

**THE**

# **COMMUNITY LAND TRUST**

**READER**



**Edited by John Emmeus Davis**

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**L** LINCOLN INSTITUTE  
OF LAND POLICY  
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# Troy Gardens

## *The Accidental Ecovillage*

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Greg Rosenberg  
(2010)

*Troy Gardens is a 31-acre project on the north side of Madison, Wisconsin. The project encompasses community gardens, a working farm, a restored prairie, an interpretive trail system, and a 30-unit mixed-income cohousing community. Troy Gardens has won numerous awards, including the 2008 Home Depot Foundation Award for Affordable Housing Built Responsibly.*

*The master developer for Troy Gardens was the Madison Area Community Land Trust (MACLT), a small community land trust founded in 1991 by Sol Levin. The author of this retrospective served as MACLT's executive director from 2001 to 2010.*

### **Beyond Housing**

For my first few years as executive director of Madison Area Community Land Trust, I labored under the mistaken impression that we were blazing entirely new trails at Troy Gardens, developing a strategy for sustainable development that pushed the CLT model into new and uncharted territory. I saw the error of my ways in 2005, when I had the pleasure of presenting a workshop at the National Community Land Trust conference in Portland with Kirby White, one of the most influential writers within the CLT movement. Kirby asked me to do some background reading in preparation for the workshop. For the first time, I started learning about the historical roots of the CLT movement. To my great surprise, it quickly became clear that Troy Gardens was actually the type of project that the founders of our movement had envisioned for the community land trust! I arrived at the Portland conference with a newfound dose of humility and a heightened respect for those who had come before me.

Many, if not most, CLTs are still exclusively focused on building or rehabilitating homes for lower-income families, with community ownership of land viewed merely as a vehicle for keeping housing permanently affordable through long-term ground leases. By the end of 2005, I had finished Camino del Sol, the first residential subdivision I oversaw as MACLT's executive director. As a result of that experience, I had come to believe that the CLT movement needs to look beyond housing. The CLT makes little



sense if we are going to limit ourselves only to the development and stewardship of affordable housing. To be sure, ground leases are beautifully tailored to perpetuate housing affordability, but they can be enormously complex. If housing is all that you do, why not take a simpler approach to protecting long-term affordability?

Where the CLT model really and truly shines is in its extraordinary potential for a broad and integrated approach to development. By thinking deeply about the value and uses of land over a very long-term time horizon, the CLT leads inevitably to thinking about sustainable development practices. Ninety-nine-year renewable ground leases provoke questions like: “What will Madison look like 100 years from now? Where will people get their food? How will they get to work, how will they afford to heat their homes, and where will they find open skies and fresh air?” Such long-term thinking requires housing to be included as an important part of the equation, but it is only one piece of the puzzle. If our homeowners, 100 years from now, cannot afford to heat their homes, then our work will have been in vain. If our homeowners, 50 years from now, cannot get to work because there is no mass transit within walking distance, who will buy our homes? And what will our homeowners do as they grow into old age, if they can no longer go up and down stairs?

The real power and potential of the CLT model is that it leads us to think in more holistic terms. The CLT is so expansive and so durable that it encompasses any possible use of land, not just housing. When a CLT purchases a new piece of land on behalf of the community, therefore, we must think more broadly about what the highest and best uses of this land might be. Not in the traditional sense of figuring out the most financially profitable returns from the land, but which uses will benefit the *community* the most? This question is always set within a specific place, moreover, within a specific neighborhood, predisposing the CLT to consult and collaborate with individuals, institutions, and businesses that surround our land.

This is a long-winded way of saying that Troy Gardens is really an “old” idea of sustainable, collaborative development that harkens back to the vision of the practical idealists who founded the CLT movement. Our road is much easier today than it was 40 years ago, when that vision was put forward in the first CLT at New Communities, because the larger society has begun to place a heightened value on sustainable development. This is not to say that it was *easy* to develop Troy Gardens—only that an evolving social consciousness about environmental stewardship, energy efficiency, universal design, and sustainable practices made it *possible* to develop Troy Gardens.

### Bringing the Story Up to Date

In December of 2001, the Madison Area CLT stepped into the role of lead developer when we purchased a 31-acre site from the State of Wisconsin. I had just applied for the job as MACLT’s executive director. I will never forget taking a walk around Troy Gardens the morning of my job interview. The only thing on the grounds was a

community garden, but I could imagine all the things that were to come: a delicious mix of urban agriculture, green space conservation and restoration, and mixed-income cohousing. It seemed so cutting-edge, especially since the ideas that formed the basis for this proposed project had all sprung from the people who lived in the surrounding neighborhood. Troy Gardens was to be developed on a foundation of excellent community organizing, accompanied by the involvement of lots of bright, hard-working people from the University of Wisconsin, local nonprofit organizations, and an increasing number of fans within governmental agencies at the city, state, and even federal level.

It has been an extraordinary journey, more rewarding than I could have ever imagined. It has also been far more difficult. I lost my mentor, Sol Levin, just four months after I started. Sol had been the “godfather” of Troy Gardens for the six previous years. Many times, it was only through the sheer force of his personality that the project had kept moving forward. His sudden death broke all of our hearts and cast the whole project into question.

By 2002, Troy Gardens was in real trouble. We had staked our organizational future on pulling off this hugely complex development. But we had lost our visionary leader. MACLT’s sole staff person, myself, had no development experience. And we had a board that had become highly ambivalent about the whole project. Fully a third of MACLT’s board members were expressing concerns that Troy Gardens would end up killing the organization.

I’m not the brightest person in the world, but I did the smartest thing I could have possibly done—I asked for help from a lot of people. And this is what saved the project. I could not possibly tell the story of Troy Gardens without saying something about their contributions.

### **Troy Gardens Hall of Fame**

Although I’m not particularly religious, I confess that the first person I asked for help was Sol Levin, who had departed to that “Great Community Resource Park in the Sky,” the name he sometimes gave to his own notion of heaven. I’d ask myself, “What would Sol do?” Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn’t—and that’s when I looked to other people for help.

So I asked our woefully underpaid architect, Jim Glueck, if he would agree to be my mentor and teach me about the development process—which he did, spending countless hours showing me the ropes, while allowing me an equal voice in the design process. And there was Bill Perkins, now our board president, whom I consider the Red Auerbach of affordable housing. He made a generous commitment to school me in the business of housing development, just to prove to his departed friend Sol that he did indeed believe in community land trusts.

I also took what might seem to be a somewhat counterintuitive step of asking for help from our primary funding source, the City of Madison’s Community Development Office. Both Hickory Hurie and Barb Constans were friends of Sol’s who had

embraced his vision for Troy Gardens. I decided to confess to them that I didn't know how we were going to pull off this ambitious project, even though we were still determined to try our hardest. These fine city officials were both supportive and patient. They stood by the project and pushed me forward when I was too overwhelmed to take the next step.

Sol's favorite author when it came to housing and community development (and yet another of Sol's close friends) was John Davis. So I called and wrote John a lot after Sol died. John always made time to answer questions and teach me about community land trusts—and to laugh about how Sol had created quite a pickle for us to deal with.

There were also two people who helped me to appreciate the history and destiny of Troy Gardens. Marcia Caton Campbell, a professor at the UW–Madison Department of Urban and Regional Planning, dedicated her academic research to Troy Gardens and was a partner and confidant throughout the arduous three-year planned unit development (PUD) process. For part of this period, she also served as the president of MACLT's board. And there was Marge Pitts, the poet laureate of Troy Gardens, who taught me about the beauty of gardening and made me believe that there was a spirit watching over us at Troy Gardens that would make sure we would always find our way.

That watchful spirit, of course, was Sol. It was hardly a surprise that the day when the Madison Common Council finally approved our PUD application for Troy Gardens was also the third anniversary of Sol's death. There has always been some kind of magic at Troy Gardens—the magic created by people dreaming big dreams and having the courage and tenacity to go after them.

### **Housing as a “Necessary Evil”**

There is a certain irony to the fact that the initial community organizing around Troy Gardens focused on preventing any housing from being built. When Sol introduced the possibility of including an affordable housing component in Troy Gardens, he was met with skepticism and outright hostility. Sol was persistent, however, explaining to the site's neighbors that affordable housing could be a fruitful source of funding to purchase the land and to preserve the vast majority of Troy Gardens for green space and urban agriculture.

When other sources of funding for land acquisition proved to be elusive, members of the Troy Gardens Coalition grudgingly accepted the possibility of including a housing element. Their agenda shifted from resisting all development to debating the maximum number of housing units that might be acceptable—and the type of housing it should be. What came out of this conversation with the surrounding neighborhood was agreement on a plan to develop a 20- to 30-unit mixed-income cohousing community clustered in the southeast quadrant of the Troy Gardens site.

The Madison Area CLT was now committed to a very complex model of housing development, one that would require an extraordinary amount of community

participation. It would challenge us to develop and sell market-priced units alongside affordably priced, resale-restricted units, which we had never done before. In order to honor the environmental ethic of Troy Gardens, we also substantially expanded our goals around green building practices, incorporating renewable energy systems, green building materials, low-flow water fixtures, and other green features into the project's design. To respect the beauty of Troy Gardens, we made a commitment to go the extra mile in terms of exterior building materials and architectural design. To make sure that everyone could live at Troy Gardens, we deepened our commitment to accessible design as well.

### **Green Building and Universal Design**

Beginning in 2002, the Madison Area CLT began constructing highly energy-efficient homes that incorporated a commitment to universal design principles, offering a high degree of physical accessibility for persons with disabilities. It took the efforts of one of our board members, Dave Borski, to push me toward making green building a central priority. I was not in a position to argue with him, so I began my apprenticeship as a green builder, learning from him, as well as Len Lenzmeier, a retired homebuilder. In the case of universal design, I brought to the project my years of work as a fair housing advocate. I simply introduced universal design principles into our housing program without asking anybody's permission.

By the time we had finalized our construction plans and specifications for Troy Gardens in early 2006, the commitment to green building and universal design had shifted from a few "burning souls" to a full organizational commitment. At Troy Gardens, we felt an obligation to raise the bar for both of these principles because we wanted the sustainability features of the housing site to be up to the same standard as the rest of Troy Gardens. We wanted the whole 31 acres to work as an integrated unit. Some folks on the board questioned whether there would actually be a market for green-built accessible housing. They worried that the added cost of these features would do little to help us to sell the homes we were about to build. But without the green building and universal design features, the housing would have seemed like an intruder at Troy Gardens.

We spent months sorting out what features we could or could not afford. In the end, we came up with a set of specifications that hit about 90 percent of our goals. We also made a decision to reduce our own developer's fee in order to add green features, hoping that doing things right at Troy Gardens would yield long-term benefits for our organization.

I now see green and accessible design as part of the same thing: they are both elements of sustainability. When I think about accessibility, I simultaneously think about access for persons with disabilities, access for persons of modest incomes, access to public transportation, and access to good schools. To do this well, you must have a long time horizon from the first moments of the design process. Sustainability is not a short-term proposition. Nor is community. To have meaning and value, com-

munities must endure for many years. This brings us back to the community land trust, of course, a model that makes forever possible.

### **Housing Finally Wins Friends at Troy Gardens**

During the initial months of construction at Troy Gardens, the Troy Gardens community (in particular the community gardeners and neighbors), had a range of reactions to the changes they were seeing at Troy Gardens. Although the vast majority of them stayed positive in their words and actions, it was obvious that many folks were still apprehensive about what new housing would mean for Troy Gardens and the surrounding neighborhood.

Now, several years later, with the construction completed, the landscaping growing in, and the cohousing community more firmly established, these fears have largely dissipated. Troy Gardens' new homeowners have brought an influx of new blood and energy to the neighborhood and provided new members for the Friends of Troy Gardens.<sup>1</sup> The housing's design has proved to be compatible with the natural areas of Troy Gardens and does not visually dominate the landscape. Gardeners and residents of the surrounding neighborhood have come to see the new housing as an integral part of the fabric of Troy Gardens.

The housing has been valuable in other ways, for it has proven to be the added element that makes Troy Gardens an "ecovillage," a replicable model for sustainable urban development. The design, affordability, and compatibility of the housing with its natural and social surroundings have also driven much of the national recognition that has focused on Troy Gardens since its completion in 2007.

### **Evolving Partnerships at Troy Gardens**

Relationships at Troy Gardens have shifted considerably since the land was purchased in 2001. MACLT's role was paramount in the overall direction of the process of planning and developing the site. A newly formed association, the Friends of Troy Gardens, played a key role in soliciting input into planning for the site's open space and agricultural areas. The Urban Open Space Foundation (UOSF) played a key role in obtaining funding from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for restoration of the woodlands and prairie areas of the site.<sup>2</sup>

### **The City of Madison's Evolution Regarding Troy Gardens**

When the City of Madison began to consider the development possibilities at Troy Gardens, back in 1995, municipal staff in the Department of Planning and Development expressed a clear preference for a traditional subdivision at Troy Gardens, hoping to maximize property tax revenues. Over the next three years, the combined efforts of the Northside Planning Council (and lead organizer Tim Carlisle), neighborhood residents, and MACLT's Executive Director, Sol Levin, slowly persuaded municipal

staff and elected officials to think about Troy Gardens in a more outside-the-box way. By 1998, the Madison Common Council approved a “development concept plan” for Troy Gardens that included the mixture of land uses that exist at Troy Gardens today. By 2002, when MACLT began the PUD application process, there had been a profound shift in the attitudes of municipal staff and elected officials, with virtually everyone having become a fan of the mixed-use project being proposed for Troy Gardens.

Because Madison’s zoning code is nearly 40 years old, most new development projects take advantage of a “custom” zoning process tailored to each individual site, known as planned unit development (PUD). The sheer diversity of land uses at Troy Gardens made the PUD process extremely complex. No project remotely like it had ever come before the City’s staff; there were no templates from which to start. And because we had agreed to give the neighborhood and community gardeners veto power over major decisions at Troy Gardens, we added even more complexity. Any modifications resulting from negotiations with municipal staff had to be brought back to multiple stakeholders for discussion and approval.

While the level of community engagement in the planning process for Troy Gardens was both intensive and extensive, it was not entirely foreign to MACLT. As a community land trust, we are, by our very mission, tied to the larger community, on whose behalf we hold land in the first place. The experience of working with neighborhood residents and community gardeners at Troy Gardens deepened our appreciation for what it means to put the “community” into a community land trust.

### **Community Engagement**

Community engagement went through two distinct cycles at Troy Gardens. From 1995 to 2001, there was continually and consistently a high level of engagement between residents of the neighborhoods surrounding the site and the multiple organizations that had an interest in using the site. Then, from 2002 to 2005, there was an “inward turning” by MACLT as it began working with various development professionals to produce the documents required for the PUD application to the City of Madison. MACLT worked with a landscape architect, civil engineer, architect, and attorney to develop the site plan, floor plans and elevations, and legal documents necessary for the PUD application, striving to stay with the development concept plan of 1998.

There was a mixed response from the community to this “inward turning” by MACLT. People familiar with the PUD application process understood the need for a more “behind the scenes” approach to assembling the technical materials required for the City’s approval of the project. Neighbors and gardeners who were less familiar with the PUD process, however, grew concerned that MACLT’s control over the planning process was becoming more closely held and less inclusive. MACLT, for its part, could have done a better job of keeping everyone posted on the project’s progress.

Because everyone involved with Troy Gardens was passionate about it, people were quick to speak up whenever they were frustrated or left in the dark. This happened

a number of times. Fortunately, the one constant at Troy Gardens has always been a commitment to resolve differences of opinion, taking whatever time is necessary to make sure that everyone has been heard and that a good faith effort to reach consensus has been made. This has not always been a smooth process. Passions and opinions often ran high and solutions sometimes remained elusive for weeks or months at a time. What got the Troy Gardens community through these rocky times was a love of the land, respect for the neighborhood, and the commitment of a remarkable group of individuals to hang on for dear life and to persist in moving forward.

### **The Power of a Beautiful Dream**

Troy Gardens has been propelled by a beautiful dream that was passionately articulated by neighborhood residents and carefully honed by multiple partners in a true spirit of collaboration. Once City staffers and other “outsiders” got over their initial skepticism that a project like this could be brought to fruition, they were helpless to resist. Everyone wanted to be thought of as the “good guy” when it came to Troy Gardens. The City of Madison’s staff and the staff of multiple organizations with a stake in the project brought a spirit of creative problem-solving to Troy Gardens, finding a way to get it done.

## **The Promise and Challenge of Community Building**

From my experience at Troy Gardens, I am finding that every CLT defines community in a different way. Indeed, it is not always clear what “community” means. Are we referring to the community of CLT homeowners? Are we referring to the community of people who become members of the CLT? Or is the community everyone who lives within the CLT’s service area?

There is no one community that is involved with the MACLT. There is the community of our CLT homeowners, who are scattered across three different development projects (as well as scattered-site single-family homes) in a variety of different neighborhoods across Madison. There is the community of people who reside in the neighborhoods surrounding our residential projects. There is also the community of CLTs across the United States of which MACLT is a part, a community joined together by the National Community Land Trust Network.

Then too, there is the community of the Madison Area CLT’s board of directors. As our former board president Marcia Caton Campbell has said:

MACLT’s board feels different than any other board I’ve ever been involved in or had occasion to observe. We share a passion and a commitment to making something happen that is different—we work for *the broader public good*, rather than for *a single public good*, such as a stream or a parcel of land. And if you think of the differences between conservation land trusts and CLTs,

we're really working for the good of all and far into the future. We seek to reach across income levels and bring people into a community of affordable homeownership that provides them stability and affords them the opportunity to participate in society in so many other ways, because they are fundamentally more secure.

To me, putting “community” in CLT means continually asking the question of which community should be involved in every big (and sometimes little) decision that we make. At Troy Gardens, it meant thinking very specifically about who the stakeholders were for any given issue, and figuring out what was the best way to engage with them to make a decision that we all could live with. Sometimes it meant having coffee, sharing a few beers, holding community charrettes or email exchanges—whatever venue or form of communication might work best for the persons and issues involved. This also led us to look for partners who could help facilitate community involvement, so we could involve local neighborhood residents more efficiently and effectively. Above all, it meant being willing to take more time to do our projects so as to honor the voices of our stakeholders.

### The Recipe for Troy Gardens

Over the past few years, I have been asked by a number of people for advice on how they can develop a project like Troy Gardens in their own community. What is the replicable recipe for completing a project like Troy Gardens? Obviously, it is NOT “Buy 31 acres in a prosperous city at \$10,000 an acre—no brownfields allowed.” If that is what it takes, there is little chance of spreading the seeds of Troy Gardens more widely. Furthermore, we need to be very clear about just what “seeds” we are talking about. Troy Gardens has been, and still is, far from a perfect project. But there are many lessons embedded within our experience at Troy Gardens that might be instructive to other communities wanting to do a sustainable development project that incorporates the elements of Troy Gardens.

First, we start with *community organizing*, because that is the only way to pull together a community to figure out what vision it might have for itself. We were fortunate to have great organizing by Tim Carlisle of the Northside Planning Council. If not for his diligence and skill, these 31 acres might have been turned into just another vinyl-clad subdivision.

The second ingredient in our recipe is *tenacity*. Projects like this are very challenging. You must push through more than one brick wall to make them happen.

Third is *patience*. Projects, particularly outside-the-box projects, take a long, long time. Our system of municipal zoning and development approval does not lend itself easily or swiftly to multifaceted projects that combine housing, open space, urban agriculture, and the many sustainability features that are found at Troy Gardens.



Fourth is putting *agriculture* at the heart of your project. The threatened loss of the community gardens, which had existed on the site for many years, sparked the organizing effort that led to everything else. Community gardens saved Troy Gardens, and remain the heart and soul of the place. Community gardens are the best engine of community building that I have ever seen, crossing every conceivable boundary of class, race, and culture.

Fifth is *partnership*. I don't know of any organization that can carry out all of the elements required to do a project like this alone. Partnering expands your horsepower. It also requires you to give away control. But it really isn't giving away control if you couldn't pull it off by yourself in the first place.

Sixth is dense *clustering of housing* to preserve open spaces. By grouping all the housing in a five-acre portion of the site, 26 acres were freed up for a farm, community gardens, and a restored prairie. If every home at Troy Gardens had been designed and developed with its own backyard, preservation and restoration of so much open space would never have been possible.

Seventh is the *community land trust model*. I put it seventh because I talk a lot about building homes for seven generations of homeowners, which is what the CLT model is all about. Because the community was so committed to the permanent protection of the green space at Troy Gardens, people understood the value that the stewardship function of the community land trust model could bring to Troy Gardens. When we talked about our 99-year renewable ground lease, people understood the benefit this type of long-term orientation would bring to Troy Gardens. Nowadays, people talk about Troy Gardens being around forever. It is the CLT model that allows people to have confidence that "forever" might be attainable.

Eight is *accessibility*. This has several dimensions: physical accessibility of housing for everyone, regardless of disability/ability; accessibility to home ownership for people of modest incomes; accessibility to green spaces for the whole community; access to fresh healthy food through urban agriculture; and access to public transportation, including the ability to walk or bike to places important to you.

Ninth is *government support*. Federal, state, county, and city support were essential to Troy Gardens. This project would never have happened without it. A key element of such government support was being very thoughtful when it came to the sale or transfer of publicly owned land. In Madison, we were able to make sure that the conveyance of state-owned land supported the public's interest.

Tenth is *belief*. You can't do a project like Troy Gardens unless you believe in the power and beauty of the dream you are trying to achieve. Belief helps you find a way through interpersonal conflicts that can grind you down unless all the players and partners hold on to a shared vision for what they are trying to accomplish. Sol Levin had faith that things would work out for Troy Gardens long before there was any logical reason to think so. His faith was infectious, and helped to carry a whole lot of people over the finish line, through difficult times and countless obstacles.

## The Vision Thing—Community, Land, and Trust

When we discuss CLTs, we often spend much more time talking about “land” and “community.” Rarely do we devote as much time to thinking deeply and creatively about the word “trust.”

Trust is a dynamic term, with multiple layers of meaning. “Community land trust” does not refer to a trust in a legalistic sense, but instead conveys a commitment to hold land for the benefit of the community, however that community is defined. As a result of my experience with Troy Gardens, I now understand “trust” in a deeper way, where the CLT has an ongoing obligation to earn the trust of the community it serves. I have learned that trust is not a static concept. No matter what you have done in the past, you need to continue to act in a manner that validates the community’s trust in your ethics and your work. When people’s hopes and dreams are tied up in your work, you simply cannot expect people to trust your intentions based on what you have done in the past. You need to demonstrate a willingness to continue to earn that trust going forward.

So when we think about the “community land trust,” we need to pull those words apart and find our own localized meaning. Each word is translated into action very differently in each of our communities.

At MACLT, I now have a notion of community that starts with the neighborhood and goes all the way to the whole world. I know that I cannot be as successful with our own little CLT unless we have a strong national CLT movement. I have put in a lot of time, therefore, working on behalf of a fledgling organization known as the National CLT Network. And I think of myself as part of a global community of people and organizations focused on affordable and sustainable development that respects the wishes of local residents, hoping that our work at Troy Gardens can help contribute to the global dialogue around these issues.

### Where Are the Dreamers in the CLT Movement?

Much of the writing to date about the CLT movement has been focused on the technical, financial, and political details of implementing this unusual form of tenure. Very little has been focused on dreaming big dreams. We have become practical—which is important and which has led to an explosion in the number of CLTs around the US—but we don’t talk so much anymore about “pie in the sky” topics like land reform.

In these challenging times, we absolutely need to be practical. But if we sacrifice all of our big bold dreams in the service of practicality, we will lose the passion that has fueled our movement since its earliest days. Big dreams have predominated at Troy Gardens. The practical has always been in service to those big dreams. Big dreams take you to a better place. Being purely practical can take you places that are good, but never to places that are magical.

## NOTES

1. Friends of Troy Gardens changed their name to Community GroundWorks at Troy Gardens in 2008.

2. Urban Open Space Foundation changed their name to the Center for Resilient Cities in 2007. After completing their initial natural areas restoration work at Troy Gardens, the Center's role was largely confined to matters pertaining to site management and monitoring the conservation easement they hold on the 26 acres of open land on the site.