An Analysis Of Block Conditions in New Haven’s Newhallville Neighborhood: Preliminary Data and Directions for Further Inquiry

Karolina Ksiazek
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Introduction

Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) of New Haven is a not-for-profit organization that works to revitalize New Haven’s neighborhoods through increasing homeownership, educating homebuyers, and rehabilitating houses. The model that NHS employs is based on David Boehlke’s Healthy Neighborhood approach to revitalization. Developed in Baltimore, the strategy focuses on “middle neighborhoods”—neighborhoods that are largely in good repair, but that attract only limited investment because of certain problem properties or unattractive houses. The key to attracting investment to such neighborhoods is to improve them enough that residents develop the motivation to invest their own time and effort to improve their communities. According to Boehlke, the four elements that must be targeted to maintain neighborhood stability are “a positive image, a viable real estate market, good physical conditions, and strong social connections.” Within these categories, individual homes can be pivotal. One home can have an effect on the entire neighborhood’s image; thus, even small-scale rehabilitation can add to the value of a block. In this sense, seemingly superficial changes can have deep effects on the feel of a neighborhood. Boehlke writes, “a Healthy Neighborhoods initiative markets a neighborhood as a good choice to call home.”

I worked with Stephen Cremin-Endes, the Community Building Specialist for NHS, to examine the conditions of the Newhallville neighborhood in New Haven. Since 2007, New

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1 David Boehlke, “Great Neighborhoods, Great City: The Healthy Neighborhoods Approach in Baltimore” (Goldseker Foundation, Maryland, 2004), 2.
2 Ibid, 8.
3 Ibid, 14.
Haven has had the highest crime rate of all the counties in Connecticut, but Newhallville has one of the highest crime rates within even New Haven’s neighborhoods. It also has the city’s highest foreclosure rate, highest unemployment rate, and lowest performing school district.

But dwelling on neighborhood statistics has only limited use. On my first visit to NHS, I learned that one of the strategies the city had implemented in Newhallville in the past to reduce crimes such as prostitution and drug-dealing was to convert two-way streets into one-way streets. While this method has had an effect on reducing crime in other cities where it has been implemented, that effect has often been limited or temporary. Similarly, such a strategy has only had a temporary effect in Newhallville, and has failed to substantially improve the community’s stability.

It is much more useful to focus, as in the Health Neighborhood approach, on restoring what makes the neighborhood a nice place to call home. Any intervention in a community requires an in depth survey of the needs of that community and the creation of an individualized solution. Thus, this report will extend beyond data and statistics, placing equal weight on the narrative that can only be gained by walking through the Newhallville neighborhood and seeing it for oneself. I worked with NHS to conduct a SuccessMeasures block conditions survey in a section of Newhallville. I will start by describing the strategies NHS has been implanting in the area. Then, I will report my findings in the block conditions survey, including both the data of the survey and a more qualitative measure of the community’s condition. Finally, I will present suggestions for further inquiry in light of an analysis of that data.

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6 Ava Kofman, “Clustering Community” Yale Daily News (New Haven, CT), March 1, 2013.
7 Ronald V. Clarke, “Closing Streets and Alleys to Reduce Crime: Should You Go Down This Road?” (Response Guide No. 2., 2005).
History

Newhallville was particularly hurt by the housing crisis in 2006. After a wave of foreclosures, speculators took advantage of the devalued housing market to make profits in the area. But when values continued to fall, the investors left the neighborhood, leaving behind even more empty buildings.8 While NHS had previously focused on renovating single homes, it became clear that a wider approach was needed. Habitat for Humanity had renovated a home on Winchester Street, but the owner of the home had to flee her house because of continued safety issues in the neighborhood. In light of this, NHS pioneered its “cluster approach” strategy, which focused on entire blocks or streets. As Cremin-Endes explained to me, what you can see from your house is just as important as the condition of the house itself. Renovating an entire “cluster”

Figure 1. 339 W. Division St. before and after NHS rehabilitation in 2011

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of houses makes the whole block feel safer, and encourages interaction between neighbors.

Seeing that work is being done on a block changes one’s perceptions about the entire block, not just the specific house that is being worked on.

One of NHS’s clusters is on West Division Street, where the organization rehabilitated four of the street’s seven houses. The renovated houses not only look better, but are also LEED-certified energy efficient.⁹ (See Figure 1.) While the main work in the approach is in acquiring blighted homes to renovate and sell to lower and middle class homeowners, NHS extended its work in the West Division Street cluster by adding street lamps throughout the street, and painting several homes in addition to those they had bought.

NHS has also worked to foster community strength and empower residents in Newhallville. During the first day of surveying, we stopped for a break on Lilac Street, where NHS had organized a community engagement project earlier this April. Local students were given a chance to talk with city officials, and chalkboards were set up to allow residents to fill in such statements as “I wish there was ___” in Newhallville and “I wish our block had ____.” In 2012, NHS also worked on another project on Lilac Street, in which they paired up with a coalition of faith-based organizations in the neighborhood to install LED lights on Lilac Street, in order to reduce crime.

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⁹ Ava Kofman, “Clustering Community” Yale Daily News (New Haven, CT), March 1, 2013.
in the neighborhood’s darkest street.\textsuperscript{10} Due to the success of the measure, the City of New Haven agreed to install an additional 240 LED lights in Newhallville.

\section*{Survey Methods}

The survey we conducted was one of the measurement tools created by Success Measures, a product of NeighborWorks America, of which NHS is a member. The Block Conditions survey is part of the “Community Stabilization” measures, within the Community Physical Conditions Set. The survey records the predominate uses of each blocks, as well as the conditions overall of the buildings on the block. It also records the conditions of open spaces and public infrastructure, the block’s cleanliness and upkeep, and the overall attractiveness of the block.

For the purposes of our survey, we defined a block as both sides of a side, up to an intersection. The parameters of the survey stretched from Huntington Street to Division Street, between Shelton Avenue and Winchester Avenue, as well as the portion of the neighborhood that includes West Division Street, Harding Place, and the portion of Dixwell Avenue between those two streets. There were 49 blocks total.

We conducted the surveying on two days, between the hours of 12:00pm and 5:00pm. It is important to note that both days were sunny and warm, but we did our best not to let the beautiful weather bias our judgments of the blocks’ attractiveness. We did most of the surveying from a car.

\textsuperscript{10} Neighborhood Housing Services, “Lilac Street Lighting”
After completing the surveys, I inputted the data into a spreadsheet provided by SuccessMeasures. I analyzed the data to see the spatial distribution of attractive and unattractive blocks, as well as the correlations between several of the variables.

Because SuccessMeasures is in the process of updating its data input system, I chose to compare the data by dividing the blocks by attractiveness, and converting the results into numbers. The Building Conditions rating was calculated by converting the percentage of buildings in sound condition to a number from 1 to 6, and weighting the predominate use as 2/3 of the measure and the other uses as 1/3, and dividing by 2, to obtain a rating out of 3. The number of vacant lots and vacant buildings are averages between all the blocks in each attractiveness group. The Open Spaces Rating was calculated by averaging the number of open spaces between blocks. Poorly maintained open spaces were counted as 1 point; adequately, as 2 points; well, as 3 points. The public infrastructure rating took the average of the conditions of the 3 categories of public infrastructure for each block, and averaged that. The same was done with cleanliness. This system of analysis is limited in its usefulness, but I was able to use it to roughly examine the correlations between factors. After the upgrading of the Success Measures data system, a more rigorous statistical analysis can be completed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predominate Use</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Very Unattractive</th>
<th>Somewhat Unattractive</th>
<th>Somewhat attractive</th>
<th>Very attractive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Blocks</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Family Homes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi Family Homes</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial/Office</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Attractiveness by predominate block use
Survey Results

As seen in Figure 3, about half of the blocks surveyed were found to be somewhat unattractive. The blocks that had more multi-family homes were generally less attractive than those which were single family. The three blocks which had a predominate use that was either institutional or commercial were somewhat attractive, but three blocks is not enough to find a trend.

Figure 4. The correlation between the factors of the survey, and the block's attractiveness rating.
In Figure 4 I have plotted the ratings for the various categories of the survey, based on their average for each attractiveness category. Based on this figure, there was no correlation in attractiveness for either open spaces, or public infrastructure. I would infer that this is because there were not many open spaces in any of the blocks, and because the condition of the public infrastructure was fairly consistent throughout the blocks. There is a negative correlation between attractiveness and the number of vacant buildings or lots. There is a positive correlation for attractiveness with the cleanliness, as well as the building condition. I will re-iterate that more vigorous and precise statistical analysis is needed.

Figure 5. Map of results in terms of block attractiveness.
Finally, Figure 5 depicts the locations of the attractive and unattractive blocks. While there are areas which seem more attractive and some which seem unattractive, the spread of attractiveness does not have a clear pattern. When one drives north up Newhall Street, one will pass through a somewhat attractive block, then one which is somewhat unattractive, then very unattractive, then attractive, then three somewhat unattractive blocks, then one that is somewhat attractive.

**Observations and Analysis**

It is important to understand the limitations of the quantitative and spatial results of the survey. While it is useful to discover trends in the conditions of blocks, the experience of doing the survey speaks to just how much is left out of the survey. Few blocks were difficult to rate on attractiveness. There were many cases where a block had several appealing structures, but the presence of just a couple unappealing structures significantly brought down the attractiveness of the block. For example, driving on block 16, west on Lilac Street from Newhall Street to Butler Street, the block grew less attractive. This made it difficult to rate the block as a whole. Block 21 was somewhat attractive, and there were signs of pride of ownership, but the unappealing Winchester Square institutional building brought down the appeal of the block. On block 3, an
abandoned garage building was out of place in a block that had many appealing buildings. (See Figure 6.)

Block 49 was West Division Street, which is one of NHS of New Haven’s clusters. The lampposts and the NHS-rehabilitated houses brought up the appeal of the block tremendously, but the South side of the street was much less appealing than the North side of the street.

The presence of churches or open spaces did not always have a positive effect on the block’s attractiveness. On block 42, the parking lot of the church was an ugly presence, and while Science Park on one side of the block is not a negative presence, the uses of the block were very disjointed.

Overall, we found that many of the blocks in Newhallville were on the tipping point. We found ourselves constantly remarking that a little sprucing up is all that would take to raise a block from somewhat unattractive to somewhat attractive.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Inquiry

Based on the survey results and my own observations, I conclude that NHS of New Haven is accurately targeting the needs of the Newhallville community, and that a continuation of implementing the cluster approach will yield positive results in this neighborhood.

In many of the less attractive blocks in the survey, the least appealing structures were vacant buildings. But Alan Mallach writes that “Despite the negative effects that abandoned properties have on their surroundings, these properties also represent unrealized opportunities to
rebuild communities.” This is exactly what NHS’s approach is doing when it turns the least attractive buildings on a block into some of the most attractive. Future research should be done on the effect of community gardens and open spaces, and determine whether the improving of poorly maintained open spaces should be a community priority. Again, making a block more attractive helps with more than just property values. Since Kelling and Wilson developed the “broken window theory” in the 1980s, linking signs of neglect in a community to crime, many case studies have shown that maintenance of neighborhood streets can actually curb crime. For example, in Seattle, when resident leaders, a community development corporation, and the Seattle Police Department teamed up to improve the appearance of the neighborhood, drug-related crime dropped by 20 percent.

Alan Mallach writes that people act to enhance their neighborhood’s vitality when they choose to be in the neighborhood; when people live in the neighborhood for lack of another choice, they seek ways to leave instead of working to improve the conditions in the neighborhood. In a 2010 pilot (of smaller scale than the current survey), NHS found that 66 percent of Newhallville residents surveys would recommend living in the community. While about half of the people asked about whether the community has improved remarked that physical conditions, safety, and public services have stayed the same, of the rest, more people believed that they had improved than believe they had gotten worse. Based on this information, it seems that the tipping point is not out of reach for Newhallville. Efforts should be continued to empower community members and give people reasons to better their neighborhood. However, it is important to continue planning strategies based on the specific needs of the community.

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12 “Curbing Crime, One Street At A Time” (MetLife Foundation, 2007), 1.
14 Neighborhood Housing Services, “Community Stabilization Pilot” (New Haven, 2010), 3.
two further parts of the SuccessMeasures survey are on individual house conditions, and on resident confidence. Once data from these surveys are collected, they can be used to plan out future actions in Newhallville. Just as the project to bring better street lighting to Lilac Street came from the suggestion and initiative of a resident, so should future projects be inspired by what residents of Newhallville feel the community needs.

Acknowledgments

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Data Haven. *Crime, Total crime, Rate (per 100,000).*


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