housing markets. Homeownership thus becomes attainable for households that are otherwise excluded from the market (Abramowitz and White, 2006).

The resale formula stipulated in the ground lease permanently maintains this affordability. The equity that sellers accrue and can extract from the home at resale is capped, usually allowing for a small amount of wealth (often 5-10% of annual equity appreciation) to be extracted. This

aggressively restricts the degree to which market appreciation affects the sale price of the home. The resale price continues to reflect the affordability that was seeded by the terms of the initial property acquisition and the subtraction of the land value. The new buyer then enters into a ground lease with the CLT containing the same resale formula, so that affordability continues to be passed along in perpetuity.

VARIATIONS ON THE CLASSIC MODEL

While there is a recognized “classic” CLT model, some CLTs adhere more closely to this in practice and others less. There is diversity and divergence in the purpose of CLTs, their organizational status, their governance models, the types of housing they acquire and develop, and their spatial distribution and development strategies (Ehlenz, 2018).

CLTs vary in terms of their purpose, that is, to what extent they are focused exclusively on the provision of affordable housing or instead integrate other goals. Additional focus areas sometimes include community development, small business support, or natural resource conservation (Colding et al., 2013).

CLTs are most commonly owned by non-profit organizations, but in some cases are operated by local governments. Among non-profit CLTs, the CLT

may be an independent organization or a program of another organization. A notable example of a municipal CLT is the Irvine Community Land Trust, which was created by the City Council of the City of Irvine, CA in 2005 and operated as part of city government until becoming independent in 2017. CLTs operated by local governments have the advantage of public funding, institutional support, and greater alignment and coordination with other areas of housing policy. On the other hand, independent CLTs enjoy greater organizational flexibility, and may be both more efficient and more responsive to grass-roots community involvement (Davis, 2010).

Relatedly, CLTs also vary in terms of their governance structure. A tripartite board comprising equal representation of leaseholders, community members, and public interest representatives is standard. However, some CLTs differ in the proportion of board representation of the three groups or in criteria used to select board members (Brown, 2007). There is also variation in how broadly the area from which community representatives are drawn is defined.

The classic CLT model centers on the individually-owned single-family home, but CLTs host a range of housing typologies and tenancy models. Some CLTs host multifamily housing, and this can be owned either through a condominium model or through a shared-equity model like an LEHC. CLTs sometimes develop rental housing, which may be owned directly by the CLT or by a third-party, usually another non-profit organization. There

is also variation as to whether CLTs simply acquire existing housing or develop new units. Many do both (Soifer, 2012).

Finally, CLTs vary in terms of their spatial distribution and development strategies. In some situations, a CLT acquires numerous contiguous parcels and develops these as a self-contained neighborhood. In others, single parcels are distributed throughout a neighborhood or region, forming a network of affordable housing. A single CLT may pursue both strategies synergistically. A portfolio of single parcels can serve as the financial foundation enabling a CLT to acquire the land for a neighborhood-scale development (Choi et al., 2018).

With nearly 300 CLTs nationwide, there is a high degree of diversity in the application of CLT models. What unites them is the core idea of the CLT model: dual-ownership of land and built improvements, removal of the land from the market, and a high degree of community decision-making in the governance of each organization. These elements dismantle the private property ownership land relation.

Recent scholarship on CLTs has sought to clarify three questions related to this move away from the private property ownership land relation (DeFilippis et al. 2018; DeFilippis et al. 2019; Hackett et al., 2019; Lowe and Thaden, 2021; Pierce et al., 2021). First, given that CLT models clearly

impinge on private property ownership, is land held in trust truly “owned” at all? If not, what happens to the private property rights associated with land put into trust by CLTs? Next, how do CLT leaseholders and community members experience land and ownership differently than in a private property ownership relationship? Finally, what psychosocial experiences do CLTs afford leaseholders and community members? Do CLTs foster a substantive sense of community? This scholarship points to limitations of the contemporary CLT model as well as to its more radical potential.

QUESTIONS OF OWNERSHIP

By separating the tenancy of land from that of built improvements, and putting land into trust, CLTs permanently remove it from the market. If the land can no longer be bought or sold, i.e. alienated, what is the content of land ownership? Does anyone really own it at all? As was discussed in the section on the private property land relationship, ownership consists of a bundle of rights and the ability to exercise them. Pierce et al. contend that the legal arrangements underpinning the CLT model (specifically the dual ownership structure and the terms of the ground lease) inhibit the exercise of these property rights (2021). In addition to alienation, these inhibited rights include those of use, exclusion, and improvement, as well as the right to unilaterally alter the terms of the ground lease. Because these rights are disaggregated in a way that prevents them from being

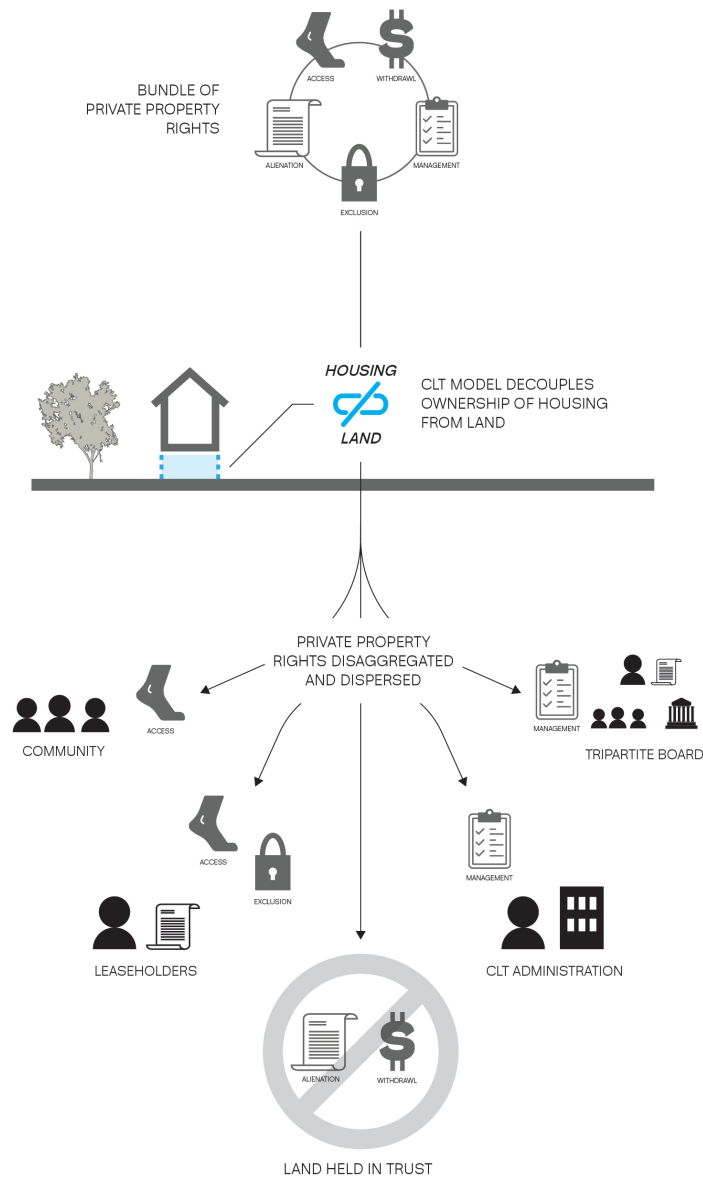


Figure 4.3: How CLTs “bury” or disaggregate property rights.

fully exercised, they are effectively “buried,” or reinterred in the land itself (Pierce et al., 2021). This is illustrated in **Figure 4.3**. Resurfacing and reconstituting them into the private property ownership structure would require dismantling the legal apparatus established by the CLT. For that reason, the exchange value of land held in trust by a CLT becomes purely hypothetical and practically unrealizable. As a consequence, no party can be said to own the land, because no one can exercise the property rights that would make that ownership real. This question of ownership is distinct from questions of management. Elinor Ostrom’s work on collective resource management makes the case that collectivized resources are effectively managed through collective governance structures that do not hinge on private property rights (Ostrom, 1990; Schlager and Ostrom, 1992).

The notion of “buried” property rights is intriguing, and is not just significant on a theoretical level. In this view, the CLT model is a bridge between the private property ownership land relation and a novel space of community land tenancy. The CLT model interlocks with the legal structure of private property ownership, using its mechanisms to establish a novel set of relationships between community members and land. The content of these relationships ends up outside the realm of ownership entirely. Rather than conflicting with the private property ownership regime, it effectively subverts it. The legal framework of private property ownership is operationalized to produce a situation beyond ownership.

EXPERIENCES OF OWNERSHIP

Do CLT leaseholders and community members actually experience their relation to land as different than in typical situations of private property ownership? The transformative potential of CLTs is harder to see if CLT participants do not report experiencing substantively different land relations. Some research suggests that in many CLTs, and particularly in the case of single-family homeowners, the perception of private land ownership persists on the part of leaseholders despite the land being held in trust (Davis, 2010; Pierce et al., 2021). Another study found CLT residents who expressed positive interest in the model as an alternative to the culture of profit and competition (DeFilippis et al., 2019). Residents surveyed in this study saw themselves as participants in tenancy relationships that differed from and perhaps challenged the dominant private property ownership regime. Interestingly, this same research also revealed hostility on the part of many CLT administrators to the notion of the CLT model as radical, transformative, or disruptive of the private property ownership regime. Instead, administrators were narrowly focused on the CLT model as an avenue toward the respectability of homeownership and expressed concern that their work could be perceived as utopian.

EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY

As with perceptions of ownership, research shows mixed results regarding the extent to which CLTs foster a sense of community among participants. There is agreement that CLTs require community involvement, for instance by drawing in board members from the greater community of each CLT's service area. The greater question is whether involvement in a CLT leads participants to other forms of community organization and prosocial behavior.

Importantly, much scholarship on CLTs emphasizes the role that community organizing often plays in the establishment of land trusts in the first place (Aernouts et al., 2018; Dwyer, 2015; Moore and McKee, 2012). The effort to identify and plan for a collective need, build community support, interface with local government, and raise funding is often the result of years of community activism. The social relations built by this process remain and contribute to an ongoing sense of belonging (Hackett et al., 2019).

Some studies point to the CLT's institutional framework as the foundation for transformative social relations (Hackett et al., 2019). Others discount the degree to which the particularities of the CLT model itself foster a sense of community, and point instead to the culture of care created

by the work of CLT administrators and staff as an important source of community ties (Cahen et al., 2020). However, Lowe and Thaden (2021) argue that conscientious community organization around an explicitly transformative program may not be necessary for CLTs to have effects that meaningfully challenge the private property ownership regime.

CLTS: PLANTING A SEED

One way of looking at CLTs is as simply an efficient means of providing affordable housing to low- and middle-income households. In this view, their role is to make homeownership attainable for more households, acting as an entry point into the market and enabling people to take a big step on the path of wealth creation. In its most prosocial form, this conception acknowledges the stabilizing effect that CLTs have on neighborhoods and the anti-displacement benefits of housing affordability. However, the historical connection of the CLT model to social justice movements and experiments in collective economics is deemphasized.

CLTs can and I think should be understood in the context of these transformative social and economic traditions instead. While Ehlenz (2018) and Choi et al. (2018) focus on CLT models as engines of affordable housing, I concur with Aernouts and Ryckewaert (2018) that collective social action is among the most important features of CLT organization.

The founders of the first CLTs consciously looked to non-capitalist models of land tenancy (Davis, 2010; Miller, 2015; Vuong, 2016). They sought to foster social relations and land relations that were impossible under the prevailing political economy. CLTs muddy the notion of ownership, and participants in CLTs can experience ownership and community in novel ways to greater or lesser degrees. CLTs do more than create affordable housing. By disaggregating and burying the bundle of private property rights related to land ownership, they shift how participants relate to each other and to land.

This thesis is an argument for CLT models that embrace and actively cultivate this potential. I have made the case that by decommodifying land, CLTs pave the way for prosocial land relations to reassert themselves. In Chapter 1, I identified these land relations with qualities like dynamism, agency, reciprocity, and interdependence. Let's get more specific about how these qualities are manifested in the urban environment. To do so, I engage scholarship and theory on the urban commons.

5. URBAN COMMONING: PRACTICES & THRESHOLDS

Urban commons is the transformative potential that is inherent in the CLT model. The term “urban commons” is multifaceted and can be described in different ways. Urban commons is a form of spatial organization that is distinct from both public and private space. It is an ethic of decommodification, an active erosion of the norms of private property ownership. Urban commons also comprise a constellation of social relationships that revolve around the production and consumption of common resources. Urban commons represent an intentional rupture of the prevailing economic, political, social, and spatial fabric. Urban commons are oriented around liminality, or what has been described as “threshold conditions” (Stavrides, 2016). Powerfully, urban commons are better understood as instances of **urban commoning**, a dynamic set of practices that establish and sustain the qualities and conditions of the urban commons with an emphasis on the active creation and maintenance of such commons. The literature on urban commons is often quite theoretical and can lean heavily into the abstract. It presents many lines of inquiry which could be followed, ultimately far away from the topic of this thesis. In this chapter, I attempt to avoid this pitfall while diving into the highly relevant areas of urban commons theory in order to reveal the radical, perhaps revolutionary, potential of CLTs.

Each of the aspects of urban commons I list above is already present, even if only nascently, in the structure and functioning of CLTs. I argue that to fulfill their greater potential as transformative pieces of the urban fabric, CLTs should embrace these qualities and actively cultivate themselves as urban commons.

COMMON-PROPERTY THEORY

What is an urban commons? What are its components, and how does it differ from other kinds of urban spatial forms? The basics of urban commons theory provide a basis for beginning to unpack these questions. First,

I'll offer a basic definition of "the commons" by briefly exploring how common-property theory came out of arguments about collective natural resource management. Then, I'll turn my attention to how urban scholars have adapted this framework to the urban environment, and point out some key attributes of urban commons.

Common-property theory arose in pointed response to the notion of "the tragedy of the commons," articulated by G. Hardin in his 1968 *Science* article of the same name. In that famous and often cited piece (Harvey, 2012: 68), Hardin contended that the weakness of common property regimes is that they inevitably result in the degradation of the resources in question. This is because of a misalignment of incentives and a diffusion of responsibility. On the one hand, all users have free access to a common resource, while on the other, no individual is incentivized or empowered to manage the resource for long-term sustainability. The result is overuse and depletion of the common resource. Effective resource management must instead come either through privatization of once-common resources or through state control (Kornberger and Borch, 2015).

In contrast, common-property theory argues that some natural resources must, by their nature, be held in common, and that such resources can be effectively managed for long-term sustainability and productivity by collective governance systems rather than through the market or the state (Ostrom, 1990). In her foundational 1990 work *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Elinor Ostrom drew attention to the limitations of Hardin's framework and held that problems

of incentives and responsibility can be overcome through communication and organizing systems of "self-governance" (Ostrom, 1990; Kornberger and Borch 2015). Ostrom's work continues to be a touchpoint for common-property theory.

Common-property theory breaks down "the commons" into three basic elements. First, a commonly-held resource (identified in the literature as a natural resource such as clean air, river waters, grazing lands, or stocks of animal resources); second, commoners, or users and beneficiaries of the common resource; finally, commoning practices, or the actions that commoners perform to manage the common resource (Ostrom, 1990). These three components make up a system of resource management known as "the commons." This was the system that was dismantled in early modern England through processes of enclosure. I find it notable that Ostrom's definition emphasizes not only the resource being managed, but also the people doing the managing and the system of relationships and actions they employ. Further, it implies a political culture of consensus-building, negotiation, and compromise (Dolšak and Ostrom, 2003). In other words, thorough-going democratic culture is theorized as key to the commons.

Urban commons theory emerges from the literature on common-property theory (Chatterton, 2016). It extends Ostrom's three-part definition of the commons to the urban realm (Lee and Webster, 2006; Kornberger and Borch, 2015; M. Williams, 2018), applying it to resources particular to the urban environment such as waste (Zapata and Campos, 2015)

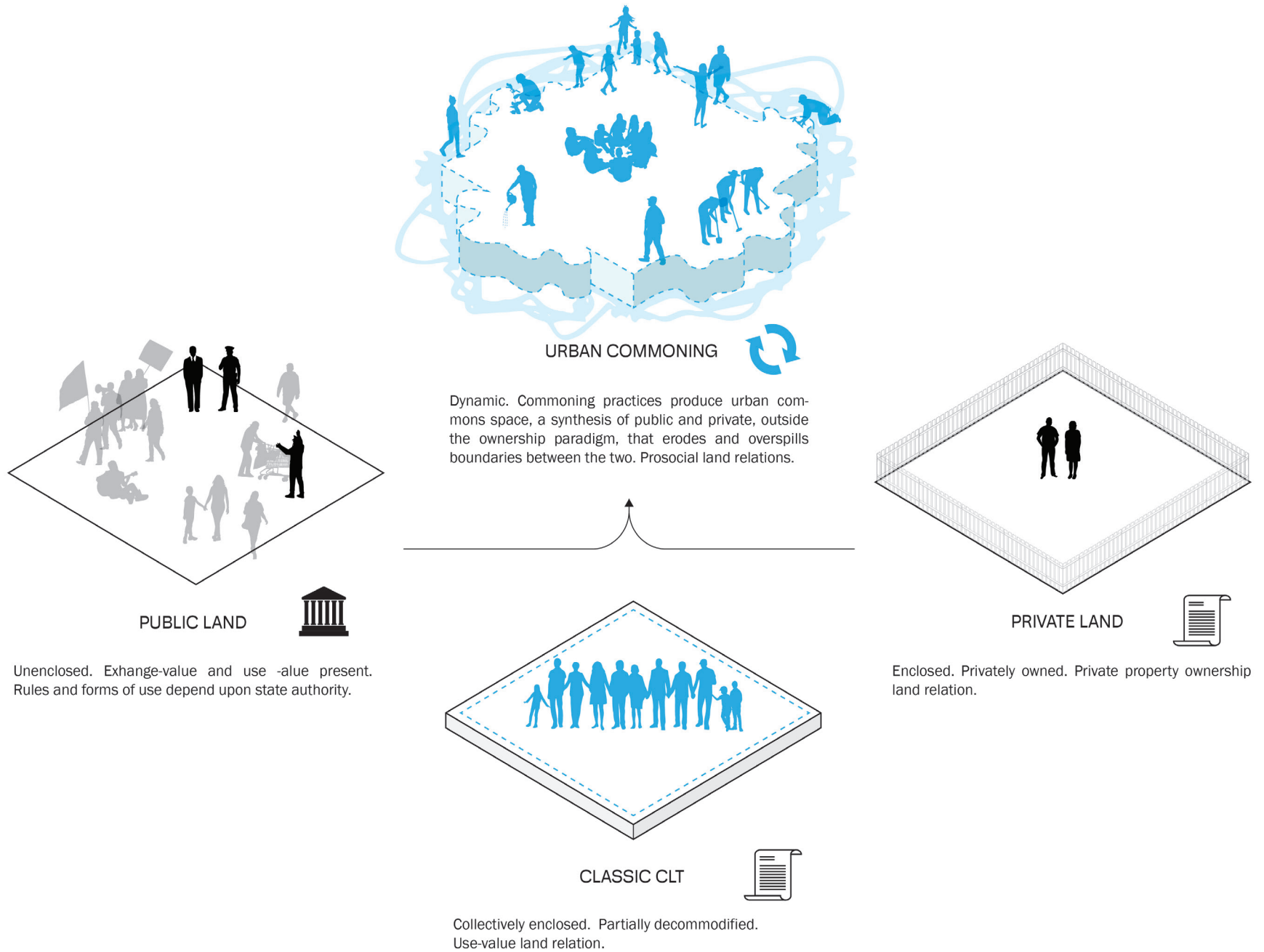


Figure 5.1: Urban commoning, a synthesis of public and private space.

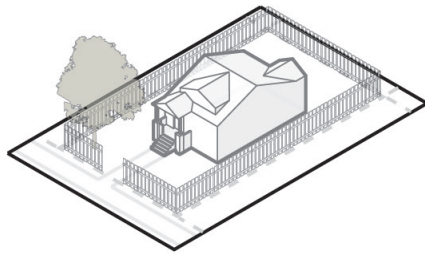
and parks and greenspace (Colding et al., 2015). However, the notion of non-privatized, non-state resource management is also applied to space itself. In *Commonwealth* (2009), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri conceive of a whole city as a massive commons of shared knowledge and labor. Urban commons are conceptualized as distinct from, and complicating the distinction between, public and private space (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Stavrides, 2016). **Figure 5.1** illustrates this relationship. Urban commoning represents a synthesis of public and private space, sharing elements with both but embodying a distinct and novel spatial phenomenon that emerges from dynamic social interaction. Public land is framed by state power, while both private land and the classic affordable-housing-oriented CLT are brought into being through the legal framework of private property. Contrasting with urban commons, classic CLTs and other forms of collectivized housing may be thought of as “collectively enclosed” in that they create common space but restrict general access to it, tending to “block the liberating potentialities of commoning practices” (Stavrides, 2016: 4).

BEYOND PROPERTY

Urban commons theorists tend to diverge from both Hardin’s and Ostrom’s conceptualization of the commons, claiming that both frame common resources merely as static, depletable objects of exploitation (Kornberger and Borch 2015; Stavrides, 2016). In her analysis of the Women’s Library in Newtown as an urban commons, Miriam Williams

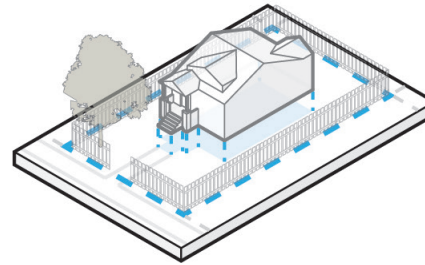
describes urban commons as “more-than-property,” arguing that to focus on urban commons primarily as a property regime misses their deeper relational significance (2018). In addition to physical resources, they point to a second category of intangible, relational common resources: “knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii). In the introduction to *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City* (2015), Martin Kornberger and Christian Borch describe such resources as “nonsubtractive,” that is, as becoming more valuable as usage increases, not less. They use a city street as an example, which becomes a richer and deeper resource for social relations, knowledge sharing, and simple enjoyment as its uses increase and diversify (7). Far from being subject to Hardin’s tragedy of the commons, and even in contrast to Ostrom’s conceptualization of common resources as inert objects to be collectively managed, urban commons are realized through a density of social activity and interaction. “In the city,” the authors write, “the commons is an inherently relational phenomenon” (7).

Meanwhile, in *Common Space: The City as Commons* (2016), theorist Stavros Stavrides contends that common-property theory’s narrowly limited conceptualization of common resources must be expanded to include intangible, fluid resources such as social relations and forms of shared knowledge (52). If a commons is composed of resources, people, and practices, it’s the latter two elements that are of central importance in urban commons. The essential resources in an urban commons *are* its “commoners” and their commoning practices.



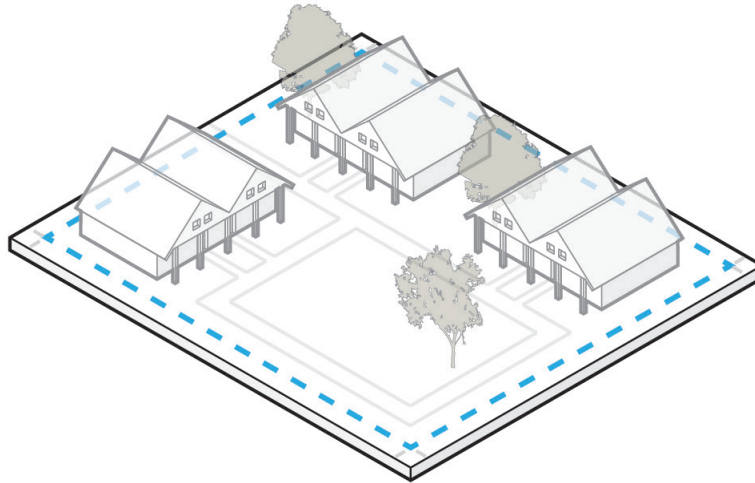
PRIVATE PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

NO COMMONING



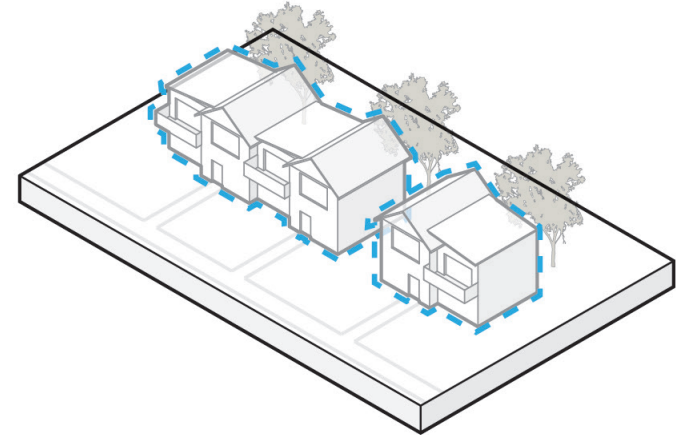
CLASSIC CLT

*DUAL-OWNERSHIP OF HOUSING AND LAND
SINGLE-FAMILY PARCEL*



COHOUSING

*COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP
NO EQUITY CAP*

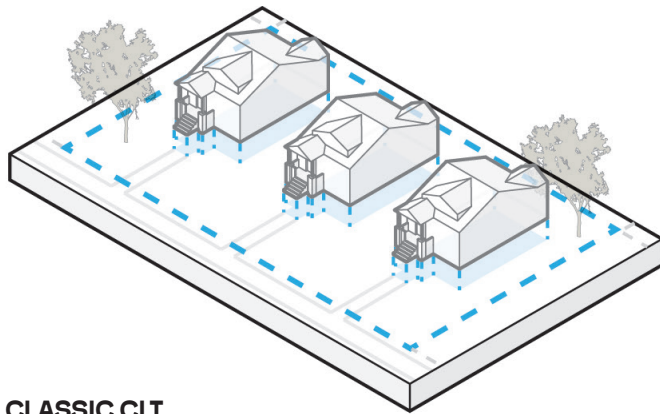


LEHC

*COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP OF HOUSING AND LAND
LIMITED EQUITY – SUSTAINED AFFORDABILITY*

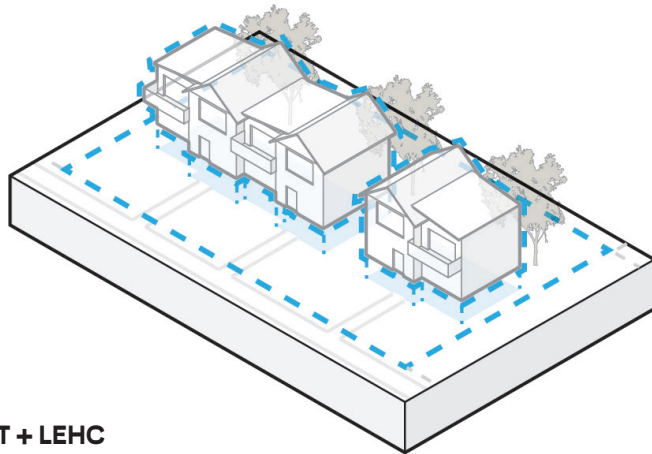
PROFIT EXTRACTION

Figure 5.2: Non-market housing models fall along a spectrum of commoning, with some arrangements resulting in more layers of commons and thicker land relations.



CLASSIC CLT

DUAL-OWNERSHIP OF HOUSING AND LAND
 PRIVATE HOMEOWNERSHIP
 COLLECTIVE PARCEL



CLT + LEHC

COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP OF HOMES
 LAND HELD IN TRUST
 LIMITED EQUITY - SUSTAINED AFFORDABILITY

COMMONING

Figure 5.2, continued

COMMONING VERSUS COMMONS

This emphasis on the relational aspect of urban commons should lead us to think of urban commons as a constellation of dynamic socio-spatial relationships rather than as a static spatial arrangement. As David Harvey writes in *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (2012), urban commons “is not to be construed...as a particular kind of thing, asset, or even social process, but as an unstable and malleable social relation...” (73). Urban commons, therefore, is something to be continually enacted, not a state of affairs to be achieved. It makes more sense then to speak of urban *commoning*. The active, open-ended nature of urban commoning parallels landscape citizenships theory’s emphasis on fluid social and land relations. Both describe continuous, dynamic processes of social and spatial negotiation. Let’s look more closely at the practical content of urban commoning. What specifically do we mean by commoning practices?

Common practices are, to quote Stavrides, those “which produce goods and services to be shared” (2016: 2). Actions associated with the production of common resources are commoning practices. For example, contributing labor to a community garden (or, for that matter, serving on the board of a CLT) could be construed as a commoning practice. What then distinguishes commoning practices from simple community service? Stavrides goes on to offer more:

“Commoning practices importantly produce new relations

between people. They encourage creative encounters and negotiations through which forms of sharing are organized and common life takes shape. Commoning practices, thus do not simply produce or distribute goods but essentially create new forms of social life, forms of life-in-common.” (2016: 2)

What distinguishes commoning practices from community service or activism is precisely the production of new social relations, as well as the production of common goods and services. This risks coming across as a tautology: urban commons comprise people engaged in commoning practices, and commoning practices are those which produce urban commons. The key is that the resources produced by commoning practices, both physical goods and services and what we can call relational goods, fall outside and are anathema to the categories of public and private (Harvey, 2012).

Still, more specificity is called for. Concrete examples of commoning practices that appear in the literature include: Collective appropriation of public space, whether for shelter, political action, food production, or simply for gathering (Stavrides, 2016); appropriation of physical resources by marginalized communities such as urban waste to create economic value, social organization, and political power (Zapata and Campos, 2015); production and distribution of knowledge regarding suppressed urban histories (Jerram, 2015); and maintenance of shared space and acts of interpersonal care that create community (M. Williams, 2018). Most relevant for my purposes, Susannah Bunce (2016) frames the

community activism and organizing that established the East London CLT as commoning practices, drawing particular attention to the “equitable and inclusive processes for community-based decision-making” that are entailed both in the creation and ongoing activities of CLTs (147). In summary, commoning practices such as collective appropriation of space and of physical resources, sharing of knowledge, acts of care, and collective decision-making spur novel social relations between participants.

Commoning practices “overspill capitalist norms” (2016: 99), to borrow another phrase from Stavrides, where capitalist norms are understood to include both market relations and bureaucratic control. That is, commoning practices actively erode the categories of public and private. Commoning practices carve out space, literally as well as figuratively, for novel social relations to unfold. This space, the urban commons, is liminal, emergent, a threshold between existing forms of urban space categorized as public or private, and between existing structures of urban life and new possibilities.

URBAN COMMONS AS THRESHOLD

A threshold represents not just a border between one space to another; it is a space in itself, albeit one characterized by movement, change, and transformation. A threshold draws together the qualities of the spaces it connects, but is ultimately of neither. People move inward and outward,

crossing paths in the threshold while on their way somewhere else, and changing in the process. The urban commons has such threshold qualities. It is dynamic, porous, a space of negotiation, contestation, and reflection. It represents not only a transitional state between public and private space, or merely an alternative form of space, but a threshold, a synthesis of public and private that pushes beyond both and calls each into question (Hardt and Negri, 2009). I explore these threshold qualities here in order to better understand how urban commons, and thus CLTs, can have a transformative effect on the urban environment. I draw the notion of thresholds principally from Stavrides' *Common Space: The City as Commons* (2016), and find connections with Orvar Löfgren's chapter "Sharing an atmosphere: spaces in urban commons" from *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City* (2015).

As I have argued, dynamism is a defining feature of urban commons. Urban commons are conjured into being by the actions of commoners. They are "unstable and malleable," to quote Harvey again. Löfgren (2015) describes urban commons as "*terraines vagues*, in the sense that they are not clearly defined or delineated and may change over time, during day and night as well as between seasons" (69). They are always on the point of changing into something else, in other words, thresholds to the new.

The porosity of the threshold is also key to its transformative function. It opens in both directions, permitting movement inward and outward. Stavrides (2016) contrasts thresholds with checkpoints, "control areas that regulate encounters and discriminate between users" (70). Thresholds

instead facilitate meeting and welcome diversity. Löfgren (2015) similarly points to urban commons as spaces where different kinds of people with different purposes may meet, linger, and pass through. Porosity not only lends novelty and interest to the experience of urban space, but challenges the spatial and social orders that underpin the urban status quo (Stavrides, 2016). The unregulated interactions that thresholds facilitate invite communication and comparison, leading to "the mutual recognition and interdependence of identities" (Stavrides, 2016: 71-72). Threshold experiences promote a critical perspective on prevailing social relations and power dynamics, loosening their fixedness. In this sense, the threshold is transformative, or more precisely, transgressive.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

In this chapter, I have introduced the concept of urban commons in order to demonstrate what I see as the transformative power of CLTs. CLTs establish physical spaces and social relations that fall outside the logic of public and private. I argue that they more accurately push beyond and challenge these categories. CLTs create a commons in the sense of establishing a system whereby commoners (CLT participants) manage a common resource (land held by the CLT and to some extent improvement on the land) by way of commoning practices (primarily community-based democratic decision-making). Urban commons theory holds that in addition to the land as a common resource, an additional layer of resources is brought into being: novel social relations and spatial

arrangements that by their nature erode the distinction between public and private space. How might CLTs more fully realize this potential? In the next chapter, I outline a spatial design strategy that engages notions of urban commons which I call “Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate.” This strategy aims to foster social relations and land relations that underpin urban commons and lead to a more enriching and life-affirming urban fabric.

6. LANDING: RECOMMONING GROUND

So far, I have explored land relationships with a focus on private property ownership; discussed the housing affordability crisis and presented alternative models of land and housing tenancy; unpacked the workings of the CLT model in detail, emphasizing its unique approach to decommodifying land; and explored urban commons theory as a dynamic process of urban commoning. The discussion has taken place mainly at the theoretical or policy level. In this chapter, I explore how the built environment might concretely register these considerations.

CLTs decommodify land and therefore, I argue, have a radical potential. Yet, their design and construction need not reflect a rupture with the status quo, conscious or otherwise. Indeed, in many cases, CLTs are physically indistinguishable from privately-owned housing (DeFilippis et al., 2019). In this chapter, I offer answers to the following questions: How does the CLT-as-urban-commons differ in design terms from existing CLTs? How can urban commoning practices be reflected in and nurtured by landscape design?

In response to these questions (and my answer is just one of many possibilities), I begin by articulating a design strategy I call **“Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate.”** This strategy aims to give form to the urban commons. It puts into practice the notion of urban commons as literal thresholds between areas of public and private space, and as figurative thresholds between different conditions of social relations. By employing landscape as a catalyst for urban commoning, I bolster the argument that urban commons imply a transformation not only of land relations but of social relations as well (Hackett et al., 2019).

To envision the application of the “Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate” strategy, I look at the Sehome neighborhood in Bellingham, Washington as a case study. Like many cities across the US, and especially in the country’s coastal regions, Bellingham is experiencing a housing affordability crisis (Ehlenz, 2018). I use mapping to home in on Sehome both as an example of the city’s struggles with housing affordability and as a nexus of other dynamic

urban qualities such as proximity to major streets and edges between different development zones. I use my on-the-ground experiences walking the neighborhood to identify a particular site that lends itself to the application of my design strategy, and use the tools of design to offer a speculative vision of the site as a CLT-as-urban-commons.

THICKEN-OCCUPY-CULTIVATE

CLTs decommodify land, and in so doing establish spaces that cannot be neatly categorized as public or private. Similarly, they engage homeowners, leaseholders, administrators, and community members in ways that diverge from normative economic, social, and political relationships (Hackett et al., 2019). Both physically and relationally, CLTs introduce thresholds into the urban environment. These physical and relational

thresholds provide promising conditions for the production and growth of urban commons. I suggest that by focusing on landscapes' physical thresholds and amplifying the relational threshold qualities in the design of CLTs, the potential of these institutions to transform urban conditions can be better realized. I call this design strategy "Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate." As the name suggests, the strategy consists of three elements that inform the design of CLT landscapes, especially in reference to the thresholds between CLTs and their surrounding urban fabric.

Figure 6.1 abstractly illustrates the application of the "Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate" strategy. Parcel edges are "thickened." More space is devoted to the threshold condition between the CLT and the surrounding urban fabric. By thickening the interface between the street and the interior of the decommodified landscape, this design element creates a wider field of opportunity to experience the gradient between space coded as either

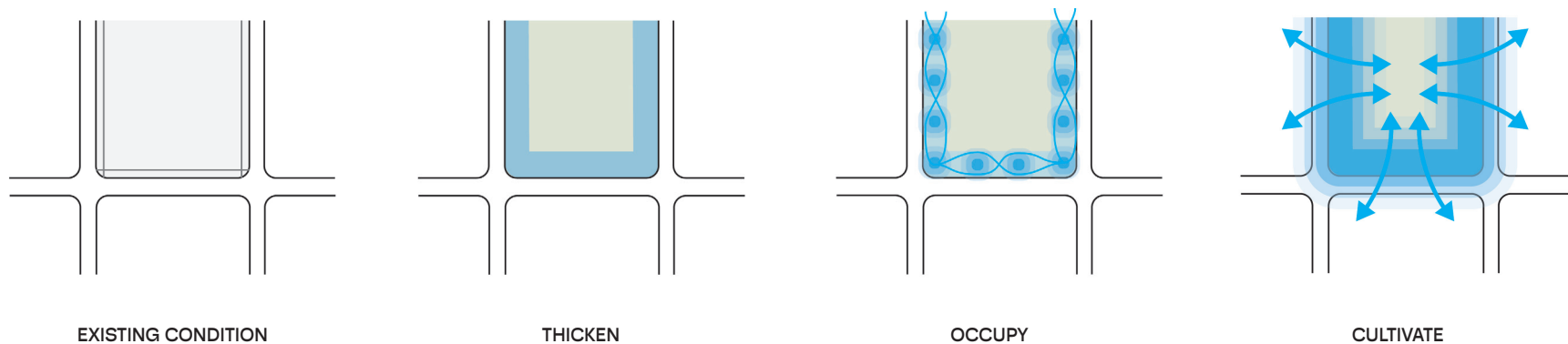


Figure 6.1: "Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate," a strategy for the implementation of urban commons on decommodified land.

public or private and the neither-public-nor-private CLT space. Next, the threshold is “occupied,” seeded with landscape interventions designed to facilitate a maximum diversity of community interactions and activities. This element applies especially to the design of circulation and gathering places within the threshold space. Circulation is conceived as a network or web in order to facilitate community members literally crossing paths. Nodes of gathering are distributed throughout this web and range from large to small, communal to intimate. Finally, the activity within the threshold area is “cultivated,” expanding inward and outward and making incursions into the surrounding urban fabric.

As this section progresses, my description of suggested design interventions will become less concrete and less prescriptive. This is intentional and important. The strategy is intended to enable the collective appropriation of space by local communities. The specific forms of this appropriation are, by nature, unpredictable and cannot be manufactured or handed down by the designer. Obviously, though, the design elements I suggest below cannot in themselves constitute an urban commons. Both public parks and corporate campuses may include thoughtfully-designed gathering spaces and a compelling blend of materials that blur spatial boundaries and spur creativity. My argument here is that such design elements, *in combination with* the underlying decommodification of land accomplished by CLTs, and *strategically located* at the threshold between such decommodified space and the surrounding urban fabric, can catalyze social relations and activities that give rise to urban commons. Let’s look at the three elements of this design strategy in more detail.

THICKEN

As discussed in the previous chapter, urban commons are characterized by threshold qualities like movement, porosity, liminality, and dynamism. The aim of this first element is to increase the physical space devoted to these qualities. Movement through porous threshold spaces facilitates interactions that forge new social relations. Löfgren (2015) uses the example of Copenhagen’s central railway station to illustrate this dynamic. Its open, multidirectional space is accessible to all different kinds of people, each possibly approaching the space with a different purpose: transit, meeting, lingering, shelter, wayfinding, or commerce. People cross paths in this threshold, bringing their differences into conversation with one another. Thickening thresholds creates more opportunities for commoning to be practiced, in other words, for the production of new social relations that give rise to urban commons.

To experiment with thickening, I focus on the edge between CLT-held land and the surrounding urban fabric as the primary threshold where this strategy could be implemented. In an urban context, this most commonly aligns with rights-of-way. A right-of-way, including the street, sidewalk, and adjacent public realm, forms the “front doorstep” of the parcels along the street. Thickening the threshold means widening this liminal zone, extending access into the neither-public-nor-private space of the CLT.

It also means reducing, softening, or eliminating “checkpoints,” those physical or symbolic barriers between, and indicators of, public and private

space (Stavrides, 2016). In this context, such checkpoints could appear as fences, gates, walls, hedges, and even topographical elements that suggest a delineation between accessible, public space and inaccessible, private space. These could be eliminated altogether, lowered, or in the case of fences and hedges, made more visually porous, signaling the accessibility of various spaces. Experientially, this aims at (1) reducing individual psychological tension and inhibition associated with interpreting and negotiating public and private boundaries (Stavrides, 2016) and (2) inviting greater interaction and conviviality between community members.

OCCUPY

The aim of this element is to encourage occupation of the thickened threshold space, and to make this space amenable to the multiplicity of activities and practices that sustain urban commons. Streets and sidewalks are typically treated as infrastructure corridors, facilitating efficient passage of people, energy, and water from one place to another, rather than as having their own spatial character and being places to pause and be. However, as I argue above, thresholds are spaces in themselves, rather than mere connection points between other spaces.

The design of thickened threshold space should encourage lingering, meeting, interaction, gathering, and sheltering, as well as passage. These kinds of activities form the basis for collective appropriation of space, sharing of knowledge, and collective decision-making, commoning

practices that give rise to urban commons (Kornberger and Borch, 2015). Thinking back especially to the notion of kinship relations explored in Chapter Two, the driving motivation of this element is to make the thickened threshold hospitable for residents, neighbors, passers-through, lingerers, those in need of shelter, and plants and wildlife.

What design elements contribute to these types of spatial occupation? I argue, first, for a range of design interventions intended to slow and collect movement. Networks of winding, intersecting paths alternately diffuse and concentrate activity, and allow for a diversity of spatial and social experiences. Small and large gathering spaces host relationship- and community-building interaction and activity. Shelters provide respite and refuge, and encourage community members to dwell in the space. These design interventions facilitate different kinds of movement, at different speeds, and maximize opportunities to cross paths, interact, gather, and share.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, such facilities should lie on a continuum of formality. It is crucial that the space allow for novel, unforeseen, informal uses. The aim is to spur the collective creativity and space-making capacity of the community, rather than to dictate acceptable uses and forms of occupation. A diversity of materials can be used to indicate different levels of formality and to invite the appropriation of space for novel uses. An overreliance on hardscape may too-clearly bound spaces and predefine intended uses. In contrast, softer, more malleable materials can suggest the blurring of boundaries and better

allow for the appropriation of space. To take a pathway as an example, gravel suggests a less rigidly prescribed delineation with surrounding softscape than concrete, is more inviting of movement across intended circulation patterns, and allows for much greater change over time.

In summary, this part of the strategy is about inviting occupation of the threshold space. This is accomplished by landscape interventions that: (1) maximize diversity of movement and gathering patterns, and; (2) invite the appropriation of space for community-generated uses. These interventions, in conjunction with the underlying decommodification of the land, which in itself contributes to the transformation of social relations (Hackett et al., 2019), set the stage for the performance of commoning practices.

CULTIVATE

The third element of the strategy aims to infuse the landscape with layers of life and activity. Cultivation here has multiple meanings and facets. First, there is the literal cultivation of the landscape: the growth of plant communities, whether for the production of food or other purposes, such as the provision of wildlife habitat. Second, there is the cultivation and growth of commoned space, the “overspilling” of the commons into the surrounding urban fabric (Stavrides, 2016). Third, the continued cultivation of novel social relations.

All three of these facets point to how at this stage, the strategy becomes much less prescriptive and much more speculative. Landscape designers may be able to design the initial arrangement of plant communities, but we cannot control how these communities change over time in response to interaction with and use by humans and in response to various environmental conditions. We cannot define the specific innovative ways that people may choose to appropriate space and make incursions into the surrounding urban fabric. And of course, social relations cannot be designed. Rather, it is the very dynamism, variation, and spontaneity of social relations that this strategy aims to cultivate. In this third element of the strategy, the seeds of urban commons planted in the process of thickening and occupying take root, and, watered by the interaction of community members (both human and nonhuman), grow into unpredictable forms.

The specific forms that the cultivation of urban commons will take will necessarily vary over time and from place to place. However, in the following sections I offer a speculative vision of how such cultivation could manifest in a site I identify in the Sehome neighborhood of Bellingham, Washington.

HOMING IN

In developing this thesis, I struggled with the question of whether it was appropriate to select a specific site wherein I might test my ideas. On

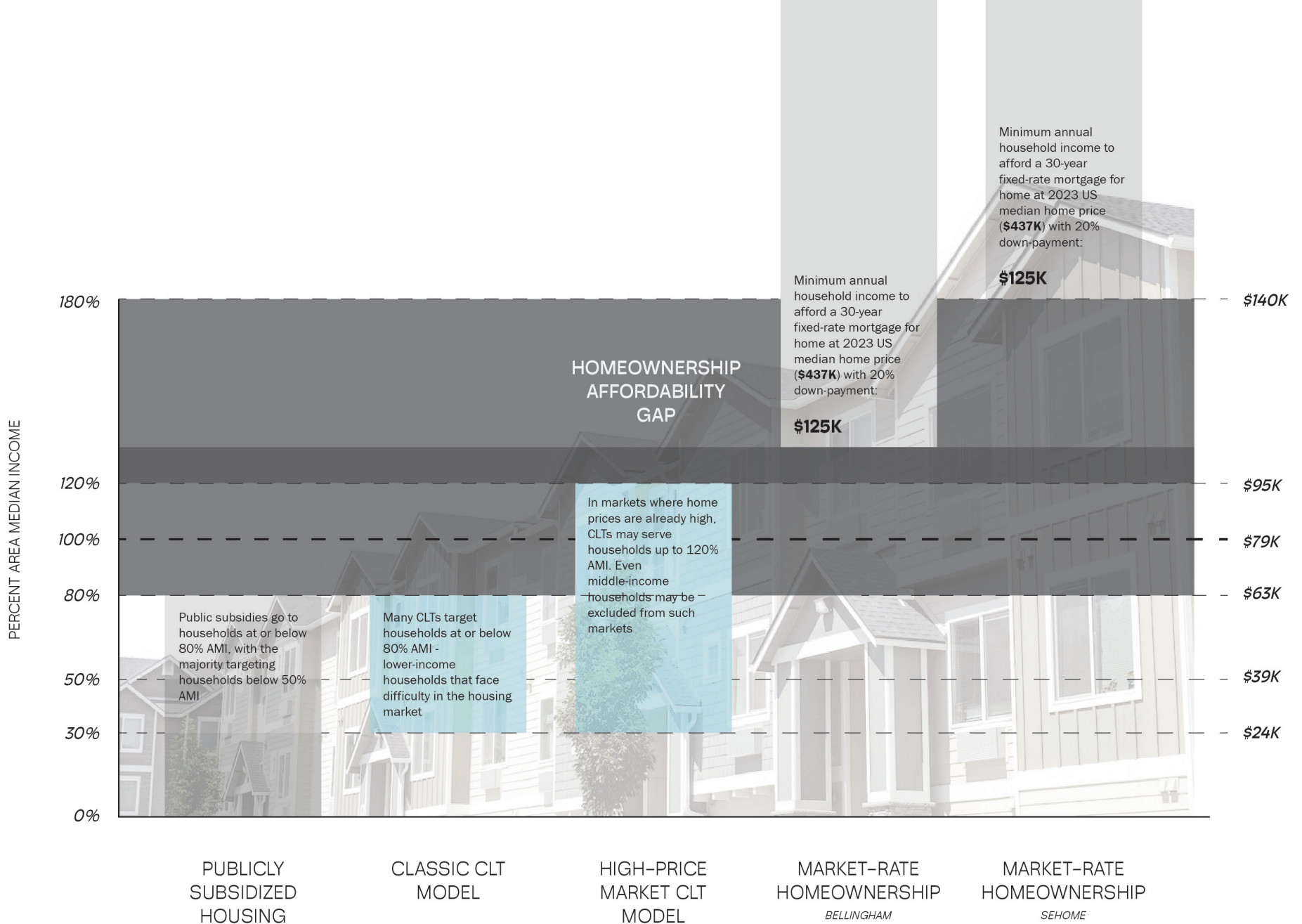


Figure 6.2: The housing affordability crisis in Bellingham. The affordability gap shows the distance between the typical income level below which households qualify for both public housing subsidies and participation in standard CLT homeownership programs and the minimum income needed to qualify for a standard mortgage at 2022 median home prices in Sehome, one of Bellingham’s most desirable (and unaffordable) neighborhoods. Sources: City of Bellingham, 2022.

one hand, by committing to a specific site, I ran the risk of presenting a vision that was too literal, and losing something important in the process. I might end up proposing a site design, which would be unable to convey the dynamism and contingency that characterizes urban commons. An argument about the fundamental reframing of the human relationship to landscape could get reduced to questions about the placement of a bench or the square footage of a community garden plot. On the other hand, it was unclear how I would demonstrate my arguments' practical implications for landscape design if they remained untethered to site conditions. A key element of my thesis, namely landscape architecture, would be missing.

To resolve this issue, I settled on a practice of speculative visioning. I chose to select a site, but rather than develop a specific, concrete site design, I focused on the application of the "Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate" strategy in order to envision possible landscape interventions and spatial arrangements. This speculative vision would not be proposed as a concrete or comprehensive solution to the design of the urban commons. Rather, the aim would be to test how my design strategy could be applied in a specific spatial context and to explore the implications for the urban landscape. This proved to be a fine line to walk. As this section progresses, it should be kept in mind that what I propose is not a site design per se, but instead a conjecture.

WELCOME TO BELLINGHAM

I focused my site selection process on Bellingham, Washington. With a population of almost 100,000 ("Population and Demographics," 2022), Bellingham is a mid-sized city that faces the challenges of the housing affordability crisis discussed in Chapter 3. Aside from this fact, what led to Bellingham as an appropriate location to test my design strategy? Beside the city's struggle with housing affordability, I considered several additional factors.

First, Bellingham's downtown core and surrounding neighborhoods feature a compressed mix of single-family and multi-family residential, commercial, and industrial zoning, as well as historic districts and several "Urban Village" areas zoned for multi-use development. This diversity is compelling because it presents many thresholds between urban areas with different characters, use patterns, and development trajectories. It allows for testing how my design strategy plays out against a range of different urban conditions.

Next, Bellingham is already experimenting with innovative forms of affordable housing. A notable example is the Millworks project. This project redevelops part of Bellingham's postindustrial waterfront, combining affordable housing with a community food campus and utilizing collectivized financial instruments to support local small businesses (Showalter, 2023). Additionally, Bellingham is served by a CLT, the Kulshan Community Land Trust. Kulshan CLT develops affordable housing

throughout Bellingham and its outlying communities (kulshanc.lt.org, 2023). Although its programs are oriented primarily toward the provision of affordable housing, the organization’s mission statement speaks to a broader vision of urban vitality (kulshanc.lt.org, 2023). These projects demonstrate the community’s interest in institutions that both respond to the housing affordability crisis and that create new social bonds. Given the preexistence of initiatives such as these that broadly align with the topic of this thesis, I felt selecting a testing site in Bellingham would increase the resonance and relevance of my arguments.

MAPPING SEHOME

Having selected Bellingham as the general location within which to situate my arguments, I used a combination of mapping and on-the-ground investigation to home in on a specific testing site within the city’s Sehome neighborhood. The mapping exercise was meant first to identify neighborhoods where housing pressure is particularly acute. I used several factors to model acute housing pressure. First, for context I mapped neighborhood boundaries. Next, I mapped the boundaries of the Urban Village zones referenced above. These zones are expected to absorb a disproportionate share of Bellingham’s future growth (“Urban Villages,” 2022). They thus represent areas of high demand for housing as well as nodes of activity. Then I mapped neighborhoods with the highest average home prices, showing the least affordable areas of Bellingham. I then mapped the city’s most densely populated and most densifying

neighborhoods (“Bellingham Housing Statistics,” 2022). I used these density measures as proxies for both neighborhood desirability and high competition for housing. Finally, I mapped census blocks with the least ratio of average income to average home price (Quarterly Residential Vacancies and Homeownership, First Quarter 2023,” 2023). I used this measure as a proxy for housing insecurity, on the logic that this represents areas where the ability of residents to afford monthly mortgage payments and rents is least secure.

Figure 6.3 shows the results of this investigation, revealing neighborhoods with high housing prices, high housing demand, elevated housing insecurity, and high exposure to future development. The Sehome neighborhood stands out on all dimensions. It is sandwiched between three Urban Village zones (the Waterfront and Downtown zones to the north and northwest and the Samish Zone to the southeast), and it overlaps with one of the least housing secure census blocks in the city. Zooming into the neighborhood scale, **Figure 6.4** shows the zoning mosaic in Sehome, a mix of single-family residential and multi-family residential zones with large areas in the north, northwest, and southeast zoned for development as Urban Villages.

WALKING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

With this context in mind, I conducted an on-the-ground investigation of Sehome. Traveling on foot, I explored the neighborhood in order

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY IN BELLINGHAM

LEAST RATIO OF AVG INCOME TO AVG HOME PRICE BY CENSUS BLOCK GROUP

13.52%



BELLINGHAM AVG.

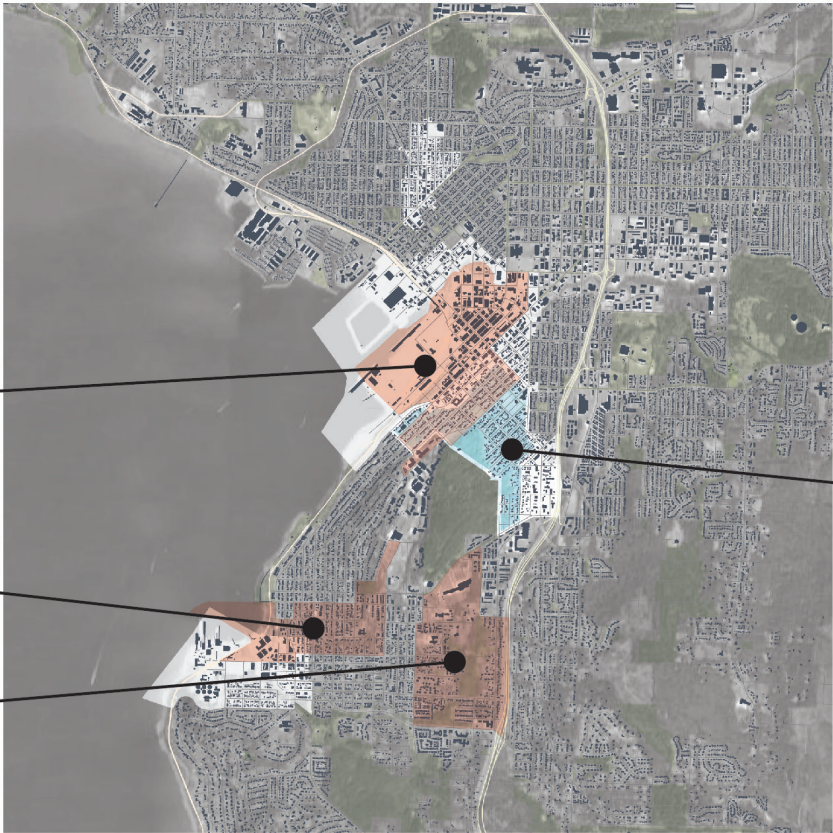
8.65%



5.29%



8.5%



- SEHOME NEIGHBORHOOD
- C.O.B. URBAN VILLAGES
- HIGH HOUSING PRESSURE CENSUS BLOCK GROUPS

DENSEST AND MOST DENSIFIED NEIGHBORHOOD SINCE 2010

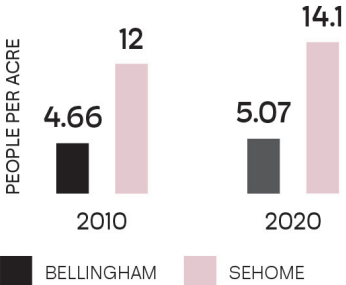


Figure 6.3: Housing affordability, housing precarity, and neighborhood desirability in Bellingham. Sources: City of Bellingham, 2022; US Census Bureau, 2023.

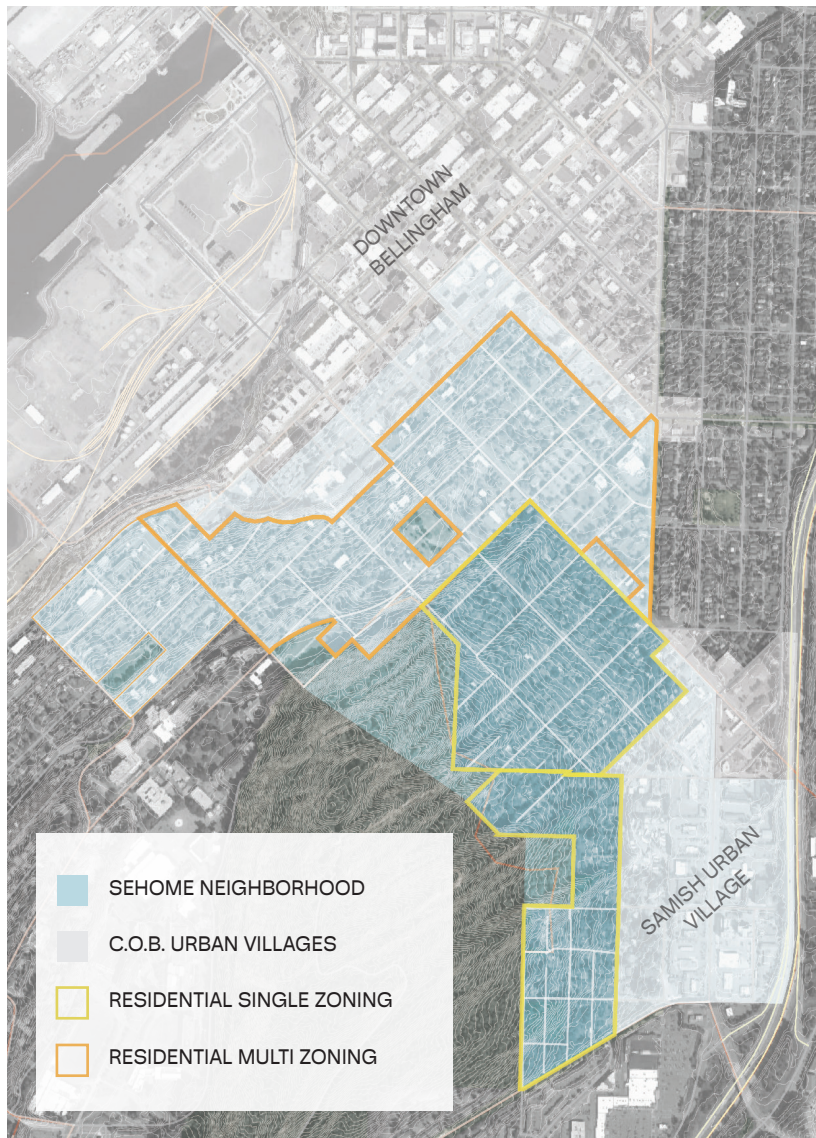


Figure 6.4: Zoning in Bellingham’s Sehome neighborhood. Source: City of Bellingham, 2022.

to experience its gradient of housing typologies and characteristics. I wandered circuitously from Downtown Bellingham along Sehome’s northern edge, south through the neighborhood’s thoroughly residential core, down to its southern extent where it transitions back to commercial development along North Samish Way. **Figure 6.5** shows photographs taken on this walking tour. The goal of this investigation was to identify locations within Sehome most appropriate for the application of my speculative visioning strategy.



Figure 6.5: Sehome neighborhood photos.

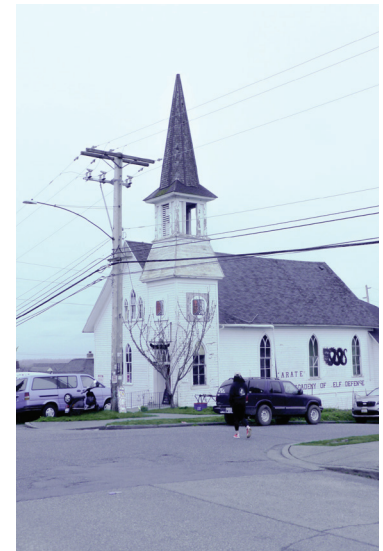


Figure 6.5, continued: *Sehome neighborhood photos. This historic district abuts the downtown commercial core to the northwest and becomes more thoroughly residential to the south and east. I toured Sehome on foot in search of an appropriate speculative visioning site.*

Through walking the neighborhood, I identified a surface parking lot (shown in **Figure 6.6** and indicated in **Figure 6.7**) on E Maple Street between Jersey St and Key St with several qualities to recommend it as a testing site. First, the lot is underutilized. Located in the middle of one of the highest-housing-pressure neighborhoods in Bellingham, the 3.5 acre expanse of mostly-asphalt currently serves the single purpose of car storage, but it has the potential to be redeveloped as housing to absorb some of Sehome's expected densification and to ameliorate housing pressure. Next, as a sizable contiguous area, the site allows for speculative



Figure 6.6: *The speculative visioning site: the surface parking lot on E Maple Street in the middle of Sehome. I visited midday on a weekday - the lot was almost entirely empty.*



Figure 6.7: *Sehome neighborhood context map.*

visioning at the scale of a neighborhood block. At this scale, the threshold between the site and the surrounding urban fabric accommodates a greater array of landscape interventions. The site is also located along two of the main arteries running north-south through Sehome, E Maple St and E Chestnut St, both of which connect the Downtown and Samish Urban Villages. Finally, I noted the site's location at the boundary between a single-family residential zone and a multi-family residential zone, as well as at the edge of the Downtown Urban Village zone. It would be strategically advantageous to intervene along existing axes of activity and movement through the neighborhood, as well as at the threshold between different zones of housing and development. The site's underutilization, its neighborhood-block scale, and its strategic location within Sehome make it an ideal site for an exercise in speculative visioning.

APPLYING THE STRATEGY

How might the CLT-as-urban-commons be physically manifested as a set of landscape interventions? In this section I take on this question directly. I reimagine the E Maple Street site as CLT-held land, and use the "Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate" strategy to offer a speculative vision of the threshold between the site and its surrounding urban fabric.

I first modeled the site's existing conditions (**Figure 6.8**). In isometric view, we see E Maple Street, the sidewalk, and a hedgerow guarding the interior of the site. The site interior is asphalt parking lot and planter islands. The

space available for public occupation is narrowly limited to the sidewalk, which also defines the space's primary use: passing through. How could this space be reimagined as an urban commons, a threshold between the neighborhood as it exists and the possibilities of urban forms based on collectivity, sharing, and dynamic interaction?

In **Figures 6.9 and 6.10**, I mobilize the "Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate" strategy to offer up a vision of this change. These visions assume that the site is acquired by a CLT: the land is decommodified and is developed for affordable housing. What we are dealing with is then the edge between this space, land held outside the public-private binary and its surroundings, and land owned and managed either publicly (the right-of-way) or privately (adjacent parcels). **Figure 6.9** shows a messy, sketchy envisioning of this threshold space; **Figure 6.10** builds on and refines these ideas. I reiterate that even the more refined drawing should be interpreted not as a fixed design but rather as an envisioning of commoning practices in one of countless possible spatial arrangements.

Beginning with a thickened threshold, housing units are deeply set back from the street, creating a wide "front doorstep" on E Maple Street. Checkpoints such as the existing hedgerow are eliminated, inviting movement along, through, and across the thickened space. The space is porous, with clear avenues between the interior and exterior of the site. Contrasting with the narrow, tightly-bounded rights-of-way across the street and on neighboring blocks, this wide landscape signals a rupture with the surrounding urban fabric and invites gathering and activity.

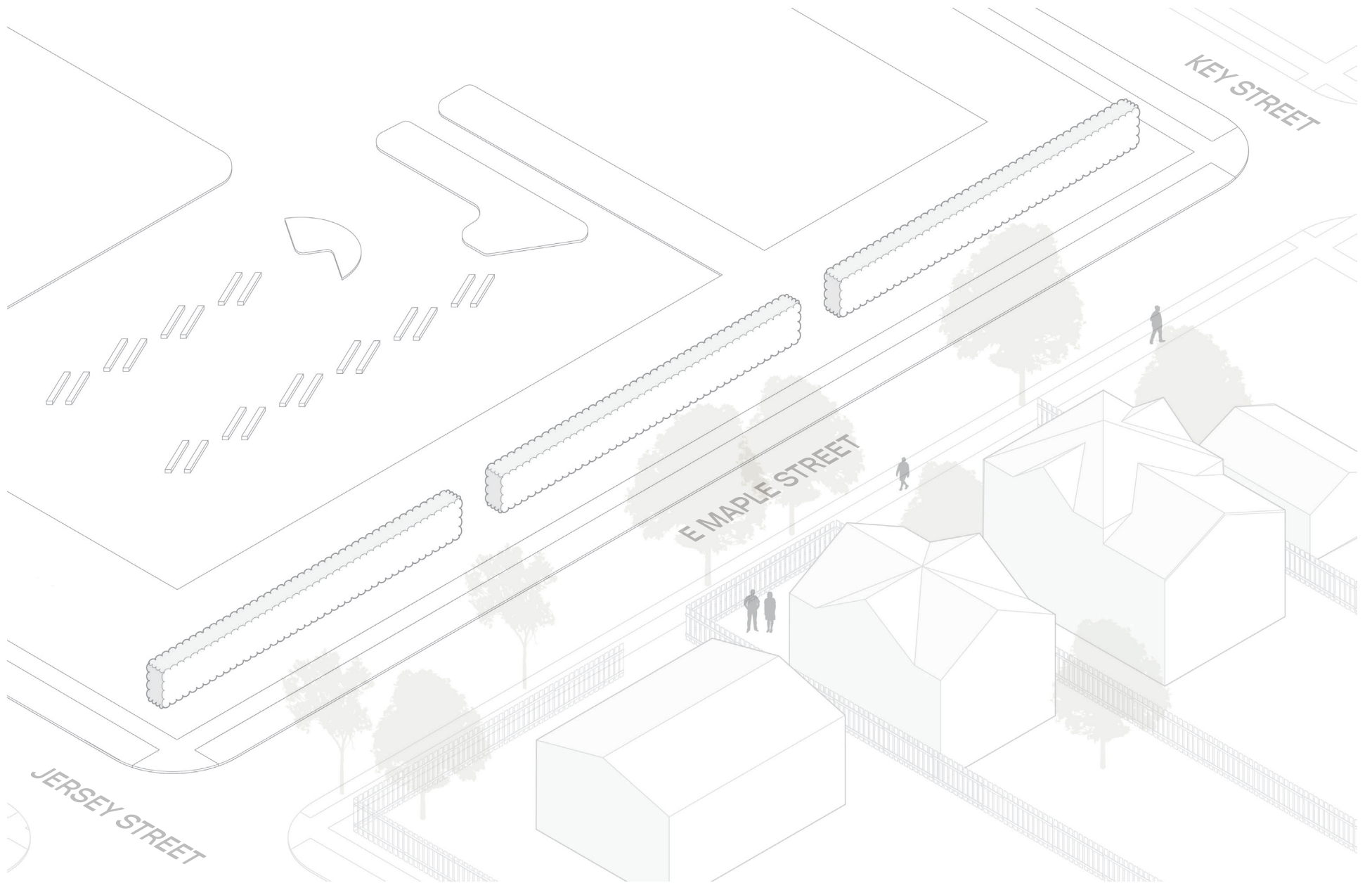


Figure 6.8: Existing conditions at the speculative visioning site and E Maple Street



Figure 6.9: Sketching a possible threshold.

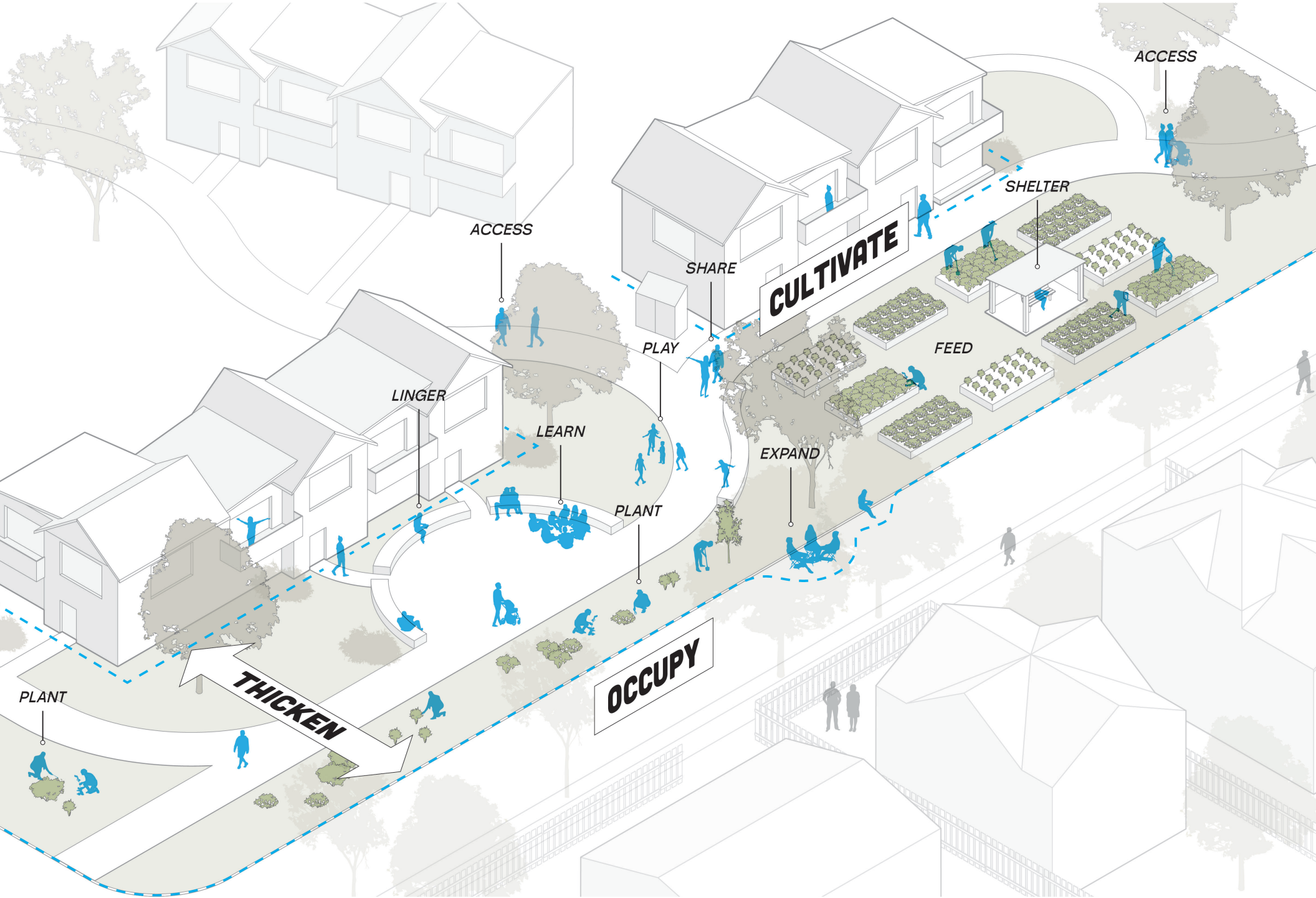


Figure 6.10: A speculative vision of the applied "Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate" strategy

Occupying the threshold space means that commoning practices are encouraged through a number of landscape interventions. Circulation channels people from the edges of the space into a network of indirect paths that aim to slow movement and redirect attention to activity within the threshold space. A rigid boundary between public and private space is replaced by a gradient of public, semi-public, semi-private, and private spaces that create opportunities for a variety of social interactions (Glick, 2019), with plantings especially helping to subtly create a range of experiences along this spectrum. Thicker plantings and narrower paths nearer the entrances of residential buildings suggest degrees of intimacy without delineating spaces as forbidden. Flexible, inviting gathering spaces large and small signal openness to residents, neighbors, and passers-through. The largest of these is located near the most open avenue into the parcel's interior and acts as the threshold's central node, the main point of interaction and activity that animates the space. Structures provide shelter and emphasize the landscape's function as a node of interaction. These are placed both at the edges of the threshold, signaling to those arriving that gathering and lingering are welcome, and in the interior to draw community members into the heart of the space.

Cultivation is envisioned here in a number of forms. Plantings overflow boundaries, visually muddying the distinction between different types of space, and inviting human interaction as well as inviting birds, insects, and other urban wildlife into reciprocal relationship with the neighborhood's human inhabitants. Community garden plots are tended, generating shared resources in the form of food and in the form of strengthened

social ties. Plant cultivation also highlights the interdependence of humans and non-humans, as plant-pollinating animals, wind, rain, and sun all collaborate to help plants grow. Novel social relations are cultivated as people meet in the threshold space and find new ways to use this space. Then, like the plants overflowing their containers, people push out into the surrounding urban fabric. Empowered by the dynamics of the threshold, they begin appropriating space beyond the boundaries of the site, for example by making themselves at home in a portion of E Maple Street and changing the norms and expectations governing that space.

LANDING

These speculative visions reveal the potential for the CLT-as-urban-commons to transform the experience and use of urban spaces. From a narrow, rigidly-bounded corridor defined by its function as a pass-through space and governed by signals of ownership and prohibition, the edge becomes a thick threshold inviting interaction and improvisation. Interventions in the design of the decommodified landscape facilitate the commoning practices that cultivate urban commons. Simultaneously, the dynamic of the urban commons changes how community members relate to the landscape, as well as to each other. The land is no longer an object, a vehicle of wealth generation and individual status, or a tool of control. Instead, it is both the foundation of and, in its own way, an active participant in the life of the community.

7. LOOKING AHEAD: THE DESIGNER'S ROLE

To return to the question with which I began this thesis, what is land? This question is critical for landscape architecture. Landscape architects may be used to thinking of land in terms of its form and its social or ecological function. What I propose in this thesis is different: to examine the institutional and cultural frameworks through which humans relate to land, and through land to each other. How humans relate to land is important, whether land is regarded as private property, as a stock of the resources necessary for economic activity, as habitat, as a co-participant in processes of self-definition and meaning-making, or as kin. Land relations shape the regulatory, economic, cultural, social, and psychological frameworks with which landscape architects approach their medium. In terms of design, they can constrain what is imaginable or inspire the as-yet unimagined. I believe it is critical that landscape architecture grapples with the question of land from this perspective.

In sum, an examination of land relations is a critical starting point. The private property ownership land relation dominates in the US context, especially in regard to housing. I argue that this land relation obscures and obstructs humans' interdependence with land. As a result, it warps the form and function of the urban environment, contributing to such disgraceful conditions as the housing affordability crisis. In contrast, other land relations better express the rich and complex interdependence of humans and land and can contribute to alternative, prosocial urban fabric. I draw attention to three prosocial land relations as examples and inspiration: the use-value land relation, landscape citizenships, and kin relations. Crucially, in each of these land relations, land is not regarded as a commodity.

The question then presents itself: how to operationalize these land relations in an urban context that is dominated by the private property ownership land relation? CLT models provide a compelling method of decommodifying land

and opening the way for prosocial land relations to resurface. CLTs not only sustainably generate and maintain housing affordability. CLT models' dual ownership structure also creates a shared resource, decommodified land, around and through which urban commoning can be enacted. The urban commons is an expression of dynamism, reciprocity, and collective action to sustain life and community. These qualities mirror those of prosocial land relations. The urban commons ruptures the existing urban fabric and challenges the distinction between public and private space.

This is where landscape architecture has a direct role to play. Landscape design is a crucial part of transitioning from the conventional housing-affordability-oriented CLT to the CLT-as-urban-commons. In tandem with the legal mechanism of decommodification provided by CLT models, landscape interventions catalyze the patterns of community interaction that lead to the emergence of the urban commons. I proposed the three-part "Thicken-Occupy-Cultivate" design strategy as a framework for these landscape interventions, and showed through speculative visioning how the strategy could be applied to the urban fabric.

I still find myself wondering whether landscape architecture has a critical role to play in such a bold reimagining of how humans relate to land, to the city, and to each other. I am aware of a disconnect. On the one hand, landscape architecture sometimes makes grandiose claims of self-importance and offers borderline-utopian visions. On the other

hand, the reality is that landscape architecture's utopian inclinations are constrained by a political economy characterized by ever more extreme economic and social inequality. How to respond? This quandary, the same posed by designer and scholar Billy Fleming in his 2019 article "Design and the Green New Deal," is the true inspiration for this thesis.

It seems to me that this thesis describes a cycle. Human experiences of and relations to land crystallize as culture, and can be described in theory; culture and theory get operationalized as policy; policy shapes the context in which landscape architects intervene; and landscape architecture plays with human experiences of and relations to land. Though the landscape architect's role in practice is just one link in this chain, I believe it is essential to have awareness of the whole cycle. It is my hope that through my future design practice, as well as through continued research and advocacy, I can play a part in influencing the course of this cycle, shifting us little by little back toward more enriching and life-affirming ways of relating to landscape.

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