



Learning to Common, Commoning as Learning: The Politics and Potentials of Community Land Trusts in New York City

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Abstract

Through a study of a coalition to promote community land trusts in New York City, this article asks how collective learning unfolds in the context of activism against gentrification and displacement. Drawing on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), we illustrate how the coalition develops as it confronts the contradictory nature of commodified land and housing and navigates the contradictions and other challenges entailed in the process of commoning. Understanding this as a learning process is critical to

understanding the politics of urban commoning practice and of particular approaches to it such as community land trusts (CLTs).

Keywords

Commoning; learning; community land trusts; contradictions; Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

Introduction

Housing is fundamental to a “right to the city,” a right to shape the city for people rather than profits (Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2003, 2012). As David Madden and Peter Marcuse write in their *In Defense of Housing*, “No other modern commodity is as important for organizing citizenship, work, identities, solidarities, and politics” (2016: 12; see also Roy 2003). As a commodity, housing is important for its use-value and its exchange-value, the latter of which is increasingly speculative. As Sam Stein indicates in *Capital City*, residential real estate accounts for forty-five percent of total global assets (2019: 2). Real-estate speculation leads to under-maintained apartments and harassment of residents when money is siphoned from overleveraged buildings’ operations to pay investors in globally marketed financial products (Fields 2015; Aalbers 2016). Cycles of urban investment and disinvestment, particularly in poor communities of color, create a churn of displacement and precarious placements in housing and labor markets and the criminal justice system.

Stabilizing housing as a place to live and from which to organize is therefore critical for establishing a right to the city (Fullilove 2009; Katz 2001; Newman and Wyly 2006; Saegert 2016), wherein the lived, place-based use-value of housing and the other means of social reproduction is reasserted over their abstract, spatially fragmented, exchange-value (e.g. Bratt, Stone and Hartman, eds. 2006; Fields 2015; Madden and Marcuse 2016). Through grassroots attempts at *commoning*, land and housing can be transformed from commodities into common goods, managed democratically by users for their collective benefit (Linebaugh 2014; also Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Huron 2018).

Yet, “commoning against capitalism” (Caffentzis and Federici 2014) is fraught with contradictions, including the entrenched tension between the exchange- and use-value of land and housing, the state’s relationship to private property rights and the public good, and the contradictions entailed in the commoning process. While all attempts at commoning entail pragmatic compromises, those in working-class neighborhoods of color in hot real estate markets at the scale of a city face especially difficult choices of strategies and tools for acquiring land, funding deeply affordable housing, and holding these and other resources in common over the long term. Should they work with or in opposition to the state and how? What form of ownership and governance should they pursue and with what resources?

Practical efforts at commoning often fall short of the radical goals of their critics. As Amanda Huron (2018: 148-54) insists, however, theoretical critiques of strategies and tools are insufficient: only through grounded analyses of attempts at commoning can we learn how to navigate the contradictions of commodified land and housing and evaluate the merits of particular approaches. Huron’s research on limited-equity cooperatives in Washington, D.C. shows how the politics of commoning are shaped by the process of “learning to common” (172-177), and thus, how the entrenched hegemony of private property can be challenged. Such developmental accounts of commoning politics are nevertheless too rare.

This article examines one experiment in urban commoning, the New York City Community Land Initiative, or NYCCLI,¹ a six-year-old effort to advocate for and form Community Land Trusts (CLTs) in New York City as a means of developing and preserving affordable housing amid speculation and gentrification. CLTs are nonprofit organizations that own land in a set geographic area, and are governed by a board of residents, other community members, and trusted professionals. CLTs design and monitor a ground lease that enforces affordability and use restrictions on housing and other land uses over the long term and seek to increase the amount of land under their stewardship. (Figure 1). Following Huron, we examine how NYCCLI activists learn to navigate the contradictions that motivate and are inherent to CLTs and urban commoning, and how this learning shapes the commoning process.



Figure 1: “How a Community Land Trust Works,” graphic by NYCCLI, accessed with permission September 10, 2019, <https://nyccli.org/resources/clts-and-mhas-frequently-asked-questions/>.

Drawing on the theoretical legacy of developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), we trace NYCCLI’s development vis-a-vis the housing movement as it has changed both the broader conception of CLTs and its own self-conception as a coalition, through its encounters with the contradictions of commoning. For Vygotsky and the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) tradition his work inspired, learning is always a social process before it is an individual one, largely because we learn by acting on and in a world with inherited means of acting, and which we must fashion collaboratively. CHAT is thus well-suited to a geographical study of the ongoing learning and transformation of a diverse coalition struggling to shape CLTs to meet the needs of poor people across one city as it navigates the contradictions of commoning against global capitalism.

In what follows, we locate CLTs in a larger discussion of urban land commoning and provide a brief overview of NYCCLI and its formation in the context of New York City’s housing movement. Next, we elaborate the concept of “expansive learning” from CHAT and use it to analyze NYCCLI’s

¹ Pronounced “nicely,” with as much tongue in cheek as suits your purpose.

development as it has iteratively defined and acted upon its objectives. We conclude with comments on how focusing on learning both highlights the contradictions inherent in commoning efforts and offers a more nuanced view of their transformative potential.

Community Land Trusts as Tools for Urban Commoning

As Sam Stein argues, we are witnessing “the rise of the real estate state, a political formation in which real estate capital has inordinate influence over the shape of our cities, the parameters of our politics and the lives we lead... a feature of government most firmly grafted onto municipal governments” (2019: 5). As the “real estate state” has gained power in New York and other US cities, so has a countervailing grassroots interest in urban commoning, including CLTs. Originating as a defense against the dispossession of Black rural communities in the South during the Civil Rights movement, CLTs’ roots go back to economist Henry George, who, in the nineteenth-century, criticized land rent as the individual appropriation of socially created value (George 1884; Davis 2010). While influenced by George’s proposal that a “single tax” on increases in land value fund public services and infrastructure improvements at a large urban scale, the first CLTs in the US were located in rural areas where land was more accessible and tended to remain small and autonomous like the utopian communal experiments of the late-nineteenth century (Davis 2010). Since the early 1980s, however, more than 200 CLTs have been established in the US, many of them in urban areas, to help secure the spaces and means of social reproduction for communities targeted by the real estate state for disinvestment and predatory (re)investment (Davis 2010). Among these, Cooper Square CLT in New York City was established in 1991 as part of a decades-long struggle against urban renewal and subsequent waves of real-estate speculation in Manhattan’s Lower East Side (See Figure 3, below).

CLTs’ growing popularity is linked to their flexibility and dynamism as tools for commoning. Primarily a way of holding land in common, CLTs are compatible with many kinds of social housing tenure, including deed-restricted homeownership, nonprofit rentals, limited-equity cooperatives, and mutual housing associations (Davis 2010), and other land uses, including urban agriculture and cooperative commercial development (Loh & Agyeman 2018; Rosenberg and Yuen 2012; Thompson 2015). CLTs can therefore be used to promote “development without displacement” in previously disinvested neighborhoods (Davis 2010), to help stabilize property values in gentrifying areas (Choi, Van Zandt, and Matarrita-Cascante 2017), and to guard against predatory lending and foreclosure in otherwise vulnerable communities (Thaden 2011; Saegert et al. 2015). Further, CLTs’ distinct commitment to expansion and stewardship (Davis 2010) implies “outward looking capacity” and “a trust structure accountable to wider publics” (Thompson 2015: 1026). CLTs both create physical space governed by non-commodified relations and a process by which this is fostered and maintained (Bunce 2016; Thompson 2015).

Yet, the degree to which CLTs practice the “transformative politics” to which commoning aspires varies (DeFilippis et al. 2019: 19-20; also Engelsman, et al. 2018). DeFilippis et al.’s research on Minnesota CLTs (2019) suggests that the transformative potential of CLTs is more speculative than real:

A transformed political economy requires a transformed set of understandings of society; not (just) a transformed set of organisational forms in society. And while there are moments of this in the CLTs we studied—and there are certainly political openings that may be enabled by the CLT form—for the most part they remained as momentary openings or hints rather than anything more (pp. 19-20).

Other analysts agree, often drawing on Engels’ (1872) analysis of “The Housing Question.” Engels argued that then-current proposals to solve the housing crisis by abolishing rental housing for workers in favor of making them homeowners would lock workers into debt “and thus [make them] become completely slaves of their employers.” Saegert argues that (2016: 665; also Engels 1872) even

collective homeownership would appear to Engels as a fetter on worker revolt as it practically restricts workers' mobility, considered a key source of collective strength. For Engels, organizing around housing simply would not touch the basic dynamics of class power expressed through capitalism. Critics also argue that despite sometimes short-circuiting the depredations of urban land markets and improving working-class lives, the radical potential of CLTs is undermined by their perpetuation of private (vs. public) ownership (Engelsman et al. 2016; Hodkinson 2012). Thus the potential for CLTs, as for urban commoning more broadly, to radically contest capitalism is often seen as secondary to those of struggles in the "productive" economy and to more conventionally socialist approaches to the housing question, such as expanding state-owned public housing.

Nevertheless, in the context of the "real estate state," some form of commoning may be fundamental to the social reproduction of counter-capitalist movements by securing working class communities' "right to stay put" and fight (e.g., Newman and Wyly 2006; Fullilove 2009; Saegert 2016). Further, rather than focusing on the commons as an outcome dependent on prior transformations of economic structures and political consciousness, others, like Huron, urge us to attend more to the transformative potential of commoning processes and how these processes may rework and resist (Katz 2001) hegemonic thought and practice. Here, collective struggles to gain control over and decommodify land and housing challenge the accumulation dynamics of financialized capitalism (Saegert 2016; Harvey 2013) and are themselves important indicators of transformative politics. Expanding CLTs and other forms of decommodified land and housing can both "undermin[e] the narrative of TINA - there is no alternative" that has otherwise prevailed in public and public policy discourse (Saegert 2016: 673) and build the base of grassroots social movements.

Additionally, as Huron argues (2018:174; see also Linebaugh 2014), "commons may be hard to replicate...[and] rely on people learning by doing." So while CLTs appear to provide a useful framework for defending housing and stabilizing neighborhoods that has some proven success, their broader transformative potentials to "common against and beyond capitalism" (Caffentzis and Federici 2014)—as part of larger movements "against the commodification of housing" (Madden and Marcuse 2016) and efforts to assert "community control in the face of global capital" (DeFilippis 2004)—have to be continually worked out and evaluated through practice (Bunce 2016; Engelsman et al. 2016; Thompson 2015). Accordingly, making sense of commoning efforts and their politics requires an analytical framework that captures collective learning-by-doing and is attentive to the contradictory conditions of the current conjuncture.

CHAT as a Framework for Tracing the Development of Commoning amid Contradictions

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a promising approach. Rooted in the developmental psychology of early Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978; 1986), CHAT was elaborated by subsequent generations of scholars across a variety of fields, including human development (Stetsenko 2008); organizational studies and worker education (Engeström 2001; Kontinen 2013), and, most relevant here, popular education (Collins 2011; Sawchuk 2010) and the sociology of social movements (e.g., De Smet 2015; Krinsky and Barker 2009; Laguarta 2016). CHAT holds that learning involves transforming one's understanding of oneself in the world and thus, too, one's capabilities for changing it. Learning is above all a social activity, in which the tools—as diverse as reading glasses, language, and organizational forms—through which we define and accomplish our goals, are understood as historical and cultural creations of earlier social activity. Social activity always contains within it the real potential for surpassing its current forms, whether because some subjects "scaffold" more advanced forms of activity for less-experienced others (Vygotsky 1978; Bruner 1983), or because collective subjects solve problems by fashioning new tools and ways acting together in order to "create something

novel, essentially learning something that does not yet exist” (Sannino, Engeström, and Lemos 2016; De Smet 2015).²

CHAT theorists emphasize the “social situation of development” (Vygotsky 2008) surrounding the subject, and, specifically, the ways in which available tools and subjects themselves are shaped by larger histories and political economic structures (e.g., Stetsenko 2008). CHAT is therefore an apt framework for analyzing the “learning by doing” at the heart of attempts to common against capitalism.

The Centrality of Contradictions in CHAT

As argued by CHAT theorist, Yrjö Engeström (1987), the source of many problems in a specifically capitalist social situation of development is capitalism’s “primary” contradiction, i.e., that between the use-value and exchange-value of commodities.³ This shapes the typical conflicts, tensions, and dilemmas we face, as well as the typical means we use to address them. For example, wage-laborers are compelled to sell their labor-power at terms so favorable to employers that they undermine their ability to reproduce their capacity to labor. Trade-unions may be used to negotiate more favorable terms, but these gains often limit the radicalism of workers’ demands and displace the problems of social reproduction onto other, less-powerful populations. Similarly, grassroots efforts to enhance community life after capital disinvestment often leads to recommodification of these enhancements and the pricing-out of long-term residents. Because of the local and partial responses to systemic commodification, unmet needs within a contradictory social order generate a collective, developmental response that is neither closed in on itself nor linearly teleological, neither unambiguously co-opted nor revolutionary. This response, which Engeström calls “expansive learning” can be illustrated as an iterative spiral. As seen in Figure 2, this spiral demonstrates that the needs rooted in the contradictions of commodification prompt collective questioning of the status quo, and modeling, testing, implementing, and generalizing new forms of activity in the current environment.

² As a theoretical approach that views practical, collective activity in historical context as the locus of learning, CHAT also has elements familiar to pragmatism (e.g., Stetsenko 2008), communities of practice and situated learning (e.g., Niewolny and Wilson 2009), critical pedagogy and popular education (e.g., Collins 2011), Gramscian theory (Kontinen 2013; De Smet 2015), and social practice theory (e.g., Holland and Correal 2013).

³ Engeström’s restriction of the primary contradiction of capitalism to the commodity form, while relevant for analyses of commoning, means that he neglects other important contradictions of capitalism (Barker 2014; see also Harvey 2014). This points to arguments beyond the scope of this paper, but we believe that any of capitalism’s central contradictions may act in a similar manner.

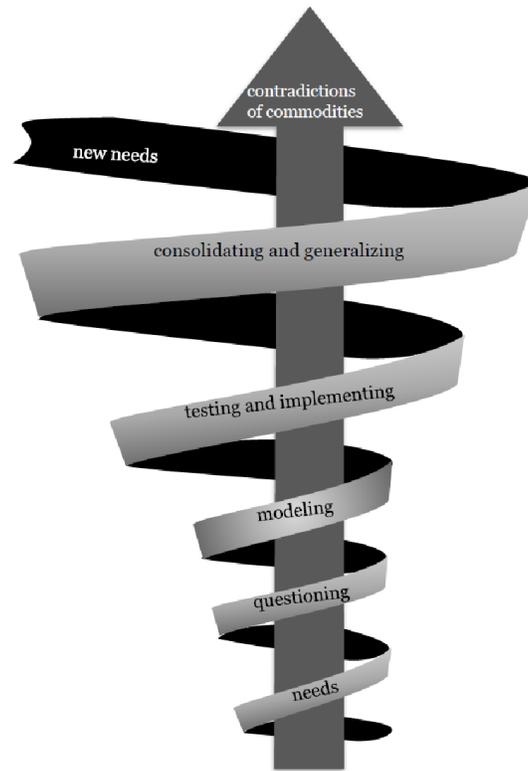


Figure 2: Spiral of Expansive Learning, self-produced, 2019, modified from Engeström (1987).

In this CHAT model, collective actors proposing and implementing new models of activity repeatedly encounter the central contradiction in ways that may generate—or stymie—the development of a new sense of their collective subjectivity in relation to their environment, and of their power to affect change. This development often involves a diverse collective of subjects, and happens at different time-scales, unevenly, and not simply as a result of our will (Engeström 2001). There may not be a single expert or “more able peer” (Vygotsky 1986) to help the collective subject question and alter its habitual means of solving problems and dealing with contradictions; rather, this role may migrate across a coalition, or may be taken up collectively as the group searches for new ways of addressing its situation (De Smet 2015). Given these complications, learning by doing is not always expansive; unless the collective subject can cultivate and maintain a praxis for tackling the primary contradiction and other contradictions that emerge in process, its ability to transcend the status quo will stall, narrow, or disintegrate. Here, we use the spiral of expansive learning from CHAT as a heuristic device for understanding how NYCCLI has developed and expanded as a coalition through the process of learning to common.

Expansive Learning as an Analytic Heuristic for an Ethnography of Commoning

In the following analysis, we trace NYCCLI’s development through a cycle of expansive learning lasting six years. The first two authors are among NYCCLI’s co-founders and remain active in the coalition; the second two authors studied NYCCLI as part of a larger project on expansive learning in social movements.⁴ Thus, we do not treat the coalition as merely an object of study because we are part of the coalition and relate directly to its social situation of development. At the same time, as part of a

⁴ The project, “Learning in Productive Social Movements,” led by Yrjö Engeström, was funded by the Academy of Finland.

larger academic research team, we are as *apart* from the coalition as other of its members are by virtue of their other institutional involvements. Here we follow feminist geographers such as Gillian Hart, Cindi Katz, and Caitlin Cahill, whose approaches to ethnography respectively emphasize the multiple determinations of activity (Hart 2004: 98), the production of contradictions and discontinuities in activity (Katz 1996: 489-90), and the possibility and importance of activist intervention (Cahill 2007).

We collected primary data both to inform the coalition about its members' concerns and motivations, and to inform the academic research of which this paper is a part. These data include: meeting notes taken mainly by the first author (Caldwell) on behalf of the coalition, an archive of materials we developed for the coalition (and have used with permission), and transcriptions of nineteen interviews and one focus-group conducted by all four authors in June, 2015. The interviews lasted from forty-five to ninety minutes, and were conducted with the principal participants in the coalition's work at the time. We developed the focus group and interview protocols together and conducted the interviews both singly and in pairs, reflexively considering our insider-outsider perspective such that the mix of deeply contextual knowledge shared by insiders could be rescued from becoming too implicit by the relative "naiveté" of the outsiders (Krinsky and Simonet 2017). As part of our own commitment to "talk with" and not "about" the coalition, we presented a draft of this paper to two groups of participants, one group of homeless activists who had been or are active in NYCCLI with Picture the Homeless, an organization that helped spur NYCCLI's development, and one group of other NYCCLI members, in order to get feedback before finalizing a draft for submission, and to prompt discussion about the ideas and activity represented here.⁵

We begin by introducing the subject of collective learning, NYCCLI, and its "social situation of development" in the context of the housing movement in New York City. We then use the spiral of expansive learning as a heuristic to illustrate the coalition's efforts to define, create, and spread CLTs at neighborhood and citywide scales. Through the developmental perspective of CHAT, we analyze the phases through which NYCCLI has learned its way through the contradictions of commoning against capitalism.

NYCCLI in the Contradictory Context of New York City's Housing Movement

NYCCLI is a coalition of more than two dozen organizations seeking to expand CLTs in the city as part of a larger struggle against the gentrification of housing, commercial space, and other land uses. The groups come from neighborhoods across the city plagued by rising rents and persistently poor and precariously sheltered populations, and the coalition also includes some citywide groups, as well. Figure 3 locates these groups in the city and in terms of when their CLT work began.

⁵ The feedback ensured that our analysis of NYCCLI's development reflected the views of those most involved. Picture the Homeless' motto is "Don't talk about us; talk with us."

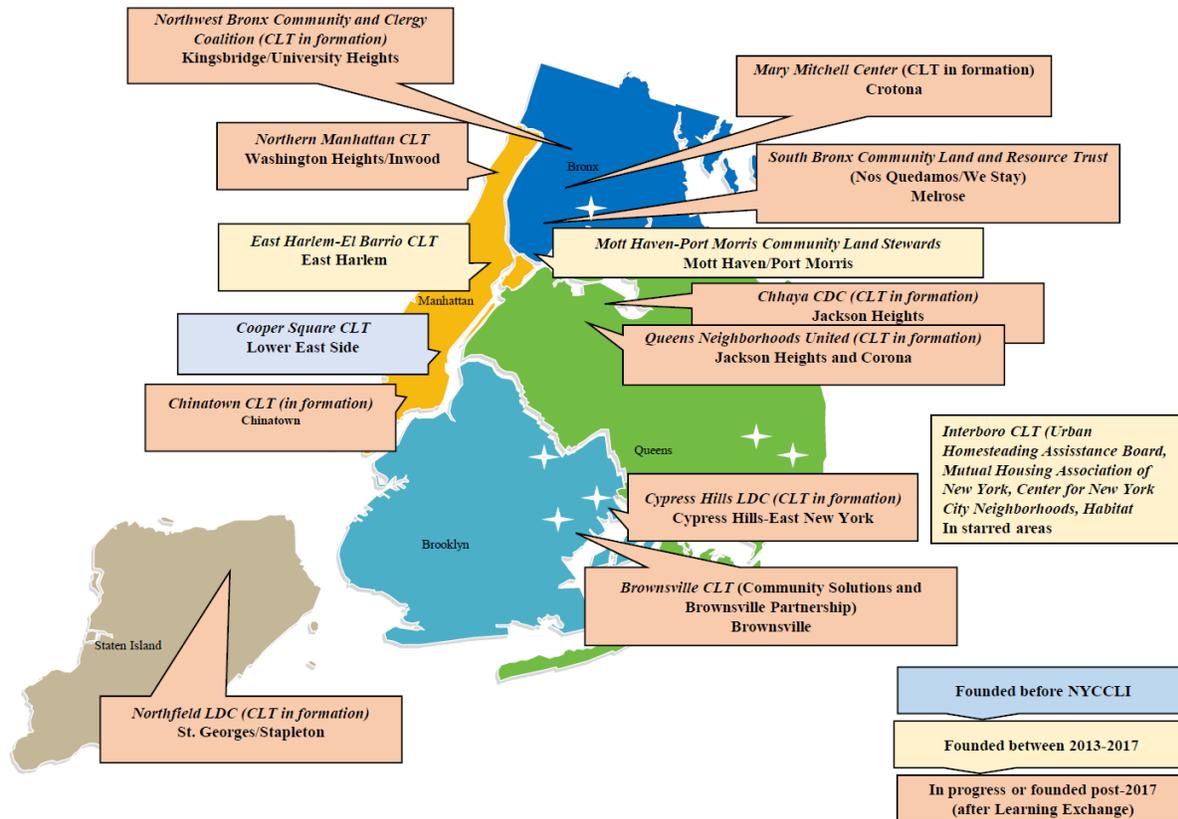


Figure 3: Selected NYCCLI Organizations and their Neighborhoods, self-produced, 2019; data from NYCCLI membership list and organizational descriptions for a citywide funding application.

NYCCLI came together in 2012 when a homeless activist organization, Picture the Homeless, the New Economy Project, a social justice advocacy and research organization, academics from two New York City universities with whom the groups had worked, and the community board (a division of local government) in the East Harlem neighborhood became aware of each other’s studies of housing instability and displacement, along with their mutual interest in CLTs. NYCCLI’s founders were concerned that the housing movement in New York City had become sufficiently segmented among tenants-rights groups, community development organizations, homeless activist groups, and others that it had been unable to effectively challenge twenty years of neoliberalizing land-use and housing policies. The result was that community-development organizations tended to “manage the crisis” (DeRienzo 1994) while homelessness and displacement increased substantially. The movement remained segmented even as the current “progressive” mayor, Bill de Blasio, embraced his predecessor, Michael Bloomberg’s approach to development, favoring for-profit developers and trading lucrative rezoning for “affordable” units whose rents were not set at levels affordable to low-income tenants, mostly people of color who are in danger of displacement (e.g., Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development 2015; Stein 2019).

This was the contradictory “social situation of development” in which NYCCLI grew. Despite the housing movement’s segmentation, Picture the Homeless and the New Economy Project recognized that there could be a broad base of interest in CLTs. They drew additional grassroots groups into the conversation, as well as long-time community-based housing developers, such as the Cooper Square CLT and Community-Assisted Tenant-Controlled Housing (CATCH), a developer of mutual housing

associations,⁶ with experience and interest in producing, managing, and maintaining democratically controlled, decommodified housing. Picture the Homeless also deepened its own, internal popular education efforts around CLTs through a weekly study group for its members facilitated by the first author. After a convening in late November 2012, the nascent coalition formed a steering committee and work groups and continued to meet, naming itself NYCCLI and articulating a mission statement the following July.

Learning by Commoning

How can we understand the process by which NYCCLI sought to expand CLTs and generalize them as a tool for the housing movement? How can we understand how the coalition, in pushing for CLTs as both a means of commoning and to house extremely poor people, learned “something that doesn’t exist” and came to specify that “something” in both more specific and expansive ways? And how can CHAT’s developmental orientation shed light on the potential of commoning practice?

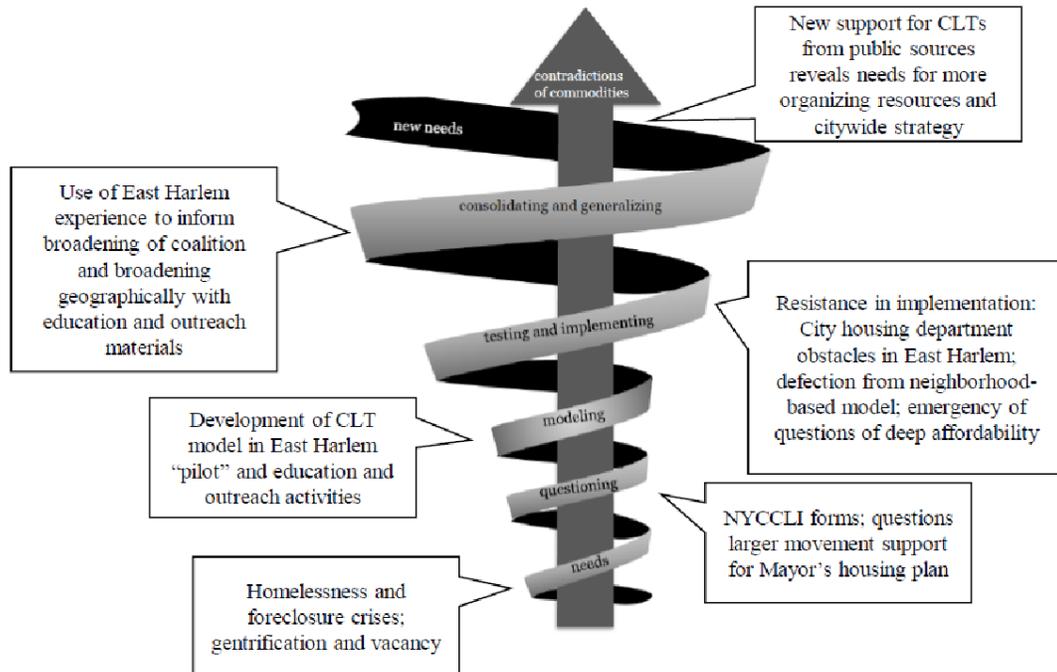


Figure 4: NYCCLI’s process of expansive learning, self-produced, 2019 on modified model from Engeström (1987).

Below, we analyze NYCCLI’s development as a coalition through the concept of expansive learning outlined above in Figure 2. Reading from bottom to top, Figure 4 depicts a distillation of the process, moving from the sense of collective need (“need”), across the housing movement, in relation to the central contradiction—here, the commodification and financialization of real estate—for a more radical and effective approach to the homelessness and displacement crises (“questioning”); to initial modeling of CLTs through a pilot project in East Harlem, popular education materials and activities, and policy changes that would enable citywide expansion (“modeling”); followed by

⁶ Mutual Housing Associations (MHAs) are multi-site nonprofit rental developments with a board that is two-thirds residents and one-third trusted professionals, thus community-assisted but tenant-controlled.

successive iterations of practicing its model and encountering more manifestations of contradictions (“testing and implementing”); arriving at NYCCLI’s attempts to generalize a model of CLTs (“generalizing and consolidating”) only to encounter new changes in the social situation and new needs rooted in the challenge to build constituencies for commoning (“new needs and questioning”). In what follows, we illustrate these phases and transitions, showing where the coalition developed, got stuck, and sometimes, unstuck again.

Contradiction, Needs, and Questioning the Current Way of Working through Common Inquiry

The formation of a new coalition, when viewed through CHAT’s concept of expansive learning, is initiated by collective recognition of unmet needs produced by the contradictory nature of commodification, and by collective questioning of how these needs are currently being addressed. The instance of commodification motivating NYCCLI’s development takes concrete form in New York City’s housing crisis, in which real estate speculation and development has fuelled unprecedented levels of homelessness, displacement, and housing instability (Coalition for the Homeless 2017; Waters and Bach 2016). By 2012, this contradiction was manifest in unmet needs that were broadly experienced across New York’s housing movement but understood in terms of situated analyses. Picture the Homeless saw that the city’s affordable housing programs—then supported by the majority of community housing groups—systematically developed the least housing for homeless people and those most at risk for homelessness, even as the financial crisis left luxury developments unfinished and vacant. At the same time, the New Economy Project saw that the smaller-scale housing stock in Brooklyn and Queens neighborhoods of color had been disproportionately hit by foreclosures during the financial crisis, reflecting the longer-term financial depredation to which these neighborhoods had been subject (Ansanelli et al. 2012). The Community Board in East Harlem saw ongoing threats to the ability of current residents to rent housing in the neighborhood as apartments were taken out of rent-stabilization, and subsidy programs linked to low- and middle-income housing were set to expire (Ronderos 2012).

These analyses converged around two conclusions: First, land must be wrested from the real estate state and brought under democratic control and long-term guarantees of deep affordability if, in the words of one NYCCLI member, “poor people will be able to live in New York City at all in twenty years.” Second, the housing movement needed a new way of working together that is not siloed by neighborhood or housing type. CLTs were seen as useful on both fronts. CLTs were not a new idea, but the recalcitrance of the needs at hand and the possibility of greater control and flexibility offered by the CLT model helped these groups to think about the problems and organizing landscape anew. Importantly, CLTs provided a framework for the groups to collectively question and see beyond the status quo. This was most clearly illustrated at the groups’ first convening in late 2012, when the groups shared their various analyses and established a steering committee and work groups to explore CLTs and new ways of working together.

Modeling New Activity: NYCCLI Work Groups Take on “Different pieces of the puzzle”

The next phase of CHAT’s spiral of expansive learning is modeling a new way of collectively addressing the central contradiction of commodification. Because existing CLTs had not demonstrated neighborhood-based governance at a citywide scale and the housing movement had not prioritized deep affordability, NYCCLI simultaneously set about modeling a new concept for CLT activity and a new politics of land and housing for New York City. It entered, therefore, into the next stage of expansive learning: modeling new activities or new forms of existing activity to meet needs produced by a central contradiction. NYCCLI’s work group structure (Figure 5) and process were designed to take on “different pieces of the puzzle” (nyccli.org). The East Harlem CLT Work Group (as it would come to be known) modeled an actual CLT and process that could be used to start CLTs in neighborhoods citywide. It began as the “Case-Study” work group to study the possibility of a CLT in East Harlem, becoming,

successively, the “Pilot Project” work group and the East Harlem CLT Work Group as its work developed and became more concrete. The Education and Outreach Work Group modeled the CLT concept through popular education materials that explain CLTs and their potential benefits to base-building, grassroots organizations, using the creative process to deepen its members’ understandings of CLTs. The Policy and Legislation Work Group modeled changes in the policy landscape that would facilitate the expansion of CLTs, in part based on the challenges identified in the East Harlem work group’s process. And the Citywide CLT work group tried to model a citywide structure that could help connect and strengthen the work of neighborhood-based CLTs and acquire property where local CLTs were not able, but found this to be premature without a more established network of neighborhood-based CLTs in place. These modeling processes each engaged the basic contradictions of commodified land and housing in its own way, at times overlapping, drawing in some common and some different participants, with a range of backgrounds, skills, and life-situations.

The East Harlem CLT Work Group understood its task as modeling a CLT that could “prove the concept” to the city’s housing agency, City Council, and the housing movement in a way that could be adapted and expanded citywide. The demand to provide housing for the very poorest, and the twin demands of scale and flexibility, raised difficult questions: On which case (e.g. housing stock, neighborhood, etc.) should the group base its model? Where is there the right mix of threat and opportunity? Who is the community for this CLT? How could the idea be effectively introduced to a community by a new citywide coalition? Could a local CLT be accountable to neighborhood residents as well as to homeless people, whose actual displacement often masked deep commitments to place, including to other neighborhoods?

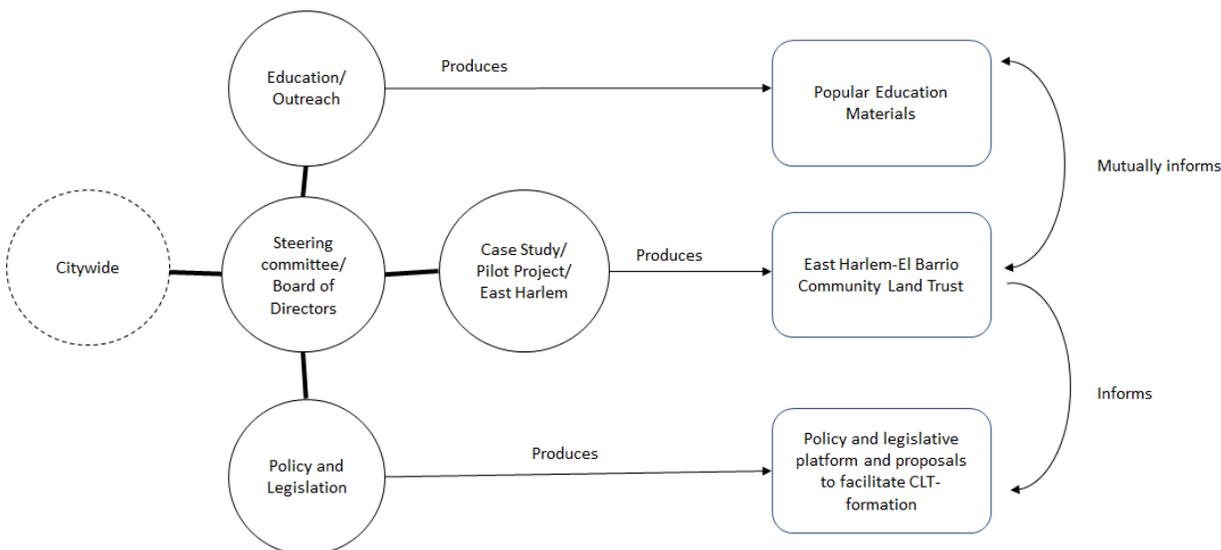


Figure 5: NYCCLI’s Initial Structure, self-produced, 2019.

After extensive deliberation, and an initial decision to look at three gentrifying neighborhoods producing high levels of homelessness (the South Bronx, Harlem, and Central Brooklyn), the group decided to focus on a group of low-income, limited-equity cooperatives, and several city-owned vacant buildings and lots in East Harlem. East Harlem was one of the neighborhoods in which Picture the Homeless had identified a lot of vacancy in research it had conducted the previous year (Picture the Homeless 2012), there was a receptive Community Board and good relations between Picture the Homeless and the local City Council member; and the neighborhood had a sizeable stock of properties that the work group considered “low-hanging fruit” for recruiting to a CLT because they were not owned by private landlords, could benefit from the support and economies of scale offered by a CLT, and in many cases had some history of resident organizing. These included city-owned, tax-foreclosed

buildings slated to become low-income, limited-equity cooperatives (with current tenants having the option to become shareholders)⁷, and buildings that had already gone through this process but were now financially and physically distressed. The decision to focus on this particular set of properties in East Harlem would prove to be a critical moment in NYCCLI's development, as will be discussed later.

The next difficulty was making the pilot project work financially without significant new subsidies. Cooper Square CLT and Mutual Housing Association (MHA) model was a key piece of "scaffolding" guiding the work group's inquiry. Through frequent consultation with its former director, Valerio Orselli, the work group learned how Cooper Square achieved and sustained deep affordability. In short, in the Cooper Square Committee's fight against the City's urban renewal plans, it made what Orselli called a "deal with the Devil," agreeing that several large parcels could be developed for market-rate housing as long as a portion of the proceeds paid for a thorough rehabilitation of the more than three-hundred apartments in the mutual housing association and CLT. So while the Cooper Square model was often held up as an example of CLT-based housing that could be affordable to people with extremely low incomes, and while the Cooper Square CLT has been a central and guiding member of NYCCLI, its achievements were contingent on a government-led process of gentrification and private accumulation, which mitigated the transformative potential of its model. Nearly 25 years later, NYCCLI as a whole hoped to make fewer such compromises, all in the context of a vastly more complex and powerful real estate state.

But how? Given the roughly \$3,000 per month per family spent on the shelter system and an ad-hoc system of poorly-maintained apartments and motels (e.g., Yee 2015), Picture the Homeless members, especially, sought to divert Department of Homeless Services funding to CLT-based housing. Many members of NYCCLI supported this idea because it was so clearly aligned with the coalition's principles. The director of CATCH ("Community-Assisted, Tenant-Controlled Housing), the only one at the table with direct experience in housing development, urged a more pragmatic approach, based on CATCH's own model, which puts into practice the idea of "development without displacement" motivating many CLT efforts.

CATCH develops mutual housing associations, by acquiring buildings from the City's inventory and financing rehabilitation through a combination of standard public and private sources. Residents who have lived in the buildings for years, and through the worst public and private disinvestment, do not pay more after rehabilitation, while vacant units are rented at prices far below market rates but high enough to subsidize the longer-term residents. As a result, CATCH can still provide some rents below \$300 per month, which is affordable to people who rely on the most minimal government benefits for income. The model that CATCH's director, Ken Wray, mocked up for the East Harlem work group similarly preserved extremely low rents at the cost of providing many new rents at that level. For Wray, it was crucial that the model not rely on new sources of funding and thus to build its case on a proven method:

What I did was present a model ... I really took the finances for a single building we were doing ... in Brooklyn. ... Actually, it wasn't a model. It was reality, which is to say, "Look, it can work and you don't need to go off and try these grand schemes that try to convert dollars [from Department of Homeless Services funds]. You are not inventing anything new, using exactly the same loan programs that we've always used.... Let's not waste our time with trying to go on these big, grand schemes. I don't care about that, you know. I want to see something actually happen."

⁷ This program was called the Tenant Interim Lease program or TIL.

“Ken’s model” for East Harlem, like the CATCH and Cooper Square models, joined multiple nearby buildings into a single mutual housing association for economies of scale, and kept many rents low. Its proposed financing had a mix of equity and debt, and some of the latter, in having to be paid off, added to the operating costs, and thus to the rents of the units. This would make it feasible but difficult to fund new units at extremely low rents.

The appeal of the work group’s model was precisely in its reality: it had already worked for CATCH, did not require a protracted policy fight, and it seemed to suit the work group’s task of proving the CLT concept could work according to NYCCLI’s principles, if expanded. The work group presented its model for a mutual housing association on a CLT to multiple audiences in East Harlem, including the community board and City Council member, whose support would be critical, and community-based organizations and nonprofit developers. The model resonated well with these audiences, based on its apparent feasibility and ability to address the attrition of affordable housing in the neighborhood, but could only go so far without testing and implementation, the next turn in the spiral of expansive learning.

Testing, Implementing, and Encountering Resistance through Community Organizing

Through the lens of CHAT and expansive learning, implementing a new model of activity entails trial and error, encountering resistance, and, in the process, expanding the size and diversity of the collective subject and its activities. In the case of the East Harlem work group, testing and implementing its CLT model relied on community organizing. As Gray and Galande note in their analysis of a CLT in North Carolina, “Building community without dedicated community organizing while dealing with the nuts and bolts of housing issues is difficult, if not impossible” (2011: 247). Dedicated community organizing is, in turn, difficult to cultivate and sustain under normal circumstances. When commoning land and housing with new models, while encountering tough “nuts and bolts” issues, organizing—and learning—takes a lot of time.

Despite its connections in East Harlem, the work group did not have significant involvement from grassroots groups in the neighborhood which could lend their collective experience to the CLT effort. There was no organization of residents across low-income cooperatives or City-owned buildings in the cooperative pipeline. Without more intimate knowledge of the concerns and needs of current residents, and without a broad base of residents actively involved, the work group could not put forward a plausible plan for a community-controlled model of development. Thus, it undertook a year of organizing and outreach to build community for the CLT: identifying, flyer-ing, and door-knocking in all city-owned buildings and low-income cooperatives in the district and holding an East Harlem residents’ forum. In this process, conducted without a dedicated organizer, the work group found that its building and contact information was often unreliable, that contacts made previously had moved on, many neighbors distrusted each other, and that many buildings were beset with governance problems on top of their financial and repair problems. Even the “low-hanging fruit” was going to be a reach.

Nevertheless, the East Harlem resident forum in November 2013 drew about two dozen neighborhood residents, mostly from the targeted buildings. At the forum, the work group learned from worried residents that the City’s initial publicly financed cooperative-formation program was being replaced by a new, more-expensive-because privately-financed one. Unlike the work group’s model, the new program was not a multi-site cooperative, and would forego any economies of scale, raising costs for current residents. That the City was imposing its new program just as NYCCLI was proposing its idea to the same residents complicated the work group’s organizing. The city was still offering residents the chance to “own” as shareholders in a cooperative (albeit at a higher price), while NYCCLI was proposing that residents transfer their buildings into a mutual housing and CLT structure in which they would remain, more securely, as renters (see Figure 6). While this manifestation of the contradiction of commodification posed challenges to the work group’s progress towards establishing a CLT, it also

forced the group to develop ways of discussing this contradiction with residents in terms of the models' concrete advantages and disadvantages.

TIL/ANCP
CLT - What it means for you

The City would sell/give your building to a group consisting of a nonprofit developer and the CLT

The CLT would take title to the land under your building

The CLT would lease the land back to the developer who controls your building for 99 years

The CLT lease would require that units in your building remain affordable over the term of the lease

The developer could

- Run the building as an affordable rental
- Turn over the building to a resident co-operative after a period of intensive resident training
- Turn the building over to a resident-controlled Mutual Housing Association, which is an HDFC Rental much like a co-operative, but with no ownership of shares

The CLT lease would enable the CLT to step in at any time if the developer/owner is violating the lease and take over the management of the property until the building is no longer in default

The CLT can change a lease fee or ground rent to support its operations

The CLT may be able to accommodate tenants facing hardships in more suitable housing that is part of the CLT

TIL/ANCP CLT Tradeoffs

- You will never be able to own your apartment so you can sell it for a profit
- BUT if your housing remains affordable over the long term, you save money you otherwise could not
- You will share control over the land your building is on with the other members of the CLT and will be subject to the land-lease agreement
- BUT you get the benefit of a back-up organization that can step in and help your building if it has trouble managing itself
- AND you get a say in how the CLT is governed

Figure 6: “TIL/ANCP vs. CLT” handout created by second author and used for organizing East Harlem residents, 2013.

The residents’ forum recruited a core group of residents to the pilot project, but the work group lacked the organizing capacity to continue base-building. Thus, in March 2014, Picture the Homeless hired a full-time organizer to convene a Residents’ Committee for an eventual CLT, Picture the Homeless members (as potential CLT residents), and the newly incorporated “East Harlem El Barrio CLT” board to devise a real alternative to the City’s plans. This phase of organizing involved months of work educating residents about the competing options and models; solidifying the relationship between residents and homeless people (something that proceeded more smoothly than anyone imagined); organizing a neighborhood tour for City housing department staff of its own mismanaged buildings in disrepair; and identifying buildings for potential inclusion in the CLT.

The closer the CLT came to reality, the more intensely it confronted the contradiction of commodification and the resistance inevitably generated by testing and implementing a new model activity. The work group’s proposed CLT would reach households at lower incomes than the City’s programs, but would not create new units for extremely low-income households like those of Picture the Homeless members and many East Harlem residents. After a studio of urban planning master’s students fleshed out financial scenarios for the East Harlem CLT, the work group realized that without either a new subsidy program, access to a large, undeveloped site with internal cross-subsidizing commercial potential, or both, the CLT could not create more than a few new units for homeless people.

This realization both refocused the work group on NYCCLI’s original goals and prompted shifts across NYCCLI’s other work groups. The Policy and Legislation work group and a NYCCLI delegation to the City’s housing commissioner pressed for a moratorium on the disposition of City-owned properties and a preference for disposition to nonprofits, CLTs included, to increase the possibilities for local economies of scale. The agency only committed to ongoing dialogue and to participate in the aforementioned tour. During the meeting and the tour, the work group tried to dislodge the agency’s

commitment to the new cooperative program, drawing from survey data the work group had collected that showed that most people in the buildings were too poor to buy into the new program or to relocate. For the East Harlem residents and Picture the Homeless members who gave the tour (one of whom had been displaced from East Harlem), made their own evidence-based demands, and secured some repairs, this was a significant milestone. For the larger CLT effort, organizing the Residents' Committee and confronting the City's contradictory activities involved teaching about the CLT model and plans and simultaneously learning about how to do so, given the available resources and various desires of potential residents.

Consolidating and Generalizing the Model through Popular Education

Collective learning, from a CHAT perspective, is not always or persistently expansive. The resistance that stems from testing and implementing a new model of activity can strengthen or stymie the developmental process (Engeström 1987; and see Figure 4). In East Harlem, the work group had to deal with a rival plan from the City and the realization that its own plan was financially inadequate for its base. CHAT leads us to ask first whether and how this resistance relates to the central contradiction of commodification, and second, whether this opportunity for learning will advance in a group's abilities or formation of concepts.

After more than a year of organizing in which residents learned about the structure and relative benefits of a CLT and mutual housing association, and multiple meetings between the newly incorporated East Harlem-El Barrio CLT board and the City, the City gave tacit approval to the CLT plan. But it tempered this victory by insisting that 80 percent of the residents in each of the buildings sign on to the plan, a nearly impossible task for organizing that reduced the number of initial buildings that would enter the CLT. The presence of residents who hoped to profit from existing cooperatives in a significantly gentrifying neighborhood with Manhattan's most-unequal incomes, took their buildings out of the pool, while the threshold was met in two buildings. Subsequently, the City committed a third, vacant, building to the project, but insisted that City-owned buildings could join the mutual housing association and CLT only with verifiable unanimity among residents. Here, the central contradiction of commodification—between use- and residents' expectation of potential exchange-value, bolstered by the City's preference for homeownership models and more extensive private financing—persisted and slowed the expansion of the East Harlem CLT.

That the East Harlem organizing process took two years and made only modest progress created tension within NYCCLI as well. It seemed to many Picture the Homeless members with attachments to other neighborhoods that the choice to focus on East Harlem had been a mistake. Some, particularly those with immediate needs for housing, felt the pilot project strategy had displaced the coalition's citywide aspirations for too long and had narrowed, rather than expanded NYCCLI's activities. Most NYCCLI members were concerned that the focus on East Harlem meant that groups and activists from other parts of the city did not know how they could link their work with NYCCLI, even when they were interested in CLTs. One activist, who dropped out of regular NYCCLI work around this time, summarized this critique: "It was supposed to be a citywide CLT thing... I know folks in other parts of the city who want us to come and help, I don't know if that's going to be a reality or not..." The idea that NYCCLI would "establish a beachhead" in East Harlem, as described by one participant, as quickly as possible with the resources available, was not quick enough given the significant needs.

These internal and external conflicts were mitigated, however, by other aspects of NYCCLI's activity in and beyond East Harlem. First, there was a dedicated core of Picture the Homeless members who knew they would not necessarily ever see any housing for themselves, but nevertheless stayed active in the East Harlem work group because they believed in the long-term vision and strategy. The persistence of these members proved to be a significant motivating factor for others to stay involved and

inspired in the struggle, as was discussed in one of our focus groups. In Figure 7, which shows a selection of notes from the June 2015 focus group on what was learned (left) and “high points” of the campaign (right) we see the recognition that organizing in the buildings takes “an eternity” alongside recognition that more housing organizations in East Harlem need to buy into the CLT. On the right, we see the presence of Cooper Square and CATCH as positive forces, alongside organizing residents, and the involvement of a local housing group, NERVE. Finally, at the lower-right, we see the importance of Picture the Homeless member support.

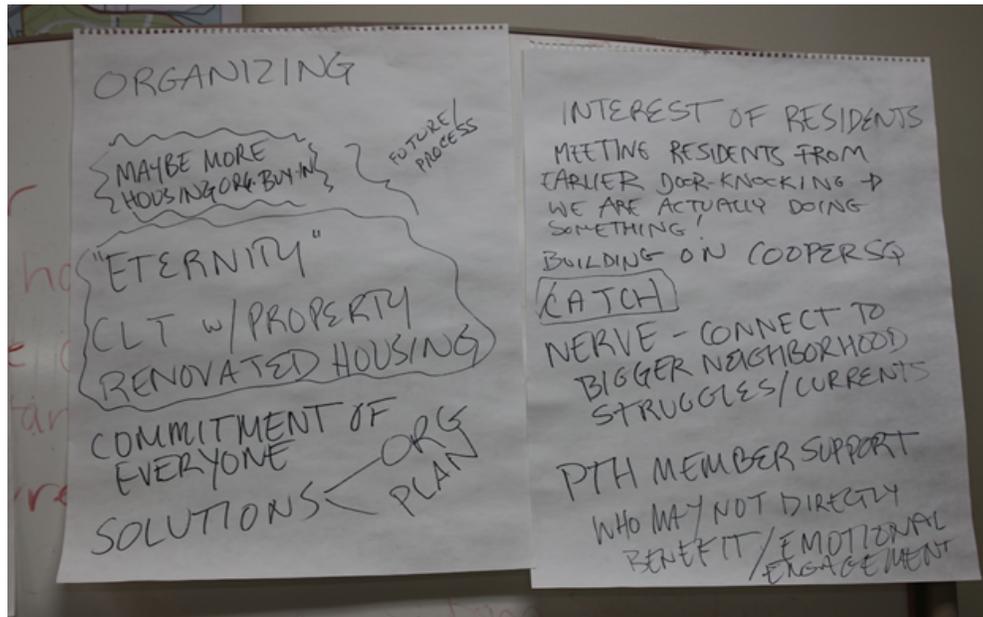


Figure 7: Notes taken by the second author during and for the East Harlem CLT Work Group Focus Group, June 16, 2015.

While the rigors and contradictions of organizing the East Harlem-El Barrio CLT led to internal conflicts and a narrowing of NYCCLI’s activity on one level, NYCCLI’s broader and diverse set of activities helped to turn these tensions into moments of expansion. The East Harlem experience motivated the Education and Outreach work group to develop popular education materials to share the model with “folks in other parts of the city” and directly informed the materials. Again, a core of Picture the Homeless members—some of whom were also involved in the East Harlem work group—fueled this work, which also proved to be slow and demanding given the work group’s commitment to participatory knowledge production. Each project took months, but in this case, the group created tangible tools that directly reflected their input and could be used beyond East Harlem.

The work group based its materials on its examination of the housing crisis and relevant models of CLT organizing: Flyers introduce and illustrate the CLT concept in the context of New York City’s housing crisis (Figure 8).



Figure 8: “The Future is Up for Grabs”, NYCCLI flyer accessed with permission September 12, 2019, <https://nyccli.org/resources/>.

A video highlights the issues of homelessness, rising rents, and vacancy, then points to the success of the Cooper Square CLT on the Lower East Side and introduces the East Harlem Pilot Project. A comic book recounts how the East Harlem-El Barrio CLT came together in a way that highlights “Frequently

Asked Questions” about the process and folds out into a poster that illustrates the benefits of CLTs (Figure 9).



Figure 9: NYCCLI “Comic Book/Poster” accessed with permission September 12, 2019, https://nyccli.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/fightingtosaveourcommunities_web.pdf.

To help people understand what it means to live in mutual housing and in a neighborhood with a CLT, a board game, *Trustville*, shows how these models work for a variety of characters that are based on Picture the Homeless members and East Harlem residents involved in the pilot project (Figure 10). These materials became part of an introductory workshop on CLTs offered to groups in other neighborhoods.



Figure 10: *Trustville* Game Board, NYCCLI, accessed with permission September 12, 2019, <https://nyccli.org/resources/nyccli-resources/>.

By the summer of 2015, NYCCLI’s work was getting better known and had gotten some press exposure. Over the next two years, it ran fifteen workshops with more than a dozen groups in all five boroughs. The Education and Outreach work group’s products helped to consolidate NYCCLI’s model of CLTs as it was developing in East Harlem so that it could be generalized; they were tools by which the model could be shared, even as the East Harlem-El Barrio CLT struggled to acquire its first buildings from the City on acceptable terms.

Full Spiral: New Needs and New Questions in Renewed Citywide Activity

NYCCLI’s popular education materials and workshops generated significant interest among groups around the city, which enabled the coalition to further define and expand its vision. With this expansion, new needs and questions arose. Even before NYCCLI was established 2013, members of its then-active steering committee had discussed a citywide CLT but with significant doubts, based both on knowledge about several citywide CLTs around the country and on local experience. As one committee member argued: “I think one of the lessons there is it’s really hard to have a representative group that is citywide; that if you’re going to have something that truly functions with real resident input, it should be community-based, neighborhood-based.” As for a citywide role, he suggested: “So you want to do one in Jamaica [Queens]? You want to do one in Staten Island? Somebody can come in say ‘Look here are all the tools. We’ve already done it and here is how we do it.’... That’s the ... citywide role.” The Education and Outreach work group’s materials and workshops were based on this idea but would take time to realize.

Meanwhile, people involved in the East Harlem-El Barrio CLT raised the problem that the City was still on track to sell off its property to private developers, and by the time many local CLTs were set

up, the opportunity to acquire City-owned property would be gone. At this point, the Education and Outreach work group realized that it needed to conduct many more workshops in short order; and NYCCLI as a coalition realized it needed to provide technical assistance to emerging neighborhood-based CLTs despite having no dedicated staff. These activities would take yet *more* time (they are ongoing) and would lead to yet more changes in NYCCLI's understanding of its approach to modeling CLTs. Combined with the continued ambiguity of the East Harlem model for citywide work, these shifts brought the coalition "full spiral" back to questioning its way of working, given the roaring back of real estate speculation by 2015, the City's own ambiguous stance vis-à-vis CLTs, and the City's encouragement of speculation by rezoning neighborhoods and selling its land to developers. Here, NYCCLI's not reaching its goals is important to distinguish from simple failure. When viewed from the perspective of CHAT, NYCCLI is at once product and part of an ongoing process of learning across the housing movement. By centering commoning and deep affordability, NYCCLI treats collective learning as integral to its evolving strategy: as long as these are central to NYCCLI, the central contradiction of commodified housing is likely to animate the coalition's activity and learning.

Another Turn of the Spiral

NYCCLI expanded further since we ended the research phase for this paper in 2017. As the result of a settlement with a large investment bank in a financial-crisis-related fraud case, the New York State Attorney General's office made several million dollars available for CLTs statewide, including in New York City. NYCCLI got funding to coordinate a "learning exchange" for a dozen CLTs and CLTs-in-formation, while Cooper Square CLT, Interboro CLT (formed by several participants in NYCCLI outside of the pilot-program process), and the East Harlem-El Barrio CLT received operating money. This meant both that NYCCLI could hire a coordinator and that it had to consider its potentially contradictory roles as expertise-contractor and movement-facilitator (Thompson 2015), especially as the CLTs-in-formation did not get funding to participate in the learning exchange. The learning exchange became a movement-building space in which participants came to know and trust each other, share knowledge and ideas, and begin to coordinate their efforts. Importantly, too, NYCCLI's role as coordinator enabled it to refine the lessons of the previous five years into a curriculum, with the interrelated problems of scale, organization, and affordability made more tractable (if no easier to solve).

In the process, new needs emerged (see top of Figure 4). It became clear that groups either did not have enough resources devoted to community and resident organizing or did not know how to explain CLTs to the people they already were organizing. NYCCLI, along with the emergent CLTs—all of which joined NYCCLI if they had not been members earlier—had to question, again, what it would take to collectively take on the central contradiction of commodified housing both as a movement and as initiators of commoning projects in their neighborhoods. This time around, groups tackled more detailed questions about CLT governance and scale, such as which tasks to do collectively and which to do at the neighborhood-level; how to go "beyond housing" and embrace other land uses; and how to build the power necessary to keep the work going. The learning exchange became a space for ongoing expansive learning about what is possible for CLTs in New York City, itself emerging from earlier expansive learning and from the contradictions of the state's relationship to financial capital that led the Attorney General to bring real-estate-related financial crimes to trial.

Learning to Common/Commoning as Learning

In her research on limited-equity cooperatives, Huron's observation that efforts to common resources such as housing involves an ongoing process of learning is central to the analysis of NYCCLI offered here. Groups do not learn to common as collections of individuals, each learning how to do a predefined task, nor to common once and for all; instead, commoning is itself a collective and ongoing learning process to creatively address a range of problems caused by the contradiction of

commodification. As with expansive learning, its achievement is made apparent by increasing numbers of groups and individuals working together in a new way, in this case to hold increasing amounts of land and housing in common.

The transformative potentials for particular commoning tools, such as CLTs, therefore lie not just in their ideological underpinnings, nor in the ideologies of participants. They lie primarily in whether CLTs can successfully wrest land and housing away from the control of landlords and financial capitalists and to bring these means of social reproduction securely under democratic community control (Lowe and Thaden 2016). Yet, given the historical specificity and contingency of commoning's goals and practices, the indicators of success are hardly clear. Even defining the parameters of community control and its political significance depends a great deal on the situations in which it is attempted. In the introductory workshops held for groups citywide, as well as in the learning exchange that followed most of the work recounted in this article, and in the exchanges NYCCLI has facilitated between local groups and CLT groups in other cities, it is clear that the goals and approaches of those involved differ considerably, even while sharing core concerns. For urban CLTs, rooted in the global and intimate histories of neighborhoods (Pratt and Rosner 2012), processes of commoning will use locally available tools to address locally perceived problems. Hence, each of these learning processes will be at once idiosyncratic and have elements broadly shared through models of CLTs. To the extent that learning involves transforming one's world, the transformative potential of each of these processes will also mix the particular and the more universal.

Accordingly, it is important not just to understand that commoning attempts by CLT activists are learning processes, but also to approach them in a way that integrates their historical situations into the analysis. Here, we use CHAT's "expansive learning" framework to illustrate how NYCCLI cultivated CLTs as a tool for commoning land and housing in New York City through a process of iterative reencounter with the contradiction of use- and exchange-value of land and housing. The framework foregrounds the learning process at the heart of NYCCLI's development as a coalition and its ambitions to common against capitalism across New York City. In various ways, from the recognition of the needs unleashed by the homelessness and foreclosure crises and questioning the then-prevalent politics of the housing movement, to modeling, testing, and generalizing neighborhood-level CLTs and then discovering new needs for organizing at a citywide scale, NYCCLI was continually led to hone its understanding of the complex tasks it faced. This complexity lay principally in the historically entrenched contradictions of land and housing as commodities, which made creating and generalizing a viable alternative difficult at every turn. What makes NYCCLI expansive, and potentially radical is its persistent commitment to deal with these contradictions in all their complexity.

With each turn there are lessons to learn that CHAT helps to reveal, e.g., about cultivating collective subjectivity among a diverse group of organizations, modeling and experimenting with tools for tackling historical contradictions, generalizing new tools and forms of activity with transformative potential, and, perhaps most importantly, about the structure and process that fostered these developments. NYCCLI's work group strategy for taking on "different pieces of the puzzle" entailed a distribution of tasks with different actors' taking the role of the "more able peer" (Vygotsky 1986) at different points, and the development and exchange of knowledge across areas of experience and expertise. While the East Harlem CLT work group developed new, local knowledge through the residents' committee, residents learned about an option for addressing the possible impending loss of their housing, and NYCCLI, as a larger coalition, learned about the housing it was trying to organize. Underlying this activity was a concerted effort to learn and act, collectively.

By creating a model for commoning against capitalism, NYCCLI and its members learned and demonstrated that the idea that "there is no alternative" is patently false. They also learned about the structural difficulties of implementing alternatives under current conditions, the structural changes that

might facilitate the expansion of alternatives, and the kinds of organizing strategies that sustain learning and development. The difficulties of reaching extremely low incomes can be overcome through policy interventions and sufficient economies of scale in decommodified housing. The tension in residents' minds between profit-motive and security and affordability can be addressed through popular education. The general difficulties in mobilizing and organizing people to support urban commoning can begin to be addressed with adequate resources directed to community organizing. None of these are easy to get and may take—and have taken—years. Whether these are lessons that therefore will be learned too late, only time and further evaluation will reveal.

Conclusion

We can only address the question of how real NYCCLI's and CLTs' potential to push the housing movement in a more radical direction by attending to their actual development as they confront the contradictions in their activity. At its current phase of development, six years after its formation, NYCCLI's activity has put a new approach to CLTs on the map and expanded the community of actors considering and organizing CLTs. It has accomplished this largely by creating and disseminating tools for groups to understand what CLTs are, and how they have been and could be used. As long-time Picture the Homeless member and Education and Outreach work-group participant, Marcus Moore, told us: "It's great to see so many groups now taking up the baton, when I can remember back then, [a] long time ago, spending so much time, feeling like I might not come back to a meeting. We had a lot of heated conversations, we got tired of explaining, felt like the only ones in the city trying to do this. So, it feels really good to see others doing it now."

We have described six years of NYCCLI's development through the lens of expansive learning to show how contradictions endemic to struggles over the means of social reproduction have been collectively confronted, analyzed, navigated, and often revisited—and to illuminate the pedagogical aspects of urban commoning—an analytic choice made well before the announcement that NYCCLI would be given substantial funding to coordinate a learning exchange for CLTs in New York City.

There are no models for urban commoning except those we fashion ourselves, out of dialogue, through conflict, and in actual efforts to build something new, "learning something that does not yet exist" (Sannino et al. 2016). In our analysis of how CLTs have been imagined, modeled and implemented in New York, CLTs may be understood as a particularly timely and potentially expansive tool for learning to common against capitalism through iterative, collective practice. CLTs are a new enough idea to inspire change while also established enough to be trusted; and they are general enough that many groups can project upon them a range of meanings in different settings while also specific enough to be put into practice in ways that tackle entrenched contradictions.

By illustrating how NYCCLI has developed and refined tools for addressing New York City's housing crisis, we hope to have shown that transformative politics are not a matter of the alignment of will with theory, and that collective situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) is fundamental to creating a new politics of land and housing. Moreover, we have emphasized the significance of a particular type of learning in which core contradictions of the current conjuncture prompt diverse actors to come together, question their present goals and ways of working, and craft, experiment with, and reflect on newly defined and expanded goals and activities. Through the heuristic of expansive learning, we can see that NYCCLI's course of development, which entailed, at first, what some took to be a narrowing of activity—modeling a CLT in East Harlem—was, in fact, "establishing a beachhead" for the expansion of commoning citywide, and addressing both problems of scale and of otherwise-siloed campaigns of housing, commercial development, green infrastructure, and community credit (Casper-Futterman 2016). We can also see that lessons learned along the way, and illustrated here, have transformative value and potential in their own right. By staying close to activity on the ground as it unfolds, we hope also to urge

some measure of theoretical modesty on those who call for more explicitly radical and broadly transformative challenges to neoliberal urbanism: such challenges are necessary, to be sure, but building the base and developing the tools are processes whose politics are cultivated and clarified only in the doing.

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