

PART FIVE

Cities as  
if Women  
Mattered:

a *La Voz*  
special series

# BEYOND DEVELOPMENT :

## Alternatives, Models, and Tactics

by Marisol Cortez

DEGROWTH

In the zero-sum game created by prevailing discussions of “economic development”, our critique of projects like Alamo Brewery and Hemisfair are positioned as entirely negative: anti-change, anti-growth. If you’re not for ‘economic development,’ you must be against change entirely. Yet our critique reaches beyond simple rejection in searching for a positive alternative to economic development as growth at any cost. What we want is to move from the kind of cancerous growth that characterizes “economic development” as historically practiced to the kind of growth that characterizes intact and healthy ecological systems.

This is a model of development based on cooperative social principles and bioregional inhabitation, which in recognizing the embeddedness of human economic activity within a complex network of relationships, takes care to nurture cultural as well as biodiversity. It is a kind of change that produces urban spaces protective of the various commons we depend on at the same time that it ensures these spaces are accessible to diverse publics.

In the final section of this series, I want to end by outlining concrete examples I’ve observed in the places I’ve lived which suggest the shape of what we ultimately want to see. What might it actually look like to exercise our right to the city and to respect the rights of nature? What tools and tactics, attempted here and elsewhere, are at our disposal? As I detail below before turning to concrete alternatives, the urban industrial model of growth and development cannot produce the kinds of social and ecological welfare we need, by its very nature.

## THE FANTASY OF GROWTH UNCHECKED BY DECOMPOSITION

In my last year of high school, I remember having to take a state-required course in government and economics. One of my strongest memories from that class was the visual model featured

in our economics textbook for gross domestic product, the metric used to measure a nation's economic welfare. Between an x and y axis that plotted production over time, GDP climbed ever upward—shakily, perhaps, perhaps with some regrettably major crashes along the way, but clawing its way forward and up, triumphant in ascendance. Or so it had been, and should be, in the best of all possible worlds. The purpose of an economy was to grow, we learned, to expand both production and consumption ad infinitum. That was health; that was social wellbeing.

And why? I wanted to know. Grow into what? To what ultimate purpose? No answer. Does not compute. Next question? Although I did not at the time have the background knowledge to pinpoint what exactly seemed crazy about measuring social welfare in this way, I knew there was something wrong with a model premised on the assumption of limitless growth and expansion.

Many years later, I find myself asking the same questions, albeit with the privilege of having had formal access to a community of ideas that has taught me to trust my earliest suspicions of a root illogic to the economy of grow-or-die. In an innovative book I've used in classes on the sociology of technology called *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Braungart write that from the early industrial revolution to the present-day context of global capitalism, "more, more, more—jobs, people, products, factories, businesses, markets—[has] seemed to be the rule of the day. ... Industrialists [have] wanted to make products as efficiently as possible and to get the greatest volume of goods to the largest number of people" (20-21).

McDonough and Braungart explain that there are two problems with this model of growth and development. First, it is a linear model, "focused on making a product and getting it to a customer quickly and cheaply without considering much else" (26). Second, this way of doing things as a result disconnects economic activity from the social and ecological systems on which it depends—a kind of unacknowledged reliance that feminist philosopher, Val Plumwood, calls the "backgrounding" of both nature and the labor of marginalized others (women, immigrants and other racialized laborers, workers broadly). Economic growth can only expand linearly and indefinitely if one writes off from the books the social and ecological costs of that growth. Profit only counts as such if it is unshadowed by and decoupled from catastrophe, on the one hand; and on the other, from the cyclic, ecological processes of growth and decay *to which it is still subject*, even as the scale of global economies obscures from easy perception these lines of connection. What we call "capital accumulation" is thus a kind of fantasy, of a growth that escapes the limits and laws of biological time. It is the fantasy of a surplus that does not rot, wealth freed from the worm and the moth, a permanent enclosure in perpetuity, a "life against death." The reality

**The tree is not an isolated entity cut off from the systems around it: it is inextricably and productively engaged with them. This is a key difference between the growth of industrial systems as they now stand and the growth of nature**

of our being eaten even as we eat, our inescapable immersion within a complex network of relationships with many more-than-human others.

*Whether we recognize it or not*: that this is the ruling fantasy does not make it so. And while our awareness of ecological embeddedness is finally catching up to the reality of our interdependence with earth others, "modern industries still operate according to paradigms that developed when humans had a very different sense of the world. Neither the health of natural systems, nor an awareness of their delicacy, complexity, and interconnectedness, have been part of the industrial design agenda" (26). At the same time, McDonough and Braungart push us beyond a simple critique of cost externalization, and toward more foundational questions: what *is* growth? What *is* economic development, anyway? While cancer has been the metaphor of choice for many critics of industrial models of growth, growth and development in other contexts is not necessarily a bad thing. Consider the growth of children, they suggest, or that of trees. Consider the cherry tree:

"As it grows, it seeks its own regenerative abundance. But this process is not single-purpose. In fact, the tree's growth sets in motion a number of positive effects. It provides food for animals, insects, and microorganisms. It enriches the ecosystem, sequestering carbon, producing oxygen, cleaning air and water, and creating and stabilizing soil. Among its roots and branches and on its leaves, it harbors a diverse array of flora and fauna, all of which depend on it and on one another for the functions and flows that support life. And when the tree dies, it returns to the soil, releasing, as it decomposes, minerals that will fuel healthy new growth in the same place. *The tree is not an isolated entity cut off from the systems around it: it is inextricably and productively engaged with them.*

*This is a key difference between the growth of industrial systems as they now stand and the growth of nature” (emphasis mine).*

What has been called “development,” then, might be more accurately recast as “maldevelopment,” as Devon Peña refers to it. However, the term “development” is so ideologically freighted that the prospect of reclaiming it along the lines advocated by McDonough and Braungart—even as “community development”—seems difficult. Within the wider public conversation on the benefits and externalities of “development,” there seems to exist no word as yet for what we want: a kind of development embedded reciprocally within surrounding biophysical and cultural diversity, a change that nurtures rather than destroys complex interdependencies (“solidarity economy,” “degrowth,” and “post-growth” come close, though.) In the absence of such a term, what are concrete examples of practices that seem to fit the bill, examples we might seed and cultivate locally? For if we can’t say what it is we want, we fall victim to being forever positioned as “against progress” or “against everything.”

## THERE ARE WAYS

Below, then, are projects I’ve seen in San Anto and other places that I’ve lived in that intrigue and inspire me—as much as possible in the words of those who have put them into practice. In general, returning housing, land, and labor to community hands and a cooperative decision-making process lies at the core of all three of these tactics.

## COOPERATIVES

According to a good friend who sits on the board of a local housing cooperative in Kansas, a co-op is a method of human organization based on cooperative principles. There are different kinds of co-ops, my friend explains, all of which have structures and decision-making processes that vary widely. In the U.S., some of the most popular and well-known cooperatives include credit unions and housing coops; organizing workplaces, food distribution systems, healthcare and utility provision along cooperative lines is not uncommon either. When I lived in the Canyon Lake area north of San Antonio, for instance, we got our telephone service and electricity from the largest telecommunications co-op in Texas, originally organized to electrify rural parts of the state. In Davis, California and Lawrence, Kansas, I frequently bought groceries from the local food cooperative, where as a member I was able to weigh in on the running of the store and received a share of any profits made. In San Antonio, I currently enact cooperative principles on the tiniest and most informal scale, sharing the costs and benefits of one vehicle with another household. We make up how the arrangement works as we go, but we decide together.

The idea, then, is hardly fringe or novel. As with the carshare set up, what co-ops primarily try to do is minimize the total resources needed in a society based on accumulation for a few (and thus on scarcity for many) by sharing the costs involved in ob-

taining and maintaining those resources. At the same time, a cooperative organization tries to organize decision making over resources in as equitable a fashion possible, leveling the hierarchies that structure most institutions within a society based on private property rights (bosses/workers, landlords/renters, corporations/consumers). As such, they are tools for making the resources required for survival—otherwise, less accessible because commodified—easier for the most vulnerable to obtain.

Here in San Antonio, one of longest running examples of cooperative principles in action is Fuerza Unida, a women’s sewing coop formed in the wake of the Levi’s plant closure in 1990. As Petra Mata explained to me, Fuerza did not begin as a co-op, but rather evolved along cooperative lines as their struggle for justice deepened over decades:



**Marisol:** *The first question is, would you describe Fuerza Unida as a cooperative? Or something different?*

**Petra:** Well, when we first started, we didn’t start with that visión; that came later, after four or five years, six years, I want to say. When Fuerza Unida was formed, it was for the rights of workers. We never thought that we would do a cooperative or sewing project; raising funds has always been an important factor of our organization.

When we started, it was about organizing workers, educating workers, those workers at the plants that closed later in 1994. There were 3 plants in San Antonio. Fuerza Unida worked to affect the closing of the 2 plants that closed after ours. Then we started to struggle a lot with funds. We started to look at other options like lim-

iting our efforts as Fuerza Unida because of the economic hardships we faced. So we started to look at sewing. When we started sewing we just made bed covers, cushions and curtains, pillows because Miller Curtain company had donated many fabric reams and fabric pieces to us. It was exciting at first; it felt really good. We were proud to be able to sew. This went on for a few years, 3, 4, 5 years, until we moved. We were on Zarzamora Street before. We’ve been in this building 17 years.

Then we saw that it wasn’t going anywhere. People didn’t buy a bed cover until theirs was super worn and we didn’t make any money. We had just one seamstress, and she was the one always there, plus me and Juanita and Viola like always. Then we met Lety; she needed a job and we hired her. She would get very frustrated, though, just doing that. She would say, Petra, why don’t we start making clothes? And she started to make little dresses, a blouse, a little dress, a little vest. And we all just loved them! And so we started to make them. We hired more seamstresses and it was going well, we were making money and for a time, we had up to 4 or 5 seamstresses. Our garments sold well at Pulquerios

on Alamo.

So, after 10 years, we did a small fashion show with a line of linen garments: a dress, a skirt and a blouse and that was it, very limited. Then we added the guayabera and that has sold very well. So we're still in that process of deciding do we go with a cooperative, or is it a sewing project or will it be separate from Fuerza Unida in the future? We're trying to figure out what will be better for Fuerza Unida and for our community. Because our purpose is to cre-

separate business. That's the difference. A business that would create income but separate. But for me, when we started as a grassroots organization, we felt that a cooperative would have more impact because it would be community. Fuerza Unida is community; we wanted to start a cooperative where community would participate, where women feel important. That it wouldn't be just like any job like at Levi's or some other business, but something where they would feel, "this is mine.

other countries like China, Japan, Honduras where they pay so little and workers are abused. So, we're very conscious of all of the injustices that occur in the market when companies make their product in other countries.

**Marisol:** *What have the larger challenges been?*

**Petra:** Well, sometimes we stop and think, the competition is too great. For example, sometimes people come and say, "Oh,



... as we make our garments, we try to educate our customers. We let them know that our products are made by women earning a fair wage ...

ate jobs; create more jobs for our people. For example, people older than maybe 50, who can't find another job elsewhere, can come and work with us, as long as they sew. Because the sewing project is becoming very important and very popular.

**Marisol:** *So what is the role that cooperative principles have played in your history?*

**Petra:** I think the cooperative is the best way for Fuerza Unida. For me a woman's cooperative where they themselves can be the owners of their work, is super important. And that is what, for years, we've dreamed of accomplishing and like I told you before, I don't know if that's the best goal for Fuerza Unida, the most beneficial, but in our history, a cooperative has been the model we want to present to our communities.

**Marisol:** *What are the differences between a coop of workers and a union? For those that don't know....*

**Petra:** For Fuerza Unida, it would be a

This is what I created. This is what I with my efforts am developing in order to better things and grow here in San Antonio."

**Marisol:** *What have been the biggest benefits of a cooperative structure?*

**Petra:** The only thing we used to know how to sew was pants, parts of pants. The benefits for us and our pride more than anything, has been learning how to create something else, and that women can make their own clothes. Unlike when you go to the store and you buy something, you take it home and it's too short or too long, or too tight. We're able to create custom fit work; we make our own patterns and you can see the happiness in our customers' faces when they feel good about how the garment fits them. And they're made by women, by women working for just wages, for better treatment as workers; and we also want to be acknowledged by people, by the city, so that clothes made in the U.S. is encouraged and we can keep our jobs here and not continue going to

I could get a guayabera for \$8, \$10 at Walmart"; "Oh, I could buy this purse at the dollar store." How can we begin to compete with that model?! Additionally, as we make our garments, we try to educate our customers. We let them know that our products are made by women earning a fair wage and that are treated well like they're at home where they're free to get up and go to the restroom or have something to eat, to leave if they have personal things to take care of. So that's been one of the bigger challenges, most difficult to address, is having to compete. ... And at the same time when they come for us to make their garments, we explain who we are and what our goals are, that way they're conscious that they're not going to buy our things just for nothing. We're not in Mexico, we're not in China. And some people leave and I say, too bad.

**Marisol:** *And this building here, do you own it in common or do you pay rent to a landlord?*

**Petra:** Here, we pay rent, but we would like the city to give us one for less monthly, or loan one to us so that Fuerza Unida can grow. What we pay for rent, we could use it for something else, like machinery, for the people. So that's all we ask, for the city to help us, because we are doing important work for the community and especially here in this part of the city. It's difficult because people want good and cheap things in this area of the city.

**Marisol:** *Are there programs in the city to encourage cooperatives? Most incentives for "economic development" seem to be for large outside investors, not small scale community-run businesses.*

**Petra:** Cooperatives in San Antonio are barely emerging. We call ourselves a cooperative, but in reality [it's difficult because], people need to earn money to buy things, pay bills, and earn a salary to do this. But because of our present economy, it is difficult, because people want to know how much they will earn. And we can't guarantee every week, because we don't know how much we will sell, so if the new pants line sells well, we can decide if we will be a cooperative or a business.

**Marisol:** *For others who are interested in beginning a cooperative of their own, where do you start? What do we need to know?*

**Petra:** First of all, there are many small details in a cooperative. It's a process that is difficult; you have to first organize the group, and talk to others who have formed coops. Of course, first of all is to get the people, but it is difficult because everyone needs to earn a little, and a coop is not a sure thing; we would need to have a market to sell for real. For example, every week we will sell 100 pairs of pants, so that if we know we need to make like 200 pairs, we would need like 10 people to buy. And if we make \$1000, then first we pay electricity, machinery, and what is left, \$500, that's what you're going to get. So [those involved] have to work themselves as a secretary too; that's the view that we have. Just get together and talk

about it; we already have 10 years doing it.

People have called us from Houston, Dallas, I remember when one teacher from California called us because she wanted to talk with us about how we began. Our project has developed so that many people are inspired. Because many have started but their projects have not worked; sometimes you have to put everything together--how to treat people, how you do things. We try not to play roles, like boss/employee, instead we try to get involved in everything.

## PERMACULTURE

Indian physicist and feminist ecophilosopher Vandana Shiva has argued powerfully that the hallmark of capitalism as an economic system has been its twin destruction of both cultural and bio diversity--the creation of a culture of "monocultures and monopolies." "The politics of diversity that combine the cultural and ecological aspects," she writes, "is the really subversive alternative of our time."

*Permaculture* is the collective name for a variety of practices of "permanent agriculture" or "permanent culture" that attempt to realize these values, seeking a form of human socioeconomic organization that works with rather than against nature. Distinguishing permaculture principles from the values and assumptions that underlie extractive economies, Bill Mollison writes, "A basic question that can be asked in two ways is: 'What can I get from this land, or person?' or 'What does this person, or land, have to give if I cooperate with them?'"

In a conversation I had with Sister Elise García, one of the founders of the Sisterfarm Santuario outside Boerne, we discussed how Sisterfarm was conceived as a space that modeled permaculture ethics and practices:



You have to have a good way of interacting with people.

**Marisol:** *So are decisions within the organization made cooperatively, too?*

**Petra:** Yes, like Lety has so much experience, 30 years of sewing; she is creative that way. She puts out images, and we learn through her decisions about sewing. So we have to make her feel important. Communication is very important--not like, I'm the director and I have more power than you; you have your own power, too.

**Elise:** So the history of Santuario Sisterfarm is, we--Carol Coston, who's another [Adrian] Dominican sister--actually, she's the founding director of Network, the Nuns on the Bus organization in 1971--she and I moved to Texas in 1992 and got this place out in the Hill Country just north of Boerne, and lived there[.] ... This was quite a ways back. ... [In] 2001-2002, we established, with Maria [Berriozábal] as the third founding partner, Santuario Sisterfarm, which would be an organization that was dedicated to cultivating diversity--biodiversity and cultural diversity--as a way to promote peace in our world. Peace between or among diverse peoples and peace between peoples and earth, because we've been in this sort of divisive role in terms of a sense of separation from earth, instead of saying, we are *of* earth and *from* earth. But humans have been acting as if we were somehow plopped down here from outer space, and are just sort of using the planet as a backdrop. So to really link those two, we were drawing inspiration from the Indian physicist and ecologist Vandana Shiva ... [who] wrote that the greatest threat to peace in our time is an intolerance of diversity. ... So, drawing on that, we set out to create at Santuario Sisterfarm a sanctuary for people to come where we could experience together a different form of living in relationship with earth and with one another. And so we started by employing ... practices of permaculture to those seven acres of land that we were living on. And living

<https://thisbridgecalledcyberspace.net>  
 transformation of consciousness  
 begins with each individual, and then  
 it spreads out from that . . .

with. . . And then, in terms of cultivating cultural diversity, we established a women's press called Sor Juana Press, dedicated to publishing the works of women of color and women religious on topics related to earth and spirituality. And then we also had programs of different sorts, where women could come, especially Latina women from the city, to—just to have a breathing space, really, and a place of connecting with ancestral roots to the land.

**Marisol:** *Can you tell me a little bit more about what you said about permaculture? What does that mean? What kind of practices did you actually do at Sisterfarm that were examples of permaculture?*

**Elise:** Well, the ethics and the values of permaculture are earth care, people care, and fair share. And Carol Coston was the primary person to head up that effort. But among the things that we did was we always looked to—trying to imitate and carefully observe nature as a model for how to proceed in terms of plantings and what to plant and how to plant, so that—you know, the modern agriculture practices are ones of monoculture, where you have the same crop covering acres and acres of land. And in permaculture you would have companion planting; you would really look at the way nature—nature abhors a vacuum, so you would be ensuring that you're following the practices of nature in terms of how to plant. Having different layers of plantings, different types of plants together, having edible landscapes rather than simply beautiful landscapes. Of course, they would be beautiful with what it was that you're planting, but also edible. So we would look to see whatever fruit trees or other kinds of plants that we could grow that had qualities that would provide for food and for nourishment or healing. So those are some of the practices where you're really looking at—as with nature, there are abundant purposes to every being, particularly in the plant world. So, really, becoming more familiar with that and trying to implement that. So we used keyhole gardens, we used geothermal heating and cooling, we used water catchment practices, using a rain catchment system, and drip irrigation. . . . We also tried to apply another out of nature's teachings, which is there is no waste in nature.

And so we composted everything that we could and had composting toilets as well, and really tried to apply those practices of living as much in harmony as we could with our surroundings, and learning from what was from the bioregion in which we were living.

**Marisol:** *How can we apply these principles in our everyday lives? How can we make them more widespread, as opposed to simply in the context of a community that's more intentional? Because I guess what I struggle with is, is the solution one of trying to transform the institutions that enact the values that are destroying life? Or is the solution to try to operate from this different value set and create these very small-scale alternatives? Or both? I mean, it's not as if they're mutually exclusive. But how can we use these principles to also challenge the big structural institutions and powers that be that are keeping us from not being a permaculture, being a culture of disposability and destruction and monoculture?*

**Elise:** I think that you're right in saying that it doesn't have to be either/or. In fact, I think both are necessary. And I think that different people have different skills that can be brought to bear in terms of trying to change structures. But ultimately we all know that what we're talking about is a huge transformation of consciousness, and that was the work that we were about. And that transformation of consciousness begins with each individual, and then it spreads out from that. So that's why I was saying that I think creating models of other ways of being is really important, because that has its own integrity. And so to the extent that—whether it's an *organization* that's able to model a different way of being, or an *individual* that's able to model a different way of being, I think that there's something very profound about that. And it's creating—again, I keep saying this, it's





<https://www.sisterfarm.org>  
 ... it's like breathing  
 space on earth for a different  
 way of being ...

like a breathing space on earth for a different way of being. And I think that until that is created, it's very difficult to then bring about transformation of major institutions that have been—you know, as they've

been for decades if not centuries or millenia. So we need constantly to be creating and living and modeling these alternatives at the same time that we stand as an alternative in the presence of the status quo that is so deadly to planet and peoples.

**Marisol:** *What was it that, in terms of the history of Sisterfarm, made it unable to continue? Why did it close?*

**Elise:** Well, Carol was in her mid 70s, and I was in my early 60s, and the two of us—I had joined the Dominican sisters here late in life, but felt—I am among the younger ones in this community and just felt a real obligation to come and provide [care].

... That was the main reason behind it. And we were always struggling for resources, but our hope was that somebody might have been able to continue the ministry there, but we weren't able to get that to work out. So that's one of the reasons why we've kept the website going [www.sisterfarm.org], 'cause that still offers a model of the different practices.

**Marisol:** *What I hear you say is that, just because the space closed, that just means that we need to create those models, and multiply them, and keep them going. I never got to visit Sisterfarm; I think I was leaving town for Kansas right as it was closing, but just knowing that that work was done has always been*



*deeply inspiring to me.*

**Elise:** I think that's the key piece, is that it's not about any one particular place. And many people were doing this. We were just one. But I think that we were trying to bring in some spiritual values in terms of a real sense of connectedness to mother earth. And different people live that differently. But I think it is that sense of how we influence one another as each one of us enters into a transformed consciousness, a transformed sense of awareness that I am *of* this earth, I arose, I am part of this 14 billion year process of unfolding. And we are the latest edge of that cosmic unfolding. And we are giving expression to a new way of being, of awareness of that. It's the first time humans have been aware of that. At least in terms of the scientific story; we also have all of our myths and our stories that come from different cultural traditions that we honor as well. But it's—this is a huge piece for us to be coming into awareness about. So we're living in a very privileged time in that sense, but also in a very perilous time, where what we do as individuals and groups and communities is absolutely pivotal. And so in that sense, each one of us counts. And as one organization closes, another one will open. And as the spirit of somebody who dies lives on in others who capture some sense of that spirit and express it in their own unique ways. And all of that's part of the wonderful diversity of life that we want to keep cultivating.

## COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS

One concrete way to make principles of cooperation and permaculture more accessible is through a tool called community land trusts (CLTs), a cooperative structure that changes relationships to land from one of private ownership to management in common.

As such, a CLT can be a way to scale up (or multiply) projects like Sisterfarm Santuario, as well as their more frequent use in urban areas to resist forces of gentrification and displacement by creating a reserve of permanently affordable housing. As Kalima Rose from Policylink describes them, CLTs “take real estate off the speculative market and ensure long-term affordability for renters, low-income homeowners, community arts and nonprofit institutions, and community-centered businesses.” According to the Northern Communities Land Trust of Duluth, Minnesota, CLTs own the land in common and lease to those owning buildings on the land; in that way, they “help low and moderate income families benefit from the equity built through homeownership, and at the same time preserve the affordability of these homes so that future residents will have the same affordable homeownership opportunities. How do we do this? First, by owning the land, CLTs are able to greatly reduce the initial housing cost to the potential buyer. Second, the land lease contains a resale provision which ensures that if the house is sold, it goes to another low or

moderate income person.” It would be an understatement to describe CLTs as an underutilized tool locally. Upon investigation, I discovered that not only are there no existing CLTs in San Antonio, but that there are no active CLTs in the entire state of Texas (the National Community Land Trust lists three in Austin and one in Houston; however, only one of those listed includes contact information. Upon contacting this listing, I discovered the program to be apparently defunct.) To gather more first-hand information from

ties for the city to be involved, and for her position to have influence in being able to grow more food and have healthier food security. And so she started talking to city officials and city staff to see what would be possible. And this is what came out of it. And it started last year that they went through kind of a selection process, and each year they’re going through and selecting more properties, based off of if they’re vacant or underutilized, if they have access to water, if they have a known history to them so they don’t have soil

ture of the local government, right?

**Jason:** Yeah. Definitely.

**Marisol:** So the CLT in Lawrence can be a number of different kinds of projects. And the community orchard is just one of those ideas. Is that right?

**Jason:** Right. Exactly. Some of the other ones - there’s a list of them on [http://www.lawrenceks.org/common\\_ground](http://www.lawrenceks.org/common_ground). There’s a garden incubator that’s in North Lawrence that’s more like a community garden for that area, but it also invites other people who want to start scaling up, going into more production. And there’s a few of the community gardens which is the standard one. There’s one that’s linked up to the Johnson County Community College student farm; they have a plot here, and then they operate it and try to teach students the entire process of planting it and then making sales. And then there’s the newest one which is an incubator farm that they kind of split into individual sections for farmers who wanna start scaling up who don’t have land themselves.

**Marisol:** And is it the case that because it came out of the Food Policy Council that most of these projects are garden or farming projects? Because I know that in a lot of other cities, CLTs are used for affordable housing.

**Jason:** Yeah, this one in particular was started with healthy food production in mind. And so it hasn’t branched out to that [housing], or like if it was a different program it would be more along those lines, but—yeah.

**Marisol:** So what do you see as the advantages of CLTs?

**Jason:** Well, [it avoids] a lot of the kind of control where one person or one small group has a hard time either purchasing, or even if they own a small piece of land, they might get bullied or bought

## ...not only are there are no existing CLTs in San Antonio, but ...there are no active CLTs in the entire state of Texas”

those with direct experience with CLTs, then, I spoke with Jason Hering, another friend in Kansas who has helped use CLTs to pilot a community orchard, among other projects:

**Marisol:** Tell me your experience with using community land trusts.

**Jason:** My experience--there’s been two parts. [First is] living on the land that [our mutual friend] Kelly lives on, Kelly Kindscher. I think that’s considered a CLT within that group on a really small scale. They set it up like a township when they bought it back in the 70s, I think. And I kinda view that as a similar thing, where everybody owns an individual house on it, but they own the land together and pay different prices and make some decisions together. Like if they want to get on rural water or there’s some development happening, then they decide what they want to say to the commission. So I lived there, and then the Common Ground Community Garden program that started last year.

**Marisol:** Tell me about that program, and the story of how it got started and how they set it up?

**Jason:** So, Eileen Horn is [the city of] Lawrence’s sustainability coordinator. She’s on the Food Policy Council with me, and once she jumped into the job she was starting to look for further opportuni-

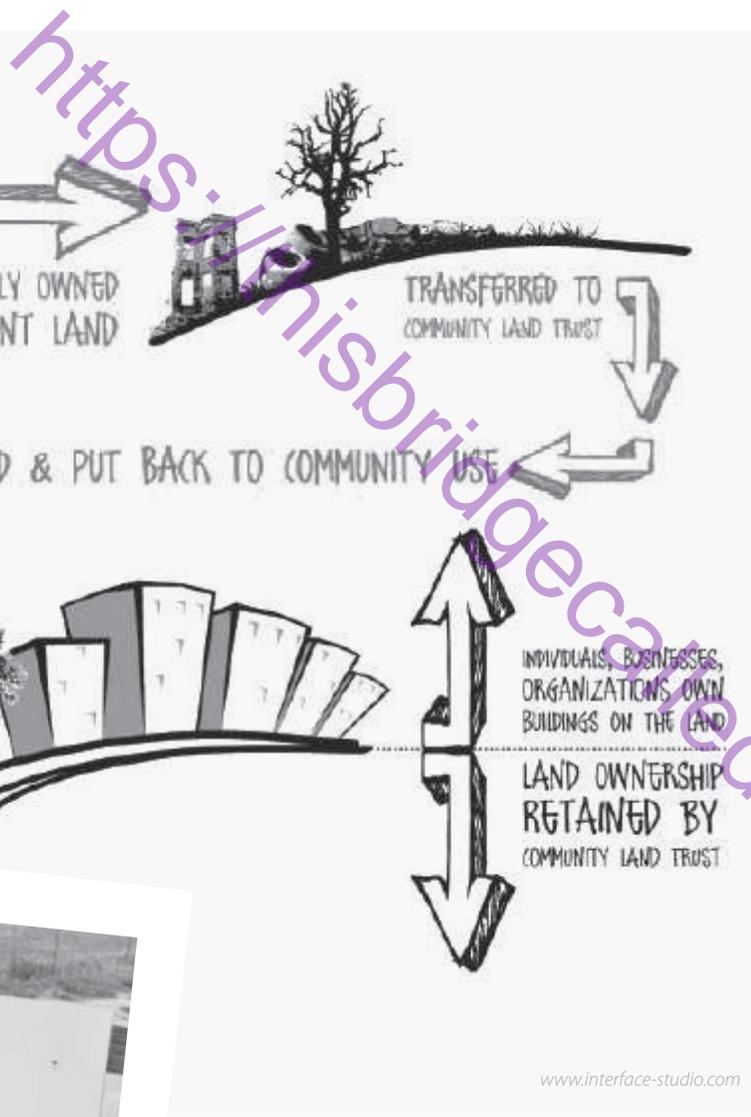
contaminants. They go through these different categories and for the ones they find that they think are good enough, they offer them to the public for groups or citizens to apply to use them.

**Marisol:** So it sounds like it’s a process that originated with somebody who was already familiar with CLTs as a tool within the city government? Like, it didn’t come from the community being like, “Oh, hey, City of Lawrence, we want to organize a community land trust”?

**Jason:** Well, I think several people approached her and it kinda came up on Food Policy Council, which has farmers and other people that were interested in that kind of idea, finding more accessible land for growing food in town. And she kinda took that question and went around and tried to find other examples of it. And I think the one she found was a municipal land leasing program similar to that in Cleveland. I don’t know the name of that one. And so I think once she had someone ask her or enough pressure to find out what she was able to do, with that she kind of researched and found what was possible, and helped create it.

**Marisol:** But the community basically had an ally within local government who was willing to take their idea forward and figure out how it would work within the struc-





out by a development firm or an individual developer or the city. And so just hav-

ing a group where they're trying to cooperate to save the land seems to make sense in terms of having more power and control over their ability to protect it and decide together what the community wants to use it for.

**Marisol:** And what do you see as the biggest challenge with that kind of model of common decision-making, common ownership over land specifically?

**Jason:** Sometimes it's the policies or just the group dynamics that form, especially at the beginning. A lot of them would be longer term arrangements, and with any longer term arrangement, the main thing that comes to mind are conflicts relating

to personality clashes or not enough things decided upon early on, like set up times, creating the bylaws, creating how things work, and what the expectations are for people.

**Marisol:** Yeah, I've actually been thinking a lot about that, 'cause I do this carshare arrangement with my friend. And just how sharing resources—the same thing that is the advantage of it is also the difficult thing about it, which is that you're sharing something. So you have to talk to people a lot, you know? Like if any problems arise, you have to figure it out together. It's a kind of model that has potential for a lot of conflict, but also for developing skills in how to figure out conflicts.

**Jason:** Yeah. It forces you to deal with and work through problems, because you're in this together with another group.

**Marisol:** And it's made me think about the flip side of that, which is that the dominant way of doing things, of owning things privately - that the corollary to that is a high

level of social isolation or alienation. In some ways, private ownership is—it's just yours, so you don't have to interact. As a model, it doesn't presume any kind of social ties to community. But my next question is, how can communities use CLTs as a tool to resist developer-driven decision-making around land use? So not just to use CLTs as an alternative to the existing system, but to actually push back or challenge that system and transform it?

**Jason:** Let's see. I know, in my mind, similar to a neighborhood association, which is a much more relaxed and less influential kind of system that a lot of cities already have—[nonetheless,] they are capable of, when there's a large development project going through, they can rally and talk to the city and be the voice of the residents of this place. When there's a project that almost the entire neighborhood association votes against, usually that's heard and there are changes that are made. And the first time there was a development project that was going in downtown for a seven-story hotel, when everything around it is two or three stories, and it butts up right against a residential neighborhood—the neighborhood association completely voted it down. And the city decided to ignore that, and that was a big first time.

And so coming up with alternatives to challenge those systems seems like an important one, because this one [neighborhood association] is kind of loose and relaxed and it's harder to get everyone on board in that kind of system. But with a community land trust, that group of people has a lot of say and just is another power bloc that can exist within a neighborhood association. Or, they can be their own power bloc, they can kinda pull resources, and then if something's going in, they can try to buy the properties around that area or expand their area to make sure their neighbors can't be bought out that way. There's less risk in one family saying yes, and then that being the ability for the landowner, the developer, to try to make the project happen. [Because] once they start there then it's easier for land value to go down and living quality to go down in the area, so just to have everybody on board in a large chunk like that seems very possible. Especially in a larger city. Like, Lawrence is harder to do, but like in Cleveland and maybe in San Antonio, where there's chunks of the area that—you kinda hear about it before it happens. You hear that there's interest

in developing in that area. So before anything surfaces where land prices are cheaper—if you give the people that are living there in a larger city—like, take an entire city block or something. And if people living there had the option of selling to a developer or selling to their neighbors, or just buying into this larger thing, it might be a much easier thing to say, you're still going to get money from it if you're interested in selling, but you don't have to sell to this developer. And here's the reasons why we can offer that it would be better than selling to the developer.

**Marisol:** *That's awesome. Because yeah, we've talked about how, all around the periphery of downtown, there's this move to gentrify and for developers to come in and create housing, condos, and high rises; and, you know, they might set aside some affordable housing units, but they're just maybe like 10 out of 100 units or something like that, and it's not even that affordable. And, that's in addition to all of the neighborhood changes happening because those developments are moving into spaces that are historically residential and historically more working class areas. And so I think, one of the questions I wanted to end with is just, okay, let's say people are interested in that kind of model as a way to push back against those forces. Where do we start? How do people with not a lot of resources to begin with come together to organize a CLT for their neighborhood?*

**Jason:** Gotcha. Yeah, I was just looking up a couple things. There is a National Community Land Trust Network [www.cltnetwork.org]; it's an umbrella thing that helps other CLTs start up. And I just started looking into them, and they have training and technical assistance for trying different things, but there are also conferences and online free resources, a variety of ways where you can either tap into or find out how others fundraise for purchasing the first area or purchasing together or just being part of this national framework. And then, depending on what you find out from that, usually there's a fundraising element, whether it's a community-driven one, or just the neighbors themselves who have houses, and you gain capital by putting down payments on things. Yeah—because I haven't seen too many start up; there's none around here that I know of. Except for the co-op houses, which are a somewhat similar model, where an organization owns the houses, and then they rent out the properties and then everybody decides things for those properties together, and decides how they spend maintenance money that's pooled together on major projects and those kinds of thing. But then, we just had to find out, make contact with the university that we bought a house from for a dollar, and it's really just networking and finding some properties that make it feasible for whatever amount of money you have.

**Marisol:** *Was there anything else you wanted to add or ask me?*

**Jason:** I remember you were talking about cooperative workplaces and other things in larger cities, and how that might be different [from smaller places like Lawrence]. And I remember going to conferences and hearing about this one in particular, and I went

In the end,  
these solutions are  
less prescriptions  
than they are  
intimations  
of what  
could be.

and found it, and it's called Evergreen Cooperative.

It's also up in Cleveland, Ohio. They're creating like large-scale businesses. They had a number of 'em. Like Evergreen Cooperative Laundry, and Energy Solutions, which is an alternative energy [coop], and the newest one I think is Green City Growers coop, which is a large-scale downtown hydroponic food production facility. And they're owned and started by people of the community, in neighborhoods that are running down or that businesses have already left and there's almost no jobs. And they concentrate on that, and they concentrate on what they call anchor institutions. Like, the institutions that, as long as there's some people around, there will be those that exist.

Either a university or more likely a hospital, I think is the one that they largely work with. And they go work with those anchor institutions that they know are gonna stay there; they're not going to be fickle or might not be there in a year. They work out an arrangement with them; they say, we're trying to find more jobs here, and we're trying to meet price points for you. So let's create an arrangement for, who do you do laundry with right now?

## WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL ABOUT PRINCIPLES OF PERMACULTURE AND COOPERATION

is that the goals of returning land, water, and sky to common protection and stewardship are inherently coupled with the goals of both economic justice—distributing resources more equitably—and procedural justice, or fair and equal access to the political process that determines vital questions over the use of and relation to the commons. In the end, these solutions are less prescriptions than they are intimations of what could be. If we take seriously Daniel Wildcat's argument that what we need is "indigenuity"—or, perhaps, *intelligente*—then the solution will be found in particular constellations of local nature-culture relations; they will emerge from particular community needs, desires, and engagements within particular places and locales. This is a politics ultimately without guarantees, then, open-ended beyond the imperative to act. As Maria Berriozabal frequently reminds me: *we are called on not to be effective, but faithful.* ■

*Note: The Fuerza Unida interview, conducted in Spanish, was translated into English by Jessica O. Guerrero and Carlos Cortez.*

*Bio: Marisol Cortez attempts to inhabit the impossible interstices between academic and activist worlds. She works primarily on issues of environmental justice as a creative writer, community organizer and liberation sociologist. Email her with thoughts at [cortez.marisol@gmail.com](mailto:cortez.marisol@gmail.com).*