

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Look, Care, Act: Project Punchlist [Roots]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7mn2b8ck>

Journal

Places, 9(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

Authors

Bollack, Francoise
Coblin, Ethelind
Elskop, Ines
[et al.](#)

Publication Date

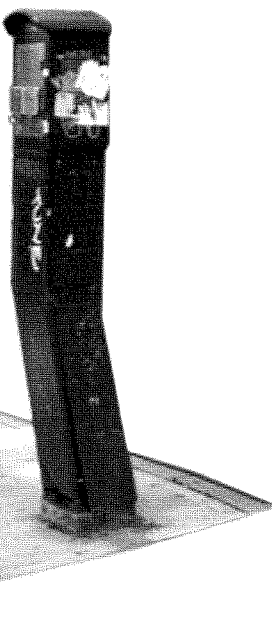
1994-07-01

Peer reviewed

ROOTS:


Look, Care, Act: Project Punchlist

*Francoise Bollack, Ethelind Coblin,
Inés Elskop, Denise Hall, Margot Jacqz*



People who care about things going downhill want to see a turnaround. Anybody who's worked on this project certainly feels a little better about themselves for having dealt with that, even if it hasn't been accomplished. They are acting in a way that involves their daily life and their environment. That's a very positive turnaround in a kind of grass-roots way that we've all been saying is missing. Project Punchlist speaks to the fact that people have been discouraged.

— Sarelle Weisberg, Program Director,
New York City Department of General Services; early project participant



Two years ago a group of women architects, members of the American Institute of Architects New York City chapter, met to brainstorm about the state of our city. We sensed that certain aspects of the city's quality of life were deteriorating and that there was no systematic way of addressing them. The reasons were multiple: too many failed global plans, too much planning from the top down, not enough follow through, too much emphasis on the distant future and not enough on the realities of the present. What could be done?

Our answer was to conceive Project Punchlist — a method for helping people recognize, note and monitor conditions in the built environment. Project Punchlist is modeled on the construction “punchlist,” the items that must be completed or corrected for a construction project to be considered finished. In this case, residents, community leaders and political representatives make a block-by-block assessment of physical conditions and direct problems to the appropriate parties.

Project Punchlist is meant to be a comprehensive and systematic tool for collaborative community action and power. It enables community members, government agencies and elected officials to look, care and act — with the ultimate goal of improving the deteriorating quality of life in our neighborhoods. While we have been working with Project Punchlist in New York City neighborhoods, it could be applied in almost any community.

The premises of Project Punchlist are simple: First, we cannot allow ourselves to become accustomed to the deterioration of our environment — as we inevitably do — because our environment influences us. The space of the city is, after all, where public and political discourse takes place, and it constantly returns to us information about ourselves, our expectations and our political systems. To paraphrase Leon Krier, the place (the city) becomes the point where individuals identify themselves as citizens fully responsible from a cultural and political standpoint.

Second, the public participation process must be made objective and tangible. In New York City, community boards play an important role but most people (including architects) are unaware community boards exist until they get involved in a hotly debated land-use or planning issue, such as the location of community-based services.

Finally, and maybe most important, residents must see their neighborhood in a truly comprehensive way if they wish to shape its future. An architect's perception and participation can help them do this. Architects deal with the built environment every day and are accustomed to observing its vital signs. Project Punchlist helps people interpret these signs by asking them to consider the connection between the physical characteristics of the environment and the more intangible relationships of urban life.

How Project Punchlist Works

We organized Project Punchlist around three general components of the public realm — streets and sidewalks, open spaces, and building facades. For each category, we devised a punchlist form on which conditions can be noted. Within each category we suggested a list of common physical problems, such as cracked sidewalks, damaged hydrants, missing curb cuts, potholes, garbage, graffiti, crumbling facades and the like. Finally, we created a supplemental glossary of common terms, which helps participants define problems for consideration, and a directory that informs them of the procedures for reporting problems and the responsibility of public agencies or individuals to address them.

The work in each neighborhood begins with an orientation session, during which we familiarize volunteers with the objectives and procedures of the project. We hand out a field manual, show slides of common conditions, designate routes volunteers will follow during their inspections and sign up teams of participants.

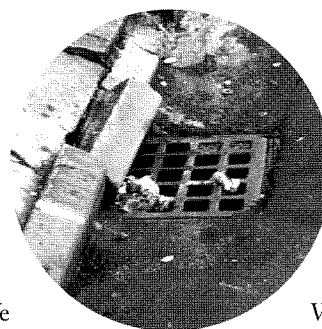
The field work consists of a walk through the neighborhood. Teams convene at a designated field location and review their routes for the day. As they walk along their routes, participants document the conditions they find, noting the exact location and time of day. At the end of the walk-through, the forms are collected and presented to the community board staff.

Implementation is the most crucial and often the most difficult phase. The information collected during the walk-through has to be processed. Ideally, this is done through the community board, whose staff generates complaint forms and directs them to the public agencies or individuals responsible for correcting each problem.

Pilot Programs

We began Project Punchlist with three pilot programs in Manhattan. We determined early on that the local community boards should be our starting point, the hub for this collaborative effort. New York's community boards, each of which serves a neighborhood of 100,000 people or more, are composed of volunteer members appointed by the borough president. Each has a paid staff under the direction of a district manager. The boards are a liaison between the community, public agencies and elected or appointed officials; as such, they are the first of many links in the political hierarchy of city government.

The community boards that were most responsive to our project were from the Lower East Side (CB3), the Upper West Side (CB7) and West Harlem (CB9). The district managers put us in contact with active neighborhood organizations — block associations, youth groups,



church groups — and individuals. Where there was an interest, we made a presentation. Where we found some level of response and commitment, we chose a site for a pilot project.

Commitment and interest were the determining factors. We wanted participants who were eager to look at their environment in a fresh way, ready to care about their neighborhood and prepared to act to improve its condition.

The three pilot programs yielded mixed results. From the standpoint of understanding the workings of neighborhoods and their physical, social and political infrastructure, they were extraordinary. From the standpoint of

Project Punchlist offers neighborhoods a vehicle for documenting physical problems like damaged street poles, crumbling curbs, pavement or sidewalks, and poorly maintained or vacant buildings. Photos courtesy authors.



Community group attitudes on the Lower East Side have resulted from a long-term, antagonistic relationship with any number of public agencies, whatever their specific problems are. Their experience has been counter to anything we can tell them and I can't see any theoretical way of convincing them to act otherwise. That resistance needs to be overcome and the only way is to develop an example of community involvement that works.

— Jerry Maltz, early project participant

solving problems, they were a relative disappointment. We realized that the strengths and weaknesses of a neighborhood are directly related to the nature of volunteerism and personal commitment, the effectiveness of community board representation, the visibility of public agencies and the sincerity of local politicians.

The processing of our punchlist documentation would be handled differently in each district, in part because of each community's sensitivity to particular problems. Also, we discovered early on that our punchlist format could interface easily with a citywide computerized complaint tracking system, into which community boards log problems for which public agencies are responsible. Unfortunately, we found out, only one of our test community boards had the system up and running.

In the Lower East Side, we found a community divided among special interest groups that often were opposed to each other and felt alienated from city government. To them, Project Punchlist was not a tool for empowering the community but another form of policing. Cooperation was minimal and turnout at our presentations somewhat slim. We did proceed with our walk-through, however, with a handful of committed residents, including several members of a recently forming block association and the founder of a community garden.

The district manager very selectively collated our documentation. Because CB3 lacked the computerized complaint tracking system, problems were sent directly to commissioners of the relevant public agencies. While the approach was limited in scope, results were immediate, with problems remedied in a timely fashion — catch basins unclogged, potholes filled. Facade and sidewalk issues directly affecting private landlords were not addressed.


In West Harlem, we found a community overwhelmed by social issues — housing, crime, drugs — but with strong group affiliations and a history of activism. Enthusiasm was high and so was the turnout. Two walk-throughs were scheduled. Everyone seemed to know exactly which trees, pay phones, garbage piles, loose cobblestones and broken parking meters were being used as points of drug activity. Residents saw Project Punchlist as a positive and efficient tool, a way for individuals to take back the streets and assume some measure of control over the physical breakdown reflected in their environment.

Unfortunately, changes of personnel were made in the community board and its staff just prior to the fieldwork. Official interest waned, and the completed punchlist forms remain unprocessed. The local residents themselves remain committed and Project Punchlist is now seeking a sponsor at the city council level.

On the Upper West Side, we found a diverse, well-organized community backed by a strong community board office and staff. The pilot program generated hundreds of complaints, which were processed through the complaint tracking system and sent to the appropriate public agencies. Anything felt to be locally sensitive was filtered out to be addressed initially at the board level. Some remedial action has been reported, but no community-based network has been set up to verify or follow up on the complaints or to verify the results.

A Full-Scale Walk-Through

Enthusiasm, structure and commitment are key aspects of any collaboration but difficult to sustain in small-scale efforts dependent on a handful of individuals. Our three pilot programs were characterized by differing degrees of each ele-



The punchlist targets problems that indicate a lack of public control or pose safety hazards.

I viewed this as an organizing project to try to reestablish in people a sense that they have control over something. For a long time, we had been trying to figure out how to do that, and how to keep campaign techniques — coffee klatsching and meeting with groups of people and talking about things — during our tenure in office. ... Project Punchlist can be a tool for the next budget. What is a better assessment for capital needs than this? It could also help us identify legislative priorities, by looking at things that come up a lot, like corner newspaper boxes.

— New York City Council Member
Ronnie Eldridge



New York City Council Member Ronnie Eldridge (right) provided political and staff support necessary for launching Project Punchlist on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

ment. Discussing Project Punchlist with CB7 district manager, Penny Ryan, we concluded it could take hold in the community only if it had greater scope and could reach more residents. To that end, she put us in contact with City Council member Ronnie Eldridge, and what resulted was the first large-scale community based effort.

The sponsorship of a council member was the political element missing from our previous collaborations. Eldridge gave us the ability to mobilize a large constituent base and access to staff (both paid and volunteer), media and city government. The structure of a political campaign, with its system of tapping into local leaders who share responsibility for canvassing areas and disseminating information, was an ideal model for organizing participants.

In response to a mailing of 70,000 households, more than 200 people attended a preliminary presentation. The sites covered in our pilot programs had been roughly five- by five-block areas; this group would cover an entire council district, covering some 200 blocks between 56th and 96th streets and Central Park West and Riverside Drive. Participants attended several orientation sessions, and on the designated Saturday almost 300 people, in sensible shoes and with clip-

boards in hand, took part in the walk-through.

The large-scale walk-through yielded a large number of complaints, and team captains delivered the documentation to CB7 staff at a lively open house. Some team captains have since recruited participants to help with the computerized data entry, and efforts are being made to enlist students from a local high school computer class. The community board staff is active, public agencies have been alerted to the onslaught of complaints coming their way and residents are poised for the follow-up. Now it is a question of time and commitment.

What Have We Learned?

Our first goal in creating Project Punchlist was to have people look at the city, their environment, and do something about it. Looking would rekindle enthusiasm for buildings, whether unique or mundane, for the streetscapes, for a particular row of trees, for a park, for the city itself. We knew that people would be shocked and galvanized into action. People would look and they would care.

Our second goal was to present communities with a simple methodology for action, one that they could very

quickly make their own. The simplicity of the punchlist format, the item by item reporting method, the division of the urban environment into the simple categories of "Streets and Sidewalks," "Building Facades" and "Open Spaces" would provide an understandable framework that could be used by anyone. People would act.

Our third goal was to make an impact on the urban environment by getting a large number of problems corrected at one time. We envisioned that the efficiency inherent in reporting groups of complaints — say 25 potholes at one time versus 25 potholes one by one — would result in better service delivered faster and more equitably (not just to the "squeaky wheel") by public agencies.

We discovered that there is indeed a lack of connection between city government — this big, amorphous set of agencies whose precise responsibilities few of us understand — and the people. Every time we presented the project we met with enthusiasm and a quick grasp of its intentions and of what it could accomplish. Where all the ingredients were in place — an active community, strong political support and an organized community board with an effective district manager (as, for example, the Upper West Side) people mobilized

We want to know about problems. The more the merrier. We as an agency depend on the public to report complaints. If they don't know they can complain or who they can complain to we don't know what to fix.

— Betty Holloway, New York City Department of Environmental Protection

in numbers, they looked and they did something about what they found.

Our second goal has proven more elusive. The punchlist format is understood by everybody, but a number of issues have arisen. Some groups want to customize the forms to collect data according to different agenda — one group wanted us to survey the types of ground floor businesses in a particular area, another wanted us to record instances of prostitution. We find we must remain involved to keep the focus on the built environment and to keep the method of collecting information consistent enough that the project does not disintegrate into a number of unrelated fragments.

As to our third goal of having a noticeable impact, it is too early to tell how Project Punchlist fares. CB7 has just finished entering the large number of complaints generated by the walk-through and has forwarded half to public agencies. One area captain reports that accessibility curb cuts were made in her area recently, but this may or may not be due to our effort. We are all watching.

We have made some unexpected discoveries. While we all expect public agencies to serve us, we forget that we have our own part to play in the maintenance of the environment. Homeowners who count on the parks department to prune their street trees, for example, do not want to be reminded that they have to repair their cornice or redo their sidewalk if conditions become hazardous.



Punchlist teams document the condition of buildings that face — and have a visual impact on — public spaces.

In one neighborhood, brownstone owners said they felt beleaguered because the copper down spouts on their buildings are frequently stolen, but they do not have money to put up new ones. Nor do they have money to fix cracked sidewalks. They did not want either item appearing on a punchlist, and for a moment it seemed that Project Punchlist would be so limited in that area that it was doomed. The head of the neighborhood association reminded the homeowners that there was strength in numbers, and someone else suggested starting a fund to help with certain repairs, something like a Business Improvement District. In the end participants realized that this group effort could actually help them deal with, and perhaps solve, individual problems.

Another interesting discovery was that Project Punchlist provides officials at all levels of city government with a tool for assessment of budget needs

and a framework for realistic dialogue. The project has been readily embraced by public agencies and elected and appointed officials.

Project Punchlist is exploring the role of the architect in service to the community. It is our responsibility to engage with communities as interpreters of advocates for the built environment. Project Punchlist provides a vehicle for us to contribute our professional expertise and knowledge in the community's interest.

Residents must remember both their rights and obligations in a democratic society. Politicians must believe that community service can be self-service. Public agencies must decide to institutionalize caring, not neglect. Architects must remember that they are citizens, too, catalysts for action and education, creators and guardians of the built landscape.