What Is a Cultural Land Trust?

Solving the cultural space crisis

CULTURAL
LAND TRUST

Acknowledgements

Land

This booklet was crafted in the area known as Vancouver, on the unceded Indigenous lands belonging to the xʷməθkwəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and səlilwətaɬ Nations. The Cultural Land Trust (CLT) recognizes that the colony of British Columbia was created through organized dispossession and colonial violence. As an organization focused on re-commoning land and buildings, our relationship to First Nations' territories is inherent. Our responsibility to honour and uphold Indigenous rights to self-determination and sovereignty is inextricable with our work, which operates within colonial property conventions in the radical hope of stabilizing the arts sector and decolonizing property relations.

Fiscal Sponsor

221A is the fiscal sponsor of the Cultural Land Trust (CLT), supporting the research, planning, and startup phases of the CLT. 221A is a non-profit operator of housing, workspaces, and cultural facilities. 221A envisions a pluralistic society in which all people have the means to access and make culture. The CLT is envisioned as an entity independent from 221A with a separate board of directors.

Masthead

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Introduction

This booklet explores the potential of Land Trusts (LTs) as a response to the cultural space crisis. It begins by unpacking the idea of “land” itself: examining what it means to occupy land in Canada; learning about land through Indigenous perspectives; analyzing the role of private property in dispossession and colonization; highlighting our responsibilities and relationships as inhabitants of these lands; and challenging the myth that communal ownership is innately flawed.

The booklet then presents Land Trusts as an alternative ownership model. It introduces the basics of LTs, provides an overview of the history of the LT movement in Canada, and explains how collective governance and decision-making work. Finally, it summarizes the cultural space crisis and its root causes, and offers an overview of the Cultural Community Land Trusts (CCLT) model as a response.

Land

WHAT IS IT AND HOW DO WE WORK WITH IT?

In the place known today as Canada, 'the land' is at the heart of national discourse, from environmentalism and reconciliation with Indigenous communities, to immigration, housing affordability, and international relations. While its importance becomes increasingly evident, 'the land' is often mentioned without precision or clarity. This ambiguity allows for appropriation by those whose goals contradict movements for intersectional justice. As artists, planners, and organizers, what do we mean when we talk about 'the land?'

We might think of the land as the matter under our feet: ground, soil, dirt. We might also think of ecological biomes and the built environment as 'the land.' What about real estate; is property also the land? Are the emotional and spiritual relationships to place also a part of 'the land?'

To respond to these questions, it is helpful to learn about the land from those who have stewarded it since time-immemorial and shaped its discourse for generations: peoples indigenous to Turtle Island (also known as North America).[1]

Long before Europeans arrived on Turtle Island, Indigenous peoples have related to land with distinct place-based cultures, governing the land through diverse practices such as cultivating, shaping, sharing, negotiating, protocol, laws, storytelling, hunting, trapping, fishing, harvesting, performing, ceremony, gathering, and more.[2] These Indigenous relations to land transcend property boundaries "by upholding obligations that extend across present, past and future generations, and that connect human bodies to bodies of land, water, animals and plants."[3]

1
For some Indigenous peoples and cultures, Turtle Island refers to the continent of North America:, it is a place-specific origin story that has evolved to be used more widely by activists and scholars to refer to North America as an act of reclamation. For accounts of the Turtle Island origin story see: Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 2011, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back : Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*, Arbeiter Ring Pub.; Robin Wall Kimmerer, 2013, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, First edition. Milkweed Editions.

2
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 2017, *As We Have Always Done : Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, University of Minnesota Press, 29. For further discussion see: Howard Grant, et al., "Planning since Time Immemorial: Musqueam Perspectives," in *Planning on the Edge: Vancouver and the Challenges of Reconciliation, Social Justice, and Sustainable Development* edited by Penny Gurstein and Tom Hutton, 25-46,University of British Columbia Press, 2019.

3
Michelle Daigle. "Indigenous peoples' geographies I: Indigenous spatialities beyond place through relational, mobile and hemispheric & global approaches," *Progress in Human Geography*, 49, no.2 (2025): 184.

Figure 1
Indigenous Syllabics on Building in Chinatown, Vancouver BC. 2025. Photo by Miriam Berndt

Indigenous governance on this continent did not involve the practice of private property ownership until the imposition of the colonial system. First passed in 1876 and still in force with amendments, Canada's *Indian Act* imposed federal control over Indigenous people, lands, governance and legal identities, creating a framework for the dispossession of First Nations' territories and cultural heritage. The Anishinaabe scholar Heather Dorries argues that the Indian Act governs all aspects of Indigenous life in Canada based on a principle of "elimination through assimilation."[4]

In today's Truth and Reconciliation era, Canadians are asked to consider their roles and responsibilities in both colonialism and decolonization.[5] Important to this shift is an understanding that land ownership as private property did not occur naturally, but that it was forcefully produced through Canadian governance mechanisms.[6] Understanding the history of colonial property systems teaches us that this relationship to land is a human construction and that we are able to strategically transform it.

Stó:lō author, activist, and teacher Lee Maracle explains the role of storytelling in this process.[7] Maracle suggests that seemingly objective tools like mapping, law-making, planning, policing can be understood as forms of storytelling. Those in positions of authority use these tools to craft particular narratives and histories, embedded with the author's beliefs about

4
Heather Dorries, "What Is Planning without Property? Relational Practices of Being and Belonging," *Environment and Planning. D, Society & Space* 40, no. 2 (2022): 310.

5
Michelle Daigle, 184.

6
Brenna Bhandar. *Colonial lives of property : law, land, and racial regimes of ownership* (Duke University Press), 195.

7
Lee Maracle, "Who Gets to Draw the Maps: In and out of place in British Columbia," in *Memory Serves*. (Edmonton, AB: NeWest Publishers, 2015), 67. Maracle argues that taking the role of social authority involves "a kind of permission to manage the present and postulate future interaction in a way that protects the original citizens' belonging… and marks each person's place in that society."

land, ownership, and belonging. Such stories establish and reinforce cultural boundaries and systems of entitlement, rooted in their authors' societal ideals and worldviews.

Until recently, cartographers and planners have worked with the assumption that settler states, like Canada, own the land they occupy. Within this narrative, there is little place for Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, governance, and culture. In fact, such stories are foundational in Indigenous erasure and territorial dispossession, transforming land into a commodity to be bought and sold.

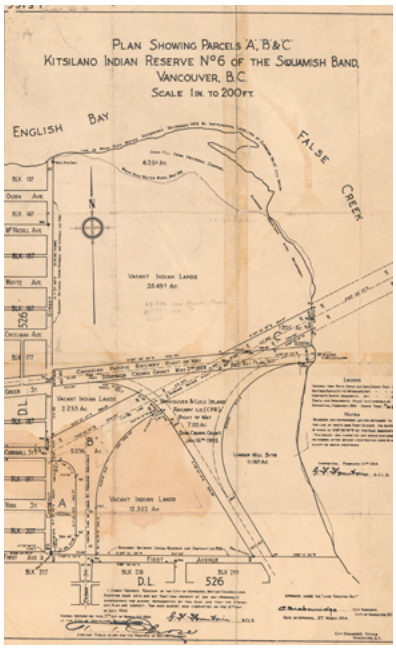


Figure 2
Map of "Kitsilano Indian Reserve, No. 6 of the Squamish band, Vancouver, B.C". 1934. From: City of Vancouver Archives.

Map describes "Vacant Indian Land".

Figure 3
Image of "Shacks on shore of Kitsilano Indian Reserve No. 6 (Sen̓áḵw lands)". 1935. From: City of Vancouver Archives.

A photograph of Sen̓áḵw Village. These City artifacts demonstrate the use of language and maps to render land two-dimensional, erasing Indigenous people, and diminishing the value of place for purposes of dispossession.

In contrast, Indigenous storytelling articulates land as a constellation[8] of relationships across species, generations, and territories. As Maracle writes, stories function as an "internal map" of a society: they "illuminate the sources of social authority of the past by either upholding or challenging that authority."[9] While stories help us to define reality and understand the past, they also shape the paths we trace into the future.

If we understand property as a narrative, then reimagining ownership requires engaging critically with the stories we tell. By "studying our internal world of story" may we "rethink of ourselves and the future of North America from the perspective of the island and all its people."[10] Reclaiming Indigenous

8
See: Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 2017, *As We Have Always Done : Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, University of Minnesota Press.

9
Maracle, 84.

10
Maracle, 72-74

stories and crafting new stories of land-as-relations, we can move material attachments away from private property and colonization and toward sustainability for generations "one thousand years ahead."[11]

Contemporary scholars and activists assert that the recognition of Indigenous storytelling by colonial institutions alone will not achieve the full exercise of Indigenous rights;[12] a nation-to-nation approach of Reconciliation must come to term. To this end, it's worth remembering that "decolonization is not a metaphor," but rather "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life."[13] In other words, we are called to enact a future where Canadian institutions negotiate and share reciprocally alongside sovereign First Nations and self-determining Indigenous communities.

No single institution can undo colonial dispossession, nor promise the full realization of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. What institutions can do is respond to the call of contemporary Indigenous scholars to reimagine beyond "colonialscapes"[14] and change how land is held and governed today. The process of decolonization invites all parts of society — individuals, families, organizations as well as government, non-profit, and commercial institutions — to unearth truths and return Indigenous land, wealth, and resources. Decolonization calls for all inhabitants of Turtle Island to become land stewards: people who take care of the places in which they live, including all facets of their ecosystems — flora, fauna, human, water, earth, and air.[15]

STEWARDSHIP OF THE COMMONS

Private ownership is one of many ways to organize land. Yet, most private property was once collectively held. In British legal history, the Commons represented lands to which all people had rights to access. Peasants could use the Commons for grazing livestock, hunting, fishing, and collecting resources like wood, medicines, and minerals. While today 'the Commons' is a concept used to describe the resources accessible to all people such as air, water, shelter, and a habitable Earth, historically the Commons meant access to the land itself.

11 Maracle, 84.

12 See: Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus : {political Life across the Borders of Settler States}*, Duke University Press, 2014; and Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks : Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

13 Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society 1, no.1 (2012).*

14 Diagle, 189.

15 Maracle, 83-84.

In the British feudal system, the Crown granted title of land to a lord to hold in the form of a manor, outside of which common land was held for the sufficiency of the commoners, who held no land title. During the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, commons were enclosed, and commoners lost access to their resources — driving many to join factory labour forces or emigrate to the so-called New World, where they contributed to Indigenous land theft. This cycle of dispossession is where we find ourselves today.

Figure 4
British Wooded Upland Landscape. Probably 1783. By Thomas Gainsborough.

Artist's depiction of the rural landscape. The British Commons was systemically and gradually enclosed from 1604 to 1914.

Canadian conceptions about the Commons are widely shaped by narratives taught as early as elementary school. Garrett Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons" is often referenced as an "irrefutable argument for the superior efficiency of private property… and justification for privatization," asserting that users of a common resource naturally over-consume and deplete it.[16] While Hardin was specifically concerned with population growth, his logic has been used against commoning and to promote the idea of land privatization as a historical inevitability. As a popularized narrative, the Tragedy of the Commons relies on a pessimistic reading of human nature, engendering fear for scarce resources and encouraging behaviour that prioritizes self-interest.

16
David Harvey, "The Future of the Commons," *Radical History Review*, no. 109 (2011): 101.

David Harvey, a critic of Hardin and advocate for the "right to the city," argues that the Commons is continually enacted and sustained by the communities who use them.[17] In other words, the Commons is not an unorganized space always at risk of extinction, but one governed by rules for sharing crafted by those that rely upon it. Management of common property resources such as Maine lobster fisheries, Mongolian grasslands, allotment gardens, and land trusts have been studied extensively and demonstrate the legitimacy of commoning models in meeting contemporary human and ecological needs.[18]

Stewarding common resources, as the next section makes clear, requires collective structures and shared control.

17 Harvey, 105.

18 For further discussion on examples of commoning, see: Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons : The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Land Trusts

DEFINITION AND LEGAL STRUCTURE

This section seeks to illustrate the potential of a Cultural Land Trust to meet the needs of artists and cultural workers in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. To do so, let's take a step back and deconstruct its components: trust and land.

Trust: A term describing confidence in or reliance on another individual, it is also a type of legal arrangement. A Trust involves a trustee who manages property on behalf of a beneficiary and who is technically the property's owner; they are commonly used in estate planning, charities, and private investment. Trusts are situated in a culturally-specific legal tradition, existing since at least Roman times and remerging in medieval English legal systems. Today this legal arrangement is specific to Common Law countries, including the United States, Britain, and anglophone Canada. Conversely, Civil Code legal systems, emerging from Continental Europe and used by a majority of world nations including Québec, do not include Trust provisions.[19]

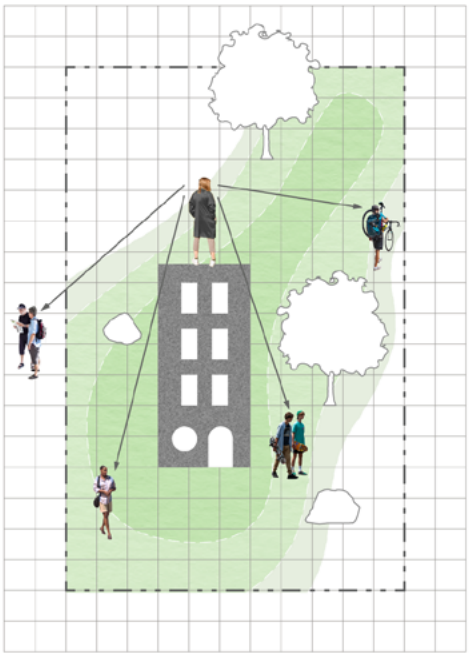
Land + Trust: Land Trusts (LTs), as non-profit organizations operating in the Province of BC, apply this legal concept to land ownership: a legal entity holds real estate as the trustee, while beneficiaries lease and use it under agreed upon terms.[20] The model often involves collective ownership, where the land remains in Trust while buildings are leased long-term to occupants.

Most LTs operate as non-profit, membership-based organizations which are accountable to a defined community of stakeholders. By way of communal ownership, LTs separate land ownership from speculation and for-profit development. It shifts the interest of property from an individual owner's

19
For further conversation on the differences between Civil Code and Common Law for Community Land Trusts, see: Sara Gwendolyn Ross. "Comparative Legal Perspectives on Cultural Land Trusts for Urban Spaces of Culture, Community, and Art: A Tool for Counteracting Displacement," *Milan Law Review* 1, no. 2 (2021).

20
Susannah Bunce and Farrah Chanda Aslam, "Land Trusts and the Protection and Stewardship of Land in Canada: Exploring Non-Governmental Land Trust Practices and the Role of Urban Community Land Trusts," *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 25, no. 2 (2016): 24.

benefit to that of its beneficiaries, and, as we describe below, entire communities, cities, and regions. By removing property from the speculative real estate market, a community-centred approach to ownership has the potential to engender more place-based land stewardship, where property is considered closely in relation to its history, neighbours, cultural heritage, and landscape. Space for the resurgence of Indigenous ways of being emerge through the place-based practices that Land Trusts are well positioned to embody.



Private Property

Communal Ownership

Figure 5
Thinking Outside the Property Lines. 2026.
By Jessica Hanzelkova & Miriam Berndt.

HISTORY OF LAND TRUSTS

While the legal mechanism of Land Trusts is seemingly straightforward, the model has evolved over time in response to different social and political contexts. They have developed along different, though intersecting, historical paths in Canada and the United States, evolving from conservation-oriented land protection toward community-controlled models that address housing, environmental justice, and urban displacement.

Early LTs emerged primarily from movements to protect and preserve natural landscapes. The earliest Canadian example is the Hamilton Naturalists' Club Land Trust, founded in 1919, acquiring land in and around the Ontario city for ecological preservation in the context of urban development and sprawl. As LTs expanded from nature preservation into broader social applications, their governance structures also evolved to support long-term stewardship and community accountability.

The model of the Community Land Trust (CLTs) emerged in the context of the United States' Civil Rights era. Established in 1969, the first CLT New Communities Inc. collectivized land ownership for dozens of African-American farmers who were otherwise excluded by racist property laws and discriminatory real estate practices. Since the 1990s, CLTs have been a preferred tool for urban communities responding to rising land values, exclusion, and displacement across Turtle Island. We might also consider landholding benevolent associations in Canada's Chinatowns and other ethnic enclaves as similar to how CLTs remove real estate from speculation on the private market and address ethnic exclusion in Canadian cities.[21]

The timeline of Canadian CLTs is distinct from their US counterparts and can be grouped into two generations:[22]

Protect and preserve: A first generation of CLTs (1980—2012) focused primarily on affordable housing and often sector-led or institutionally-driven, for example: Colandco (Toronto) and Vernon District Community Land Trust (Vernon, BC). Modeled after Canada's wildlife LTs, this generation of CLTs focused on protecting urban housing akin to natural resource conservation.

Reclaim and transform: A second generation of CLTs (2012—present) emerging from struggles against gentrification and housing insecurity emphasizes community participation, anti-displacement strategies, and broader social impacts, for example: Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (Toronto), Kensington Market CLT (Toronto), Hamilton CLT (Ontario), Hogan's

21
For further discussion on the role of benevolent associations in the fight against racist property practices, see Chapter 3 of this publication.

22
Susannah Bunce & Joshua Barndt, "Origins and Evolution of Community Land Trusts in Canada," in *On Common Ground: International Perspectives on the Community Land Trust* edited by John Emmeus Davis, Line Algoed, María E. Hernández-Torrales (Terra Nostra Press, 2020), 95-106.

Alley Society (Vancouver), Weymouth Falls (Nova Scotia) and many more. Contemporary CLTs continue to address housing affordability while broadening their scope to address socio-economic precarity, food justice, arts and culture, and alternative forms of community governance. Many CLTs of this generation depart from the protect and preserve model of earlier Canadian examples toward transforming the colonial property system by prioritizing solidarity with First Nations and Indigenous communities.

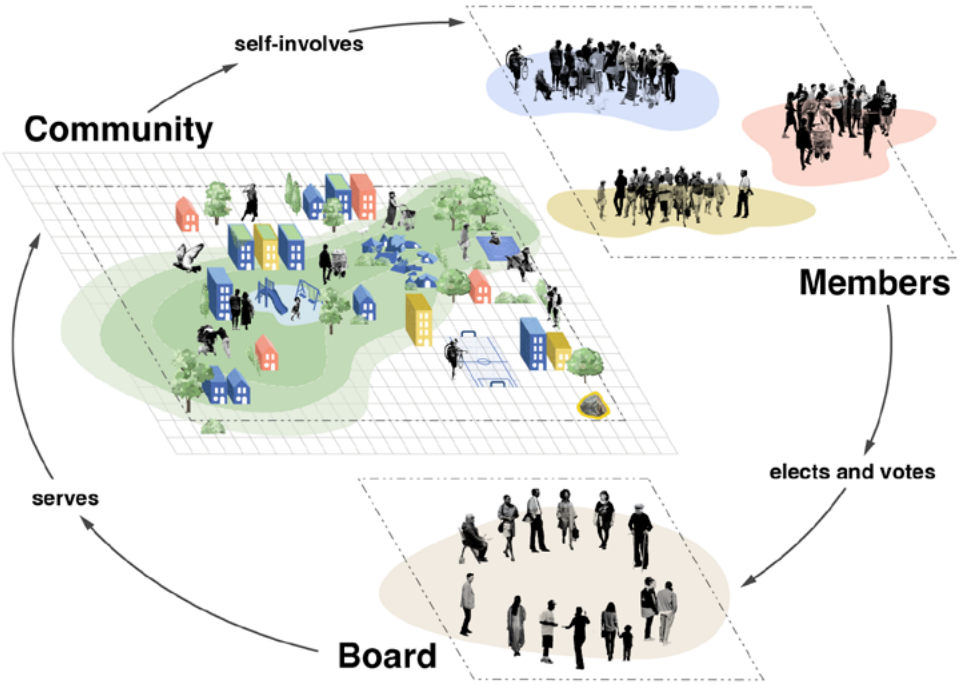


Figure 6
Basic Structure of Land Trust Governance. 2026.
By Jessica Hanzelkova & Miriam Berndt

GOVERNANCE & STRUCTURE

Principles of collective democracy guide CLT development and governance priorities. CLTs function as non-profit societies under provincial or territorial acts, meaning they must operate with members, a Board of Directors, and bylaws. This structure offers entry points for individuals and organizations to become involved in their local CLTs. It ensures that management of assets are collectively controlled by a board which represents the interests of its direct beneficiaries and broader community. While CLT governance models change over time and place, the following is an overview of the key players involved in CLT governance.

Community: This is who the CLT serves. While mandates and missions vary between organizations, local individuals and organizations within a CLT's service area are critical to its function. There are many avenues to become involved in a CLT and for community voices to be integrated into its functioning: one may be involved as a volunteer, member, community representative, or in direct communication with a CLT's Board of Directors. Starting with community organizing, research, and base-building, many of Canada's second-generation CLTS emerged as engaged advocacy groups before acquiring property. Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT), Kensington Market Community Land Trust (KMCLT), and Hogan's Alley Society all formed as grassroots associations of neighbours well before becoming landholding organizations. Their preparation efforts ensure that governance reflects real community needs and facilitate durable operations.

Members: A person (or Non-profit Society) "who supports or benefits from the goals and objectives" of the non-profit organization.[23] Eligibility for CLT membership is tied to an individual's connection to the neighbourhood or cause the CLT serves. For example,, Vancouver's False Creek South (FCS) Community Housing Trust has 5 categories for membership: Community Member, Organization, Housing Co-op Members, Supporter Individual and Supporter Organization.[24] Member rights and responsibilities vary between CLTs, but possible rights include: attending and voting in member meetings, nominating and voting for members to serve on the Board of Directors, and approving by-laws. These rights are usually distributed under particular membership types as outlined in the Society's by-laws. At the FCS Community Housing Trust for example, only membership types which require the member to live or work within the boundary of False Creek South are granted voting rights.

Board of Directors: The Board is nominated and elected by members and manages the asset which belongs to the organization. Control and decision-making at a CLT is designed to be decentralized and balanced to ensure that the interests of one group does not outweigh others, ensuring that a range of perspectives and experiences are heard

23
Canadian Network of Community Land Trusts, *CLT Board and Membership Structures* (webinar presentation, 2025), https://www.communityland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Webinar-2.1-CLT-Board-and-Membership-Structures.pdf

24
False Creek South Community Housing Trust, "Membership Page," accessed April 23, 2026, https://fcs-cht-membership.raiselysite.com

and considered. The most common model for CLT board structure is referred to as "tripartite governance": representation evenly distributed among core members (e.g. direct beneficiaries using CLT property), community members (e.g. residents in a CLT's catchment area) and public representatives (e.g. members of allied organizations or local businesspeople). Importantly, a CLT's governance structure adapts to suit its communities' specific profile and priorities. For example the Gabriola Island Land Stewards Society's Board requires up to 2 *Snuneymuxw First Nation representatives*, 6 *Organizational Members* with operations on Gabriola Island and/or Snuneymuxw First Nation, and 5 *Individual Members* with permanent or part-time residents of Gabriola Island of member of the Snuneymuxw First Nation.[25]

Additionally, CLTs broaden participation and decision-making among membership and community stakeholders by including committees, advisory councils, and working groups in their governance models. For instance, the Kensington Market CLT's board and staff are supported by members who volunteer for committees such as: the Finance Advisory Committee, Acquisitions Committee, the Research Committee and more.[26]

25
Gabriola Island Land Stewards Society, *Bylaws of the Gabriola Island Land Stewards Society* (2024), https://gabriolaislandlss.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GILSS-bylaws-revised-2024.pdf.

26
To learn more about KMCLT's advisory committees, see: https://kmclt.ca/Committees (accessed 20 April, 2026).

Culture In Crisis

ARTISTS' PRECARITY

Across disciplines, artists' labour conditions are defined by precarity: the material and existential instability resulting from flexible employment and irregular work.[27] Grant-based income, limited artistic employment opportunities, and the prevalence of short-term gig work means that "artists on average earn less and have greater income inequality and variability" than workers of similar age and education.[28] Among artists, this phenomenon is often referred to as the 'cycle of feast or famine.'

Artists' precarity is structural, not individual. According to an economic survey of artists in Canada, 57% of respondents in 2019 reported a total gross annual income of less than $40,000, the low-income threshold.[29] According to Vancouver's 2019 cultural plan, a majority of the city's artists live below the local poverty-line "with 63% reporting an income of less than $40,000 per year and a median income of $22,000 a year."[30]

Volatile economic cycles for artists reflect broader trends of precarious income generation in the context of an acute affordability crisis across Canadian cities. A nationwide study evidenced that race, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, and/or disability pose significant barriers to accessing spaces and mediums for income-generating artistic activities like producing, recording, or disseminating one's work.[31]

THE CREATIVE ECONOMY AND CULTURAL INSTRUMENTALIZATION

Since the early 2000s, the idea of the 'Creative Economy' has taken hold of urban cultural policy. As popularized by urban planning researcher Richard

27
Alison Bain and Heather McLean, "The artistic precariat," *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 6 (2013): 97.

28
Ibid.

29
"Canadian Artists and Content Creators Economic Survey" (Government of Canada, 2022): 6, downloaded on 20 April, 2026, https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/pch/documents/services/copyright-policy-publications/results-survey-artist-content-creators/CACCES-Report-2022-eng.pdf

30
"Making Space for Arts and Culture: Vancouver Cultural Infrastructure Plan" (City of Vancouver, 2019), 6.

31
"Canadian Artists and Content Creators Economic Survey Report," 52-54.

Florida, this idea positions artists as entrepreneurs who enrich cities with the cultural capital they produce. According to Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*, cities that cater to the three T's — technology, talent, and tolerance — tend to attract more artists, cultural workers, and designers and, thus, score higher on the Global Liveability Index.[32] Charles Landry's *The Creative City* elaborates on the idea that arts and culture allow cities to overcome a slew of challenges from housing and transportation to safety and disenfranchisement of marginalized groups. Florida and Landry's popularized ideas for cultural policy place pressure on individual artists to remedy structural socioeconomic problems.[33]

Cultural policy frameworks and urban development strategies that embrace the idea of the Creative Economy often instrumentalize artistic labour as a driver of economic growth and city branding without improving artists' material conditions. Governments and urban planners often use artists to market the idea of a creative city, but do not support systems that sustain the creative sector. By limiting resources for arts and culture, this approach to cultural policy reinforces competitive and individualistic behaviour among artists and cultural organizations, rather than creativity and collaboration.

While Canadian cities have embraced the Creative Economy, public funding has not kept pace with challenges faced by artists and cultural organizations, namely the skyrocketing cost of real estate. We can pinpoint four main issues within Canada's arts and culture funding system:

Most operating grants are too small: downloading the financial risk of operating arts and cultural programs from government to organizations and from organizations to artists;

Grants are temporary: privileging short-term project grants, which do not provide artists and organizations the consistency and durability to renew the sector;

Legacy organizations have an overconcentration of funding: at the expense of sectoral transformation and generational renewal, leaving grassroots associations

32
Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class : And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (Basic Books, 2003).

33
Charles Landry, *The Creative City : A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, 2nd edition (Comedia, 2008).

and emerging non-profit cultural spaces to remain static, which are more accountable to historically excluded communities;

Lack of long-term sustainability: grants are used to pay private property owners, rather than the long-term viability of non-profit cultural spaces through property owned by a community-based organization.

CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN CRISIS

The Creative Economy forces artist-run spaces and cultural organizations into precarity and, thus, reduces their ability to secure physical space and realize their artistic visions. In Canadian cities, cultural space itself has become a scarce resource for which artists and organizations are forced to compete for rather than develop through collaboration.

Figure 7
901 Main Street in Vancouver BC.
2024. Image By: Uytae Lee

Rising land value, speculation, and large-scale redevelopment projects have displaced arts spaces through renovictions, demolitions, and rising rent. In 2021, non-profit owner Akin Collective and private developers evicted dozens of artists of Toronto's emblematic 888 Dupont live-work studios to redevelop the site into a mixed-use tower including fewer live-work studios and at a higher price. The fate of 888 Dupont is not an isolated instance, but part of a

general trend toward the displacement of artists from the buildings and neighbourhoods that they animated, stewarded, and called home.

Once properties around cultural hubs like 888 Dupont increase in value, artists and cultural organizations alongside other working class neighbours are displaced and replaced by higher-income residents and the businesses that cater to them. This pattern has produced a widely circulated narrative that artists act as first-wave gentrifiers, despite the fact that they largely remain low-income cultural workers who scarcely benefit from urban redevelopment or gentrification.

Figure 8
The windows of 888 Dupont, after the artists and businesses that called it home were evicted this spring. 2022. Photo by Alfred Holden. https://www.taddlecreekmag.com/return-to-zenith

Cultural infrastructure, in the form of studios, performance venues, rehearsal spaces, and artist-run centres, is essential to cultural production and the livelihood of artists.[34] Cities where artists flourish are not those where the Creative Economy has taken root, but those where access to affordable cultural space and the development of cultural infrastructure is protected and promoted. At the behest of artists and cultural workers, policymakers have begun exploring new institutional mechanisms for securing long-term cultural spaces.

34
Erika Hennebury, "Cultural Land Trusts as an emerging solution to the arts space crisis," in *The Routledge Handbook on Urban Cultural Planning* (Routledge, 2014): 319. Erika Hennebury defines cultural infrastructure as: "the buildings, spaces, services, networks and relationships that enable cultural production."

The following section examines the Community Land Trust model as one such mechanism, exploring how it has been adapted to support cultural infrastructure, arts communities, and neighbourhoods.

The Cultural Community Land Trust Model

A RECENT INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE

Today, cultural policy is shifting toward new models of collective ownership and long-term stewardship of cultural infrastructure that place control back in the hands of community. Acknowledging the negative impacts that conventional urban planning and the Creative Economy have on artistic communities, governments are starting to consider Cultural Community Land Trusts (CCLTs) as a potential solution.

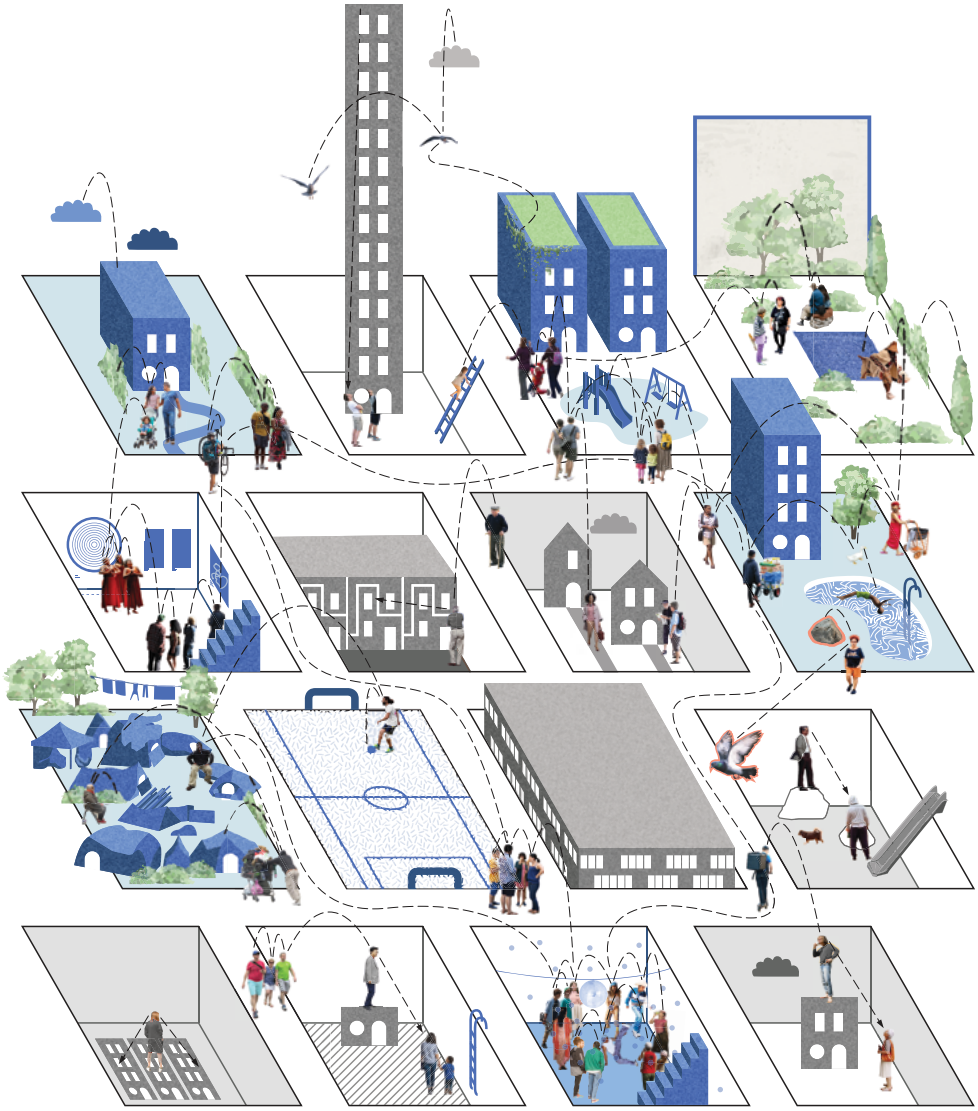


Figure 9
Collectivizing Cultural Infrastructure. 2026.
By Jessica Hanzelkova & Miriam Berndt.

Rather than relying on market-driven solutions, and competitive and costly short-term rental, CCLTs are community-led organizations meant to hold land for cultural use in perpetuity. Emphasizing affordability and equitable distribution of space between artists, the participatory and non-market nature of the Land Trust model proposes to disrupt the cycles of precarity and displacement that have defined artists' lives since the neoliberal deregulation of real estate began in the 1990s.

Unlike Community Land Trusts (CLT) that focus primarily on residential housing, CCLTs differ in that they are dedicated to collectivizing cultural infrastructure. Like CLTs, CCLTs must be grounded in the material needs and organizing capacities of specific communities in order to effectively address problems faced by their communities. While the CCLT model is still emerging, several organizations have begun experimenting with it to secure long-term cultural space through collective ownership.

EMERGING CCLT MODELS

Recent initiatives demonstrate how Land Trusts can be adapted to support cultural spaces through a range of governance structures, funding models, and partnership strategies.

Figure 10
Alice Billing House studios, Stratford, London. 'Playing with Fire' by Andy Mac Manus, paint on wood art installation. Credit: Monika Szolle Photography.

In London UK, the Creative Land Trust was formed in 2019 on the initiative of the Mayor of London and the Arts Council of England in partnership with philanthropies and investment companies. Acquiring land through asset transfers, freehold purchases, and donations, the Creative Land Trust works with town councils and developers to secure buildings for cultural uses. Their 30,000 square foot Wallis Road studio complex in Hackney Wick, for example, was acquired with a 999 year-long lease. With no membership structure, governance of this CLT is restricted to specialists whose expertise serves the functions of its Board of Directors. The participation of artists renting space in the Creative Land Trust is limited to an advisory committee, which, as CLT researcher Erica Hennebury suggests, tips "the balance of power ... toward the professional sector."[35]

Figure 11
The Community Arts Stabilization Trust (CAST), 80 Turk St. San Francisco. Photo by Cesar Rubio.

In 2023, the arts non-profit organization Vital Arts and Northern California Community Land Trust launched the San Francisco Bay Area's Arts Space Trust (AST). AST was created as a response to the lack of living and professional space for artists and to stem the displacement of low-income artists from the Bay Area, prioritizing marginalized demographics.

35
Hennebury, 325. The author's study reveals the contradiction between the formalization of the Community Land Trust as a legal entity by England's Housing and Regeneration Act (2008), which excludes a membership structure but facilitates creating CLTs, on one hand, and the flexibility of CLTs to introduce member and community driven models in jurisdictions where a legal definition does not exist.

AST's strategy is to acquire housing and creative spaces through property donations and below-market purchases, then stewarding these spaces via a housing justice approach that prioritizes members' decision-making.[36] AST also developed an "aging in space" strategy in which aging artist-homeowners receive an annuity to offset rising healthcare costs "in their final years, after which the property is transferred to AST."[37] Additionally, by pursuing grassroots impact investment rather than governmental funding, AST purchases existing live-work, studio, and performance spaces that are protected against changes in governmental cultural policy.

Within Canada, similar ideas are beginning to take shape as cultural organizations explore how the CLT model can be adapted to stabilize cultural infrastructure in rapidly changing urban environments.

Toronto's Community and Cultural Spaces Trust (CCST) was founded in 2022 to "create and facilitate sustainable processes for acquiring and maintaining real property" for artists and cultural workers in Toronto's Ward 9.[38] CCST emerged from a half decade-long battle for a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) between the grassroots group Build a Better Bloor-Dufferin (BBBD) and private developers of the Bloor Crossing mega-development. Negotiations amounted to a $17 million CBA which BBBD put toward establishing CCST.[39] Emphasizing slow organizational development, community needs assessment, and cultivating governance, CCST did not rush to buy property with its settlement fund. However, via a collaboration with the private Inspirit Foundation and City of Toronto, CCST managed to acquire its first units in 2025 — two studio spaces in the former Artscape Youngplace building — without displacing current tenants nor depleting its settlement fund.

THE CULTURAL LAND TRUST IN BC: A PROPOSAL

The Cultural Land Trust, developed by 221A as a response to the precarity and displacement of artists and cultural space in Vancouver, represents

36
To learn more about Artist Space Trust, see: https://www.artistspacetrust.org/approach (accessed 20 April, 2026).

37
Hennebury, 321.

38
Ward 9 "Davenport" corresponds to the artist-concentrated nieghbourhoods Dufferin Grove, Brockton Village, Dovercourt Village, Corso Italia, and Wallace-Emerson.

39
For more information about the Community and Cultural Spaces Trust, see: "Our Story" https://www.communityculturalspacestrust.ca (accessed 20 April, 2026).

the Lower Mainland's first CCLT. It is designed to steward long-term cultural infrastructure through land acquisition, community governance, and reinvestment in the cultural sector. Like Toronto's CCST, 221A has focused its efforts on policy research and community organizing before acquiring property. Within Vancouver's affordability crisis, 221A identified security of tenure as one of the biggest threats facing the survival of community cultural spaces. In response, 221A explores multiple acquisition strategies: from asset transfers from the city, to co-development model, donations, bequests, and market purchases. The goals remain clear: remove property from the market and threats of speculation, dedicate space to artists and artist-run organizations, and redirect added property value back to artists.

Figure 12
Francis Gibson (Natalie Wright's husband), Natalie Wright (Evelyn Pinkerton's stepdaughter), Tassillie Dent (Evelyn Pinkerton's friend and executor), Brian McBay (221A Executive Director), and Monica Morgan (Community Land Trust Executive Director) pictured in front of the Pinkerton Estate house (left to right), the Cultural Land Trust's first property. 2026. Photo by Kayla Isomura.

221A's proposal prioritizes pathways to ownership, shared governance, and operational durability for groups historically excluded from property ownership and stewarding cultural infrastructure. The model also explores strategies for Indigenous rights recognition and reciprocity with First Nations on whose territories the CLT operates. Such strategies include a First Nations land-tax, in which a part of annual revenue is remitted to host nations, as well as meaningful

participation of Indigenous artists and community members in the governance, staffing, and projects of the CLT.

By stabilizing land, buildings, and units for cultural uses under the umbrella of a community-governed trust, the Cultural Land Trust aims to retain the economic and social value that artists generate, rather than allowing that value to go to for-profit landlords in the city's speculative real estate market. Taken together, 221A understands the CCLT model not only as a property-holding organization but as a long-term institutional framework for sustaining cultural production and community stewardship of land. Visit 221A.ca for additional booklets that present recent projects that illustrate tools, techniques, and lessons to apply toward the creation of the Cultural Land Trust.

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221A is supporting the research, planning, and startup of an independent Cultural Land Trust (CLT).

The CLT builds a future where artists and cultural organizations in B.C. have collective ownership of land and buildings. A community model for artists and non-profit arts organizations—especially low-income, disabled, LGBTQ2IA+, and Black, Indigenous and people of colour—that opens pathways to sustainable stewardship of cultural spaces, rent stability, and collective wealth.

221A CULTURAL LAND TRUST