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Procedural Justice Through Design

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Raphael Pope-Sussman Senior Writer Center for Court Innovation	2015	This publication was supported by Grant No. 2011-DC-BX-K002 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance to the Center for Court Innovation. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Photos by Michael Falco and Emily Gold LaGratta.

# IMPROVING COURTHOUSE SIGNAGE: PROCEDURAL JUSTICE THROUGH DESIGN

## INTRODUCTION

Few government facilities are lauded for their welcoming atmosphere. Picture the typical motor vehicle department or post office with long lines, grey walls, and a cold, institutional feel. Courthouses pose particular challenges to user-friendly design given security concerns and a tradition of imposing architecture. But what if the physical atmosphere of the justice system is actually working against one of its fundamental goals? Could a more accessible and respectful atmosphere enhance the legitimacy of the courts?

Over 20 years of sociology research suggests that the answer is yes. The concept of “procedural justice” has been examined in a variety of contexts—from courthouses to corporate workplaces. The research shows that when people feel they have been respected and understand the process, they are more satisfied and more likely to accept decisions, even ones they might view as unfavorable. In the justice system, minor adjustments like helping court users to navigate a courthouse may translate into increased compliance with court orders and enhanced perceptions of legitimacy. Yet courts often remain unwelcoming and opaque to those who pass through.

A recent experiment at the Red Hook Community Justice Center in Brooklyn set out to test how graphic design strategies and new signs could change the look, feel, and navigability of a courthouse—and improve perceptions of fairness along the way.

## RED HOOK COMMUNITY JUSTICE CENTER

Launched in 2000, the Red Hook Community Justice Center is a neighborhood-based court that seeks to improve public safety, reduce the use of incarceration, and promote public trust in justice. Operating out of a refurbished Catholic school in the heart of a geographically and socially isolated neighborhood in southwest Brooklyn, the Justice Center seeks to solve neighborhood problems using a coordinated response. A single judge

hears neighborhood cases from three police precincts (covering approximately 200,000 people) that under ordinary circumstances would go to three different courts downtown—Civil, Family, and Criminal.

In 2013, an independent evaluation conducted by the National Center for State Courts documented a range of positive results in Red Hook, including decreased use of jail and reduced re-arrest rates for participants compared to those whose cases were processed in a conventional court. The evaluators asserted that procedural justice might be responsible for these wins, citing the respectful interactions between the presiding judge and defendants, helpful staff, and an environment that is more welcoming than the larger, more anonymous downtown court.

As encouraging as these results were, the evaluators noted opportunities for improvement. Among their recommendations was providing better instructions for people entering the courthouse and information about appropriate courtroom behavior. While the Justice Center, a 26,000 square-foot building with a single courtroom, is far smaller than many courthouses, it is home to a range of services and organizations, which visitors may not be familiar with or may have trouble finding.

“The evaluators pointed out that for a court program that was so good on the procedural justice front, we were missing an opportunity to extend this thinking to the physical plant,” says Greg Berman, director of the Center for Court Innovation.

Based on the findings of the evaluation, staff from the Center for Court Innovation set out to redesign the signage at the Red Hook Community Justice Center. What follows is a description of the planning, implementation,



The security desk at the Red Hook Community Justice Center before and after the signage initiative.



Previously, visitors entering the Justice Center passed by a blank wall. That wall is now adorned with a prominent Red Hook Community Justice Center logo and the message “A Community Court Since 2000,” a reminder that this is not a traditional courthouse.

and evaluation process of the signage initiative. By highlighting how this process unfolded, we hope to encourage like-minded jurisdictions to experiment with their own signage improvement projects.

## PLANNING

The first step was to assemble a team. Emily Gold LaGratta, who leads procedural justice efforts at the Center for Court Innovation, identified a core group of Justice Center staff and representatives from partner organizations to help guide the project. LaGratta knew that the project would require input and buy-in to be successful. A year earlier, she had attempted to help the Milwaukee Circuit Court implement a similar signage renovation project, but red tape stalled the initiative.

### Identifying needs

The planning team wanted the signage initiative to focus on two primary elements of procedural justice: treating people respectfully and helping them understand key procedures.

Over several weeks, the planners spoke with a broad cross-section of the court community, including judges, attorneys, and court personnel. LaGratta says these consultations were critical for gaining early buy-in. “I think the various stakeholders were enthusiastic about this project because they really got to shape it—and saw that, in some cases, it would make their jobs easier,” she says. “People are much more amenable to change if they feel they have a seat at the table.”

Questions the planners asked included:

- Are there opportunities to explain the mission and function of the Red Hook Community Justice Center to court participants?
- How can courtroom rules be efficiently and respectfully explained to all court users?
- How can resources be made more accessible and identifiable throughout the building?
- What key terms or places need definitions or explanations? Are there words or phrases currently being used that could be rephrased to improve clarity and understanding?

The team also conducted walk-throughs of the Justice Center. While Red Hook is viewed as a national leader in community justice, the interior of the courthouse was less than welcoming in places. Many signs in the building were homemade, either handwritten or printed hastily on plain paper. Hallways and doors were dirty and in need of a fresh coat of paint. “The messaging coming across through the signs and environment didn’t seem to match the mission of the court,” says LaGratta.

To document these conditions, the planning team took high-resolution photographs throughout the courthouse, focusing on heavily trafficked areas like the lobby and the corridors near the courtroom. The team arranged for researchers to conduct a two-week survey of court users about their experiences in the building.

These data points would serve as a useful reference throughout the planning process and as a baseline for comparison after the installation of the new signage.

According to LaGratta, “We began the process with some initial ideas, but we needed to understand the experiences of the entire spectrum of courthouse users. The Justice Center staff know the building—what’s confusing or frustrating and what’s working well—and they were able to talk about common complaints or questions from the public.”



Before the signage initiative, handmade signs were a frequent sight at the Justice Center.

### Choosing a design partner

The next step in the process was to look for help with design. The planning team wanted a graphic designer who shared their vision and understanding of improving perceptions of fairness, and who could offer innovative designs that were appropriate for the context of the justice system. Flexibility and a willingness to work collaboratively and iterate were musts. The views of stakeholders would have to be incorporated, and the New York State Office of Court Administration would need to sign off on the final designs.

Several local design firms submitted proposals for the project. The team selected Zago, a New York-based design shop focused on social impact. Zago had previously designed the Center for Court Innovation's website as well as several printed publications for the Center. The designers understood the challenges and were willing to work within a relatively modest budget. Zago proposed using paid design interns as the primary workforce for the project, with supervision provided by the firm's director.



Helping court users navigate the courthouse was a priority. Here, the cashier and court clerk window before and after the signs went up.

### Setting goals

To begin the design process, the planning team brought the designers to the Justice Center for a guided tour. Based on the results of their information gathering, the planning team and Zago identified three initial priorities for improving procedural justice through improved signage: create a welcoming atmosphere at the courthouse, help court users navigate the building more easily, and communicate rules and procedures clearly and respectfully.

**Create a welcoming atmosphere:** The Justice Center strives to improve confidence in justice, and to make the justice system more accessible, so one focus was making its mission more apparent before visitors even walk in the door. The simple, elegant architecture and the human scale of the building, formerly a parochial school, feels more welcoming than traditional courthouses. But the planning team felt that additional logos and welcome signs would more clearly represent the Justice Center’s commitment to procedural justice.

**Help court users navigate more easily:** Improving navigability centered on two primary tasks: re-designing building directories and designating clear pathways to the facility’s most frequented locations. The building’s prior directory was on the main floor only. Etched in glass, it was beautiful but difficult to read and prohibitively expensive to edit, rendering it obsolete shortly after it was installed.

**Communicate rules and procedures clearly and respectfully:** A courthouse necessarily has many rules. Staff had developed an array of self-made signs over the years in response to frequently asked questions, as well as rules frequently broken by visitors.

Flagging areas that are off-limits to the general public was another recurring need. On the first floor, many doors had a handmade “Restricted Area” sign.

Changing these signs seemed like an easy opportunity to respectfully articulate expectations for behavior in the building.

The project focused on adhering to fundamental design principles such as the use of a consistent, legible font type and size and placement of signs at eye level. Special care was also given to ensuring that the signs matched the existing branding of the Red Hook Community Justice Center, including the use of its signature shade of red.

On a practical level, the planning team wanted the new signs to be simple, replicable, and cost-effective. Signage materials were chosen with durability and adaptability in mind. The new signs would need to be tough enough for a high-use setting, but affordable and easy to modify in response to changes in programming. The team also wanted designs that could be adapted for use at other local projects.



New signs outside the courtroom politely and clearly present rules for courtroom behavior.



### Adhering to a budget

The planning team wanted the signage project to be ambitious and to visibly change the Justice Center, but they also knew they weren't going to be able to give the entire building a makeover. A signage project was uncharted territory, and both time and money were limited. (A preliminary proposal had called for a budget almost triple the amount that was ultimately spent.) The team, with Zago's help, sought to use affordable materials and restrict the scope of the project to control costs.

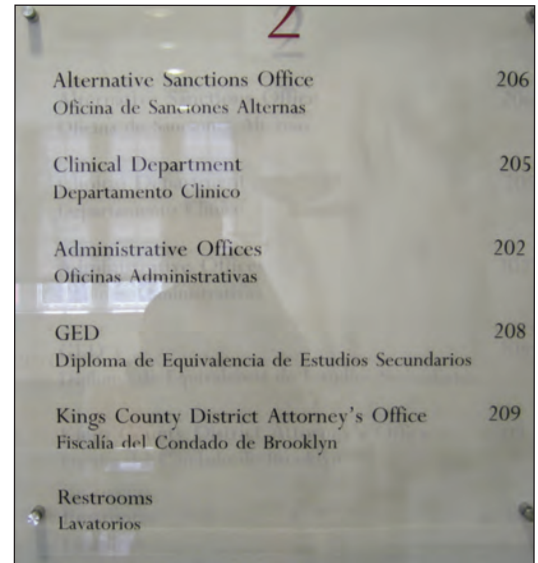
### Defining parameters

There were serious obstacles to changing certain kinds of signage. For example, one need identified during the information-gathering stage was the holding cell area in the basement. The planners felt that the holding cells would benefit from better messaging to detained offenders. But they ultimately decided that crafting appropriate messaging for these offenders would be too complex for the initial phase of the project. Addressing holding cell signage later on would allow the planners to draw on lessons from Phase One and give them more time to get the messaging right. The holding cells are also under the jurisdiction of the New York Police Department, so approval would have required yet another layer of review, which might have further delayed implementation.

### Dividing the work into phases

After LaGratta's experience with the Milwaukee signage project, she wanted to aim for achievable, realistic wins to start. "This was particularly important with time and money in short supply, but also to gain some credibility with key stakeholders through a 'baby steps' approach," she says.

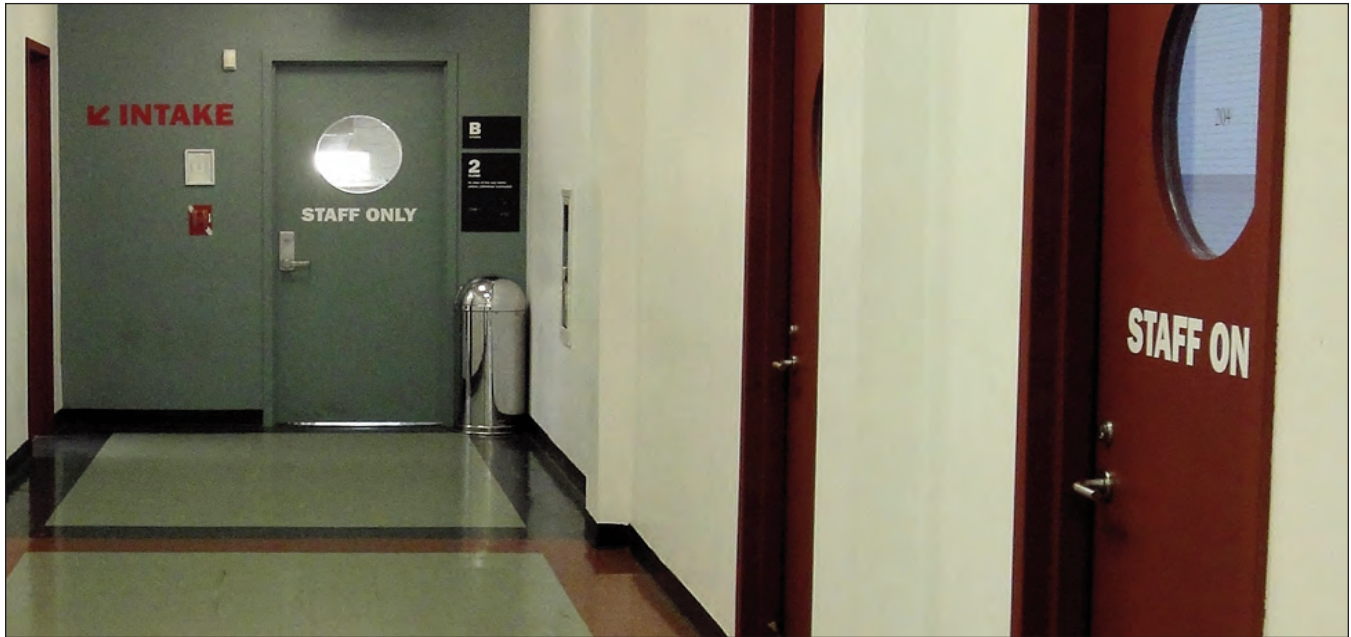
Thus the project was divided into phases. The first phase would focus on four primary tasks: re-designing building directories, designating clear pathways to the facility's most frequented locations, making the building entrance more welcoming, and creating user-friendly signs about building rules. Issues that could not be



The old etched glass directories were attractive but presented limited information and could not be updated.



New directories were made out of vinyl, which can be removed from the wall and updated easily and inexpensively.



Prominent labels were added to doors and hallways throughout the building.

addressed in Phase One, such as the signage for the holding cells, were documented, to be considered for inclusion in a later phase.

## DRAFTING

Once the planners and Zago had agreed on a rough scope for the project, they began the process of testing out designs. An early proposal included designs as well as explanations of font and color choices. The color scheme was drawn from the colors already in use around the building—the greens of the doors, the blacks and reds of the floor tiles, and the whites of the walls—to create a cohesive theme. Zago also provided maps of the courthouse, as well as illustrations and renderings of the building with the proposed signage.

### Consulting stakeholders

The planning team carefully examined Zago's draft designs, seeking input from relevant stakeholders when necessary. For example, initial drafts included a welcome sign translated into three languages other than English: Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic. The planners reached out to interpreter staff in the court system for suggestions on other languages to include on the list, based on data showing annual interpretation requests for the court. But the interpreters pointed out that given the linguistic diversity of the city—particularly in southwest Brooklyn—including languages beyond English and Spanish might grow the list to 10 or more languages. The

sign was revised to include only English and Spanish, an imperfect but necessary compromise that prioritized clarity over inclusivity.

The planning team also consulted agency partners with offices located within the Justice Center, including the Legal Aid Society and the Brooklyn District Attorney’s Office. Both requested tailored messaging for their respective offices to address their specific needs. While this messaging was crafted by each agency, the tone and formatting were consistent with the rest of the building’s signs.

### Rethinking language

As the project progressed, the planners identified and documented smaller challenges that needed resolving before the larger goals could be achieved. Redesigning the directories revealed that some of the room names were inherently confusing and could be improved. For example, the room that all defendants must report to after seeing the judge to complete community-based sanctions was called “Alternative Sanctions” (or “Alt Sanc” for



An important facet of the renovation was making language clear and comprehensible to visitors. The “Alternative Sanctions” department was renamed “Intake.”

short). While this name was perfectly logical to court staff, it was somewhat of a mystery to court users, particularly those with limited English proficiency. After much deliberation, the room was renamed “Intake”—a short and accurate description of the room’s purpose.

Some changes were controversial. Toni Bullock-Stallings, assistant deputy chief clerk at the Justice Center, pointed to a signage change in the clerk’s office. An area that had been known as the “Housing Resource Center” was relabeled “Help Desk,” even though a housing specialist still sat behind the desk. “This sign is too generic because people see it and think they can ask for help with any problem,” says Bullock-Stallings. Project planners had favored the change because the building lacks a dedicated and designated place to direct questions. “The alternative was that court users would have no one designated to answer questions, or would simply never ask questions,” says LaGratta. “Having the housing specialist triage the situation and make any necessary referrals was much more in line with the mission of the Justice Center.”

### **Revising along the way**

Originally, project planners had identified signage in the courtroom as a central focus of the first phase. They discussed creating signage that would communicate the rules of the courtroom and the goals of the Justice Center and explain to visitors frequently used terms and the role of each person in the courtroom. However, they found the process of drafting language far more complicated and freighted than they had originally envisioned. To keep the project moving forward, the team ultimately decided to limit their intervention in the courtroom to the list of posted rules, with the understanding that further changes could be explored in a later phase.

Over the course of the project, the planners reviewed and revised several drafts from the design team, offering comments, line edits to language, and suggestions. Midway through the process, stakeholders, including representatives from the Office of Court Administration, had the opportunity to offer feedback.

The original Zago proposal had suggested a timeline of 8 to 12 weeks, plus fabrication time; the project actually took much longer.

Julian Adler of the Center for Court Innovation admits that the planners’ original timeline was overly ambitious. “To do this right, we needed to have several layers of review—by Justice Center staff, partners, and the court system,” he says. “If we had skipped any one of those steps, we would have faced the possibility of our signs being removed as soon as they went up.”

### **FINALIZING**

After all of the iterations and fine-tuning, project planners and Zago brought a proposal back to the Office of Court Administration for approval. This was the final green light needed before printing.

The printing process was straightforward. The team bid out the job to three signmakers, pricing out different materials—vinyl versus plastic—for signs that would be frequently touched, such as those in hallways and on bathroom doors.

## INSTALLATION

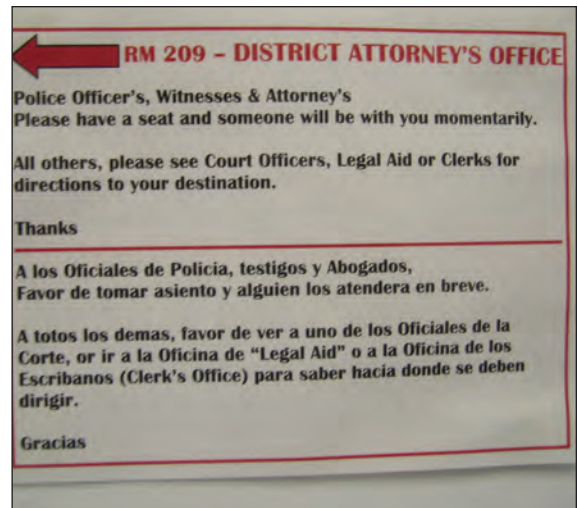
The installation was scheduled over a few days. To prep the space, walls and doors were painted and old signs removed.

By the end of the first day of installation, the new signs had transformed the look and feel of the Justice Center—which presented a bit of a shock to some staff. Throughout the process, planners had been in communication with the staff in the building, but some seemed initially put off by the new signs.

While the planning team had scheduled the installation for certain dates, many staff members were caught by surprise when the installation team arrived. Some expressed frustration at what they perceived as a failure of communication. “The problem dissipated once staff got used to the changes, but we definitely missed an opportunity to review the planning process and explain how staff could provide feedback going forward. We overlooked one the key tenets of procedural justice that motivated the entire project,” LaGratta says.

## EVALUATION

Two months after the signs were installed, researchers conducted a follow-up survey of court users to measure the signs’ impact. One key finding: court users were five times more likely to report that they found their destination using signage. Nearly one in four court users attributed feeling welcome in the Justice Center to the building’s signage, compared with just 7 percent before.



The old handmade signs were flimsy and the text was often wordy and difficult to read.



The new room signs are made of durable hard plastic and communicate information through the use of simple labels and crisp, legible lettering.

Judge Alex Calabrese, who has presided over Red Hook’s courtroom since it opened in 2000, says the signs have made the Justice Center run more efficiently. He believes they make life easier for visitors, changing their perceptions of the court process. “Reducing confusion helps people understand that they are important to us,” Calabrese says. “These signs underscore our mission to treat everyone with respect.”

## CONCLUSION

The Red Hook signage project represented a new approach to procedural justice. The Center for Court Innovation had previously applied the concept to courthouse architecture, training, and program development, but it had never attempted to use signage to create a more welcoming atmosphere for visitors. In the days ahead, the Center hopes to refine its approach to courthouse signage and to look for new opportunities and new locations to improve.



The new signage mirrors the Red Hook Community Justice Center’s commitment to procedural justice.

**Center for Court Innovation**

The Center for Court Innovation is a non-profit organization that seeks to help create a more effective and humane justice system by designing and implementing operating programs, performing original research, and providing reformers around the world with the tools they need to improve public safety, reduce incarceration, and enhance public trust in justice.

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