

UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY

# **West Hill Neighborhood Conditions Assessment**

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An analytical look into West Hill's housing stock and existing conditions

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**12/13/2012**

## **Abstract**

The following report explores a portion of West Hill’s housing stock conditions through qualitative and quantitative measures. The divulgence of problems reveals ongoing issues plaguing the community. An in-depth analysis reveals broader implications and suggestions on how to amend ongoing issues. Teams were assigned designated areas in the West Hill neighborhood in Albany, New York to observe and document the condition of the properties. Data was subsequently entered into a public database and reports were generated to establish severity and clusters of problems in the area. Overall, properties designated as “no problems” were generally clustered together with few other problems in the direct vicinity with minimal severity. Observations of bad sidewalks and crosswalks, graffiti and scratchiti were associated with vacant lots and abandoned buildings. Information disseminated from this analysis can be used by the Arbor Hill Development Corporation to prioritize and mobilize people to invest in this well-deserving neighborhood with a focus on the regions where the most severe problems are clustered.

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## West Hill- An Assessment of the Built Environment

### *Introduction*

Community development has been attempting to transform the lives of people for years throughout the United States. Communities arise by the relationships between people in a given area, usually confined by the place they are located in. Community development occurs when the conditions of surviving and thriving are not being supplied by enough private, public, or social capital (DeFlippis and Saegert, 2012). Neighborhood assessments are important for community development because quality of the built environment is a good indicator of the pulse of a community. Neighborhood assessments give developers, corporations, and community organizations quantitative data to disseminate into a plan of action for neighborhood revitalization.

Neighborhood assessments are an excellent tool to get data from a particular region, as stated before, however, they are largely subjective to the person who is taking the assessment and can often be hard to align with the interests of the community and the investors. Community capacity of an area needs to be determined before any revitalization project can occur. To determine community capacity you need participation, leadership, problem assessment, resource mobilization, and finally program management (Mohamad, et. Al, 2012). Community Development Corporations are an excellent tool for revitalizing low- and moderate- income communities, like West Hill in Albany (Dandridge, N. and Dandridge, A, 2011). We are in the problem assessment phase of assessing community capacity.

The neighborhood of West Hill in Albany, New York has been selected because of its potential successful development through financial reinvestment, poverty deconcentration, and eagerness of the local community. Financial reinvestment is important to get public and private businesses and local and state money back into that area which will create jobs and hopefully revitalize the area. Poverty concentration will be alleviated if we spread out the money in Albany, make investing in West Hill a necessity, making that small area of less impacted with financial burden. What used to be a beautiful area of brownstone houses, public parks and recreation, and thriving businesses has become an area that is largely rundown, unsafe, and undesirable to live in. Key to the success of this area will be wealth creation through housing and business development and increasing public safety.

This paper will explore the observed properties of the West Hill area of Albany. Beginning with looking at the data disseminated from all 4 regions of West Hill and focusing on the problems in the areas and where they are clustered. Following will be a focus on the area of our designated group, Team 4, which encompasses the area from Second Street to the North, North Lake Street to the East, Clinton Avenue to the South, and Ontario Street to the West. This paper will conclude with a discussion of the observed problems and suggestions for Arbor Hill Development Corporation to improve the area.

### ***Background***

Albany, New York is the capital of New York State. Albany is Located about 130 miles North of New York City. According to the United States Census Bureau (USCB) Albany County has an estimated population of 298,000 while the city of Albany has a population of about 94,000

people (USCB, 2010). According to 2010 Department of Health (DOH) data the average household income was \$59,245 and 12.3% of people lived below the poverty line (DOH, 2011).

West Hill is a neighborhood embedded in the city of Albany that is distinctively its own community. The area of West Hill that we were reporting on encompassed Livingston Avenue to the North, Henry Johnson Blvd. to the East, Clinton Avenue to the South, and Ontario Street to the West. According to the New York State (NYS) American Community Survey there are 6 educational establishments, 62 health establishments which are operational throughout the entire year in area code 12206 (NYS, 2011). In addition, only 5% of the people old enough to be in the workforce were unemployed in Albany in 2011 (NYS, 2012).

Arbor Hill Development Corporation is a community development corporation (CDC) interested in helping out the area of West Hill. Founded in 1981, their main objective is to promote sustainable community revitalization while encouraging economic development and job creation in the area (AHDC, 2012). Performing a conditions assessment provides the Neighborhood of West Hill and Arbor Hill Development Corporation the capability of prioritizing short and long term goals and objectives. By categorizing issues a proactive approach can be achieved, providing a method of quantifying neighborhood problems. Residents, local activists and the City will all benefit. The utilization of the information will allow organization to further justify their efforts in altering the negative conditions plaguing their community, residents will have receive an improved environment and the City will have data to justify their allocation of funds without having to produce an analysis of the area.

## Data Collection & Analysis

### *Method*

Data was collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods. We went out to our designated area and looked at each individual property. The address was recorded, along with any observations about the façade of the property, the sidewalk around the property, the people in the area, and what the use for the property appeared to be. Once the data was collected on all the properties for the assigned areas, we were able to log into [www.comnet2go.org/hq](http://www.comnet2go.org/hq) and were prompted to set priority of each property. Next we were prompted to enter the characteristics of each property through appropriate drop down menus and comment portions which were dictated individually.

Our group was able to generate reports on all 4 group's input. For each group we calculated percentages for: occupied building, vacant building, no problem observed, vacant lot, Graffiti/Scratchiti, Sidewalks, People Congregating, Roads, and Crosswalks. For only group 4 we calculated percentages for: Occupied Building, Vacant Building, No Problem observed, Vacant Lot, Land Use, Vegetation, Graffiti/Scratchiti, Sidewalks, People Congregating, Roads, and Crosswalks. Within categories of Land Use and Sidewalks, more specific categories were calculated for a better understanding of the property.

There are several limitations to this data. The main limitation to the study is the reliability of the data reported. There are 4 different groups, who all looked at the properties and all entered the data separately, and because of this the recorded observations will vary. What is considered a “moderate” or “severe” problem to one person may not be to another. In addition,

generalizability is another limitation to this study. The area that was studied was very specific, so any findings cannot necessarily be generalized to any other area. Furthermore, one area to another of the 4 designated areas may not be generalized to each other.

**Analysis**

The area of West Hill that we were reporting on encompassed Livingston Avenue to the North, Henry Johnson Blvd. to the East, Clinton Avenue to the South, and Ontario Street to the West. When comparing the data for all 4 regions, only 17.3% of properties were considered to have no problem. This is less than one-fifth of the properties in the entire area. According to the data, 42.4% of the observed properties were occupied buildings while 30.1% were vacant buildings. Few lots were vacant and few properties had graffiti or Scratchiti (Table 1). One of the most glaring problems was the sidewalks, with all 4 areas reporting a total of 82.0% having problems. There were few observed issues with people congregating, crosswalks, and roads (Table 2).

<b>Table 1: Team 1-4 Percentages of Observed Problem</b>		
<b>Problems</b>	<b>Number of Observations</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Occupied Building	361	42.4%
Vacant Building	256	30.1%
No Problem	147	17.3%
Vacant Lot	68	8.0%
Graffiti/Scratchiti	19	2.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>851</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1- Total Percentage of Observed Problems

**Table 2: Team 1-4 Percentages of Observed Problems**

<b>Problems</b>	<b>Number of Observations</b>	<b>Total Percentage</b>
Sidewalks	146	82%
People Congregating	17	9.6%
Roads	11	6.2%
Crosswalks	4	2.2%
<b>Total=</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>100%</b>

Our team (team 4) only covered the area from Second

Street to the North, North Lake Street to the East, Clinton Avenue to the South, and Ontario Street to the West. Our area did not include the block between Second Street to First Street in between Ontario and

Quail. Only 16.9%

of the properties

were observed as

having no problem.

The observed

problems in our

region were representative of the entire region as a whole. Approximately one-third of the properties were occupied buildings at 33.7% while only 15.3% of the properties were vacant.

The majority of the properties were used for residential purposes. In congruence with the group data, the sidewalks were an overwhelming visual issue not fully portrayed in the figures below, with splits, trash, and unsafe conditions

(Table 3).

**Table 2- Team 1-4 Percentages of Observed Problems**

<b>Land Use*</b>		
<b>Residential</b>	55	90.20%
<b>Commercial</b>	2	3.30%
<b>Both Residential/ Commercial</b>	2	3.30%
<b>Vacant</b>	2	3.30%

**Table 3- Team 4 Percentage of Observed Problems**

<b>Occupied Building</b>	110	33.70%
<b>Vacant Building</b>	50	15.30%
<b>No Problem</b>	55	16.90%
<b>Vacant Lot</b>	10	3.26%

<b>Land Use*</b>	61	18.70%
<b>Vegetation</b>	13	3.90%
<b>Graffiti/Scratchiti</b>	1	0.30%
<b>Sidewalks *</b>	17	5.20%
<b>People Congregating</b>	0	0%
<b>Roads</b>	0	0%
<b>Crosswalks</b>	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>395</b>	

Table 3- Team 4 Percentage of Observed Problems

Our study area contained a high percentage of residential properties, with a low percentage of commercial and mixed-use buildings. Vacant lots were low in frequency, varying in location and upkeep, although the low volume of vacant lots is not an indication of there being a lack of a problem. Unmanaged vacant lots can bring down curb appeal and overall appearance of a neighborhood. Approximately 15.3% of properties were considered to be vacant. A high percentage for such a small geographical area. No observable issues were apparent within the roadways, with only minor cases of litter, so insurmountable it lacked documentation (Table 3).

When looking at recorded observations across the all 4 teams, you can see clusters of various problems. There were some problems that were evenly disbursed through all regions, such as problems with sidewalks, vacant lots, and occupied buildings. Teams 1-3 had input more “land use” than we had, however the majority of the designations in all 4 groups was residential land use. Teams 1-3 also had more graffiti and Scratchiti than Team 4 region did.

<b>Sidewalks*</b>		
<b>Minimal Hazardous Conditions</b>	4	23.50%
<b>Moderate Hazardous Conditions</b>	3	17.60%
<b>Uneven, Cracked</b>	3	17.60%
<b>Garbage, Broken Glass</b>	7	41.20%

There was a large concentration of road problems in Team 1’s area, as opposed to the rest of the groups. In regards to group 4 only, there was a relatively even distribution of problems throughout the area (Fig. 4).

Team 4 region had the most properties designated as “no problem.” They were eventually distributed between Clinton Avenue and First Street, however between First Street and Second Street there were less properties observed to have no problems (Fig. 5). Team 4 sidewalk problems were concentrated in the area between Quail Street and North Lake Street, between First Street and Second Street, exclusively. There were no observed problems with the sidewalks in any other region (Fig. 6). Team 4 vacant buildings were not evenly distributed throughout our area, but instead were concentrated in the Northeast and Southeast area of our region. There were very few on the west side of our area (Fig. 7).

The removal of trash and scattered graffiti are the easiest problems to be dealt with first. Both issues have insignificant fiscal costs, while having high potential for public participation. Having residents take charge is important, it strengthens community ties and has the ability of empowering residents from within.

## **Discussion**

After many observations and analysis of the area, it is not surprising to conclude that certain problems are clustered in designated areas. Overall, it was observed that in the area’s designated as “no problem” were in the nicer looking areas, with better sidewalks and roads, more lighting, less vacant properties and lots, and less overgrown vegetation. In our area, the problems with the bad sidewalks, coincide with the areas with graffiti and vacant buildings. In addition, the areas designated as “no problems” had the least amount of vacant buildings and best kept sidewalks. Clinton Avenue is a larger street, bordering a more affluent area, closest to the park so that may

be one explanation behind why that specific area is better kept. Having more occupied residential buildings means more people are there to take care of their properties, which may be another reason as to why those areas are less problematic. Vagrancy and loitering were not seen as issues, although this could be due to the early hours of observation. Individual residencies had minor structural issues, but contained slightly deteriorating or outdated exteriors. The aggregation of smaller issues create the appearance of an aging housing stock.

## **Recommendations**

Arbor Hill Development Corporation looked to us to collect raw data on the area they want to invest money and time into. By gathering this data they will be able to determine what problems are most prevalent and where, and what can be done with it. Many different members of the community need to be mobilized to respond: the people who live in the area, the people who want to fiscally invest in the area, and community development corporations within and out of the area who have a stake in growing the area. A primary step is going to be prioritizing the “problems” and figuring out what is the easiest to fix, at the lowest cost with the most support, and move forward from there. It is much easier to repair a street light than to repair an entire street and limitations of funding come into play.

Gathering community support by making the overall project appear doable will be key. As long as people see this as a worthwhile investment and an area worth dedicating time and money to, support will follow. With community support, financial reinvestment and a deconcentration of poverty will soon follow. Ultimately this should reduce the crime rate and increase the health and socio-economics of this area in large. Incremental steps would produce the most desirable

outcomes. By taking on smaller issues first, confidence and trust will develop. Beliefs and ideas are powerful motivators and if the community has the idea that they can believe in changing their neighborhood from within larger projects can be accomplished.

Arbor Hill Development Corporation needs to reach out to the local community and get support behind this project before they can move ahead with anything. Once people get excited about seeing the potential improvement of their neighborhood, they can begin to implement the data and use it for planning purposes. Changing an entire disenfranchised neighborhood appears like a daunting task, so making it appear doable and worthwhile will be a necessary first step toward total renovation. Involving both public and private community investors will be important to get funding for the project implemented.

**Figure 4: Map of observed problems for Teams 1-4**

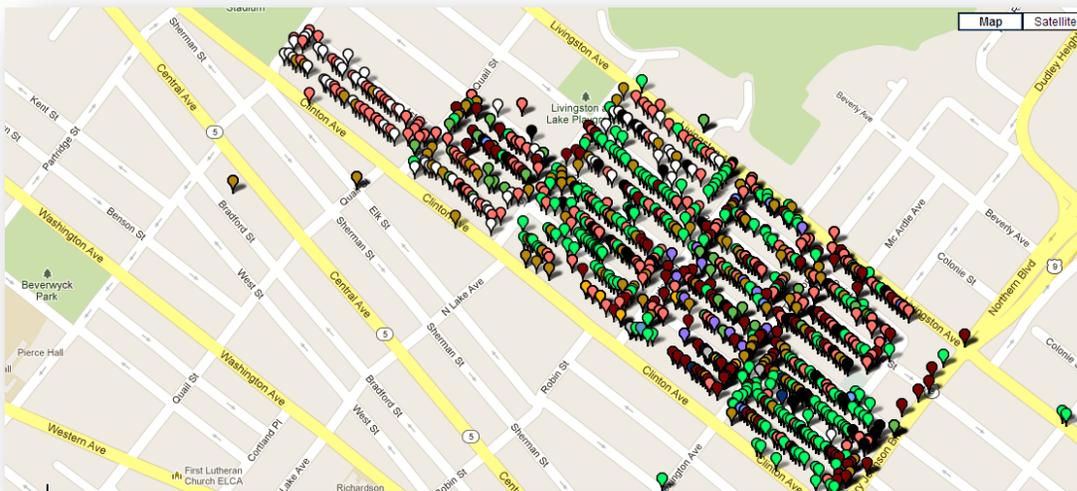


Figure 4 shows the observed problems for all 4 teams. As you can see the problems are disbursed evenly throughout all 4 teams.

**Figure 5: Map of Team 4 “No Problems”**



Figure 5 is a map of “no problems” documented for either residential or commercial properties. There are far less problems between First Street and Clinton Avenue than there are between First and Second Street.

**Figure 6: Map of Team 4 “Sidewalks”**



Figure 6 shows where the documented problems with the sidewalks are located. The sidewalk problems are all documented on the block between First and Second Street and Quail and North Lake Street. The sidewalks coincide with figure 5 which shows where the least amount of “no problems” is.

**Figure 7: Map of Team 4 “Vacant Buildings”**

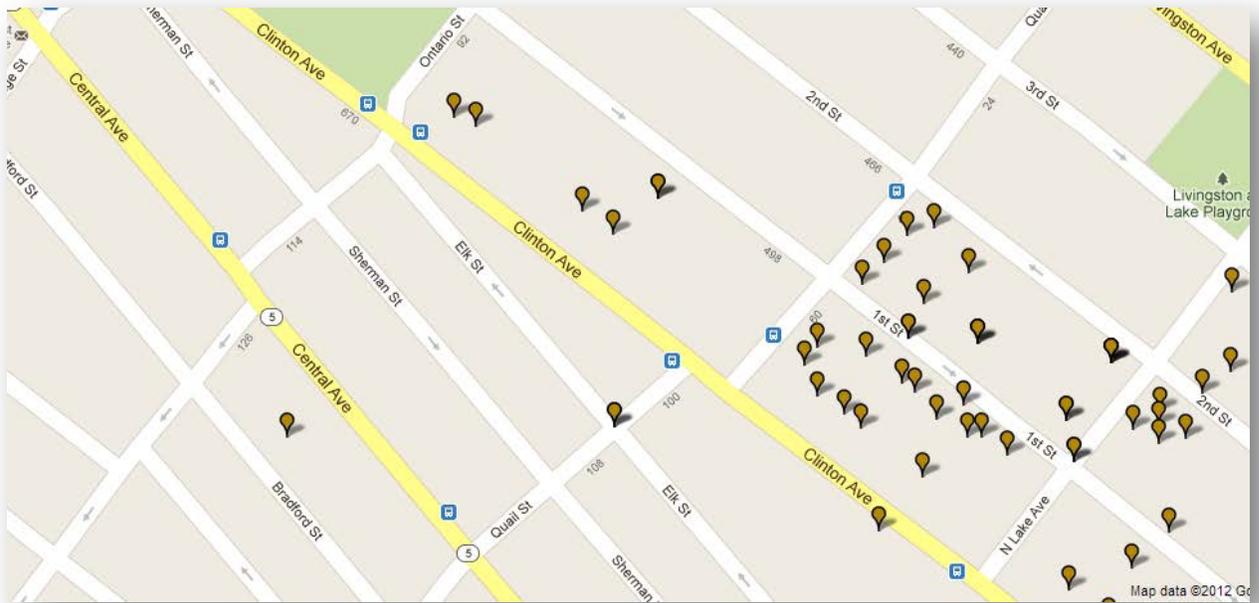


Figure 7 shows a map of vacant buildings. The vacant buildings are Northeast and Southeast blocks of the map. Tying in figures 5 and 6 show that the areas with the most problems and the more problematic sidewalks are also the areas with the most vacant buildings.

*Figure 8: Map of Teams 1-4 Designated Area*

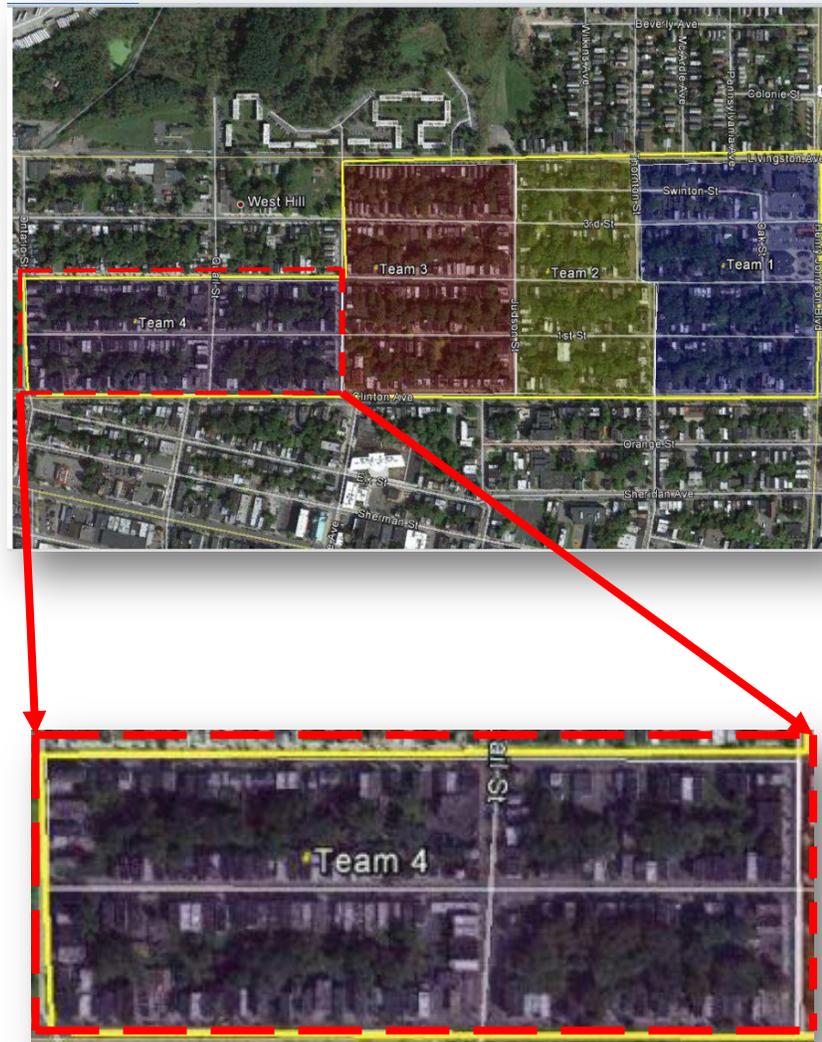


Figure 8 shows the designated area of Team 4. As pointed out in the paper, our Team had the region between North Lake and Ontario and Second Street and Clinton. Our team did not get data on the upper left hand quadrant (Quail to Ontario, Second to First Street).

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