



BORN IN BEASLEY: A HISTORY OF THE HAMILTON COMMUNITY LAND TRUST, PART 1

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April 11, 2016

I

Last November, at a National Housing Day event held at Hamilton’s Waterfront Banquet Centre and sponsored by the Realtors Association of Hamilton-Burlington, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the City of Hamilton, and the Social Planning and Research Council (SPRC), Hamilton Community Land Trust (HCLT) coordinator Allison Maxted spoke as part of a “solution-focused panel” of ways in which a community land trust (CLT) could ameliorate Hamilton’s housing crisis by challenging the city’s increasing gentrification and displacement of vulnerable tenants. Present for the event, Rob Fiedler, a past president and then active Board Member of North End Neighboursⁱ, reported being “struck by the possibilities” a CLT offered, while noting: “Timing, of course, is everything. To be of maximum benefit, a community land trust must acquire land before speculation drives up prices.”ⁱⁱ

Maxted, the coordinator and driving force behind the Hamilton Community Land Trust (HCLT), defines CLTs as non-profit corporations that own land in the name of residents and lease it back to social-purpose organizations and individuals to help meet needs prioritized by communities.ⁱⁱⁱ Designed to revitalize neighbourhoods while protecting affordability, she adds, CLTs “acquire, hold, and steward urban land for community benefit,” utilizing ‘ground leases’ as central stewardship mechanisms.^{iv} Just over thirty land trusts exist in Ontario today^v, though of these only one – Toronto’s Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust – can rightly be described as a CLT in the urban sense.

To develop a consultative five-year plan for the then still recently incorporated HCLT, whose roots lie in Hamilton’s Beasley Neighbourhood Association (BNA), the Trust would go on to organize, this past January, a series of participatory public workshops, under the title ‘Community-Owned Land.’^{vi} Were the Trust to acquire a property tomorrow, it asked participants, what should be done with it?^{vii} To successfully support the needs of Beasley’s increasingly displaced low income residents, HCLT Board Chair Michael Borrelli would insist during his opening remarks at the January 12th Collaboration Station meeting, the Trust would need to secure land within a year. Key to any acquisition initiative, he would add, would be a clear vision of how a given property would be used.^{viii} Consequently, the January meetings would seek, above all else, to answer this question. As a subsequent March summary would report:

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Preserving the affordability of housing in neighbourhoods experiencing change emerged as the clear top priority, followed by facilitating the re-use of vacant and underused properties (land recycling), reinforcing open space and urban agriculture initiatives, and providing meaningful ways for residents to participate in land trust decision-making.^{ix}

II

In an interview conducted the following month, HCLT Director and long-standing BNA activist Charlie Mattina would outline how the HCLT – now a city-wide organization - had begun as a BNA initiative. Charlie's thoughts would most often express concern over the intensifying threat displacement posed to Beasley's vulnerable, low-income residents. Poverty was being pushed out to peripheral neighbourhoods, he would insist, which lack necessary amenities and services. In an effort at sanitizing Beasley, he would add by way of an example, a great deal of pressure had recently been placed on the Good Shepherd to relocate its downtown service centre.

Less than a month after Charlie's interview, Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horwath would publicly echo his concerns. "I know alarm bells have been going off in some quarters around gentrification in the downtown and the fear that people who have lived there for a long time aren't going to be able to live there anymore," she would tell *CBC Hamilton* in March, adding: "the important thing is to ensure mixed housing and income levels'."^x Around that time, moreover, a related debate would erupt over accusations the City of Hamilton's plans for selling and rebuilding its north end social housing stock amounted to *de facto* segregation.^{xi}

"It is difficult," Maxted had cautioned in her 2013 CLT report, *Community as Developer*:

to establish exactly what a CLT will be able to accomplish [or] an exact timeline, as it [can] be months or years before an appropriate piece of land becomes available. In the meantime, it is possible to establish an organization with the mandate and readiness to acquire land when it becomes available.^{xii}

In the three years that had lapsed between the release of her report and his interview, Charlie would indicate, circumstances had changed. The speed with which properties were now moving through the local real estate market, as well as the rate of intervention of speculators, were making it increasingly difficult for the Trust to forward viable and timely bids. "A race is on," Charlie would insist, for the HCLT to gain a foothold in Beasley – for it to demonstrate its potential – for it to help lock in place Beasley's "existing values, character, and spirit." Opportunities for the Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust, Ontario's other CLT, to acquire land, he would warn, had recently narrowed in an astonishingly short time. "We're almost too late," he would add of Beasley.

In fact, Maxted's report had anticipated this development, offering both directives and advice as to how a CLT might operate in a 'weak-market community' – as Beasley had arguably been up to the early 2010s – and in a 'strong-market community' – as is presently the case.

III

Then, as now, nearly 6,000 Hamilton households remain on a social housing waiting list. Days after Charlie's interview the Government of Ontario would announce, as part of its new budget, a \$178 million investment in affordable housing that was expected, province wide, to generate 1,500 new units.

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When *CBC Hamilton* asked local MPP and provincial Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Ted McMeekin how soon Hamilton might expect to receive its portion of these funds, however, he would only declare: “‘Soon, I hope’.”^{xiii} In less than a month though, he would pledge by June to pass new ‘inclusionary zoning’ legislation “that would give Hamilton the ability to demand that developers build more [affordable] housing.”^{xiv}

Shortly after, Canada’s new federal Liberal government would table a deficit budget that included a two-year, \$2.3 billion affordable housing commitment. Though \$1 billion less than the total anti-poverty groups had advocated for^{xv}, the SPRC’s Renée Wetselaar would insist in an interview with *CBC Hamilton* that the announcement amounted to declaring a new “‘historic’” *de facto* ‘national housing strategy.’^{xvi}

Following these multilevel governmental developments, it is perhaps unsurprising that the HCLT’s planned public release of a draft plan in March was downgraded to an invitation-only Summit, attended by a strategic network of municipal officials, granting agencies, and non-profit leaders. During the meeting several guests – Wetselaar among them – Tweeted of the HCLT’s potential for helping Hamilton secure more affordable housing. These were not mere individual opinions, however, but expressions of emerging consensus that the Trust’s first project should be housing-based.

IV

Study of Google’s current Hamilton map reveals the presence of a clearly marked Beasley district, bound in the east by Wellington Street North, in the south by Main Street East, in the west by James Street North, and in the north by the CN railway tracks (though some maps set its northern boundary at Barton Street). The neighbourhood had acquired its namesake from one Richard Beasley: a propertied New Yorker who settled in the early 1790s in what is now Hamilton and at what was then referred to as Barton Township. Despite a number of failed commercial ventures and political controversies, a portion of Beasley’s original settlement would go on to bear his name^{xvii}, alongside such original Hamilton districts as Durand and Corktown.

Consult leading books on Hamilton and note the absence of any historic references to anything understood as Beasley neighbourhood, however. As *Hamilton Spectator* reporter Bill Dunphy would write in his seminal 2006 article “This Isn’t Mr. Roger’s Neighbourhood”: “there is no Beasley neighbourhood. Beasley is a construct, a ‘neighbourhood’ created by city planners back in the ‘70s when neighbourhood planning came into vogue and bureaucrats carved up the entire city ... [.]” In seemingly terminal decline at the time, the once busy district, Dunphy explained, had long since lost its reasonably well-paid skilled and unskilled jobs when manufacturers, citing high taxes, had either closed or left, leaving acres of abandoned buildings and lots in their wake.^{xviii}

Charlie recalls Beasley’s decline accelerating in the 1990s.^{xix} Contrary to popular perception though, the district’s decay dates back fully *sixty years*, to the mid-1950s, a point Maxted had made explicit in *Community as Developer*. By the 1950s, Hamilton’s decision making class, historian Bill Freeman writes in *Hamilton: A People’s History*, agreed that the city’s downtown decline required a “dramatic” solution. Even then, he elaborates:

Deterioration downtown had set in to such an extent that stores were sitting vacant, movie theatres had emptied, and even the market was losing business. The once jammed, noisy, downtown streets that had so much life and vitality were showing clear signs of decay. People were simply not coming downtown in the numbers that they once had ... [.]”^{xx}

Freeman would attribute these ills to Hamilton’s postwar transformation into an automobile town, a change that enabled downtown residents to move to the suburbs and commute back to the core to work. Free parking in suburban malls and the absence of a critical mass of white collar workers in the downtown core capable of supporting downtown shops, he adds, were also key factors.^{xxi} Indeed, historian T. Melville Bailey has noted, postwar Hamilton settled its emerging ‘mountain’ suburbs so rapidly that its mountain population would increase by 12,000 between 1945 and 1952 alone.^{xxii} Moving to the mountain, historian John Weaver clarifies was a particularly attractive option for the European immigrant families who had built up commercial and residential properties in the city core. The mass migration, he adds, ultimately “[left] the Barton Street commercial and religious strip as a distant and shrinking anchor.”^{xxiii}

At the same time, Weaver explains, after the war most of Hamilton’s industrial sectors grew “static” or merely “inched forward,” a factor often obscured by steel’s continued and often innovative expansion during the period.^{xxiv} Citing “high land taxes,” Bailey notes, a dozen firms were in the process of leaving Hamilton by 1964, while others, among them Studebaker and Tuckett Tobacco Company, soon followed, taking with them countless jobs.^{xxv} Further, following a brief period of manufacturing stability and labour peace in the early 1970s,^{xxvi} Hamilton’s manufacturing base entered a second period of gradual yet persistent decline; between the early 1980s and the 1990s alone, Freeman accounts, manufacturing jobs declined by nearly half, from 63,030 to 32,030.^{xxvii} To make matters worse, the SPRC’s Sara Mayo and Mark Fraser would later note in their study *Incomes and Poverty and Hamilton*:

After the recession of the 1990s ... the nature of work, especially for men ... changed dramatically. Many of those laid off from industrial jobs were never able to find well paying, stable employment again as the labour market ... shifted to more temporary, precarious, low-paying service sector jobs.^{xxviii}

V

By the mid-1960s Hamilton’s political class, led by Mayor Victor Kennedy Copps, had unveiled its “dramatic” solution to downtown decline: what historian John Weaver has termed an “overly optimistic” and “massive urban renewal” program that failed to address the ongoing issue of Toronto’s vast “drawing power” as a rival metropolis.^{xxix} While Copps’ plan - whose implementation would necessitate levelling multiple blocks of historic downtown structures - might be regarded today as a cultural success (it delivered a new library, gallery and concert hall), it would also impose on the core what most regard today as a failed commercial hub (Lloyd D. Jackson Square).^{xxx} Though geographically peripheral, these developments proved disruptive and ultimately depressive for Beasley.

Charlie Mattina remembers well the demolitions and subsequent building of Jackson Square in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He and his family were by then living in a social housing complex, located at James Street North and Macaulay Street, on the edge of Beasley. It was, then as now, he insists, a very tough and tight-knit neighbourhood. There, he recalls, close friends were like brothers and essential to survival.

By the mid-1980s though, Charlie was ready to make a move to Hamilton Mountain, where he continues to live today. Securing work with a North York based pharmaceutical firm, he would commence many years of long highway commutes, and lose, for a time, his historic connection to Beasley.^{xxxi}

VI

By 2001, Bill Freeman explains in *Hamilton: A People's History*, a new consensus had emerged in Hamilton “that mega projects do not solve the problems of the inner city, and [that] new solutions ... [should] encourage small, incremental steps.” “The key,” he added, lay in “[bringing] more people downtown so that [the] area [could] become a more livable and safer neighbourhood.”^{xxxii} He would cite as concrete examples the LIUNA Station project, as well as the condominium-based repurposing of the Pigott, old *Spectator* and Royal Connaught buildings.^{xxxiii} While the city is still waiting, fifteen years later, for the Connaught project to finish, the condominium trend Freeman had flagged remains unquestionably the city’s dominant downtown ‘renewal’ trend.^{xxxiv}

The official backdrop to this, Maxted explains in *Community as Developer*, lay in the City of Hamilton’s 2001 secondary plan document “Putting People First: The New Land Use Plan for Downtown Hamilton,” its principles later extended and reinforced in the 2005 follow-up, “Setting Sail: Secondary Plan for West Harbour.” In part, both had been inspired by the increasingly palpable concern expressed in the late 1990s for the downtown core and what was increasingly referred to as Beasley neighbourhood. While the latter document focused on relocating heavy industry, redeveloping brownfields, improving public access to the harbour, promoting heritage, and strengthening existing neighbourhoods^{xxxv}, the former, Maxted notes, called for downtown to transition from surface parking, heavy industry and high-rise office spaces, to work/life oriented small offices and warehouse conversions.^{xxxvi} Notably, the latter document recognized, for perhaps the first time, the “distinct” challenges Beasley faced.^{xxxvii}

The spirit expressed in “Putting People First” would influence the grassroots orientation of the Hamilton Community Foundation’s (HCF) 2002 community building initiative, ‘Growing Roots-Strengthening Neighbourhoods’ (GRSN). “We believe that every neighbourhood has assets - people with ideas and strengths and skills to offer,” its webpage reads today, and “that residents know best what their neighbourhoods need.” The job of professionals, it adds, lies in helping residents build on existing strengths and in listening and being responsive and “[helping] their voices be heard.”^{xxxviii} In practice, Maxted explains in *Community as Developer*, the GRSN meant launching small-grant, high impact projects calculated to reduce poverty and increase vitality in vulnerable neighbourhoods by partnering community developers and local planning teams with residential leaders through the Neighbourhood Action Strategy.

It would almost certainly be as a result of this work that journalist Bill Dunphy would be able, four years later, to offer some good news in his otherwise grim January 2006 *Hamilton Spectator* Beasley profile. By then, he cautiously conceded, Beasley could be said to have acquired “a makeshift” Community Centre and status as “a real neighbourhood,” though both developments struck him as attributable to the self-conscious initiative of a mixed yet organized residents’ group. At the same time, Dunphy’s profile strongly suggested Beasley’s “distinct” challenges remained unresolved; amongst its roughly 5,000 residents unemployment stood at forty-five per cent while overall poverty rates remained two and a half times greater than comparable neighbourhoods. Beasley, in short, remained vulnerable and impoverished.^{xxxix}

Whether people with needs originally moved to the district to utilize its interconnected cluster of shelters, drop-in centres, clinics, thrift stores, and social agencies, or service providers originally clustered there to service a preexisting yet precarious population, remained, Dunphy added, an open question. Regardless, providers had assumed, on moving in, that only large scale service interventions

could be viable and fiscally sustainable. Despite all of these services, Beasley lacked a recognizable recreational infrastructure, including community based pools or arenas.^{xi}

VII

Later that year - or perhaps in the following one - Charlie found himself reconnecting with lower Hamilton for the first time in decades. A friend had purchased a fixer-upper near Gage Park and had invited him to pitch in. Charlie enjoyed working on the project so much he asked himself, once it was done, what he might do next?

After researching his options, he would decide to volunteer his time and skills with the Hamilton Community Foundation, which offered flexible scheduling and promised to draw on his existing skills. When he subsequently learned of the grassroots work the GRSN was doing to build vitality in Beasley – it had by then transformed its Neighbours for Neighbours group into the Beasley Neighbourhood Association (BNA)^{xii} - he enlisted enthusiastically in support of his former ‘hood. In particular, he was interested in supporting the BNA’s initiative to renovate and enliven the district’s Beasley Park.

Beasley’s biggest challenges revolved at the time around low incomes, inequality, and the rehabilitation of old and often neglected, abandoned, or contaminated, lots, the neighbourhood brimming over with fear and anger. Further, he would explain in interview, disenfranchised vulnerable people were regularly being shipped to Beasley, from points across the country.^{xiii}

Despite these and other issues, however, Charlie’s commitment to his home neighbourhood would prove unshakeable.

This has been Part 1 in a series by John A. McCurdy about Hamilton Community Land Trust’s organizational history. Part 2 will appear in the summer 2016 edition of the Hamilton Community Land Trust newsletter.

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ⁱ North End Neighbours website: <http://northendneighbours.blogspot.ca/>

ⁱⁱ Rob Fiedler, “Affordable housing growing in importance in Hamilton,” *Raise the Hammer*, November 23, 2015: https://www.raisethehammer.org/article/2763/affordable_housing_growing_in_importance_in_hamilton

ⁱⁱⁱ Hamilton Community Land Trust Launch booklet, April 2, 2014.

^{iv} Allison Maxted, *Community as Developer*, November 2013, pp. 11, 15, 19.

^v Ontario Land Trust Association website: <http://olta.ca/land-trust-members/>

^{vi} HCLT Backgrounder, November 5, 2015.

^{vii} Hamilton Community Land Trust Visioning Workshops: Summary of Results (March 2016), p. 3.

^{viii} Based on notes taken by the author at the event.

^{ix} Hamilton Community Land Trust Visioning Workshops: Summary of Results (March 2016), p. 7.

^x Samantha Craggs, “Province promises new rules to force more affordable housing,” *CBC Hamilton*, March 14, 2016:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/province-promises-new-rules-to-force-more-affordable-housing-1.3490120>

^{xi} Samantha Craggs, “Plan to sell North End lands seems like a done deal, residents say,” *CBC Hamilton*, February 26, 2016: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/plan-to-sell-north-end-lands-seems-like-a-done-deal-residents-say-1.3465159>

^{xii} Allison Maxted, *Community as Developer*, November 2013, p. 55.

^{xiii} Samantha Craggs, “Mayor hopes Ontario budget helps Hamilton’s affordable housing crunch,” *CBC Hamilton*, February 25, 2016: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/mayor-hopes-ontario-budget-helps-hamilton-s-affordable-housing-1.3464856>

^{xiv} Samantha Craggs, “Province promises new rules to force more affordable housing,” *CBC Hamilton*, March 14, 2016: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/province-promises-new-rules-to-force-more-affordable-housing-1.3490120>

^{xv} *Canadian Press*, “Affording housing budget commitment totals \$2.3 billion,” *Huffington Post Canada*, March 22, 2016: http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/03/22/affordable-housing-budget_n_9525606.html

^{xvi} Samantha Craggs, “Federal budget will give Hamilton more affordable housing, advocates say,” *CBC Hamilton*, March 22, 2016: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/federal-budget-will-give-hamilton-more-affordable-housing-advocates-say-1.3503112>

^{xvii} Robert L. Fraser, “Beasley, Richard,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 7 (University of Toronto Press), 1988, accessed on March 25, 2016: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/beasley_richard_7E.html

^{xviii} Bill Dunphy, “Beasley: Portrait of a Neighbourhood: This Isn’t Mr. Roger’s Neighbourhood,” *Hamilton Spectator*, January 28, 2006: <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/2209438-beasley-portrait-of-a-neighbourhood-this-isn-t-mr-rogers-neighbourhood/>

^{xix} Interview with Charlie Mattina, February 21, 2016.

^{xx} Bill Freeman, *Hamilton: A People’s History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers), 2001, pp. 156-157.

^{xxi} Bill Freeman, *Hamilton: A People’s History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers), 2001, p. 157.

^{xxii} T. Melville Bailey, *Hamilton: Chronicle of a City* (Windsor Publications [Canada] Limited), 1983, p. 103.

^{xxiii} John C. Weaver, *Hamilton: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers and National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada), 1982, p. 172.

^{xxiv} John C. Weaver, *Hamilton: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers and National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada), 1982, pp. 162, 164.

^{xxv} T. Melville Bailey, *Hamilton: Chronicle of a City* (Windsor Publications [Canada] Limited), 1983, p. 108.

^{xxvi} T. Melville Bailey, *Hamilton: Chronicle of a City* (Windsor Publications [Canada] Limited), 1983, p. 103.

^{xxvii} Bill Freeman, *Hamilton: A People’s History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers), 2001, p. 178.

^{xxviii} Sara Mayo and Mark Fraser, *Incomes and Poverty in Hamilton*, Social Planning and Research Council, April 2009: <http://www.wesleyurbanministries.com/cmfiles/Incomes%20and%20poverty%20in%20Hamilton%20-%20April%202009.pdf>

^{xxix} John C. Weaver, *Hamilton: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers and National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada), 1982, pp. 179, 191.

^{xxx} John C. Weaver, *Hamilton: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers and National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada), 1982, p. 179.

^{xxxi} Interview with Charlie Mattina, February 21, 2016.

^{xxxii} Bill Freeman, *Hamilton: A People’s History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers), 2001, p. 182.

^{xxxiii} Bill Freeman, *Hamilton: A People’s History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers), 2001, p. 182.

^{xxxiv} Lisa Marr, “Condo projects to transform Hamilton skyline,” *Hamilton Spectator*, August 9, 2014: <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4751562-condo-projects-to-transform-hamilton-skyline/>

^{xxxv} Allison Maxted, *Community as Developer*, November 2013, p. 42.

^{xxxvi} Allison Maxted, *Community as Developer*, November 2013, p. 42.

^{xxxvii} Allison Maxted, *Community as Developer*, November 2013, p. 42.

^{xxxviii} Hamilton Community Foundation, Strengthening Neighbours:

<http://hamiltoncommunityfoundation.ca/leadership/strengthening-neighbourhoods/>

^{xxxix} Teri Pecoskie, "Poverty Project: Beasley Neighbourhood in Transition – Then and Now," *The Hamilton Spectator*, October 29, 2015: <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/6060384-poverty-project-beasley-neighbourhood-in-transition-then-and-now/>

^{xl} Teri Pecoskie, "Poverty Project: Beasley Neighbourhood in Transition – Then and Now," *The Hamilton Spectator*, October 29, 2015: <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/6060384-poverty-project-beasley-neighbourhood-in-transition-then-and-now/>

^{xli} Allison Maxted, *Community as Developer*, November 2013, p. 14. One member of the original Beasley Neighbours for Neighbours group was Jeanette Eby, who in 2008 authored the McMaster University sponsored report *The Voices of Poverty in Hamilton: Mapping Community Relationships*: http://www.caledoninst.org/Special%20Projects/CG-COP/Docs/Voices_of_Poverty_in_Hamilton_-_Mapping_Community_Relationships.pdf. Another initiative from this period, maintained until late 2010, was the collaboratively authored blog *No Excuse: The Poverty Project*: <http://poverty.thespec.com/who.html>.

^{xlii} Interview with Charlie Mattina, February 21, 2016.