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Decommodifying Housing in Los Angeles County

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Decommodifying Housing in Los Angeles County

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Issue

Decommodified housing is housing that no longer generates profit or acts as a vehicle for investment. In Los Angeles, the Housing Movement Lab is a coalition of housing justice organizations co-led by the Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) with a long-term goal to decommodify 20% of housing units in L.A. by 2050. Their vision is for “all poor, working class, and people of color in Los Angeles County to live in high quality housing that is affordable and within stable, healthy, resilient, accessible, and vibrant communities.”

The process of decommodifying housing includes acquisition of a property and the ongoing ownership model. While there are a variety of ownership models, this project focuses on four property types — congregation-owned land, publicly owned land, naturally occurring affordable housing, and expiring affordability covenants — asking: What are feasible property sources in Los Angeles County for decommodified housing?

Study Approach

The researcher conducted a quantitative analysis to estimate the potential unit yield from each of the four property sources using publicly available datasets. This was followed by a feasibility analysis based on five criteria: cost, scalability, community control, process barriers, and political will. Using interviews with tenant organizers, housing nonprofits, developers, and planners, the researcher ranked each criterion as favorable, unfavorable, or neutral (Table 1).

Key Findings

Cost and Scalability

Overall, each property source is either favorable or neutral for cost and scalability. The costs are compared relative to the new construction of an affordable housing development, which can cost over \$500,000 per unit in Los Angeles. Each property

Table 1.

Feasibility Matrix Results

	Cost	Scalability	Community Control	Process Barriers	Political Will
Congregation-Owned Land	Neutral	Neutral	Unfavorable	Favorable	Favorable
Publicly Owned Land	Favorable	Favorable	Neutral	Unfavorable	Unfavorable
Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing	Favorable	Favorable	Favorable	Unfavorable	Neutral
Expiring Affordability Covenants	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Unfavorable	Unfavorable

source produces or preserves housing in a way that is less than or significantly less than new construction. The unit analysis revealed the potential to scale each strategy far beyond existing efforts, with publicly owned land and naturally occurring affordable housing yielding the largest number of units.

Community Control

Congregation-owned land is ranked as unfavorable due to current reliance on the traditional affordable housing development process, which does not provide community ownership or tenant autonomy. Naturally occurring affordable housing is most favorable for community control due to current efforts by community land trusts to purchase affordable properties and preserve them within the trust. Publicly owned land has multiple pathways with differing levels of community control. Expiring affordability covenants have a spectrum of strategies upon expiration — a mission-driven housing nonprofit could choose to extend the affordability covenants or tenants can pressure the city to use eminent domain and convert the building to resident ownership.

Process Barriers and Political Will

Overall, political will and process barriers were unfavorable for these property sources. Decommodified housing strategies are not mainstream and financial, state, and nonprofit infrastructure do not exist or are not compatible with alternative housing ownership. Removing these process barriers also requires the political will to enact the changes. Shifting political will among elected officials, government staff, and in the general public will require a dedicated campaign to change the narrative from housing as a commodity to housing as a human right.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the unit analysis and feasibility matrix analysis, the following recommendations for strategy and policy advocacy are presented for each property type.

Congregation-Owned Land

- » Create a congregational zoning overlay for housing development.
- » Create a congregational community land trust.

Publicly Owned Land

- » Create a countywide inventory of public land suitable for housing development.
- » Investigate water district-owned land as a potential property source.

Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing

- » Pass a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA).
- » Extend the Los Angeles County Community Land Trust Pilot Program.

Expiring Affordability Covenants

- » Create a database of affordability covenant expiration dates.
- » Research strategies for expiring covenants beyond eminent domain.

For More Information

Harper, L. (2022). The Movement to Decommodify Housing: Property Sources for Non-Speculative Housing in Los Angeles County (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6234k8cb>.