

CUTTING THROUGH THE RED TAPE

HOW BALTIMORE'S VACANT LOT PROGRAMS HAVE MADE IT EASIER FOR COMMUNITIES TO REVITALIZE THE UNDERUTILIZED AND BLIGHTED SPACES IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS



<http://powerindirt.blogspot.com/>

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ABSTRACT

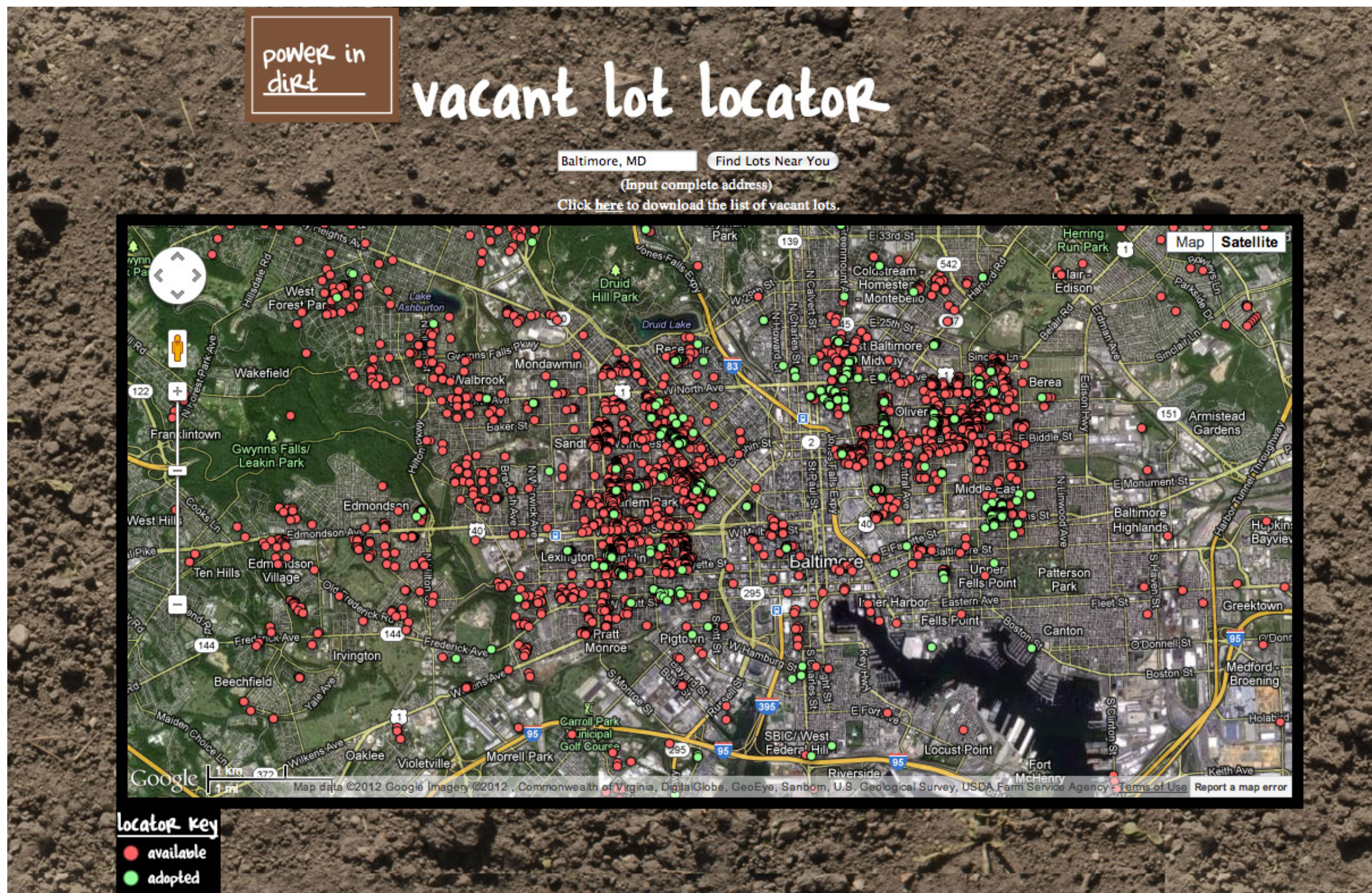
Baltimore is a city that has faced significant decline in recent decades. Its current population is 65% of its 1950s peak of 950,000, leaving a landscape of more than 30,000 vacant lots and abandoned buildings. However, there are strong signs that the city is turning around, and Mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake has made it a policy priority to address vacancy in Baltimore and work towards the goal of “10,000 new households in 10 years.”

At the center of Baltimore’s vacancy strategy is Baltimore Housing’s recent Vacants to Value initiative, which looks to ways to both streamline the disposition and code enforcement processes to make it easier to redevelop blighted properties and ways to target redevelopment strategies at those areas of the city in transition, so as to build off existing assets. However, approximately 65% of the city’s vacant and abandoned properties are in areas without foreseeable development demand. This case study looks to the policies and programs Baltimore has developed for these longer-term vacant spaces.

QUESTION: How has Baltimore made it easier for communities to revitalize vacant lots in their communities? And how do the city’s programs for the greening of vacant lots fit into a larger plan for the future of Baltimore?

The focus of this project is on three main programs for vacant lots in the city: Power in Dirt, which streamlines the adopt-a-lot process by which residents can use and maintain city-owned lots; an Urban Agriculture Request for Qualifications for farmers to participate in the development of a pre-selected 35 acres of city-owned vacant land for the purpose of urban agriculture; and the transfer of lots to Land Trusts for their long-term preservation as open space.

This case study of a successful adaptation of nature in an urban environment seeks to understand transferrable lessons from Baltimore’s vacancy strategy, as well as suggest where it might be improved upon.



A map on the “Power in Dirt” website includes all available and adopted city-owned vacant lots and their addresses. Residents and community groups can easily submit an online “adopt-a-lot” application to Baltimore Housing, check a box and write a \$120 check to the Department of Public Works for Water, and if approved, have access to redesign and maintain a city-owned vacant lot for community use.

<http://www.powerindirt.com/map.html>

HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?

INITIAL QUESTIONS:

1. HOW DID THE POWER IN DIRT PROJECT COME ABOUT?

- Who runs it? Why?
- What was involved in setting it up?
- How is it paid for?
- How successful has it been so far?

2. WHAT IS THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE PHYSICAL PLANNING OF BALTIMORE'S VACANT LAND?

- To what extent has the city capitalized on the opportunity to plan and redesign its open vacant space?
- What are the various vacant lot redevelopment programs (for housing, urban agriculture, community use, etc)?
- What is the process by which certain lots are "saved", if at all, for housing redevelopment?
- How does the city determine the criteria for different lot uses?

An aerial photograph of a Baltimore neighborhood. The image shows a grid of streets with row houses. A large central area is under demolition or construction, with debris, bare trees, and some new structures visible. The surrounding areas are filled with intact row houses, some in various states of repair. The overall scene depicts a city in transition.

WHY LOOK AT BALTIMORE?

Baltimore is in an exciting transition right now and has a lot of energy around its redevelopment strategies that other cities are using as a model. As a case study relevant to Philadelphia specifically, Baltimore shares a similar post-industrial history of decline and recent rejuvenation as well as a vast row house typology paired with “missing teeth” vacancies.

POPULATION

1950:	950,000	PEAK
1960:	940,000	-1.1%
1970:	905,000	-3.5%
1980:	785,000	-13.1%
1990:	735,000	-6.5%
2000:	650,000	-11.5%
2010:	620,000	-4.6%

GOAL FOR 2020: 10,000 new households

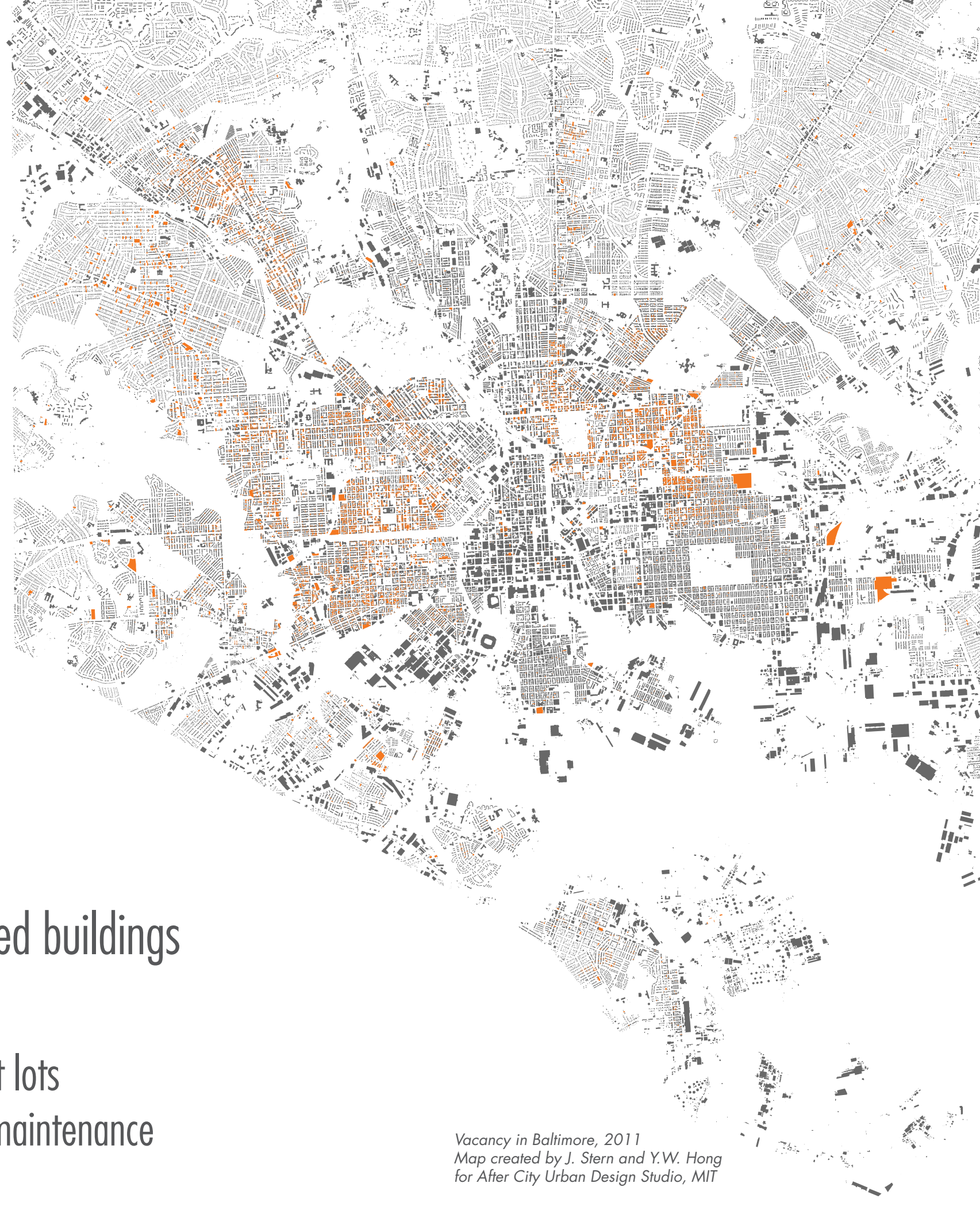
Mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake has made this one of her main policy priorities.

VACANCY

- 16,000 vacant/abandoned buildings
- 14,000 vacant lots

4,000 city-owned vacant lots

\$7,100,000 in annual maintenance



Vacancy in Baltimore, 2011
Map created by J. Stern and Y.W. Hong
for After City Urban Design Studio, MIT

BALTIMORE'S VACANT LOT FRAMEWORK

1. IDENTIFY AREAS TO TARGET FOR HOUSING AND COMMERCIAL REDEVELOPMENT IN THE SHORT- TO MEDIUM-TERM
2. VARIOUS ALTERNATIVE USE PROGRAMS FOR THE REMAINING VACANT LOTS WITH LITTLE DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL
 - Transfer to Land Trust
 - Urban Agriculture RFQ
 - Power in Dirt Adopt-A-Lot Program

VACANTS TO VALUE:

MAKING IT EASIER TO REDEVELOP VACANT AND ABANDONED PROPERTIES

A program launched by Mayor Rawlings Blake in 2010, Vacants to Value seeks to drive growth and reinvestment in targeted Baltimore neighborhoods by streamlining the process by which vacant properties are transferred to new owners, strengthening code enforcement, and providing incentives for developers and homeowners who invest in vacant properties. It is the overarching framework by which the city approaches vacancy and redevelopment.

WHO: Baltimore Housing

WHAT: 6 STRATEGIES:

- 1: Streamline the Disposition of City-Owned Properties
- 2: Streamline Code Enforcement in Stronger Markets
- 3: Facilitate Investment in Emerging Markets
- 4: Target Homebuying Incentives
- 5: Support Large-Scale Redevelopment in Distressed Areas
- 6: Demolish and Maintain Severely Distressed Blocks

HOW: Market Value Analysis — using data to determine areas to target redevelopment strategies.



BALTIMORE HOUSING



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Property Detail

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Type: Vacant Building

Neighborhood: MIDDLE EAST

Address: 2226 HENNEMAN AVE, 21213-3409

Block Lot: 1553 102

Price*: \$4,150.00

Status: Available

[Map It!](#)



[SHARE](#)

Investment opportunity! Change this neighborhood with the purchase of the city own houses on this block - renovate all six. These are two-story row houses located in the Middle East neighborhood of Baltimore City. Fee Simple.

[Search Again](#) | [See All Listings](#)

[Buy It Now!](#)

[Download the Vacants To Value Application.](#)

*This is not an offer, but a preliminary price as established for marketing purposes. Actual price and availability may be updated at the time of a sale agreement.

http://www.baltimorehousing.org/vacants_to_value.aspx

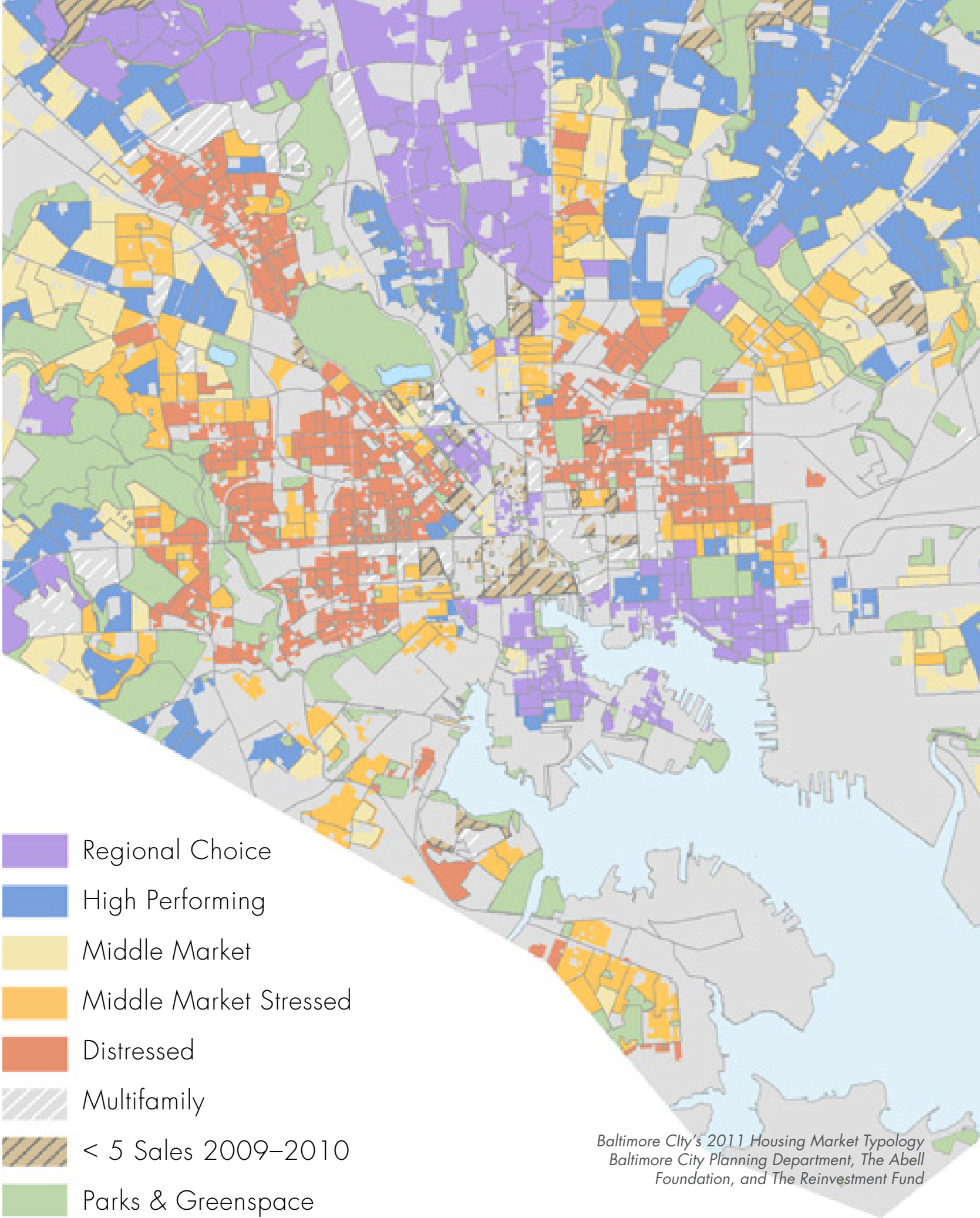
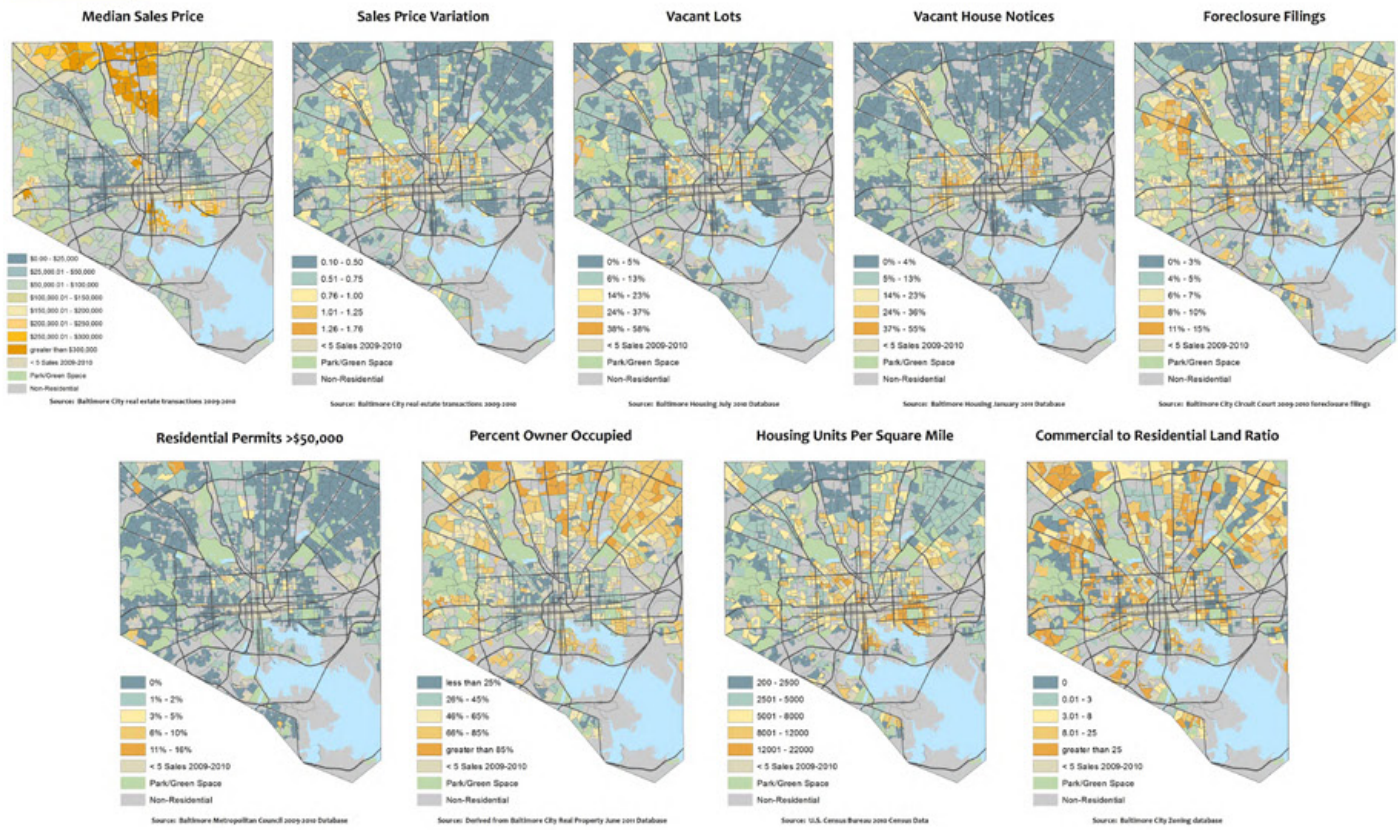


VACANTS TO VALUE:

WHERE: Focus investment in the “middle neighborhoods”

The Reinvestment Fund, a national group working on similar analyses in other cities, developed a market value analysis (MVA) for Baltimore based on the city’s own data. This analysis shows where market strengths in the city are geographically clustered. Using this analysis, Baltimore has made a policy decision to focus its redevelopment strategies on those “middle market” and “middle market stressed” areas where such efforts can build off existing assets to strengthen transitional neighborhoods.

FACTORS: housing prices, foreclosure rates, vacancy rates, owner occupancy rates, etc

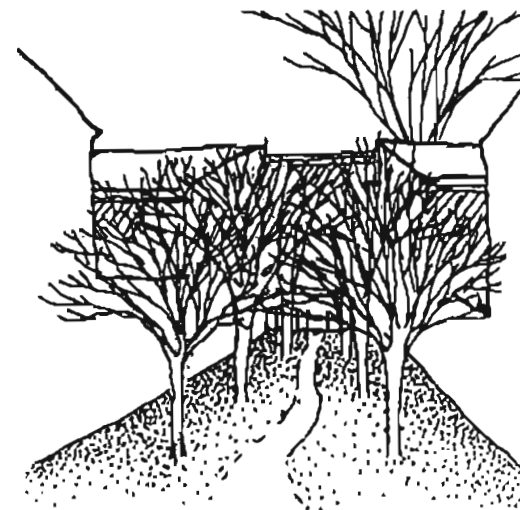
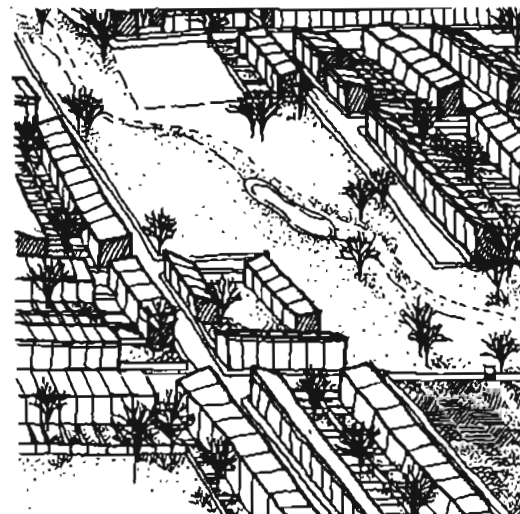
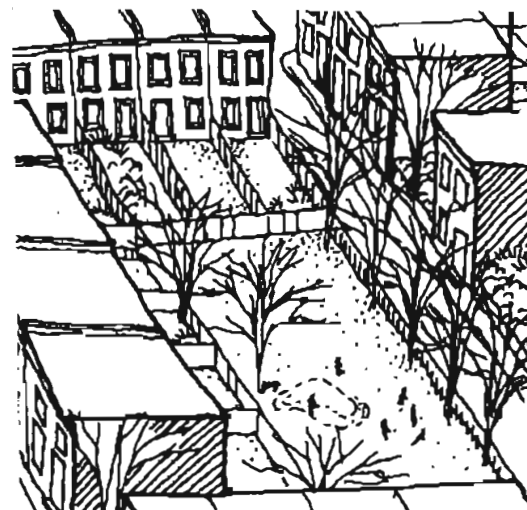
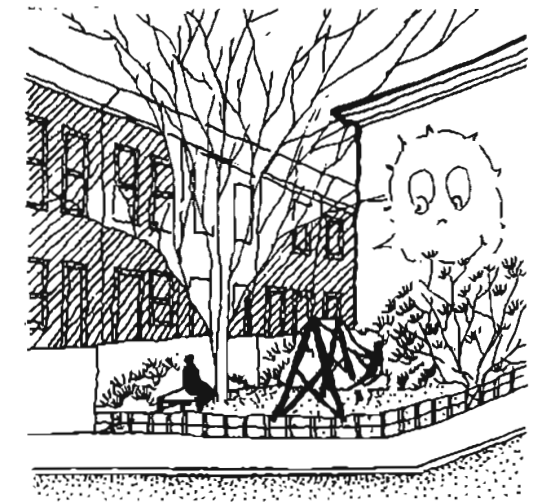
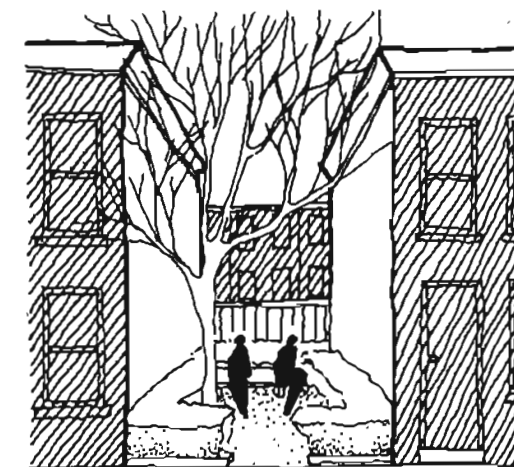
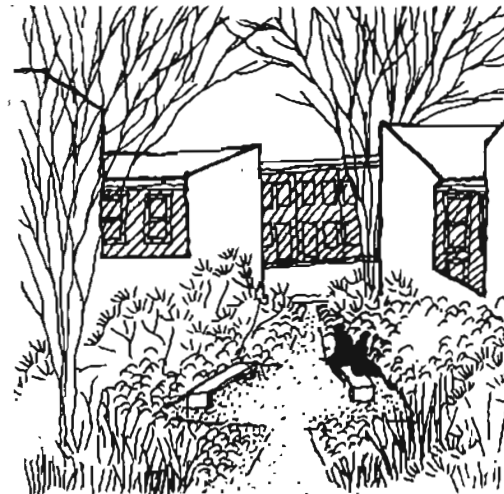
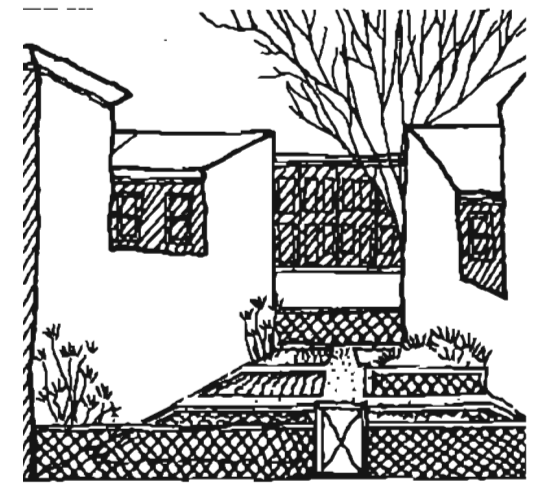
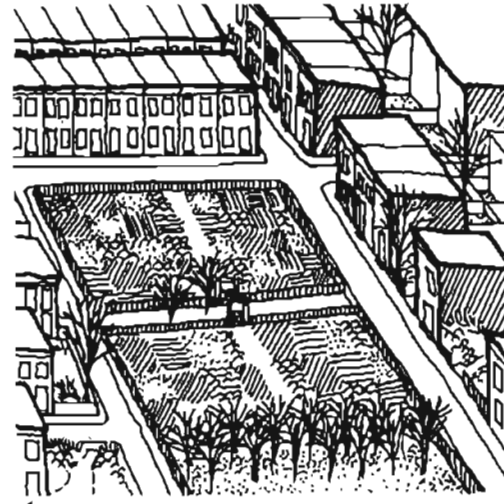


Baltimore City’s 2011 Housing Market Typology
Baltimore City Planning Department, The Abell Foundation, and The Reinvestment Fund

...BUT

65%

OF CITY-OWNED VACANCIES
ARE IN AREAS WITHOUT
DEVELOPMENT DEMAND



HOW DOES BALTIMORE
PROMOTE ALTERNATIVE
COMMUNITY USES?

*Images from "Vacant Land: A Resource for Reshaping Urban Neighborhoods"
in the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan. Spring, 1991*

POWER IN DIRT:

ALL REMAINING CITY-OWNED PARCELS UP FOR GRABS!

Mayor Rawlings Blake announced the "Power in Dirt" initiative in August 2011 as a complement to Vacants to Value. As of June 2012, there were 700 community managed open spaces (CMOS) with a goal of 1200 by year's end.

WHO: Mayor's Office as part of StepUP! Baltimore initiative, in partnership with Baltimore Housing, Baltimore Green Space land trust, and other for profit and nonprofit organizations.

WHAT: reduces systemic barriers that prevent residents and organizations from revitalizing vacant lots, creates new initiatives, and provides support along the way.

HOW IT WORKS:

1. one-year lease to develop community green or open space
2. If successful, can renew for up to 5 years
3. After 5 years, lot can become part of the Baltimore Green Space land trust.



POWER IN DIRT:

ALL REMAINING CITY-OWNED PARCELS UP FOR GRABS!

HOW:

1. Make list of all city-owned vacant lots and where they are located publicly available on a user-friendly map.
2. Streamline and simplify the process of applying to adopt a lot, making it possible to do so online.
3. Make it easy to access water — flat \$120 fee
4. Provide resources — heavy machinery, materials, supplies, and grants
5. Full-time AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers to assist applicants through the process.



POWER IN DIRT:

ALL REMAINING CITY-OWNED PARCELS UP FOR GRABS!

WHY IMPORTANT:

Power in Dirt makes it incredibly easy for communities to legally adopt the City's vacant lots and get technical assistance to redesign those lots for community use. Where many cities have similar programs, Baltimore has successfully streamlined the process and made it both well-publicized and user-friendly. The initiative, by putting all of the city-owned vacant lots on a map for public consumption, shows the City's willingness to be frank and open about those abandoned spaces that may not be redeveloped any time soon. Power in Dirt is in many ways a public campaign to highlight adopt-a-lot policies that already exist in Baltimore. In and of itself, it may not be a sustainable program or promote long-term systematic solutions, but it has proven successful in engaging the public in the process of neighborhood revitalization. The 700 new community managed open spaces since the initiative began illustrate a strong desire from communities to revitalize blighted spaces in their neighborhoods as well as the success of Power in Dirt in eliminating barriers to doing so.



TRANSFER LOTS TO LAND TRUST

BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND CITY AGENCIES

To protect community managed open spaces (CMOS) as permanent green space and to give communities a sense of ownership over these spaces, several land trusts have been developed in Baltimore. Baltimore Green Space, started in 2007, has partnered with Power in Dirt to help greened vacant spaces become part of the land trust after 5 years. Notably, Land Trusts help manage the often confusing legal process of acquiring vacant properties and managing liability.

WHO: Land Trusts in partnership with CMOS Team of city agencies (HCD, Office of Sustainability, Dept of Planning)

WHAT: A land trust is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to preserve land to provide affordable access to land resources to a community.

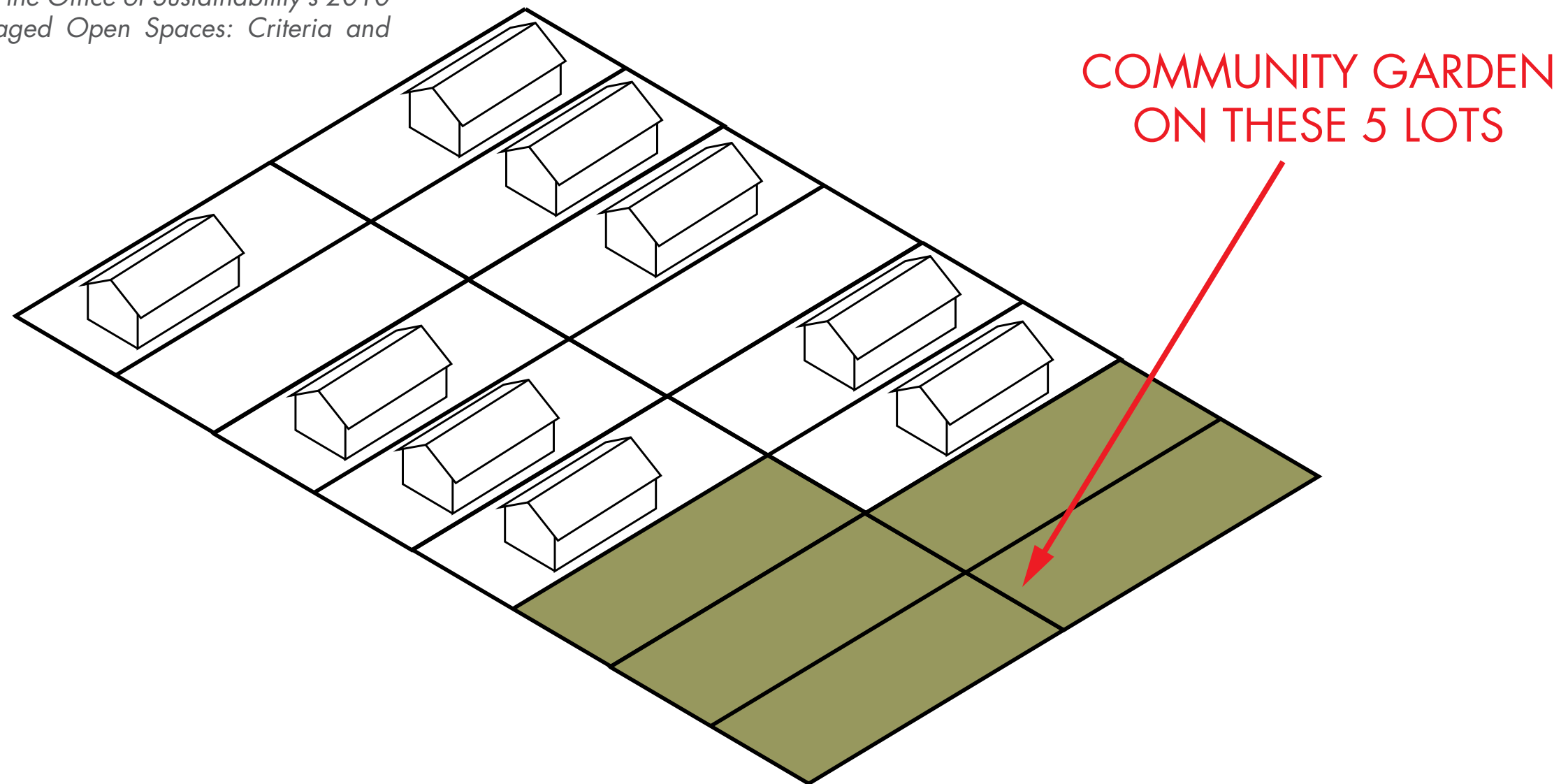
HOW: Transferring lots to a land trust protects them as permanent greenspace.



TRANSFER LOTS TO LAND TRUST

BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND CITY AGENCIES IN PRESERVING COMMUNITY MANAGED OPEN SPACES

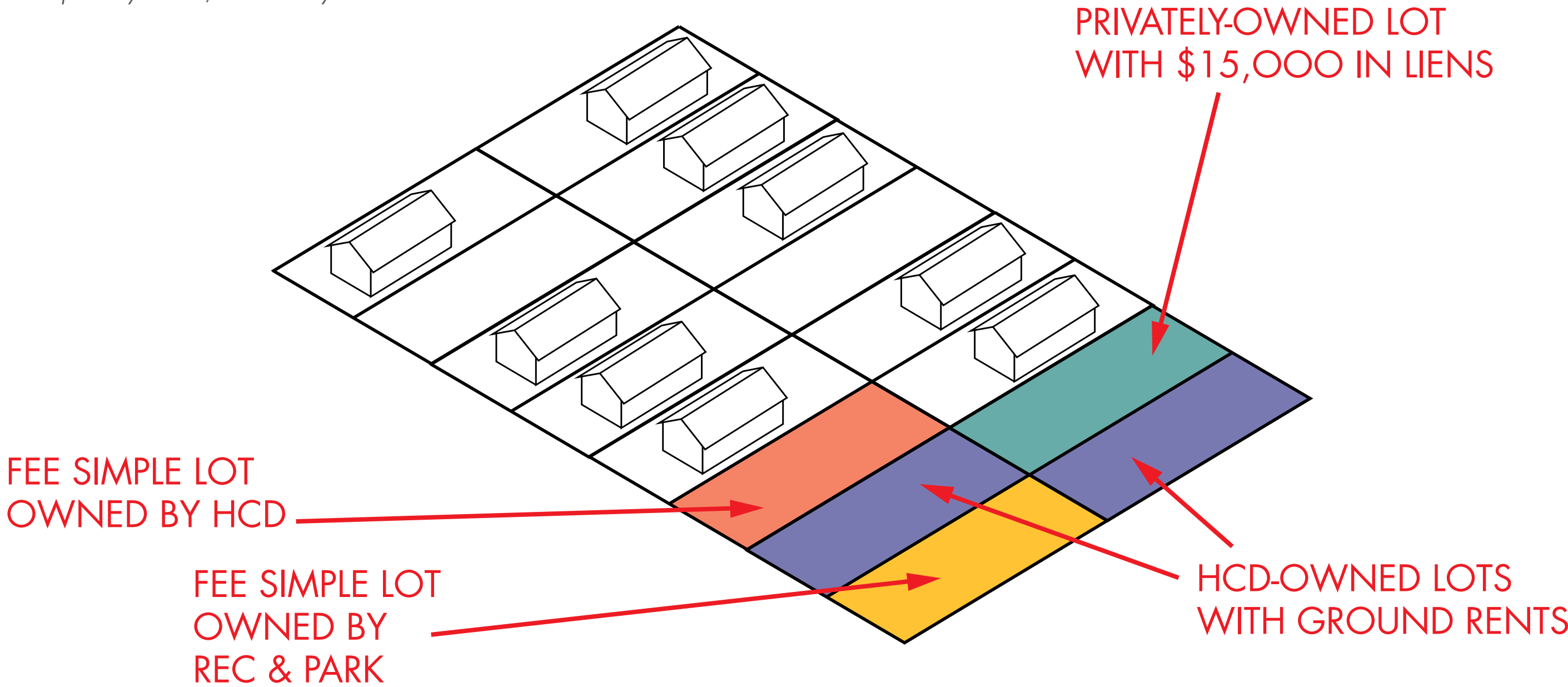
This is a graphic demonstration of how a Land Trust would help a community garden, occupying 5 vacant parcels, gain long-term rights to those lots as preserved community open space. These graphics illustrate an example case pulled directly from the Office of Sustainability's 2010 report "Preserving Community-Managed Open Spaces: Criteria and Process".



TRANSFER LOTS TO LAND TRUST

BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND CITY AGENCIES IN PRESERVING COMMUNITY MANAGED OPEN SPACES

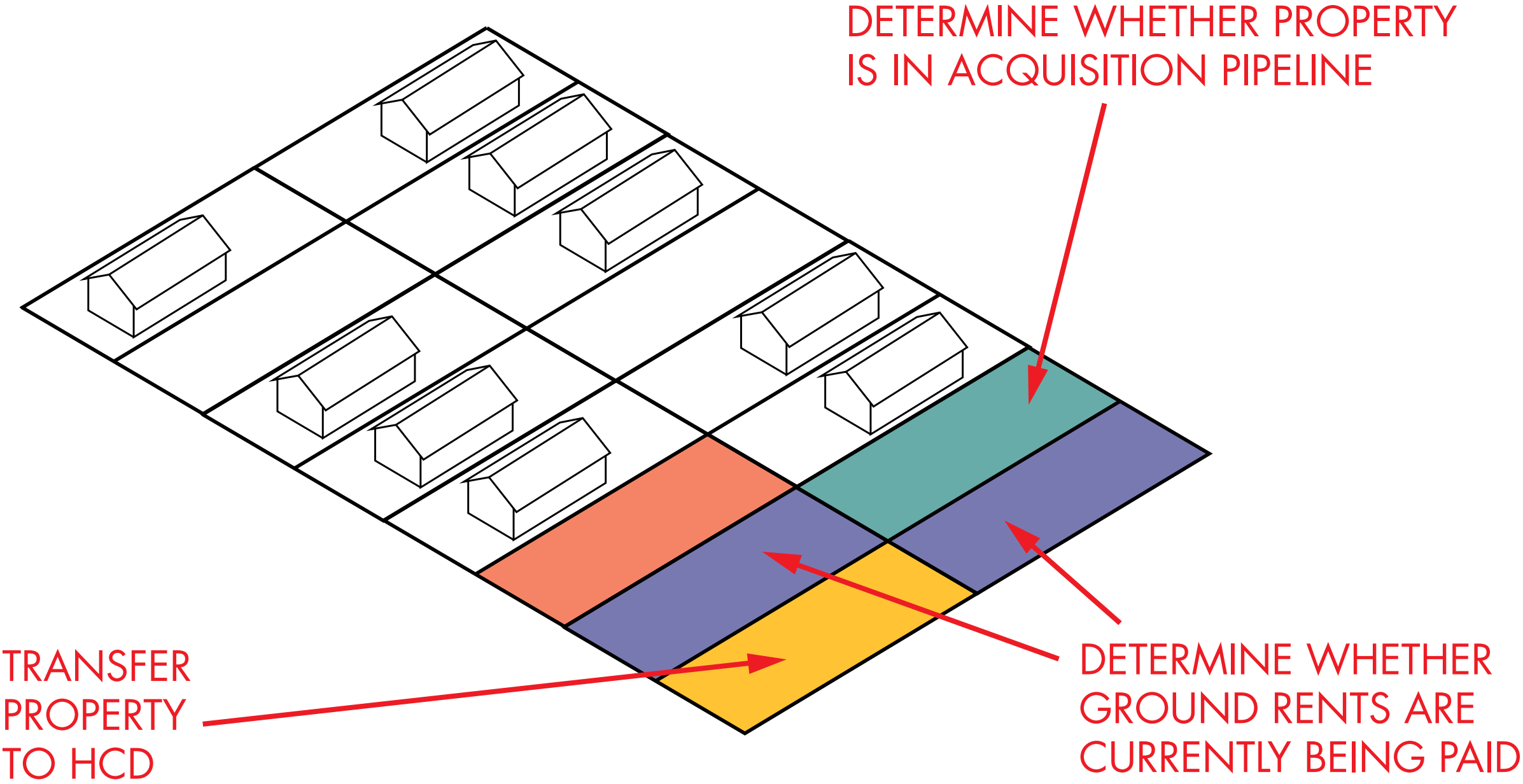
The seemingly simple single community garden actually occupies five lots with completely different ownership structures. Four are city-owned, and the last is privately owned, but with City liens.



TRANSFER LOTS TO LAND TRUST

BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND CITY AGENCIES IN PRESERVING COMMUNITY MANAGED OPEN SPACES

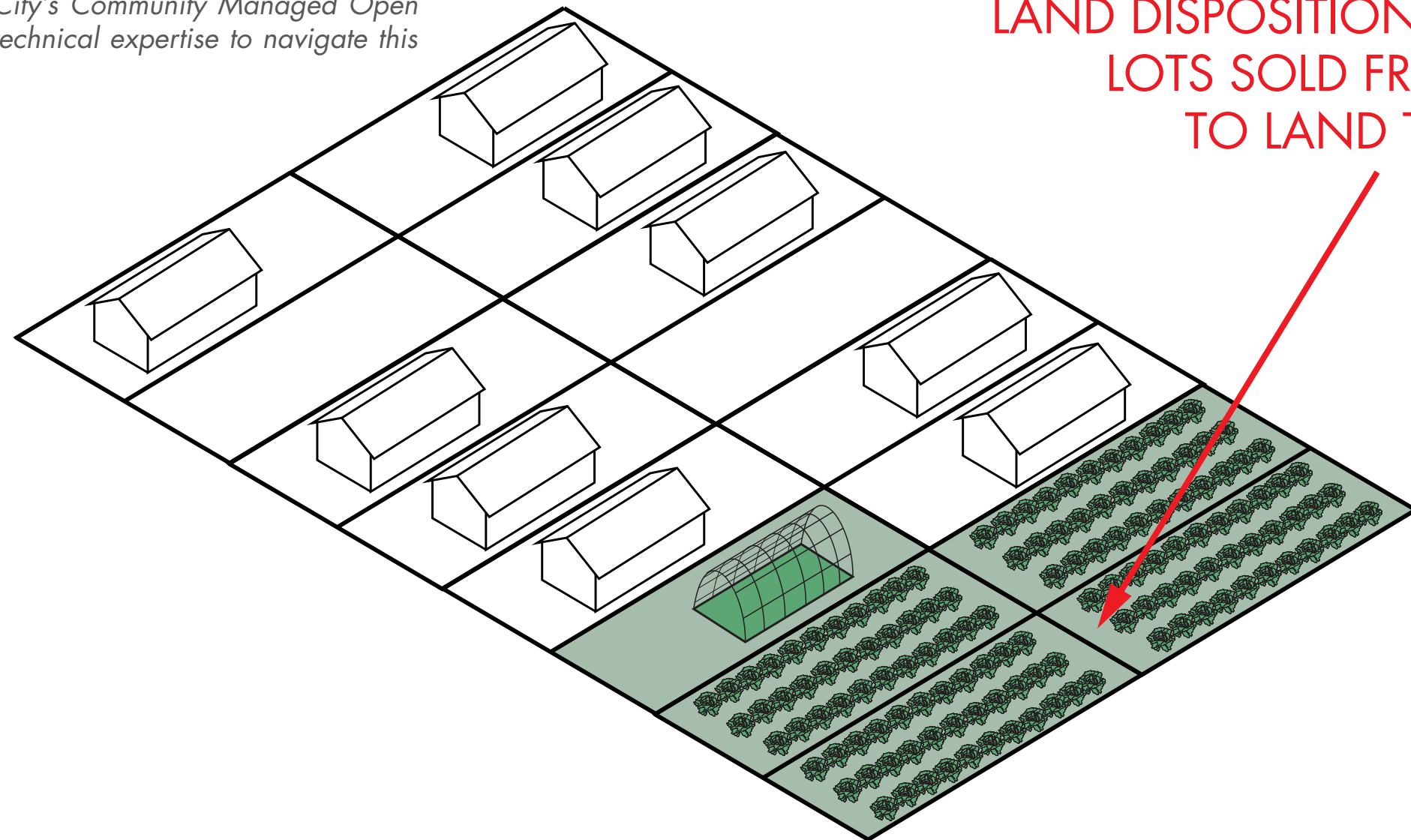
This illustrates a sample of actions the city would have to take before transferring these 5 lots to a land trust. These actions are specific to the particular ownership structure of each lot.



TRANSFER LOTS TO LAND TRUST

BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND CITY AGENCIES IN PRESERVING COMMUNITY MANAGED OPEN SPACES

The final step is a land disposition agreement in which the lot is sold from the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) to a land trust. This requires HCD to move the land development agreement through the Law Department, Real Estate committee and Board estimates and provide lien sheets and, if necessary deed preparations to the Land Trust. The Land Trust and the City's Community Managed Open Space Team provide the legal and technical expertise to navigate this bureaucratic process.



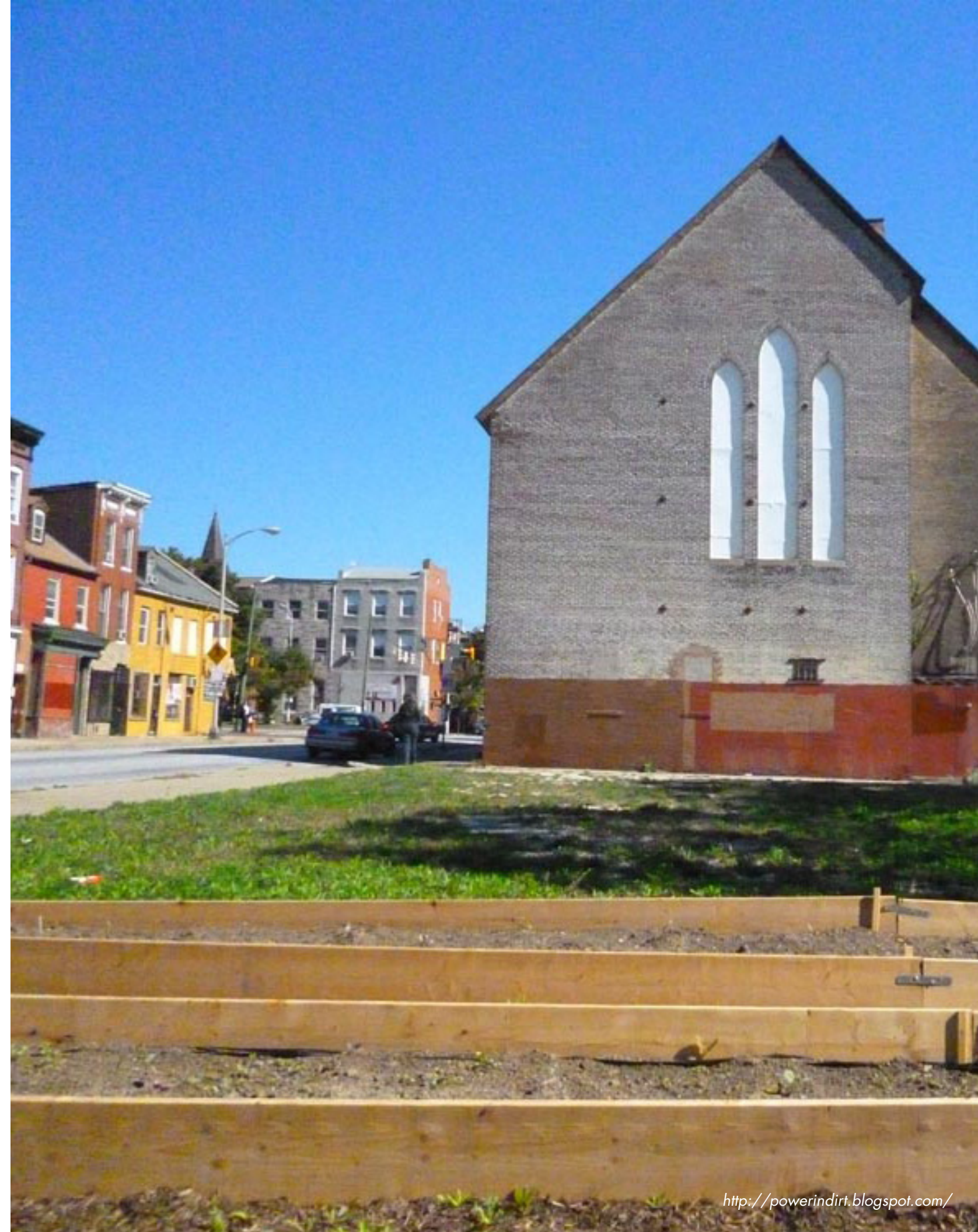
LAND DISPOSITION AGREEMENT:
LOTS SOLD FROM HCD
TO LAND TRUST

TRANSFER LOTS TO LAND TRUST

BRIDGE BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND CITY AGENCIES

WHY IMPORTANT:

Land Trusts and Baltimore's commitment to support their activities are a long term solution to promoting community managed open spaces. Many spaces adopted through the Power in Dirt program may not be sustained over a long time, but those organizations who are committed to a particular community managed open space can work with Land Trusts to protect their access to those sites. Land Trusts also take the legal and bureaucratic burden off of communities. They provide the expertise to acquire land for community use, bridging the gap between communities and city agencies. So far, Land Trusts in Baltimore are modest in size. Baltimore Green Space has 3 community owned open spaces in its inventory. However, the City's commitment to work with Land Trusts suggests they may become more prominent as organizations look to maintain their open spaces over a long term.



URBAN AGRICULTURE RFQ:

CITY-LED PROGRAM TO TURN LARGE VACANT LOTS INTO URBAN FARMS

Using the Market Value Analysis and other related data, this request for qualifications was issued in March 2011. Through this process, the city established a partnership with ten groups and the first sites have recently started growing.

WHO: Department of Planning (Office of Sustainability) & Department of Housing and Community Development

WHAT: Request for Qualifications from farmers to participate in the development of a certain selection of pre-identified city-owned vacant and underutilized properties throughout the City of Baltimore for the purpose of urban agriculture

WHERE: Criteria used to identify 35 acres of vacant land —

1: No short/mid term development purposes

2: Minimum 1 acre in size

3: Environmental quality suitable for farming



URBAN AGRICULTURE RFQ:

CITY-LED PROGRAM TO TURN LARGE VACANT LOTS INTO URBAN FARMS

WHY IMPORTANT:

Unlike Baltimore's other vacant lot greening programs, the recent Urban Agriculture RFQ marks a more proactive approach from the City. Rather than waiting for farmers to come to them with sites to redevelop, the City identified sites suitable and desirable for urban agriculture and sought to match each site with the right groups. This program is aligned with the interagency Baltimore Food Policy Initiative, which looks to increase access to healthy and affordable foods in the City's food deserts. The Food Policy Initiative updated the City's zoning code this year to better support urban agriculture by allowing farmers markets as temporary uses, removing permit requirements for hoop houses, and allowing urban agriculture with a conditional-use permit. Additionally, the Food Policy Initiative updated the health code to allow for animal husbandry of chickens, rabbits, goats and bees. Baltimore is proactively demonstrating a commitment to and desire for agriculture within its city limits.



LESSONS FOR OTHER CITIES

- DATA DATA DATA!
- ALIGNING GOALS WITH OTHER CITY INITIATIVES
- TARGET AREAS FOR REDEVELOPMENT FIRST
- PARTNER WITH LAND TRUSTS TO PRESERVE GREEN SPACES
- CREATE AND CONVEY STRONG VISION FOR THE FUTURE



MORE ROOM FOR PLANNING?

One possible critique of Baltimore's strategies for its vacant land with little development potential is that the City has so far not fully capitalized on the opportunity to link together those spaces as a more connected natural system and to be more proactive in deciding what those spaces SHOULD be in the context of an overall vision for the long-term future of Baltimore. However, the work on the Urban Agriculture RFQ and some recent efforts to look into how vacant lots could be connected to a larger green stormwater management system or connect all residents to a nearby park suggest the city is looking to be more proactive in planning its patchwork of green space. Overall, the efforts Baltimore has already made to align its vacancy strategy with other city initiatives is an important step. Continuing to seek such opportunities where vacant spaces might provide a functional use for another city program will help Baltimore move towards an even stronger framework for its vacant land.



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