

Planning with Contingency Modes of Urban Planning Engendered by a Community Land Trust

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In the spring of 2003, a design studio examined a seventy-five block area of Houston's Fourth Ward. The intent of the studio was to provide comprehensive planning for the area that could be enacted by a neighborhood organization that initiated the studio's inquiry. Given the size and means of this organization, the traditional manners and modes of urban design were not applicable. It could never hope to amass the resources to implement a master plan, or to enforce a zone or code, and establish the visual order that both entail. However, a basis for developing different urban design approaches was identified in the mechanism that the neighborhood organization is interested in implementing, a community land trust (CLT) – a democratic non-profit organization that acquires and holds land for the benefit of the community.

While the principal role of a CLT is to provide and preserve long-term access to affordable housing, their practice of maintaining ownership of the land while selling the built structure to individual members suggested an untethering of the land from its exclusive service to the buildings upon it. Typically a long-term land lease to the building owner hides the restructured relations between buildings and lots that the trust creates. The building owner is responsible for the maintenance of the leased land. However, the potential for comprehensive planning develops through a slight shift in this practice. A CLT might provide a guarantee of easements, or lease portions of a site yet maintain control over other portions in order to provide and support other relations that could be unrelated to the buildings on top of it. In those other uses a site might work in conjunction with other sites to develop relations and connections amongst lots and blocks that elaborate on the economic links amongst properties that a trust establishes. These other links are suggested in the identification of additional roles and services that a CLT can have and provide within the community. Working with these modifications of a CLT's practices, the studio developed comprehensive planning approaches enabled

by different definitions of what a community land trust could be.

The approaches to urban design enabled by a CLT are significant for the scale and manner in which they implement processes that are dynamic, organizational, and operative. The work of the studio reveals that comprehensive planning can begin by providing such relations amongst small and disparate sites to describe areas of influence. Those relations can subsequently change over time in response to external conditions as well as the shifting needs of the trust as it might continue to acquire new sites, and introduce further relations across a broad spectrum of concerns. These diffuse, scalable and flexible aspects of the active processes and relations that a trust can enable are socially significant. In contrast to the large-scale superblock developments and enclaves that are indicative of the contemporary growth of cities, a trust extends the ability to engage in comprehensive planning to communities that possess limited means and have rare opportunities to organize or initiate significant transformations of their environment.

BACKGROUND OF COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS AND FREEDMEN'S TOWN

While a trust's distinct form of ownership stresses three primary concerns – acquiring land for a community, increasing opportunities for homeownership by community residents, and maintaining affordability for subsequent owners – a CLT can address a diverse range of the needs of the community in which it operates. In addition to housing, a trust might provide land for parks, community gardens, open space, and commercial space. There is no limit on the kinds of economic development activities or community services that it might seek to provide upon its land except those that a CLT imposes upon itself. All of these directions have been taken on in various combinations,

in response to specific local needs, by different CLTs, since the introduction of such organizations in the 1960s, their gain in popularity during the 1980s, and their greatest increase in number, tripling, between 1987 and 1996. In 1996 there were 84 community land trusts operating in urban and rural locations in 31 states of the US, with 23 more in development (from *Planning Commissioners Journal*, Issue 23, Summer 1996, p. 10).

In urban areas, CLTs, and the projects that they implement, have developed in response to two general conditions. In high growth metropolitan areas, university communities, and resort communities they have worked to alleviate rising real estate prices due to population growth and economic investment. A CLT's purchase of land permanently limits land costs for homeowners on trust property by effectively removing that property from the speculative swings of the market. As a result, the cost of the land does not appreciably enter into the price of the purchase of a house. In disinvested communities, a trust seeks to not only keep housing affordable by reducing the impact of land costs on homeownership, but to increase homeownership amongst residents in a community, and to reduce the effects of absentee ownership which often exacerbates disinvestment. Absentee owners will rent properties, but might let them deteriorate, and any efforts to improve the area by residents might actually increase their rents if not trigger efforts to drive them out. With a trust in place, residents reap the benefits of improvements that they make to the area and have an amplified voice for expressing their needs and concerns to various local and regional agencies.

Both of these conditions are applicable to Fourth Ward, which has historically been a predominantly African American neighborhood and was created at the turn of the century by freed slaves. The area reached its height in the years preceding the Depression, but after the Depression, Fourth Ward never fully recovered its vibrancy. It continued intact yet slowly eroding until a series of efforts in the 90s to redevelop the area, would start, fail, and intensify the community's erosion. The area is viewed as prime real estate – given its direct adjacency to downtown and midtown and position along street corridors that connect both areas to an affluent neighborhood to the west.

Where a similar studio conducted less than a decade ago might have emphasized preservation of a vast number of shotgun houses and two-story quadplexes in the area, the predominant context during the spring of 2003 was vacant land (figure 1). A CLT in the area is more likely to consist of vacant land than land with existing buildings. The structures that had filled Freedman's Town, the historic district located in this 75 block area, as well as many adjacent blocks to the south, remain a palpable and defining presence, albeit a diminishing one. The area is a rapidly changing environment. Just as the studio began, several blocks were cleared, having been claimed through eminent domain by the local school district to make

way for a new performing arts high school. Any decrease in the area's 52% vacancy, at the time of the studio, is primarily through the supply of new affordable or market rate housing that can not accommodate the low- to moderate-income families and individuals who have lived there.

The economic differences are visually evident in the contrasts between old and new construction, but the area is in fact more varied than those visual differences indicate. A study of land ownership and value yields a complex field of properties held by resident owners, Hou-Tex (a non-profit corporation overseeing properties accumulated from a bankrupting land purchasing effort), private developers, area Community Development Corporations (CDCs), and absentee owners. Given various economic factors related to each of these kinds of ownership, even vacant land has a wide range in value – in part dependent on who is seeking to purchase it.

ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS, SLT DEFINITIONS, AND SITE SELECTION

A working assumption in the studio was that the CLT would successfully enlist the participation and membership of the sixteen long-term residents in the area, as likely supporters of a revitalization effort that did not displace their remaining neighbors. Other property that might be considered in comprehensive planning for the area would have to respond to the grid of varied economic textures as well as the physical environment. An assumed budget equal to the amount that two area CDCs had each received in grants, offered a constraint. In developing plans for the area, the studio members would have to work with what they could afford to acquire, as well as what properties might be desired given different definitions of the CLT's mission.

Students were asked to reflect on the diverse community needs that a trust can address and the range of issues and concerns of residents in Fourth Ward, and to offer a mission and direction for the CLT. Initial properties for acquisition were then selected based on a balance between affordability and the identification of which properties were the most critical for the emphasis indicated by the mission and focus of the CLT that each student, or group of students, defined.

Jason LaRocca's criteria – corner sites below a certain price value – for optimal sites to locate small retail, service, and live/work spaces revealed two clusters in the interior of the area. Further analysis of the differences in the two areas and the uses surrounding them indicated the cluster to the east to be more conducive to retail and the cluster to the west to more conducive to service (fig. 2). That service corridor could provide a basis for historic preservation by creating links amongst some of the more significant historic structures remaining in the area – the Yates House on Andrews Street, a brick road that

residents built in the early 1900s, and the Gregory School. In time, having addressed the internal service and retail needs, the trust might seek to acquire sites along the south edge of the area. Adjacent to a major street, those properties could support commercial activity that addressed a more extensive public and could serve to bring income into the area. The phasing sequence was important here so as not to over stimulate the area and subsequently eliminate opportunities for the CLT and its constituents.

An emphasis on housing could utilize land available for the lowest amount, tax-delinquent sites or Hou-Tex property. From those properties, Jamie Flatt and Brendan Mulcahy proposed site groupings that permitted through-block configurations in order to provide a higher density of housing while minimizing curb cuts and driveways to maintain the pedestrian character of the area (fig. 3).

Envisioning a time in which the area would, like the surroundings, be fully built out with new construction, Anne Buttyan proposed that the trust maintain open space in the ward (fig. 4). Approaching the area as a palimpsest in which aspects of past occupation were reappropriated and reused, she focused on vacant sites containing remnants and traces, such as foundations, rows of trees along a property line, curb cuts as well as trails or other indications of current use. On those sites the CLT might provide small structures that supported different sites, construction, and activities in the area so that those open spaces – and the various histories they collected – would become public spaces over time.

Fourth Ward Car Access Within Block
Existing and Planned Construction (2003)

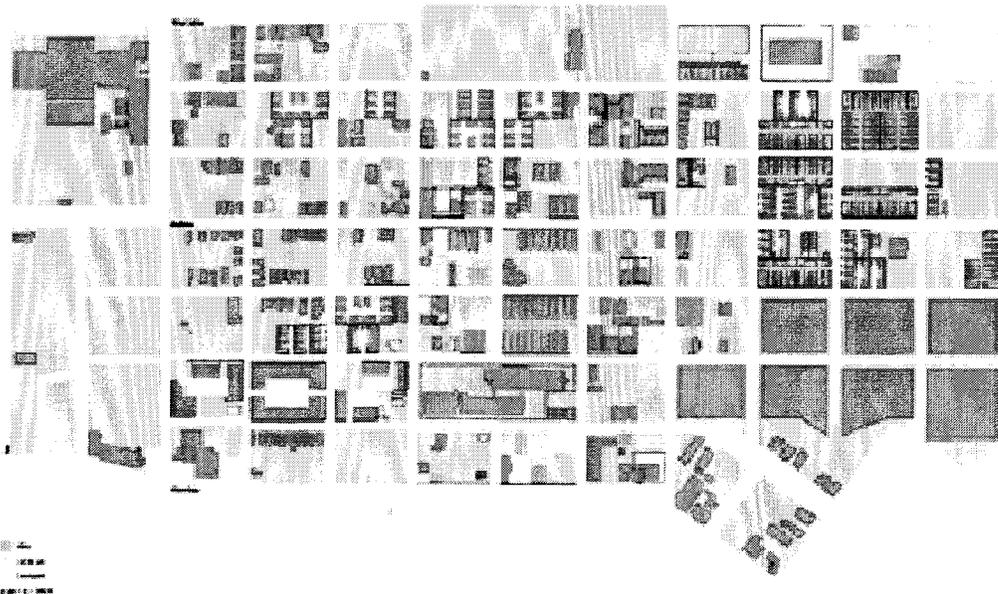


Fig. 1. Map indicating existing and planned construction during the spring of 2003.



Fig. 2.

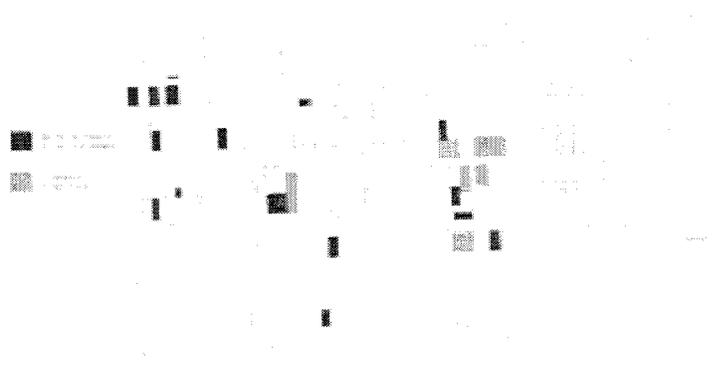


Fig. 3.

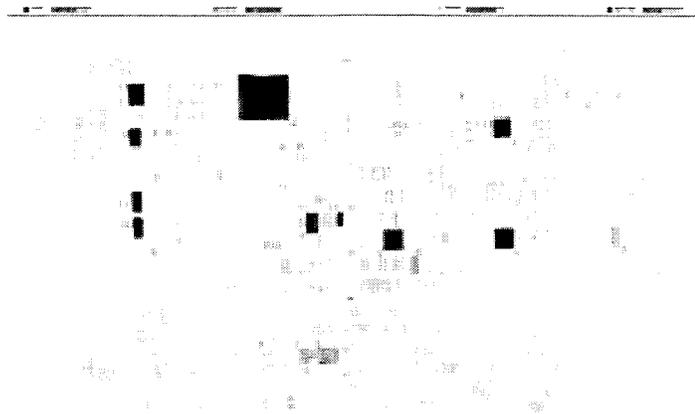


Fig. 4.

INCREMENTAL, DISPERSED, AND VARIABLE ENVIRONMENTS

With the understanding that the sites selected within the budget constraints were initiators, many projects incorporated indications of other sites that the trust might acquire later in order to further develop the defined area of focus or take on additional uses. Building upon the temporal emphasis of this incremental process, all of the projects incorporated some accommodation of contingency in at least two other manners. One was the introduction of variability in some aspect of the project. Within the designs for specific sites there were a range of efforts to permit more than one form of occupation. The open space sites were designed to receive soil from the construction on surrounding sites, and those soil deposits might modify the constructions and their subsequent use. Many of the service and retail spaces were designed with the ability to expand and contract in response to changes in traffic at different times of the day and the week. In the housing and live/work projects, spaces could be re-partitioned or sub-partitioned in various ways to permit supplemental rental or work spaces.

Most of the projects also describe an area of influence, rather than a distinct and discrete territory, by selecting sites that are dispersed throughout the area of study rather than concentrated in one position. This emphasis may in part be due to the constraints of the problem, comprehensive planning on a limited budget. However, it additionally reflects an understanding that dispersal enables impact over the whole area as well as complementary—or conflicting—work and activities to be implemented by others. Contrary to the efforts in most contemporary developments, including some of the new construction in Fourth Ward, to create isolating enclaves and superblocks, dispersal creates opportunities for extension, outreach, and connection between sites and with surrounding spaces. Through dispersal, the CLT can create a network of relations that other sites can plug into. The CLT can operate as one of several organizers within an area.

One project, by Quyen Luong, Delia Wendel, and Kathy Williams, maximized the potential of these three contingent aspects by emphasizing multiple readings of sites that could be discerned from the community's various reappropriations of several sites containing small indications of buildings that had been located on the land (fig. 5). Those sites with remnants of old houses currently appropriated in different ways stimulated thinking about the ways that electricity, and plumbing, as well as the slight variations in slab, pier, and block foundations could provide support for a range of programmatic needs and directions that could develop and be negotiated in time (figs. 6-7). The three students subsequently provided a definition that takes full advantage of the opportunities of a group acquiring and holding property for long-term access by the community. The CLT could be a general provider of community resources and infrastructures with the responsibility to prepare and tend the land that it acquires so that the land can more adequately address the community's needs.

In this tending and preparation, no one site needs to be fully determined in its use from the outset. All of the sites can have an initial fluidity. Multiple programs can be seeded and supported upon them. With the addition of more sites and the relative success or failure of programs activated on a site, the form of any one site and/or program can become more determined and more formalized. Eight informants and processes were identified (fig. 8) —

- acquire land
- fit foundations and identify programs
- promote and revise microeconomies
- apply synthetic and organic materials
- provide urban fixtures and renovate existing
- install utility infrastructure and connectors

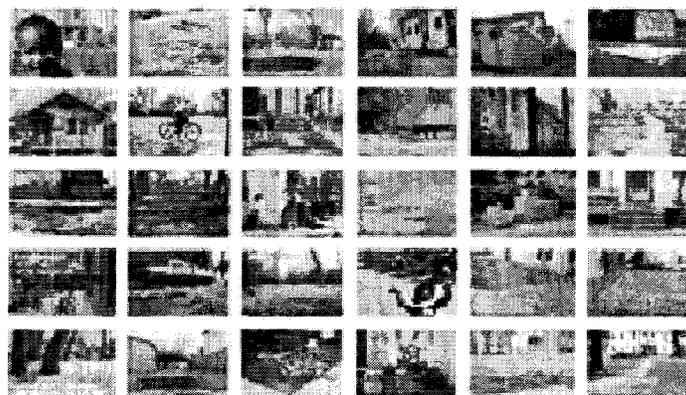


Fig. 5.

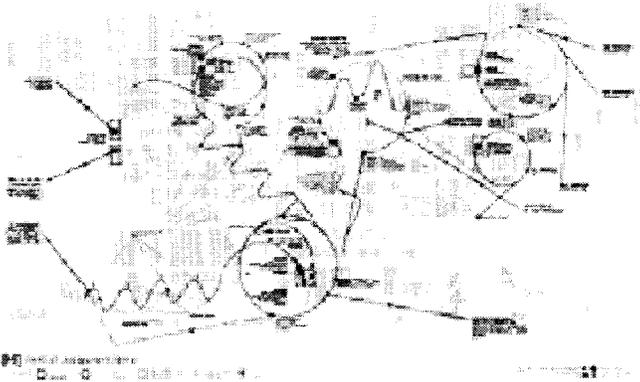


Fig. 6.

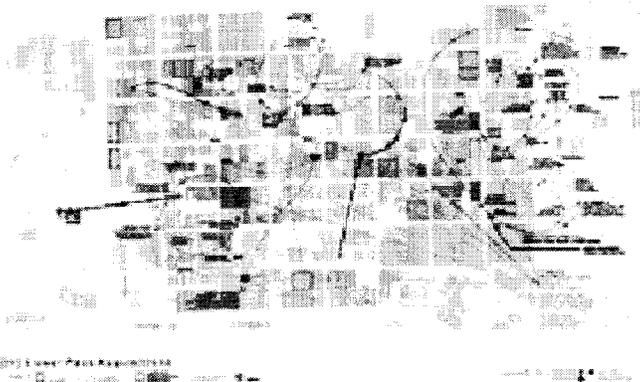


Fig. 7.

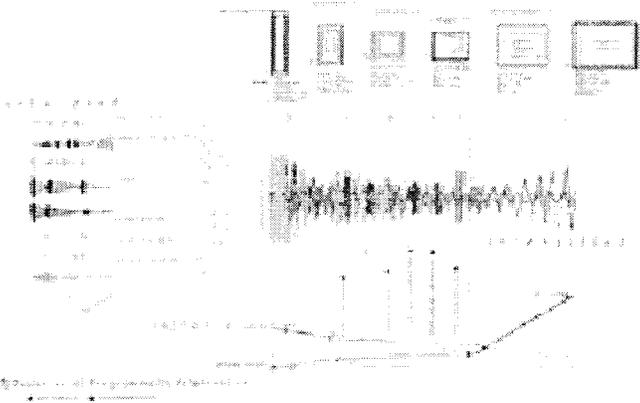


Fig. 8.

- equip mobile units and build covered structures
- formalize envelopes and buildings

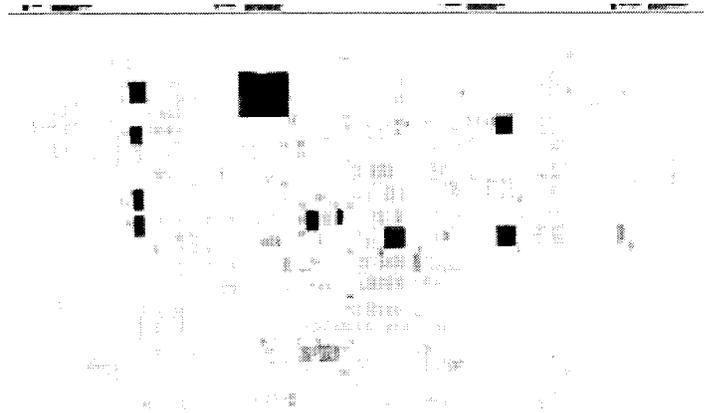


Fig. 9.

The intensity of each of these activities would be generally informed by two guiding parameters, the vacancy rate and the rate of new house construction within the ward, and six critical construction projects that others might initiate. The project thus outlines an internal pattern of growth as well as a guide for shifts in concern or direction that might need to occur in response to external conditions. A community garden, for example, might serve a vital need for years, but the construction of a grocery store at some point in the future could supersede the need for the garden and permit the garden site to be given over to different uses.

Planting and gardening is a significant component of the project (fig. 9). The students identified ways that sites could be planted with vegetable gardens, bamboo, or fruit trees, each indicating a different length of time before the planted land might be re-evaluated for other uses, and different growth patterns that could inform the implementation of additional uses and construction on a site. Planting is a way to occupy sites, to demonstrate that although the land is vacant, the area is inhabited and tended, even if the CLT obtained property that exceeded the needs of the community at any given point.

SCALABILITY

Of the work produced in the studio, this last project is the lightest in its initial requirements for implementation, yet the most comprehensive. In essence, the project is a guide for assessing the community's needs, and assessing and clarifying the manner in which the trust can effectively respond – through shifts in the programs and activities upon the properties it holds, or properties that it should look to acquire. The design

outlines a series of processes and mechanisms for the CLT and community to activate and negotiate the area's development in time. Through that emphasis on processes and mechanisms, speculation about some questions beyond the scope of the studio can occur—What is the smallest increment from which one can implement comprehensive planning? How much investment is needed to initiate such a plan?

The assumed budget that the studio worked with is much higher than the neighborhood association can hope to initially obtain. However a start on a smaller number of sites can be inferred from the dispersed, variable, and incremental qualities revealed in the projects, especially the last one. Two dispersed sites could be just as effective for initiating a comprehensive plan that develops in time—the work on those sites could enable the neighborhood association to develop interest and membership in the trust as well as complete a small project. The uses on those sites could change. Planting, or a similar light occupation, might work to activate both sites for a season. Formulated as a project that the CLT organized, such an activity and its documentation could provide a basis for the CLT to obtain grants and further support to then take on greater projects.

The form that this outlined project might generate would differ from the studio projects presented here given time as a variable. In the time that such a project would need to reach a scale similar to the presented projects, the shape and character of the surrounding area would be markedly different. However, it is not the form but the agency that is of greatest importance here. Through the access to dynamic, organizational, and operative processes that they can engender upon a range of sites, including a collection of small and disparate ones, economic structures such as a community land trust can provide an increased number of alternative and widely accessible ways for the heterogeneous growth of cities to not only be imagined, but to be enabled.

FIGURE CREDITS

1. Jamie Flatt and Brendan Mulcahy
2. Jason LaRocca
3. Jamie Flatt and Brendan Mulcahy
4. Anne Buttyan
- 5-9. Quyen Luong, Delia Wendel, and Kathy Williams