

NON-CONFORMING URBAN REALITIES – THE CASE OF ALBANY

Vatsal Bhatt
Department of Geography & Planning
University at Albany
Albany, NY 12222

ABSTRACT: *Issues of population loss and deteriorating quality of life in many older American cities are widely known and amply discussed in the urban literature. The City of Albany faces similar concerns with plenty of vacant houses and related urban blight. Despite several attempts by different stakeholders, problems have been frustrating. In Fall of 2002, graduate students in Planning instituted vacant housing inventory, which inspired this study to discuss the issues of urban plight with selected stakeholders from diverse sectors. Extensive one to one interviews were conducted to understand their perception of problems, probable causes and how to bring a sustainable change with social equity.*

INTRODUCTION TO NON-CONFORMING REALITIES

The City of Albany, New York, was a major trading post and a gateway to the West in the 17th century. It achieved the status of nation's sixth largest city in the 18th century and played a significant role in the nation's industrial revolution in the 19th century (Studio, 2002). After 300 years of its establishment, issues of population loss and deteriorating quality of life like many other older American cities have become prominent. Growing number of vacant and abandoned buildings in the City frustrates stakeholders who are involved in the redevelopment. Such an issue has been given the label "undercrowding" by Douglas Rae, director of Yale University's Changing Cities Research Group. Rae and Calsyn (1996) define undercrowding as a pattern of persistent population loss that leaves behind a large surplus of buildings and land. Representing a mix of uses, these residential, commercial, industrial and institutional properties are usually located in the older, deteriorated and inner-city neighborhoods. Over time, these "underemployed" buildings and lots begin to take on negative economic and social value. These structures visually blight neighborhoods, depress property values, serve as an open invitation to vandalism and invite undesirable and sometimes illegal activities.

They are the most visible signs of private disinvestment in a community, which invites further degradation. Absentee landlords, lack of quality infrastructure and high crime rates are often blamed for the problem. Once the inner city and lower-income neighborhoods become blighted, they emerge as "non-conforming realities" in an urban fabric. They make it difficult for the City to reverse the trend of disinvestment, abandonment, revenue loss, deteriorating public services and improve quality of life. Nevertheless, they present a remarkable opportunity for reshaping residential and commercial patterns and casting bold new visions for desperate and decaying city quality of life. The concept of quality of life, as applied to the urban living is an inexact science (Perloff, 1969) that concerns chiefly to the living environment, the quality and affordability of housing (Blumenfeld, 1969) and involves the patterns of inequitable advantages and opportunities (Perloff, 1969) that affect each citizen through economic vitality, social equity and accessibility to services, facilities and amenities (Lynch, 1960).

FOCUS OF THE PAPER

Compromised quality of life issues as hampered by the so called "non-conforming realities"

were experienced by many people who have been investing their efforts in revitalizing blighted areas of the City of Albany. Discussions with some of these stakeholders highlighted interesting and intricate relationship for the decay and decline of the neighborhoods. This article builds on the challenges identified in that survey and later discusses opportunities for revitalization. Consensus among key stakeholders is vital for identifying challenges and building a successful redevelopment strategy, which always remains unaddressed (Culhane et al., 2001). To do this, structured personal interviews with ten stakeholders were conducted over the Summer and Fall of 2003. It is important to mention that this article was inspired by an exercise that generated extensive inventory of vacant housing in the City of Albany carried out by a team of 17 members comprising graduate students from the Department of Planning of the University at Albany as a part of their Fall 2002 Planning Studio. One representative from each of the ten stakeholder groups was interviewed. Personal interviews were conducted on a set of predetermined questions, except one, which was conducted over the phone. A segment of public sector stakeholders that were covered included three - the City Administration, the Department of Public Safety and Code Enforcement and the School Board, the private sector included two - a Coalition of the Financial Institutions and Insurance Companies and a Real Estate firm, and non-profit sector included five - a Faith-based Coalition of Organizations, the Albany Community Land Trust, the Historic Albany Foundation (HAF), the Enterprise Foundation and a lawyer cum academician turned columnist from Albany (all of them will be referred to as "Stakeholders" and the exercise will be referred as "the Survey" hereafter). Despite keen persuasion, the business community and the County administration could not be interviewed. All stakeholders were asked the following questions to find out their perception on few open-ended questions.

1. What do you perceive are Albany's quality of life issues, in particular housing problems?
2. According to you which are the prominent issues for Albany's reduced quality of life mainly pertaining to the housing conditions?

3. What will you consider as Albany's strengths that may help in developing the redevelopment strategy?
4. Which are the major issues to be focused in the redevelopment according to you?

The article begins with an overview of the problem of housing vacancy in the City of Albany, where it identifies some of the key challenges. It is followed by an analysis of the City strengths that may help in developing the redevelopment strategy. The article concludes with a discussion of what Albany can and cannot do with policies and programs to deal with vacant houses.

IMPACTS ON THE CITY QUALITY OF LIFE

There is no consistent definition of vacant housing, nor is there a periodic, systematic count and analysis of such housing. As noted by Accordino and Johnson (2000), there is dearth of literature by researchers and policy makers on the problem of housing vacancy because it is viewed mainly as a symptom of urban decline rather than as a cause. Longtime vacancy without maintenance forces it in to a category of abandoned housing and further degradation, which several urban analysts have described as the life-cycle theory of neighborhoods (HOLC, 1940; Hoover et al., 1959; RERC, 1975). Hoover and Vernon analyzed New York metropolitan region in 1950s and came up with similar issues, which preceded the profound impact of some factors that have affected current conditions in inner-city neighborhoods. In past four decades, extensive literature has developed on the demographic and socioeconomic changes occurring in U.S. metropolitan areas post-World War II, focusing on causative factors of neighborhood changes in cities. Such factors include the role played by global economic restructuring and deindustrialization of cities (Bluestone et al., 1982; Galster et al., 1997; Wilson 1987, 1996), federal policies and spending programs that subsidized middle-class (mostly white) out-migration from cities (Gelfand, 1975; Jackson, 1985), and private lending and real estate practices that redlined certain areas and contributed to racial

Table 1. Characteristics of Albany's Quality of Life Issues - Pertaining to Housing

Issues Raised by Stakeholders	Pub	Pvt	Npr	Issues Raised by Stakeholders	Pub	Pvt	Npr
Reduced housing demand	2/3	2/2	3/5	Increased crime in certain pockets	1/3	1/2	3/5
Vacancy blights the community	2/3	2/2	4/5	High concentration of poverty	2/3		1/5
Aging & deteriorating housing	3/3	2/2	3/5	Increasing homelessness			2/5
Decreasing affordable housing	2/3	1/2	3/5	Degrading infrastructure		1/2	2/5
Compromised quality of life	2/3	1/2	4/5	City is taxed higher than suburbs			2/5
Depopulation of the city	3/3	2/2	4/5	Suburbs don't buy in to smart growth principles	1/3		1/5
Racially segregated city center			2/5				

Source: Personal interviews. Note: Public sector (Pub) includes three interviews, Private sector (Pvt) includes two interviews and Non-profit sector (Npr) includes five interviews.

segregation and neighborhood decline (Massey et al., 1993; Metzger, 2000; South et al., 1997).

A combination of these factors was also responsible for the population loss of many Albany neighborhoods, resulting in lower demand for homes that revealed severely hampered quality of life issues. Like many of the nation's older cities, Albany has been losing population in the past several decades. The City's population of 96,658 in the Census 2000 represents a decline of nearly 30% since 1950 (Census, 2000). Case studies on other cities are dealt in detail by Cohen (2001), Scafidi et al. (1998), Hillier et al. (2001), the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2003) and International City/County Management Association (ICMA, 2003). According to a recent study carried out by the Cornell University and the Brookings Institution (Roy, 2003), the "sprawl is spreading across Upstate New York, rapidly outpacing population growth." While population has grown at "a snail's pace – 2.6% between 1982-97, more than 425,000 acres of rural land has been converted to urbanized development - a 30% jump." Using ZIP codes, they found that "cities lost 2,200 business establishments during that 15 year period, where as non-city ZIP codes gained 2,800 new businesses." "Dead malls and vacant housing and office spaces have proliferated in the cities;" said Rolf Pendall, the Cornell professor who authored the report.

The Survey outlined similar stakeholder concerns (Table 1) on almost all of the aforementioned issues that are common to many old cities of the America. Table 1 also indicates the frequency of each issue mentioned in the survey, which is separated by the stakeholder represented sector. Survey responses mainly focused on housing vacancy, which is due to "multifaceted issues", but as

can be seen from the frequency of issues raised, many of them tried to keep distance from some of the controversial issues like, segregation, deteriorating infrastructure and proliferating suburbs. Others however forthrightly mentioned that "some pockets in the city have unsaid boundaries" and the City is "mentally segregated."

Further investigation of the City specific issues highlighted that the early years of the post-modernist era were the most detrimental. In 1962, Governor Nelson Rockefeller undertook the construction of a new State Capital complex, now known as Rockefeller Empire State Plaza, by condemning almost 100 acres of mostly residential structures next to the present Capitol (Studio, 2002). Over 7,000 people were relocated to make room for this 11-building complex. In early 1970's, the interchange of 1787, US9 and US20 was built at the east end of the city displacing couple of thousand more (Studio, 2002). Neighborhoods were eradicated along with the historical portion of the old Fort Orange of Albany. In 1980s, Governor Averill Harriman expanded the State office complex in the western part of the City (Studio, 2002). A network of expressways encapsulating the City made commuting easy from the suburbs. The Albany City Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) report (1985) highlighted a sharp decline in youth population, decrease in commercial employment and the City's tax base. According to its 1989 report, funding from Housing and Urban Development (HUD) programs dropped from \$30.17 billion to \$9.97 billion in 1986, creating a greater challenge for Albany in response to the needs of low-income residents and vacant housing issues. In the 1990's, housing abandonment and vacancy increased in Albany. The County records (1995) indicated that in 1990, 288 residential

properties in the City of Albany were tax delinquent and were subject to foreclosure. An estimated 60% of these homes were already vacant. In 1999, the City of Albany Assessors Office recorded 409 vacant or boarded-up residential buildings (Consolidated Plan, 2000).

The study done by a team of 17 Planning graduate students as a part of their Planning Studio (referred here after as “the Studio”) thus proves to be a significant initiative to document exact status of the vacant housing in the City and to develop a sound long-term vacant building registry. Studio teams covered every structure within a large target area estimated to include about 95% of the vacant and abandoned buildings in the City and identified 840 vacant structures. Students used a variety of sources, including 2000 Census data, the City Register, neighborhood association (NA) lists, and a comprehensive street-by-street survey to collect data of the exterior building conditions and took digital photos of all structures identified. Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping techniques, the students produced a database of vacant structures (Studio, 2002).

Many of the buildings surveyed by the Studio teams showed signs of vacancy for long periods, some were burnt and others were vacant but in comparatively good condition, which can be reoccupied with minor improvements. In few of the instances buildings were structurally unsafe for

occupation with poor foundations, deteriorating facades, failing porches and boarded up doors and windows (Studio, 2002). According to the Consolidated Report (2000) of the City of Albany, a survey of exterior housing conditions accomplished in 1992 estimated that 6,110 units or 13.2% of all housing units in Albany were in need of repair. The units were located primarily in the Arbor Hill, North Albany, West Hill, Capital Hill and the South End neighborhoods. The Studio (2002) also pointed out same neighborhoods. In ten years, the status of these neighborhoods seems to have remained the same. One of the stakeholders from the non-profit sector who is also a housing activist characterized this phenomenon as the “city of pockets with unsaid boundaries” and Studio featured one of the case studies mentioning that the “neighborhood remained true to its modest roots - a history of vacancy.”

CHALLENGES FOR THE REDEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

It is imperative to look into the reasons of high vacancy of the City as a whole and some neighborhoods in particular. Second question in the interviews was aimed to find out the perception of causes for the reduced quality of life in the city mainly pertaining to housing conditions. Table 2

Table 2. Challenges for the Redevelopment Strategy

Issues Raised by Stakeholders	Pub	Pvt	Npr	Issues Raised by Stakeholders	Pub	Pvt	Npr
Diminishing home ownership rates	1/3	1/2	4/5	Strings attached to the buildings		1/2	2/5
Absentee landlords	2/3	1/2	4/5	Cost exceeds the market value		1/2	2/5
Houses are ill-maintained		1/2	3/5	Increased code violations		2/2	1/5
Unhealthy interior environment			4/5	Drug trafficking		1/2	1/5
Housing design is not contemporary	2/3	1/2	1/5	People are less educated	1/3		2/5
Historic fabric not maintained		1/2	2/5	Concerns with quality schools	2/3	1/3	
High rents for low income people		1/2	2/5	Schools - a perception problem	1/3		3/5
Low rents and sale price	1/3	2/2	3/5	Little inter-racial integration			2/5
People in transition			1/5	No collective priorities/missions			1/5
Scarce redevelopment funds	3/3	2/2	3/5	Scarce redevelopment funds	3/3	2/2	3/5

Source: Personal interviews. Note: Public sector (Pub) includes three interviews, Private sector (Pvt) includes two interviews and Non-profit sector (Npr) includes five interviews.

illustrates a concise list of issues raised by stakeholders. It is obvious from the frequency of each issue that all have different concerns and some are contradictory as well. It is also evident that many issues that are sounded by some are not even recognized by the others. It is important at this juncture for each stakeholder to understand the significance of these multifaceted issues and thus have a cohesive approach, while addressing the problem.

Home Ownership and Housing Maintenance

It is significantly important to find out the issues related to housing occupation and tenure, which directly impacts the housing maintenance and its condition. Owner occupied housing comprise 37.6% of the total housing stock according to the Census 2000, which was 38.3% in 1990 and 39.3% in 1980 (Census, 2000). Renter occupied housing units were 62.4% of the total housing stock in Census 2000, as opposed to the national figure of approximately 36%. This phenomenon is growing, as it was 61.7% in 1990 and 60.7% in 1980. More than half the population in Albany is transitory. Noteworthy, 28.7% of the population moved in to the present house from January 1999 to March 2000, where as another 28.7% showed similar behavior for 1995 to 1998. In total, 57.4% of the population changed residence in less than a period of 6 years (ACS, 2002). Transitory population is expected to prefer rented facilities. Though a high number of State jobs and a significant amount of student occupied rental housing may characterize the market, in general, renter occupied buildings are not maintained sufficiently. Renters who have significantly low incomes will be unable to sustain a high rent, which further reinforces the phenomenon. Nearly 44.4% of the households have gross rent that was more than 30% of the household income in 1999 (ACS, 2002). In one of the case studies for the Studio, students analyzed Census data for Dana Avenue, which indicated that the study area falls within census tract 21-block group 1, a group of similar low-income residential streets. The median household income of \$22,841 for the block group was nearly half the citywide median of \$40,772; where as the neighborhood's median gross rent of \$570 was identical to the citywide median. 84% of the residents lived in rented units and the area did not

experience a decline in census population since 1990 (Studio, 2002).

Absentee landlords were another big concern of almost all stakeholders surveyed. According to them, buildings exhibit signs of haphazard maintenance provided by absentee landlords who approach their buildings as a "long-term source of income." At times a small amount of work may be performed to prepare a building for sale or to attract more reliable tenants. In the absence of routine maintenance, some of the buildings become dilapidated, and possibly reach a point where repairs are no longer feasible. A survey of exterior housing conditions conducted in 1992 (Consolidated Report, 2000) stressed that renter occupied units were in relatively poor condition, an estimated 4724 (18.1%) of all rental units and 1386 (8.6%) of all owner occupied units needed repair. According to one of the realtors surveyed, the "exteriors, front yards and backyards are not maintained and are found deteriorating, which exacerbates the blight and reduces property values."

Albany comprises 15.2% of the population that is of age 62 years and older according to the Census 2000 (Census, 2000). Housing issues are closely related to this in the case of Albany as this population is quite high compared to the national totals. In 1990, 25.2% of all renter households were extremely low-income, out of which 29.1% were elderly. Elderly homeowners accounted for two-thirds of the extremely low-income owner households in the City, approximately 58% of these homeowners were cost burdened, while 29.5% were paying more than 50% or their income toward housing (Consolidated Report, 2000).

Property flipping is another significant phenomenon, which makes buildings more susceptible to a long-term deterioration. It refers to a fraudulent practice, in which investors buy a decaying building at very low price, make cosmetic improvements, and then quickly resell the property at an inflated price through the use of false appraisals (Cohen, 2001). Between 1990 and June 2002, 26,373 property transactions took place in the City; nearly one-third of which were transacted for \$10 or less. Property flipping, foreclosure of tax delinquent parcels and some spurious transactions may tell a part of the story. Streets, sidewalks and overall infrastructure receive minimum maintenance in such run down neighborhoods. Many blocks are devoid of

Table 3: Opportunities for a Strong Redevelopment Strategy

Issues Raised by Stakeholders	Pub	Pvt	Npr	Issues Raised by Stakeholders	Pub	Pvt	Npr
Historic character	1/3	1/2	4/5	Geographical advantage	1/3	1/2	1/5
City redevelopment initiatives	2/3	2/2	2/5	A potentially good inland port	1/3		
Reasonably stable city economy	2/3	1/2	4/5	No environmental threats (Water)			1/5
Big job providers	1/3	1/2	3/5	Academia input in redevelopment	2/3	1/2	4/5
Active community and NA	1/3	1/2	4/5	Network of Faith based organzatsns			2/5
All services in a walkable distance	1/3	2/2	3/5	Reasonably good school district	1/3		1/5
Strong rental market		1/2	1/5	Improvements by the school dist	1/3		
Good public safety	1/3			Labor intensive historic revitaliztn			1/5

Source: Personal interviews. Note: Public sector (Pub) includes three interviews, Private sector (Pvt) includes two interviews and Non-profit sector (Npr) includes five interviews.

trees, grass or vegetation of any kind. Disinvestment was very noticeable in all nine case studies carried out by the Studio (2002).

Old Deteriorating Buildings

Nearly half of Albany’s housing units (22,584 units – 49.9 percent) were constructed prior to 1940 (Census, 2000). Older buildings tend to have higher maintenance cost, which is true for Albany. In Surveys, almost all stakeholders stressed the need to revitalize the City’s historic character by adaptive reuse as well refurbishing and renovating decaying historic housing stock. But the task is not that straightforward. Buildings have “strings attached,” which makes it utterly complicated to refurbish, as mentioned by a representative from the non-profit sector, who is immensely involved in refurbishing housing stock in the City. Further more, she cited severe interior environmental problems like lead based paint and asbestos removal that escalate the cost. At the end, cost exceeds the market returns. “Buildings can’t justify the debt recovery,” notes a representative from the financial institution, who was mainly worried about the marketability of the properties after rehabilitation. It is a substantial challenge for public, private and non-profit sectors to obtain financing where the cost of rehabilitation, including lead hazard control, historic preservation and disability access or demolition and new

construction exceeds the market value of the property in Albany. Without enough financing, property owners and non-profits are faced with depressed values and unattended further deteriorating housing stock.

Students (Studio, 2002) noted that “several building demolitions have occurred within the study area over the past years, as there are occasional vacant and abandoned lots in the middle of a dense building fabric.” Such demolitions affect structural stability of adjoining buildings as well as create snaggle-tooth blocks. According to the City estimates (Consolidated Report, 2000), demolitions accounted for 25% of vacant housing in 1980s, where as between 1991-97, nearly 400 buildings were demolished, and there was as a net decrease of 911 houses in the City from 1990-2000 (Census, 2000).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR A CHANGE

The City of Albany can concentrate on its strengths and opportunities for its revival. Survey brought out certain important issues that propose a bright future for Albany. Historic character, State capital, booming health service providers, strong academic base, committed City administration and active community make the revival strategy more optimistic. But the frequency of each issue as

illustrated in Table 3 indicates that there is not much of consensus among stakeholders.

Significance of the Historic Character

Albany has a noteworthy stock of historically prominent buildings with appreciated architecture. By early 1900's, "Albany assumed grandeur, rarely looked for in a small upstate city." Indeed, it was said to have "put to shame cities many times its size," writes Diana Waite (1993) commemorating the richness of the City's architecturally significant buildings. On an average, the structures are two to three storied row houses with brick/stone masonry and wood framing, built very close to the property line. Many of them exhibit beautiful architectural details, particularly in the cornices and eaves.

Some of the existing vacant and abandoned buildings are structurally intact and could be easily and quickly renovated with proper amount of concern and funding. Mostly the neighborhoods are strictly residential, but few prominent streets possess a character of mix uses. They offer a combination of retail, commercial, office, and residential space. According to the Surveys, investment in retail and residential could potentially be an impetus for development of commercial and office space and vice-versa in numerous instances. Several institutional buildings such as churches and school buildings that are gorgeous structures of historical significance make up an admired community core.

Accessibility to the Services

Many neighborhoods have good accessibility to many services and amenities; located in and around the community offering services ranging from childcare to substance abuse to medical assistance. Proximity to the parks, riverfront and downtown further enhances the quality of life of such neighborhoods. Large employers are also positioned in the vicinity such as health care services, central business district, the State and the City administrative offices as well academic institutions. However, the industrial area located in north Albany has remained dormant over years. According to Census 2000, 36.4% of the population above the age of 16 years in the City is not in labor force. From the rest employed, 27.6% do not own any vehicle and out of

total commuting workers, nearly 24% use public transport or walk to work (Census, 2000). In such cases, having jobs near the residence is a positive aspect of city living. The City as well has a reasonably served and maintained public transport managed by the Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA) that further enhances accessibility.

The City Initiatives in Redevelopment

The City initiatives to improve the quality of life were regarded highly in the Survey. Due complements were offered to the ingenuity and dynamism it has showed over recent years. Conversely, many condemned the dormant approach shown by the City over last several decades. According to one of the stakeholders from the non-profit sector, "Albany has seen only three mayors since 1940," due to which "administration got stagnated, and code enforcement was not pursued diligently, where politics added complexity." In 2001, the city of Albany created a new division in the City's Planning Department to focus on neighborhood revitalization. A new C-1 zoning to promote neighborhood commercial districts was introduced in 1999. At present, there are 21 such districts in the City promoting economic development and are expected to improve neighborhoods and increase mix uses. The City also uses other tools such as, Albany Empire Zone and Business Improvement Districts to promote economic development. Since 1994, the City could mobilize more than \$ 1 Billion in investment, which projects are either completed or firmly committed (ALDC, 2003). Couple of stakeholders did consider the City's approach as "patchy," "piecemeal," "lopsided" and the one, attempting to create "suburbs in the City." Fulfilling "social needs" and "quality services" for the residents were considered some of the prime objectives of the City strategy rather than attracting suburban population to the City for only recreation. At the same time, "resource restraint" and "limited staff" constrained the operating efficiency. The City has recently consulted a not-for-profit organization named the Enterprise Foundation that has worked with many cities to design the revitalization strategy. Interview with one of their representatives highlighted that "they aim to provide

solutions for improving the City’s network for available resources and skills for the redevelopment.” A combination of “bottom-up and top-down” approach was suggested by them to promote strategies to “build coalitions and partnerships with the community to have an integrated strengthening of the neighborhoods.”

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE REVIVAL

Increasing and preserving habitable housing stock is critical to quality communities and their sustainability. There were a number of strategies that emerged out of the Stakeholders’ Survey as outlined in Table 4.

Stabilize the Housing Stock

Preserving the historic fabric through city and community initiatives was advocated predominantly in the Survey. As mentioned above, city is taking initiatives to create momentum for the revitalization in the city. It was proposed to generate innovative partnerships between local, State and Federal government programs to channelize resources for redevelopment. “Main Street” redevelopment alternative was also suggested that proposes the transformation of streets from a strictly residential strip into a corridor that is mixed-use with small business, offices, and residences. Theme Development District (i.e.; art district), “Urban Village” concept, Craft Market, Farmers and Food Market, and Flea market were few other suggestions to improve the neighborhood character.

Table 4. Major Issues to be focused in the Redevelopment

Issues Raised by Stakeholders	Pub	Pvt	Npr	Issues Raised by Stakeholders	Pub	Pvt	Npr
Promote historical preservation	1/3	1/2	4/5	Develop quality of life guidelines	1/3		
Improve built environment	1/3	1/2	2/5	Incentives to live in cities	1/3	1/2	3/5
Stabilize the city population			1/5	Create public subsidies	2/3		2/5
Selective demolition	2/3	1/2		Marketing of the city living	1/3		1/5
Conservative surgery/adaptive reuse			3/5	Network for resources	1/3		
Finite stock- fix by neighborhoods	1/3	1/2	1/5	Strict zoning & code enforcement	2/3		1/5
Identify developers to rehab/market	1/3		2/5	Improve foreclosur&auction policy	1/3	1/2	1/5
Convert in to lofts and efficiency			1/5	Implement graffiti tax			1/5
Infill with new condos			1/5	Develop good schools		1/2	
Contemporary design and facilities	1/3		1/5	Places for social interaction	1/3		2/5
Create rehab specificatons & models			1/5	Improve transportation			1/5
Institute vacant buildings registry			2/5	Mitigate financial risks			1/5
Mechanism to acquire&dispose bldg			1/5	Encourage academia participation	2/3	1/2	4/5
Increase homeownership			1/5	Region needs diversity of jobs		1/2	
Educate investors/home buyers			2/5	Develop walkable neighborhoods	1/3	1/2	
Mobilize community participation	1/3		4/5	Encourage mix uses	2/3	2/2	5/5
Regional agenda for partnerships	2/3		1/5	Replicate the success stories			2/5

Source: Personal interviews. Note: Public sector (Pub) includes three interviews, Private sector (Pvt) includes two interviews and Non-profit sector (Npr) includes five interviews.

The Grand Street project in the City was one of the few recent prominent projects that encouraged couple of stakeholders to suggest the “developer endorsed redevelopment” concept that can be replicated to other neighborhoods. However, the developer may prefer redeveloping older housing stock or provide in-fill development on the scattered vacant and abandoned lots, which will improve the building frontage and streetscape too. On the other hand new construction will also provide a mix of building ages and may help to draw moderate and higher income newcomers to the neighborhood, thereby providing a mixed income character.

Increase Home Ownership

Problems of absentee landlords and lack of maintenance are a couple of the major issues hampering the betterment of quality neighborhoods, the Survey stressed on increasing homeownership. Young professionals and first time homebuyers can be offered incentives for remodeled homes to suite the present day living. There are many housing and community development non-profit organizations in the City that work with neighborhood associations and produce appreciable results. However, the Survey emphasized that such organizations have “limited resources” and mobilizing additional resources has proven to be a “challenging task.” Albany has a strong network of neighborhood associations working with the Council of Albany Neighborhood Associations (CANA, 2003), which will prove to be an asset to stimulate community participation. Some of the stakeholders were active members of such neighborhood associations and unanimously pointed out a need to “motivate few NAs that are inactive” and urgency for “coordinated efforts.”

Employer Promoted Housing

The City has indicated steady economy and as the Survey points out “due to the presence of some big employers it is not expected to perform badly in the near future.” Public-private partnerships should be promoted for providing employer promoted housing, where in employer can offer benefits to the first time homebuyers or the employees who reside in suburbs and are willing to live near the work place and reoccupy undercrowded remodeled

neighborhoods. The gain would be many folds. The benefits include, less strain on the transportation system because employees can “walk to work,” improved air quality with less commuters, reduced office parking, increase in tax revenue and nothing but enhanced appearance and vitality of the City’s non-conforming realities.

Emergence of the Tech Valley

The Capital region’s increasing visibility as a tech valley and a major job provider may attract highly technical and skilled workforce to the area. According to two of the stakeholders, the City needs to “get prepared to attract them” to fill some of the housing stock that is lying vacant. Similarly, the regional economic growth may initiate the trend of young professionals returning to the city, which may stimulate an increased demand for urban housing. Among many, one of the faith-based coalition of organizations is concerned with socio-economic impacts of such developments on low-income segments of the City. Their immediate concerns are “to work on the anticipated effects of a growing hi-tech industry in the region;” so that “specific areas of shared community concern can be identified and pursued.” “Access to jobs, related small business development and homeownership for integrated community development” are a part of the primary agenda which can “develop a powerful voice for positive change,” especially in derelict neighborhoods.

Participation of the Academia

Academia participation can be harnessed for redevelopment issues. One such initiative was the involvement of Planning students in generating vacant housing inventory and related database, which is in a process of being verified by NAs, motivated by HAF. This work can be further developed in to an active online “vacant housing registry” on the lines of Philadelphia’s Neighborhood Information System, University of California at Los Angeles’ Neighborhood Knowledge Los Angeles Project, Chicago’s Neighborhood Early Warning System and New York’s Early Warning Information System (Culhane et al., 2001). Such a web based system will allow easy access for the vacancy information as well as serve to be a medium for dialogues between the

City administration, communities and other stakeholders who are engaged in the redevelopment. Apart from participating in the knowledge based research and skill development activities, investments by the academic institutions in their adjoining neighborhoods may strengthen decaying neighborhoods. Conversely, “some communities have recently opposed one of the institution’s attempts to expand their activities in downtown.”

Design Changes

Most of Albany’s housing stock was generated considering the population of mid 20th century. The Capital District Regional Planning Commission (CDRPC, 2003) projected a stagnant population growth over next four decades. In such a situation, vacancy will continue to plague the city. A couple of stakeholders also suggested for remodeling the housing stock to address the needs of single-family housing with increased amenities and an open yard. Thus the city might solve the problem of evident vacancy and lack of maintenance.

Zoning and Code Enforcement

If redevelopment/new construction is to be encouraged within older historic neighborhoods, the zoning and design guidelines may be modified in such a way that the “architectural and historic character of the existing buildings is not compromised.” Such design guidelines may require matching the surrounding properties by building to the lot lines with zero setbacks, using similar exterior materials, and matching levels/sizes of windows, doors, and roofs. Thus, a compatible development, which increases historic value and character of the neighborhood, can be ensured. In other blighted neighborhoods, implementing “land-value taxation” may encourage owners to fix their deteriorating buildings.

EPILOGUE

The City of Albany is at the crossroads of redevelopment. Today’s planners are faced with challenges created by non-conforming urban realities.

Urban blight on one hand reduces the City resources, which impacts the performance inversely. On the other hand, such challenges are difficult to address in most comprehensive manner. Policy initiatives have long gestation periods that might create a situation of uncertainties for the stakeholders and the community at large. Community planners in zest to aid the situation mobilize non-conventional strategies to address the plight. Financial planners work hard to mobilize resources and attempt to monitor its optimum use with best possible results. A part of the community may or may not work along the lines of such efforts towards achieving a greater common good. Notably, most of them have varying agenda and different means to achieve it. Not many advocate a cohesive approach that builds coalitions and converge efforts in a concerted redevelopment strategy. In this state of dilemma, the study here found that many efforts are duplicated and resources wasted. There is knowledge of available resources, opportunities, policy initiatives and willingness to achieve improved quality of life and eradicate non-conforming realities from the City. In this demanding time, the 21st century planner is confronted with a challenge to find a common thread that binds all goals together, which are focused in one direction for a greater common good.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would sincerely like to thank the stakeholders whom I interviewed for this article. Without their time and precious insights, this article would not have come in to existence. I also extend my appreciation to the faculty at the Department of Geography and Planning who have reviewed drafts for this paper repeatedly. Their diligent comments helped keep this work in a structured framework. Painstaking efforts of the 17 member team comprising of the graduate students from the Department of Planning at the University at Albany are worth complementing who gathered vacant housing inventory as a part of their Fall 2002 Planning Studio, which inspired this work.

REFERENCES

- Albany Local Development Corporation. 2000. *Consolidated Plan 2000*. The City of Albany. Refer <www.albanyny.org/business/econdev/aldc.asp>, as seen on October 2, 2003.
- American Community Survey. 2002. *Data Profiles*. U.S. Department of Commerce. Refer <www.census.gov/acs/www>, as referred on October 9, 2003.
- Bluestone, B., and Harrison, B. 1982. *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry*. New York: Basic.
- Blumenfeld, H. 1969. Criteria for Judging the Quality of Urban Environment, *Urban Affairs Annual Reviews* 137-144.
- Bureau of the Census. 1980. *Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: General, Social, Demographic and Housing*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Refer <www.census.gov> as seen on October 19, 2003.
- Bureau of the Census. 1990. *Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: General, Social, Demographic and Housing*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Refer <www.census.gov> as seen on October 15, 2003.
- Bureau of the Census. 2000. *Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: General, Social, Demographic and Housing*. U.S. Department of Commerce, Refer <www.census.gov> as seen on October 11, 2003.
- Culhane, D.P. and Hillier, A.E. 2001. Comment on James R. Cohen's Abandoned Housing: Exploring Lessons from Baltimore. *Housing Policy Debate*, Fannie Mae Foundation 12(3):449-455.
- Galster, G.C., Mincy, R.B. and Tobin, M.S. 1997. The Disparate Neighborhood Racial Neighborhood Impacts of Metropolitan Neighborhood Restructuring. *Urban Affairs Review* 32(6):797-824.
- Gelfand, M. 1975. *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hillier, A.E., Culhane, D.P., Smith, T.E. and Tomlin D.C. 2001. Predicting Housing Abandonment with the Philadelphia Neighborhood Information System. *Working Paper*. University of Pennsylvania Cartographic Modeling Laboratory.
- Home Owners' Loan Corporation. 1940. *Waverly: A Study in Neighborhood Conservation*. Washington, DC: US Federal Home Loan Bank Board.
- Hoover, E.M., and Vernon R. 1959. *Anatomy of a Metropolis*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.
- International City/County Management Association. Refer <www.icma.org> as seen on October 12, 2003.
- Jackson, K.T. 1985. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lynch, K. 1960. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Massey, D.S. and Denton, N.A. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Non-Conforming Urban Realities – The Case of Albany

- Metzger, J.T. 2000. Planned Abandonment: The Neighborhood Life-Cycle Theory and National Urban Policy. *Housing Policy Debate* 11(1):7-40.
- Perloff, H.S. 1969. *The Quality of Urban Environment*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Rae, D. and Calsyn, D. 1996. Undercrowding and the American City. Partial draft proposal. Yale Changing Cities Research Program.
- Real Estate Research Corporation. 1975. *The Dynamics of Neighborhood Change*. Washington DC.
- Roy, Y. 2003. More rural land urbanized. An article in the *uticaod.com*, October 20. (a service of the Observer-Dispatch), Refer <<http://www.uticaod.com/archive/2003/10/19/news/17828.html>>, as seen on October 23, 2003.
- Scafidi, B.P., Schill, M.H., Wachter, S.M. and Culhane, D.P. 1998. An Economic Analysis of Housing Abandonment. *Journal of Housing Economics* 7(4):287-303.
- South, S. and Crowder, K.D. 1997. Escaping Distressed Neighborhoods: Individual, Community, and Metropolitan Influences. *American Journal of Sociology* 102(4):1040-84.
- Strategic Planning Committee. 1985. *Albany Ahead: A Historic City's Bright Future*. Albany: City of Albany.
- Strategic Planning Committee. 1989. *Partnership to Progress, Realizing Albany's Future*. Albany: City of Albany.
- Studio. 2002. *The Problems and Potential of Vacant Buildings: A Survey of Vacant Structures in Albany*. Unpublished report: Department of Urban and Regional Planning, University at Albany.
- The Capital District Regional Planning Commission. 2003. *Community Fact Sheets*, Refer <www.cdrpc.org/CFS/CFS-AlbCo_City_of_Albany.pdf>, as seen on October 17, 2003.
- The Council for Investment in the New American City*. 2000. The US Conference of Mayors
- The Council of Albany Neighborhood Associations*. 2003. Refer <<http://councilalbanyna.tripod.com>>, as seen on October 19, 2003.
- Waite, D.S. 1993 (Ed). *Albany Architecture: A Guide to the City*. Albany: Mount Ida Press.
- Wilson, W.J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, W.J. 1996. *When Work Disappears*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.