

# Expanding Civic Insight's Functionality

2013-2014

**SKILLS USED:** UX Research & Interaction Design  
Content Strategy  
Visual/UI Design  
Product Management  
Business Development

**TOOLS USED:** Many notebooks, whiteboards & post-its  
Balsamiq & Apple Keynote for clickable prototypes  
Join.me for remote usability testing  
Adobe Illustrator & Photoshop for graphics  
Sublime Text & Github for HTML & CSS edits  
Asana, Hipchat & Google Apps for product management

# THE CHALLENGE:

After the success of our 2012 fellowship, we saw the opportunity to scale our app & its impact nationwide, and decided build a company (re-branded as Civic Insight).

Early market research showed that to truly add value to the marketplace, **our platform needed to provide data not just about blighted buildings, but about renovation & new construction as well.**

My challenge was to identify why this information was so important, and how best to incorporate it into our platform so that it was both detailed enough to have value to professionals, and simple enough to make sense to regular residents.



# MY ROLE & APPROACH:

As Chief Product Officer and our only designer, I led the design process from initial needs-finding research through execution and ongoing product management.

I conducted focus groups & individual contextual interviews with residents, city staff & construction professionals in one of our pilot cities, Palo Alto, and translated my findings into rough design concepts on paper and the whiteboard.

Civic Insight

Search new address MY ACCOUNT

**1234 Address St**

Sort records by: Latest Activity Date Current Phase

**THIS YEAR:**

Residential Remodel **IN PROGRESS**

12/10/13: Building Dept. Plan Check (Not approved)

Application → Plan Check → Permit → Construction → Inspection

**PROPERTY PHOTO**

**OLDER:**

Residential Remodel **COMPLETE**

10/3/11: Final Inspection (Approved)

Application → Plan Check → Permit → Construction → Inspection

Residential Remodel **EXPIRED**

Civic Insight

Search new address MY ACCOUNT

**1234 Address St**

Sort records by: Latest Activity Date Current Phase

**THIS YEAR:**

Residential Remodel **IN PROGRESS**

12/10/13: Building Dept. Plan Check (Not approved)

Application → Plan Check → Permit → Construction → Inspection

**Progress Details:**

- Application: 11/23/13: Application Submitted - Plan check required
- Plan Check: 11/28/13: Public Works Plan Check - Plans received
- Electric Dept. Plan Check - Approved
- Building Dept. Plan Check - Not approved
- 11/28/13: Plans received
- 12/10/13: Not approved

From there, I had to weigh the trade-offs of pursuing a solution that “perfectly” represented the nuances of the permitting process, versus designing a solution that could be flexible enough to accommodate both permitting data and code enforcement data equally effectively.

With these constraints in mind, I incorporated these concepts into

a quick-and-dirty clickable prototype that I tested with users through both in-person and remote usability testing sessions. I discovered that the information hierarchy still needed work, as regular resident users only needed the gist of what was happening with a given property, whereas professionals needed much more detail.

**Building Dept Plan Check**  
Plans received; pending review

**HISTORY:**

- May 4, 2014: Plans received; pending review
- May 10, 2014: Not approved (see comments below)
- May 15, 2014: Plans received; pending review

**DEPT. CONTACT:**  
Bud Starmer  
bud.starmer@cityofpaloalto.org  
650-123-4567

**PLAN CHECK COMMENTS:**  
May 10, 2014:
 

- 1) Wall 2" higher than allowed.
- 2) Roof angle 10% too steep; needs to adhere to standard lorem ipsum dolor.

Civic Insight

1234 Address St. **WATCHLIST**

RECENT | OLDER | COMPLETED | ALL

Residential Remodel **IN PROGRESS**

Application → Plan Check → Permit → Construction → Inspection

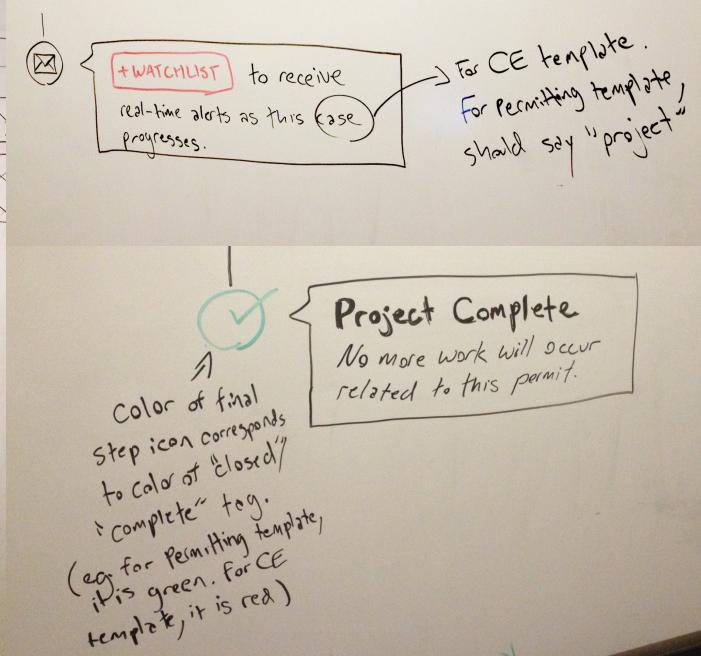
**APPLICATION**

DEC 3 2013 Application Submitted Plan Check Required Project Description: Dept. Contact: Bud Starmer (650) 333-5555

**PLAN CHECK**

DEC 10 2013 1 Building Dept. Plan Check Not Approved

DEC 22 2013 0 Public Works Plan Check 12/8/13 Plans Received



# THE OUTCOME:

By employing progressive disclosure in our final design, both regular residents and more expert professionals were able to find the information that was pertinent to them significantly more effectively than in earlier iterations.

The screenshot shows the Civic Insight website interface for a building permit. At the top, there's a search bar with 'Lookup an address' and a 'TRENDS' button. Below the search bar, the address '3541 Emerson St' is displayed with a 'WATCHLIST' button. The main content area shows two permits: 'Res Addition & Remodel' (Permit #15000-00361) and 'Permit #14000-00298'. Each permit has a timeline with 'APPLICATION', 'PLAN CHECK', 'PERMIT', and 'INSPECTION' stages. Below the timelines are 'Project Description' sections. To the right of the permits are a Google street view image and a map showing the location in Palo Alto.

This screenshot shows a different view of the Civic Insight website for the same address. It features a prominent 'Building Permits (5)' section at the top. Below it, the 'Res Addition & Remodel' permit is shown in more detail, including its application date (Feb 11, 2015), plan check date (Feb 26, 2015), permit date (Mar 13, 2015), and inspection date (Apr 25, 2014). The 'Project Description' is also visible. The bottom of the page includes links for 'Civic Insight', 'Terms of Service', 'Privacy Policy', 'Help Center', 'Technical Support', and 'Get Civic Insight in your Area'.

This screenshot provides a detailed timeline of the building permit process for the first permit. It shows the 'Application' stage (Feb 11, 2015) with a green checkmark and the status 'Building Application Application Submitted'. The 'Plan Check' stage follows, with two entries: 'C And D Review Not approved' (Feb 11, 2015) and 'Planning Dept. Plan Check Not approved' (Feb 17, 2015), each marked with a red exclamation point. The bottom of the page includes standard footer links.

This screenshot shows the detailed timeline for the second permit. It follows a similar structure, starting with the 'Application' stage (Feb 11, 2015) and moving through 'Plan Check' (Feb 11, 2015) and 'C And D Review' (Feb 11, 2015, marked as 'Not approved'). The 'Comments' section contains a note from the City of Palo Alto regarding waste management. The 'Planning Dept. Plan Check' stage is listed as 'Not approved'. The bottom of the page includes standard footer links.

And by creating a consistent design framework that scales across a variety of data types, we were able to make complex information about the many distinct regulatory processes that affect a building throughout its life cycle both simple and approachable, even for non-experts.

The app is currently live in 9 cities as diverse as Dallas, TX, Gary, IN & New Orleans, LA, and cities are beginning to use it as the resource of record for all official public information about building regulations in their cities.

**blightSTATUS**  
What's the status of blighted properties in New Orleans?

Search addresses for property code violations  Enter exact address, neighborhood, or street name.

**Filters**

Code enforcement hearings in New Orleans in the last 30 days

Map view showing numerous red dots representing blighted properties across New Orleans, with a callout for 9026 COLAPISSA ST.

**Civic Insight**  
Find out what's being built in Palo Alto

Powered by Zillow

Search addresses for building permits  Enter exact address, neighborhood, permit number or street name.

**Filters**

Building permit applications submitted in Palo Alto in the last 30 days

Map view showing numerous red dots representing building permit applications across Palo Alto, with a callout for 525 CHARLESTON RD.