

Urban Conservation Land Trusts as an Alternative Model for Stewardship: A Case Study of Baltimore Green Space



Baltimore Green Space—Duncan Street Community Garden (*Source: Baltimore Green Space website*)



Baltimore Green Space—Pigtown Horseshoe Pit (*Source: Baltimore Green Space website*)



Baltimore Green Space—Springfield Woods (*Source: Baltimore Sun website, 1*)

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Abstract

A conservation land trust is a nonprofit organization that holds title or other rights to land for conservation purposes. While most land trusts operate in rural and ex-urban settings, the model can also be applied effectively in cities. Urban conservation land trusts have the potential to contribute to more socially just and ecologically strong cities by encouraging community ownership and investment in neighborhoods, and by increasing the number and quality of open spaces in the city.

This paper will provide an overview of standard models for community stewardship of urban land and explore urban land trusts as an alternative, focusing especially on the potential for addressing the needs of low income communities and urban natural systems. A case study of the urban conservation land trust Baltimore Green Space will provide a context for exploring these issues.

My research suggests that: (1) the conservation land trust model offers a powerful mix of flexibility and permanence to urban open space management; (2) increased collaboration by urban conservation land trusts with community land trusts will increase opportunities for addressing issues of equity; and (3) a more explicit approach towards supporting natural processes will support urban land trusts' conservation goals as well as increase opportunities for community engagement.

Introduction

Guiding Questions

Land trusts have the potential to contribute to more socially just and ecologically strong cities by encouraging community ownership and investment in neighborhoods, and by increasing the number and quality of open spaces in the city. Are they realizing this potential? In what ways do they do this, and how do their efforts address the needs of low income and working class communities?

Why Community Control of Land

1. Community ownership and investment

Kevin Lynch, the influential urban planner and writer who explored how people perceive and navigate space in cities, believed that the land should be owned by those who use it, defining ownership as the right to assume control, enjoyment, and responsibility for a place. Randolph Hester adds that this ownership can be either legal ownership or “symbolic ownership.”ⁱ Especially in low-income neighborhoods, where people often have less power in shaping the public realm, the ability to control and take responsibility for one’s surroundings can be transformative.

2. Improvement in quality, quantity, and usability of neighborhood open spaces

Many cities face significantly decreased funding for park and recreation facilities; money is tight for maintenance of existing facilities, and acquisition of new facilities is rare. Low income communities and communities of color are often disproportionately impacted by maintenance cuts and lack of parks.ⁱⁱ Vacant lots are also more common in lower income neighborhoods. While these spaces can attract crime and blight, they also offer unique opportunities for adding parks and open spaces to underserved neighborhoods. When



596 Acres Campaign, NYC (Source: I'm Just Walkin' website)

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communities are able to take control of vacant land and transform it into parks and open spaces, they are directly addressing the equity gap that exists in park access and quality.

3. Serves the needs of green infrastructure

Cities are increasingly recognizing the potential for natural systems to support the urban infrastructure. In Philadelphia, for example, the Water Department has received EPA approval for its plan to decrease storm runoff by managing it at the source.ⁱⁱⁱ This approach will require many scattered, small-scale open spaces throughout the city, raising concerns about the management costs for maintenance by city departments. Stewardship of these small sites by local community members can help address these maintenance concerns.



Philadelphia Green Cities, Clean Waters
(Source: *Smart Growth America* website)

Conventional Models for Community Control of Land

- “Friends” organizations
- Privately funded parks
- Adopt-a-lot programs
- Unofficial stewardship of open spaces
- Community purchase and management of vacant lots

Obstacles Presented by These Models

1. Risk of furthering uneven distribution of open space and resources

Coordinating with the city to develop partnerships and creative solutions takes time, money and expertise. “Friends” organizations and private foundations that can fund and maintain parks are more likely to be located in wealthier neighborhoods. If cities funnel their limited resources towards supporting these efforts, they may unintentionally exacerbate existing inequalities in the distribution and maintenance of open spaces.

2. Vulnerability of short-term arrangements to eviction

Lots tended through adopt-a-lot programs and informal adoption are generally subject to the whims of the market and run the risk of being sold or developed. This can make it challenging for communities to make long-term improvements and investments in the site.

3. Difficult and costly to buy vacant lots

The cost of buying a vacant lot is often prohibitive for community groups. Even when a lot is affordable, acquisition can be difficult. Frequently the title is unclear and may be difficult to track. Additionally, one lot can actually be made up of several parcels, each with a different owner, making acquisition extremely complex.

4. Difficult and costly to coordinate legal aspects of maintaining property

It can be challenging for a group of neighbors who are not a formal organization to jointly own property. With ownership comes liability and legal responsibilities in addition to responsibilities for the upkeep of the land. Property taxes and liability insurance can be costly and complicated to manage.

An Alternative Possibility: Land Trusts

Overview of Land Trusts

A conservation land trust is a nonprofit organization that holds title or other rights to land for conservation purposes. The Land Trust Alliance defines a land trust as “a nonprofit organization that, as all or part of its mission, actively works to conserve land by undertaking or assisting in land or conservation easement acquisition, or by its stewardship of such land or easements.”^{iv} The First land trust was the Trustees of Reservations in Massachusetts, founded in 1891 by Boston landscape architect Charles Eliot. From the beginning, the Trustees of Reservations held protection of public access to the land as an important guiding principle.^v

Land trusts continued to develop over the next century, but there was a significant growth in the number of land trusts starting in 1980’s as federal money became increasingly less available for the purchase of conservation land. Although the Trustees of Reservations’ intent was to include land “within ten miles of the State House,”^{vi} conservation land trusts have focused primarily on rural land and land at the urban-rural interface, with an emphasis on conservation of land for ecological and scenic qualities. Despite this rural bias, urban land trusts are growing in strength; these organizations tend to focus on either conservation or community development.



Charles Eliot, founder of the
Trustees of Reservations (Source:
Trustees of Reservations website)

Land Trusts

Benefits of Land Trusts for Communities

- Land trusts protect open space in perpetuity, thereby removing the threat of development and opening the possibility for long-term investment by communities.
- Land trusts take the responsibilities of land ownership off of communities, allowing communities to instead focus their resources on the land itself.
- Land trusts leave the responsibility for vision and management in the hands of community, maintaining community investment and control.

Conservation Land Trusts in Cities

While the majority of conservation land trusts continue to be focused outside of cities, urban conservation land trusts are increasing in numbers. They tend to have a different focus, as expressed by Terry Mushovic, executive director of the Neighborhood Garden Association in Philadelphia, in an interview with the Land Trust Alliance: "I really do see urban land trusts as a different sort of animal. They are very people oriented versus just land oriented."^{vii} Urban land trusts are often more highly designed and intensively used spaces. They can include community gardens, formal gardens, parks, and natural areas.



Liberty Lands, Philadelphia, PA
(Source: Project for Public Spaces website)

Community Land Trusts

Community land trusts are a more recent form of land trust. In contrast to conservation land trusts, they tend to be focused on the creation and preservation of affordable housing in urban areas. According to the National Community Land Trust Network, "The purposes of a Community Land Trust are to provide access to land and housing to people who are otherwise denied access, to increase long-term community control of neighborhood resources,

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to empower residents through involvement and participation in the organization, and to preserve the affordability of housing permanently."^{viii}

There are increasing efforts to bring the two types of land trusts together. The Land Trust Alliance website now includes a lengthy description of Community Land Trusts, referring to them as an "exciting movement."^{ix} The integration of elements of each type of land trust may be especially relevant for conservation land trusts in urban setting. Three examples of land trusts that combine elements of each model include the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston, Troy Gardens in Madison, and Charm City Land Trust in Baltimore.

Structures of Different Urban Land Trusts

1. Acquiring land on behalf of community groups and supporting these groups.

The focus is on securing land used by community groups and offering ongoing support to partners. Examples of organizations employing this model include Baltimore Green Space, Chicago NeighborSpace, and Neighborhood Garden Association/ A Philadelphia Land Trust.

2. Owning land on behalf of an existing network of open spaces/gardens.

The focus is on supporting current projects rather than on acquiring new land. This model can be seen in the New York City Garden Land Trusts.

3. Actively developing new sites with community input.

The land trust is a part of envisioning and realizing new projects rather than supporting existing projects run by other groups. An example of this model is the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust.



Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative Greenhouse (*Source: DSNI website*)

Land Trusts

4. Protecting a specific site.

Some land trusts are formed to protect a specific project on a specific piece of land. Examples of this are the Southside Community Land Trust in Providence, RI Starr King Open Space in San Francisco, CA.

The first model offers particular promise for supporting neighborhood ownership and autonomy and for having an impact citywide. To explore this potential in more detail, we turn to a case study of Baltimore Green Space in Baltimore, Maryland.

Case Study: Baltimore Green Space

Baltimore Green Space as an Exemplary Case

1. Commitment to increasing preserved properties and supporting community-initiated visions

Unlike land trusts that focus on one site or that manage several existing gardens, Baltimore Green Space aims to provide ongoing support to existing projects as well as to assist new projects in gaining permanence. Its goal is to help communities realize their own vision for the land. This is the land trust model that most clearly supports community control of the land.

2. Grassroots origins and strong collaboration with city government

Some land trusts, such as Chicago's NeighborSpace, were formed with strong government involvement. Others, like Philadelphia's Neighborhood Garden Association, were started by nonprofits. Baltimore Green Space, however, has grassroots origins that connect it more clearly to community-level control of the land. At the same time, the organization has been very successful at collaborating with the city government in order to have a more significant impact.

3. Broad definition of what constitutes "open space"

Many urban conservation land trusts are focused primarily on urban gardens. Baltimore Green Space allows the community to define its needs for an open space within certain parameters. This flexibility supports the community's autonomy in designing a space. The diversity of spaces preserved also offers potential for increasing a city's ability to adapt to the natural environment.



Baltimore Green Space Logo (*Source: Baltimore Green Space website*)

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Mission

"Baltimore Green Space is a land trust that partners with communities to preserve and support community gardens, pocket parks, and other community-managed open spaces. We aim to protect the social and environmental benefits that residents create through their sweat equity investments in their neighborhoods."^x

Origins

Baltimore Green Space grew out of grassroots efforts to save a threatened community garden. Gardener Miriam Avins struggled to save her informal garden, Homestead Harvest Community Garden. In the process of searching out options, she met other community gardeners and learned about common issues and problems.^{xi} Ultimately she and other gardeners founded Baltimore Green Space in 2007, and Avins was awarded an 18-month, \$48,750 fellowship with the Open Society Institute to help her establish the land trust.^{xii} She used the Chicago land trust NeighborSpace as a basic model. However, unlike that land trust, Baltimore Green Space is independent of the city government.^{xiii}

Scope of engagement

Baltimore Green Space currently owns the land for two community gardens and one community horseshoe pit, and is engaged with several other established groups in the process of securing their land. Baltimore Green Space also collaborates with city government to shape policies around protecting community-managed open spaces and supports less established groups through workshops, guidance, and links to other resources.



Homestead Harvest Community Garden (*Source: American Community Gardening Association website*)

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Program Structure

Overview

There are many programs in Baltimore that support community-managed open spaces at all stages of development, from start-up to maintenance. Baltimore Green Space's program, however, is one of few programs that specifically target groups that demonstrate the commitment and capacity to survive for the long term. Because the process of vetting and approving requests for the acquisition of land is time consuming and labor intensive for a land trust, it is important that it be thoroughly worked out, well documented, and publicly accessible; Baltimore Green Space has done an impressive job with all of this.

Qualifications for project approval

These requirements aim to ensure that the project is truly community-based, that it can succeed over the long term, and that it is environmentally sound. First, all requests for preservation must come from members of the immediate community. Second, the community must demonstrate the capacity for long-term management of site. A qualifying project must have been in operation for at least five years, must designate a site manager, assistant manager, and enough volunteers to maintain the project, and must have at least one established organization in local community willing to partner with it. Finally, there must be a good match between environmental conditions (e.g. contamination) and how the site is used.^{xiv}

Application process

An important part of the application process for land protection with Baltimore Green Space is the prescreening and orientation. On the website and at the beginning of the application form, Baltimore Green Space emphasizes the importance of groups contacting them before filling out the application. This helps to ensure that groups are qualified and gives Baltimore Green Space an opportunity to support them in being successful in their application. Once a

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group has completed its application, Baltimore Green Space's Land Transactions committee votes on whether to proceed with research about the site. If the vote passes, they commence with research and bring their findings to the full board. The board votes whether to acquire the land or not, and efforts to acquire the land begin. Once the land is acquired, Baltimore Green Space commits to ensuring the ongoing stewardship of the land.^{xv}

Means of acquiring land

Baltimore Green Space employs several means of acquiring land. They are able to purchase property owned by city for \$1 through the Dollar-a-Lot program. If the community-managed open space is on private land that is abandoned and owes the city money, the city can take title and then transfer it to the land trust. The land trust can accept private donations of land, and, finally, the land trust may on occasion be able to purchase land from private owners.

Services offered to community group partners

- Permanent protection of land.
- Basic liability insurance.
- Technical support.
- Five-year renewable terms.

Expectations of community group partners

While the organization allows communities considerable autonomy in designing and using their green spaces, Baltimore Green Space does require that partners protect the land trust's liability and commitment to conservation. This translates into rules such as no permanent structures, playgrounds, water features, dogs, organized sports, or vehicles.

Baltimore Green Space, like many conservation land trusts, considers public access a priority. While community gardens are frequently locked to prevent

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theft of produce, Baltimore Green Space urges its partners to find ways to allow for access. They suggest that if only some parts of the garden need to be protected, they can be fenced while leaving other areas open. If all of the area must be fenced, the group is required to post open garden hours for the public.

There is also a strong emphasis placed on attending to site maintenance. Stewards are to not only maintain the hardscape and softscape of the space itself, but they are to pick up litter and maintain planting strips on the adjacent sidewalk. The interface with the public realm is important.

All green spaces need to have source of water. Baltimore Green Space recommends installing a ground hydrant, with potential alternatives including getting permission from the city to use a fire hydrant or getting access from an adjacent neighbor.^{xvi}



Upper Fells Point Garden Gate Source:
Upper Fells Point Improvement District website)

Shaping City Policy

Context: the City of Baltimore

In recent years the city of Baltimore has unveiled a wide range of programs to encourage and facilitate the productive reuse of vacant land. These range from programs to encourage redevelopment of vacant row houses (Vacants to Value program) to programs to encourage community stewardship of vacant lots (Power in Dirt program) to programs that facilitate localized ownership of lots (Side Yard program, Dollar Lot program). Baltimore Green Space and the City of Baltimore have significant overlap in their vision for vacant land in the city. In an interview with Christopher Gardener, Miriam Avins remarks on this confluence: "The Sustainability Commission and the Office of Sustainability have made an enormous difference. ... By the time I sat down to talk with the city, they were already 'there.'"^{xvii}



Abandoned Baltimore Row Houses
(Source: *Citizens Planning and Housing Association website*)

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Collaboration

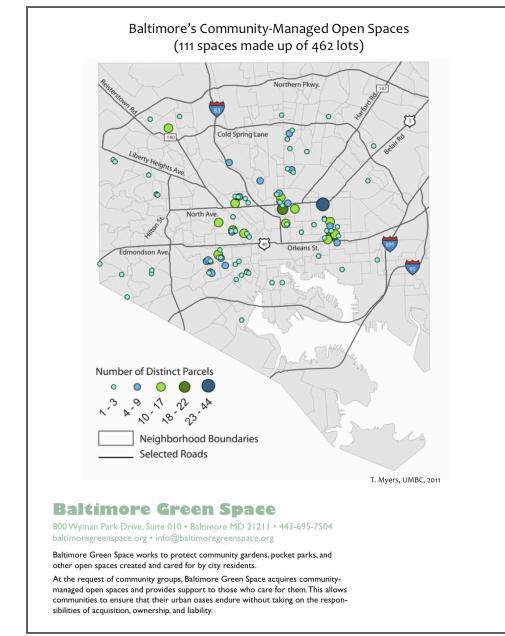
Baltimore Green Space and the City of Baltimore have taken advantage of these shared values by collaborating to strengthen each other's efforts. Miriam Avins' approach to working with city government is clear in this quote from an interview with *Indymedia*: "There are good reasons to partner with government. Baltimore Green Space will be far more effective at preserving community-managed open spaces if it works cooperatively with city government, which is such a major owner of undeveloped properties."^{xviii} Baltimore Green Space has been instrumental in helping shape city policy and actions around open space preservation and management, including (1) the Community Open Space Preservation project, (2) the Dollar Lot program, and (3) conducting a land census.

1. Community Open Space Preservation Project

The Community Open Space Preservation Project was a partnership between the Baltimore Office of Sustainability, the Department of Housing and Community Development, and Baltimore Green Space. It was established to identify the criteria and processes for efficiently transferring city owned land to established land trusts on behalf of community groups. The results of this effort were city guidelines for the screening and transfer of community-managed open spaces from city ownership to land trusts, as well as in the creation of the handbook entitled *Preserving Community-Managed Open Spaces: Criteria and Process*.^{xix}

2. Dollar lot program

This is the specific policy that came out of the Community Open Space Preservation Project. It enables the city to sell lots it owns for a dollar to a land trust on behalf of community organizations running established open space projects. This model helps the city ensure the longevity of projects by selling the land to land trusts rather than neighborhood groups, which are generally



Land Census Map (Source: Baltimore Green Space Spring 2011 Newsletter)

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more transient and less structured. It also helps land trusts and community groups by allowing land trusts to acquire land affordably on behalf of community groups. The low price reflects the investment that has already gone into the site and the direct benefit of the project to the immediate community.^{xx}

3. Land census

In 2010, the mayor and the housing commissioner presented plans to speed up sale of vacant lots and structures (the Vacants to Value program). Concerned that community-managed open spaces might be inadvertently sold to developers, Baltimore Green Space organized a census of existing open space projects to share with the city. They sent volunteers out to document existing projects, analyzed the data and provided the Department of Housing and Community Development and the Department of Planning with a list of 111 sites (462 lots) that were in community use.^{xxi} The city was then able to use this information to guide its sales of vacant lots.

Baltimore Green Space Open Spaces

Duncan Street Miracle Garden

Located in East Baltimore, the Duncan Street Miracle Garden occupies an entire city block of what used to be 44 row houses that were torn down in the 1980's. The site attracted crime and dumping. In 1989 the Pharaoh's Club, a local men's association, started a garden to try to clean things up. They were ultimately able to get the city to close down the alley running through the center of the block,^{xxii} and over time the garden has grown to cover 1/2 acre. Gardeners regularly share their bounty with churches and soup kitchens. A key player in the success and growth of the garden over the years has been neighbor and garden manager Lewis Sharpe, who spends his days looking after



Lewis Sharpe, Duncan Street Miracle Garden (*Source: blogspot.com*)

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the garden and the community. He is the voice of the garden, and one of the voices for Baltimore Green Space as well, figuring prominently in numerous news articles and interviews.

Upper Fells Point Community Garden

In 1990 neighbors in Fells Point established the Upper Fells Point Community Garden on a site where three houses had been demolished after a fire. This neighborhood of “well-kept row houses and within a short walk of some of the city's best-reviewed restaurants and tourist attractions...”^{xxiii} is not low income, but the garden is the only green space around.^{xxiv} Increasing gentrification of the neighborhood increased the threat of development of the garden.^{xxv} The Upper Fells Point Garden was the first site protected by Baltimore Green Space.^{xxvi} The land trust protected two of the three lots that make up the garden in 2009. In 2012 they acquired the third lot,^{xxvii} which had been privately owned and was delinquent on taxes. The city was able to foreclose on the property and take ownership, enabling it to then pass it on to the land trust.^{xxviii}

Pigtown Horseshoe Pit

The Pigtown horseshoe pit, occupying a vacant lot on a residential block in the Pigtown neighborhood, has been a community institution in this racially and economically diverse neighborhood for over 40 years. When the city sold the lot to a developer in 2007, neighbors were outraged and protested the sale. The city turned to Baltimore Green Space to help protect the site and ultimately completed a land swap with the developer and sold the lot to Baltimore Green Space.



Fells Point Community Garden
(Source: *Joel the Urban Gardener* website)



Pigtown Horseshoe Pit (Source:
Baltimore Sun website, 2)

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Assessment of Strengths

- Allows for a wide diversity of open spaces

From community gardens to urban woods to horseshoe pits, groups do not have to compromise their autonomy and vision in order to get the support of the land trust; Baltimore Green Space's definition of "open space" is broad and inclusive.

- Clear requirements for participation

The clarity as to what is required of groups and sites, combined with the direct communication and guidance given through the application process, supports applicants and increases the likelihood of success.

- Strong collaboration with the city

The close collaboration with the city of Baltimore has resulted in policies and practices that are supportive of the land trust and its goals. While the number of properties in conservation is still low, the groundwork has now been laid for more efficient acquisitions.

- Potential environmental benefits are identified and valued

Both the land trust and the city identify significant environmental benefits of community-managed open spaces. This increases the likelihood of these spaces actually contributing to the city's adaptation to the natural environment by encouraging sustainable practices.



Pigtown Horseshoe Pit (*Source: Baltimore Sun website, 3*)



Birding in Springfield Woods,
Baltimore Green Space (*Source: Baltimore Sun website, 1*)

Potential gaps

- Social justice and equity are not specifically addressed in the organization's mission.

Baltimore Green Space does work with low-income communities, and the application process includes an assessment of the need for open space in the surrounding community. Nonetheless, it may want to consider being more explicit in this intent so as to institutionalize it for the long term. There is a potential for gentrification of low-income neighborhoods associated with greening projects; an articulated commitment to equity can help the organization support low-income communities over the long term.

- The focus on established groups could conceivably disadvantage groups with less access to social capital and resources.

This equity concern is offset by the fact that Baltimore has several other programs to support nascent greening projects. Baltimore Green Space guides people to these resources, but they are not the focus of its program; the permanence of the land trust model really addresses the needs of established groups. Hopefully the combined efforts of the city and Baltimore Green Space will help new groups develop so that they are ready to join the land trust.

- The small scale of the program may limit its effectiveness.

The city of Baltimore is turning to land trusts as a solution to addressing ownership and maintenance issues around vacant lots. However, in truth very few properties have been protected. Baltimore Green Space is a small nonprofit. There are two other land trusts in the city as well, but neither is operating at any scale. This situation may change now that the system is in place for easy transfer of land from the city to land trusts. However, both the city and the land trusts should consider whether or not this is a concern and how to address it if necessary.

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- There is less guidance on ecological sustainability practices than in other areas of site maintenance.

Baltimore Green Space has demonstrated a commitment to environmental concerns through hosting bird walks and supporting forest stewardship groups, and the Upper Fells Point Garden has also recently installed pervious pavement in front of their garden. Still, there is little explicit guidance for improving the conservation value of the land. Specific trainings and brochures on permeability, habitat creation, and similar topics would add to Baltimore Green Space's strong collection of resources.



Pervious Pavement at Fells Point Garden (*Source: Gravel-lok blogspot*)

Findings

Potential for Land Trusts as a Model for Supporting Community-Managed Natural Areas in Cities

1. The land trust model offers a valuable mix of flexibility and permanence to urban open space management.

Some of the challenges facing the urban conservation land trust model, including its potentially limited scope and scale, are also its strengths. Land trusts can be effective in helping existing community projects achieve long-term stability, encouraging innovation and investment in the land.

2. Increased collaboration by urban conservation land trusts with community land trusts could increase opportunities for addressing issues of equity.

One of the challenges that urban conservation land trusts face is how to address issues of equity while carrying out their mission. Community land trusts' articulated focus on empowering residents and commitment to neighborhood affordability can provide a powerful addition to the mission.

3. While urban land trusts should continue to focus on community empowerment, a more explicit approach to conservation techniques would strengthen preserved spaces abilities to support cities' natural processes.

Urban conservation land trusts, even when they do not have a specific commitment to social justice, are focused on people and communities as well

Conclusions

as the land. The conservation element of caretaking the land is often not as strongly articulated as the commitment to caretaking community. Conservation land trusts could partner much more explicitly with cities and neighbors to support urban ecology and to help meet the needs of green infrastructure.

Resources

General land trust information:

Land Trust Alliance: <http://www.landtrustalliance.org>

National Community Land Trust Network: <http://www.cltnetwork.org>

Urban Land Protection Council: <http://lowelllandtrust.org/content/urban-land-protection>

Some urban land trusts that protect open space:

Baltimore Green Space: <http://baltimoregreenspace.org/>

Neighborhood Gardening Association/ A Philadelphia Land Trust: <http://www.philadelphialandtrust.org/>

Chicago NeighborSpace: neighbor-space.org/

Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust: <http://lanlt.org/>

Boston Natural Areas Network: <http://www.bostonnatural.org/>

Trust for Public Land: <http://www.tpl.org/>

Southside Community Land Trust: <http://www.southsideclt.org/>

Brooklyn Queens Land Trust: <http://www.bqlt.org>

Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative: <http://www.dsni.org/>

Troy Gardens: <http://www.troygardens.net/>

Baltimore programs:

Baltimore Green Space: <http://baltimoregreenspace.org/>

Baltimore Office of Sustainability: <http://www.baltimoreresustainability.org/>

Vacants to Value: http://www.baltimorehousing.org/vacants_to_value.aspx

Power in Dirt: <http://www.powerindirt.com/>

Parks and People Foundation: <http://parksandpeople.org/>

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