The Inception of the BlightStatus App
February - November 2012
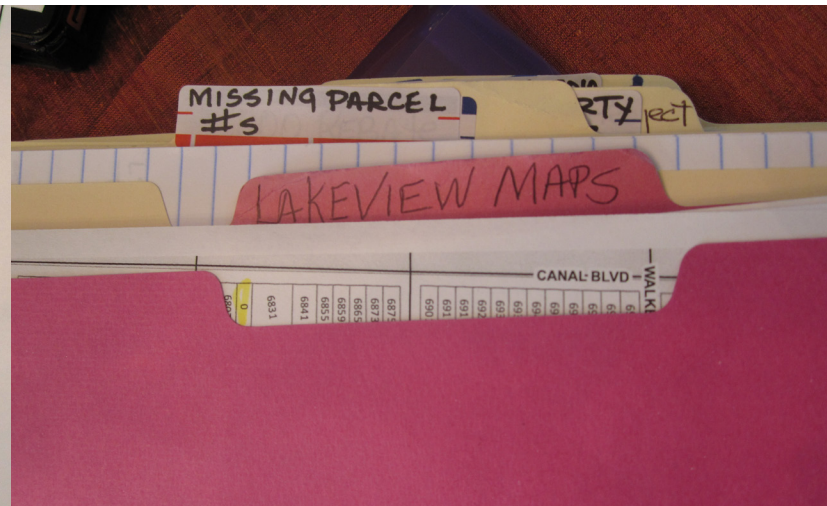
SKILLS USED: UX Research & Interaction Design
Content Strategy
Visual/UI Design
Project & Stakeholder Management

TOOLS USED: Many notebooks, whiteboards & post-its
Balsamiq for user flows & clickable prototypes
Adobe Illustrator & Photoshop for graphics
Pivotal Tracker & Google Apps for product/project management

THE CHALLENGE:

Residents were bombarding City Hall with questions and complaints about blighted buildings in their neighborhoods.

From my intial kickoff meeting with the client, the City of New Orleans, my team & I learned that frustrated residents were compiling their own lists of vacant & deteriorating buildings in their neighborhoods, and bringing maps & spreadsheets to City Hall saying "do something about this!"

City Hall didn't have the means to process this feedback effectively, or to give residents satisfactory answers, even though they were actively working to remediate these blighted properties. Residents were dissatisfied and City staffers were overloaded.

The City's initial hypothesis:

Residents must need an easier way to submit complaints about multiple addresses at a time to the City's service-request system, 311.

MY ROLE & APPROACH:

As one of a team of four Code for America fellows partnering with the City of New Orleans to tackle this challenge, I assumed the role of lead designer as well as overall project lead, leading the design process from initial needs-finding research through execution, iteration, and launch.

Through hundreds of contextual interviews on the ground in New Orleans, we learned what was really going on. Because it was nearly impossible to find any coherent information about these problem properties on the City's website, *residents assumed that the City didn't know these properties were problems in the first place,* and that they weren't doing anything to fix them up.

However, we knew from shadowing a number of City staffers that the City was in fact working to remediate many of these issues, and even has a substantial amount of data tracking the status of these problem properties.

The City's hypothesis was close, but they had it backwards:

In truth, residents just needed a simple way to find out what the City was already doing to remediate blighted properties in their neighborhoods.

Once the problem was defined and stakeholders were aligned around this new hypothesis, my team and I got to work synthesizing our research findings into user personas, user stories, and rough user flows for the initial prototype.
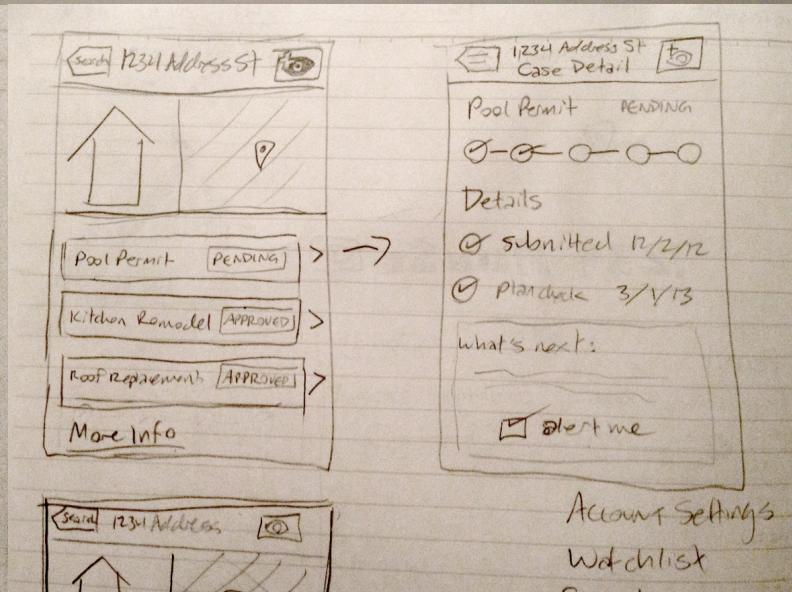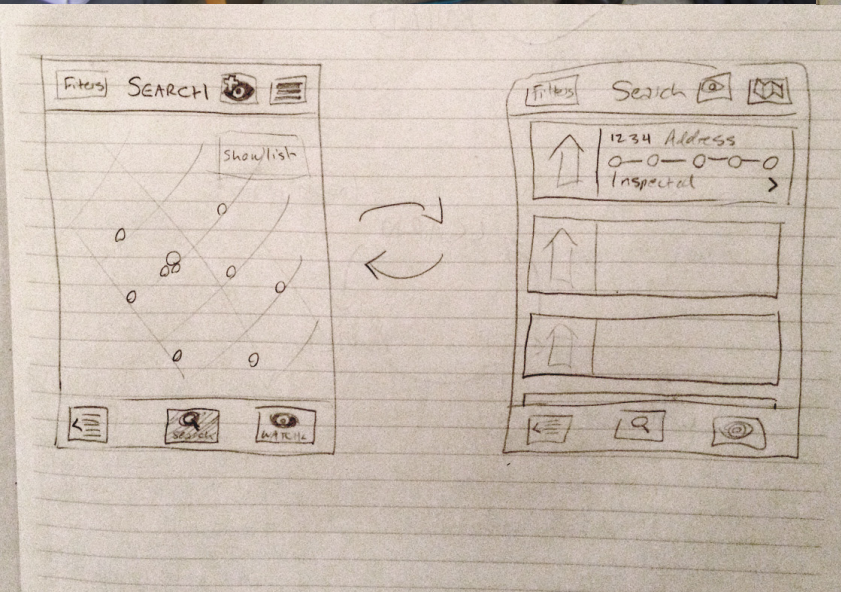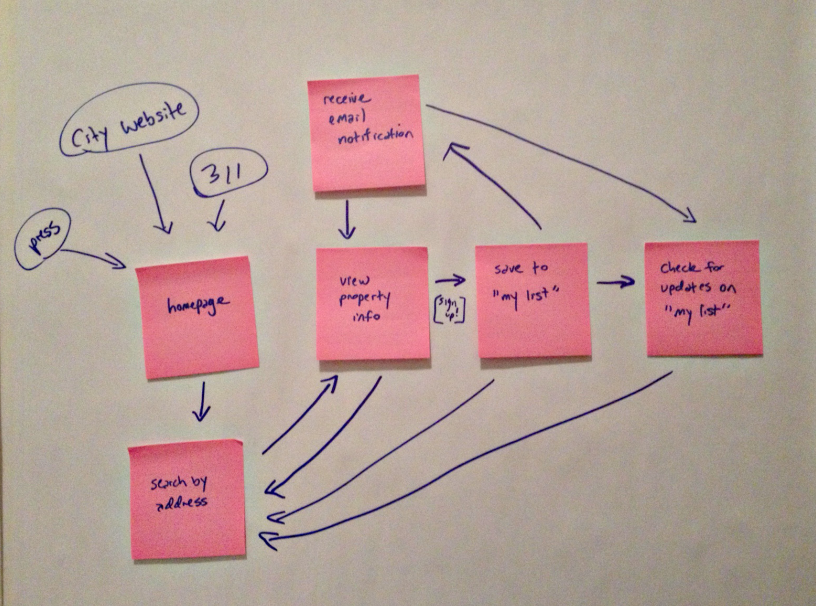
THE OUTCOME:

Once we had a minimally viable version of the app built, we released it to the public for further testing in the wild. Right away, the app struck a nerve in the community - we saw a significant amount of adoption without much marketing, and got the following feedback from many early users:

"This is very important and I think more folks will get involved when they see what you have done to help us get all the data that we need in one place. What a great day for New Orleans!"

"We have been working on this stuff for years, and this is the first time in a long time that it seems like things are actually happening with blighted properties moving through the pipeline and something happening with them. Pretty awesome."

Screen 1 — Search / Explore

blight**STATUS**

Search **Explore**

New search

My Watchlist

Found 1397 addresses with cases where step is **Inspection** starting **Apr 14, 2014** ending **Jul 14, 2014** .

Show cases that are:

In Progress | Complete

Where the following status has occurred:

Inspection ✕

☐ Only show cases where this is the most recent status.

Between the following dates:
Start Date:

Apr 14, 2014

End Date:

Jul 14, 2014

Search

10 Charlotte Dr ✕
05/12/2014 : Judgment
SEE COMPLETE HISTORY ›

(Map markers: 8, 3, 2, 4, 2, 7, 3, 2, 2, 4, 2)

Screen 2 — 10 Charlotte Dr

blight**STATUS**

New search

My Watchlist

10 Charlotte Dr ⊕ WATCHLIST

Case #: 12-08680-PNBL Open

14 Violations

| OPENED Aug 9, 2012 | INSPECTION Jan 21, 2014 | HEARING | JUDGMENT |

ⓘ **14 Violations** ⌄

Aug 9 2012 — Case Opened

Jan 21 2014 — Inspection
Violation: No Work in Progress

✉ ⊕ WATCHLIST to receive real-time email alerts as this project progresses.

View parcel, tax, and ownership details from Assessor's website

FAQ

- If I have information about a property, how can I get it to the City?
- How accurate is the data in BlightStatus?
- Where does the data in BlightStatus come from?

View All Questions ›

Screen 3 — My Watchlist

blight**STATUS**

New search

My Watchlist

My Watchlist

☑ Remove

A-Z | Latest Activity

1 2716 St Anthony St New Activity
Case#:12-09681-PNBL

| OPENED | INSPECTION | HEARING | JUDGMENT |

06/26/2014 : Judgment

SEE COMPLETE HISTORY ›

2 4129 Jumonville St New Activity
Case#:14-02881-MPM

| OPENED | INSPECTION | HEARING | JUDGMENT |

04/22/2014 : Inspection

SEE COMPLETE HISTORY ›

3 2921 Audubon St In Progress
Case#:12-10407-PNBL

| OPENED | INSPECTION | HEARING | JUDGMENT |

Account Settings

☑ Receive e-mail alerts
☐ Public watchlist

ONGOING ITERATION:

Ever since the 2012 launch, the app has been live and continues to see traffic every day. The app is now supported through our SaaS company Civic Insight, so I continue to beta-test new features with our users, and make enhancements & adjustments based on feedback we receive via UserVoice, periodic surveys I conduct using Google Forms, and through monitoring our web analytics for changes in user behavior.

	A	B	C	D
1	**Issue/Fix**	**Theme**	**Priority**	**# of mentions**
2	"Analytics" = gives no info. "statistics" a little better? other ideas?	Analytics	1	J
3	need to do browser testing: scroll bar issue in Chrome on a PC	Bug	1	C
4	clearer indication that site is accessing live GOV data; that it's not just Trulia	Homepage	1	C
5	auto-zoom when hovering over a search result is disconcerting. this should only happen upon click, not hover	Map	1	C, D
6	clustering: clustered map marker should appear larger than non-clustered ones	Map	1	J, C
7	better consideration of hover vs click behavior throughout map	Map	1	J, C
8	When zoomed in, map markers should NOT all be labeled "1"	Map	1	J, C, Ma, Mi
9	search results not listed in numerical/alphabetical order. should be able to "sort" listings	Map	1	J, Ma
10	when hovering over map markers, should be clear which listing that map marker relates to	Map	1	J, C
11	zoom in/out & recentering controls disappear when scrolling; these are important for people not comfortable with trackpad/scroll wheel on mouse	Map / Bug	1	C, D
	need a clear pathway "back" to the results from a property page - whether a			
				D
				J, C, Ma, Mi
				J, Ma, Mi
				C, D, Mi

7% attribute a real-world positive impact to BlightStatus:
- *"Yes, 777 Walker st property was blighted since Katrina. Via your website we were able to list the property as blighted and eventually demolish the property. The neighborhood thanks you!"*
- *"It's impactful to develop a strategy to reduce blight within our community"*
- *"Made it easier to file complaint and follow up with code enforcement."*
- *"Yes, it has helped my give better information to my clients."*

If you could change one thing about Civic Insight what would it be?

36% want more detailed info:
36% of all respondents (38 out of 105) said the main thing they would want to change was adding more detailed information.
- Almost all of this feedback was asking for more detail about information we already show (eg more information about each step in the Code Enforcement process and each event in a particular case), rather than asking for the inclusion of totally different workflows (eg permits or planning).
- **Most of the requests asked for two things:**
  - **more clarity around what happens after a guilty judgement is reached**
  - **more information about the overall process, and how decisions are made by the city**
- Three respondents compared BlightStatus directly to One Stop Shop, saying that, while our UI is definitely nicer, the fact that One Stop includes much more detailed info and the ability to download

How did you first hear about BlightStatus?
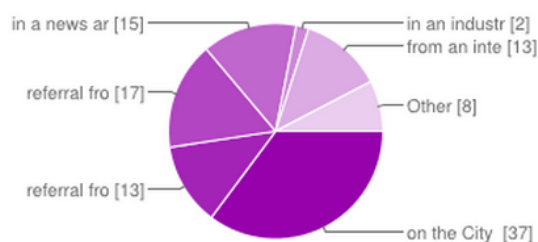
on the City website	37	34%
referral from a City staff person	13	12%
referral from a friend or colleague	17	15%
in a news article or blog	15	14%
in an industry newsletter or other publication	2	2%
from an internet search	13	12%
Other	8	7%