

4.3 Exterior Storefront and Entry Design Guidelines



These design guidelines apply to all properties that are considered historically significant in the Main Street Historic District

4.3.1 INTRODUCTION

Building storefronts and entries are the most important architectural feature of many historic commercial buildings. In commercial buildings, storefronts play a crucial role in a store's advertising and merchandising strategy to draw customers and increase business. Not surprisingly, then, the storefront has become the feature most commonly altered in a historic commercial building. In the process, these alterations may have completely changed or destroyed a building's distinguishing architectural features that make up its historic character.

Wherever possible, significant storefronts (be they original or later alterations), including windows, sash, doors, transoms, signs and decorative features, should be repaired in order to retain the historic character of the building. Where original or early storefronts no longer exist or are too deteriorated to save, the commercial character of the building should nonetheless be preserved - either through an accurate restoration based on historic research and physical evidence or a contemporary design which is compatible with the scale, design, materials, color and texture of the historic building. The sensitive rehabilitation of historic storefronts will not only enhance the architectural character of the overall building but will contribute to rejuvenating neighborhoods or business districts as well.

Once a decision is made to rehabilitate a historic commercial building, a series of complex decisions faces the owner, among them:

- if the original storefront has survived largely intact but is in a deteriorated condition, what repairs should be undertaken?
- if the storefront has been modernized at a later date, should the later alterations be kept or the building restored to its original appearance or an entirely new design chosen?
- if the building's original retail use is to be changed to office or residential, can the commercial appearance of the building be retained while accommodating the new use?

4.3.2 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the 1880's, following the arrival of the railroad in Texas, the availability of architectural cast iron helped transform storefront design as architects and builders began to experiment using iron columns and lintels at the ground floor level. Simultaneous advances in the glass industry permitted manufacturing of large panes of glass at a reasonable cost. The combination of these two technical achievements led to the storefront as we know it today - large expanses of glass framed by thin structural elements of cast iron or wood. The advertisement of the merchant and his products in the building facade and display windows quickly became critical factors in the competitive commercial atmosphere of downtowns.

The typical late 19th century storefront consisted of single or double doors flanked by display windows. The entrance was frequently recessed, not only to protect the customer from inclement weather but also to increase the amount of space in which to display merchandise. In some cases an additional side door provided access to the upper floors. Thin structural members of cast iron or wood, rather than masonry piers, usually framed the storefront. The windows themselves were raised off the ground by wood, cast iron or pressed metal panels or bulkheads; frequently, a transom or series of transoms (consisting of single or multiple panes of glass) were placed above each window and door, providing light into the building interior. The signboard above

the storefront became a prominent part of the building. Canvas awnings, rolled metal (corrugated metal) or in some cases tin or wooden canopies, often shaded storefronts of the late 19th century.

The first decades of the 20th century saw the growing use of decorative transom lights (often using small prismatic glass panes) above display windows; in some cases, these transoms could be opened to permit air circulation into the store. Electric incandescent lights enabled storeowners to call attention to their entrance and display windows and permitted nighttime shopping.

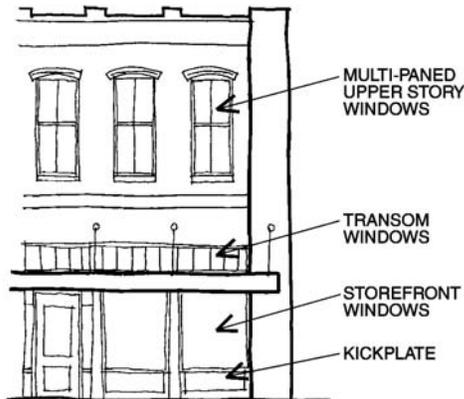


**STOREFRONT W/ STAINED
GLASS TRANSOMS**

In the 1920's and 1930's a variety of new materials were introduced into the storefront, including aluminum and stainless steel framing elements, pigmented structural glass (in a wide variety of colors), tinted and mirrored glass, glass block and neon. Many experiments were made with recessed entries, floating display islands, and curved glass. The utilization of neon lighting further transformed store signs into elaborate flashing and blinking creations. During this period design elements were simplified and streamlined; transom and signboard were often combined.

4.3.3 REHABILITATING EXISTING HISTORIC STOREFRONTS

If a rehabilitation or restoration of the original storefront is contemplated, old photographs and prints, as well as physical evidence, should be used in determining the form and details of the original.



STOREFRONT COMPONENTS

Because storefronts are particularly susceptible to alteration in response to changing marketing techniques, it is worthwhile to find visual documentation from a variety of periods to have a clear understanding of the evolution of the storefront.

- Become familiar with the style of your building and the role of the storefront in the overall design. Don't "early up" a store front in an attempt to make a building appear older than it is.
- Preserve the storefront's character even though there is a new use on the interior. If less exposed window area is desirable, consider the use of interior blinds and curtains rather than altering the existing historic windows.
- Avoid use of materials that were unavailable when the storefront was constructed; this includes vinyl and aluminum siding, anodized aluminum, mirrored or tinted glass, artificial stone, and brick veneer.
- Choose paint colors based on the buildings historical appearance. In general do not coat surfaces that have never been painted.

The extent and materials used in the rehabilitation of existing storefronts depends on

the condition of the existing storefront and the extent and condition of the original materials; this is defined in the section following. However, there are several materials which are inappropriate for use on storefronts at Main Street commercial buildings: wood shingles, board and batten or other rough texture wood siding, fake brick or stone or gravel aggregate materials

4.3.4 EVALUATING THE STOREFRONT

The important key to a successful rehabilitation of a historic commercial building is planning and selecting treatments that are sensitive to the architectural character of the storefront. As a first step, it is therefore essential to identify and evaluate the existing storefront's construction materials, architectural features and the relationship of those features to the upper stories. This evaluation will permit a better understanding of the storefront's role in, and significance to, the overall design of the building. A second and equally important step in planning the rehabilitation work is a careful examination of the storefront's physical conditions to determine the extent and nature of rehabilitation work needed.

The following questions should be taken into consideration in this two-part evaluation:

- **Storefront's Construction Materials:** What are the construction materials? Wood? Metal? Brick or other masonry? A combination?
- **Storefront's Architectural Features:** What are the various architectural features comprising the storefront and how are they arranged in relationship to each other?
- **Supporting Columns/Piers:** What do the columns or piers supporting the storefront look like? Are they heavy or light in appearance? Are they flush with the windows or do they protrude? Are they all structural elements or are some columns decorative?
- **Display Windows and Transoms:** Are the display windows and transoms single panes of glass or are they subdivided? Are they flush with the facade or are they recessed? What is the proportion of area between the

display windows and transom? Are there window openings in the base panels to allow natural light into the basement?

- **Entrances:** Are the entrances centered? Are they recessed? Is one entrance more prominent than the others? How is the primary retail entrance differentiated from other entrances? Is there evidence that new entrances have been added or have some been relocated? Are the doors original or are they later replacements?
- **Decorative Elements:** Are there any surviving decorative elements such as molded cornices, column capitals, fascia boards, brackets, signs, awnings or canopies? Is there a beltcourse, cornice, or fascia board between the first and second floor? Are some elements older than others indicating changes over time?
- **Storefront's Relationship to Upper Stories:** Is there a difference in materials between the storefront and upper stories? Were the storefront and floors above it created as an overall design or were they very different and unrelated to each other?

It is also worthwhile to study the neighboring commercial buildings and their distinctive characteristics to look for similarities (canopies, lighting, signs) as well as differences. This can help determine whether the storefront in question is significant and unique in its own right and/or whether it is significant as part of an overall commercial streetscape.

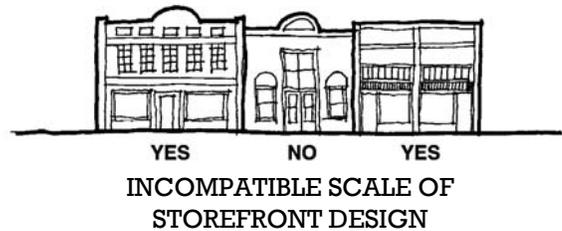
4.3.5 DESIGNING REPLACEMENT STOREFRONTS

Where an architecturally or historically significant storefront no longer exists or is too deteriorated to save, a new storefront should be designed which is compatible with the size, scale, color, material, and character of the building. Such a design should be undertaken based on a thorough understanding of the building's architecture and, where appropriate, the surrounding streetscape. For example, just because upper floor windows are arched is not sufficient justification for designing arched openings for the new storefront. The new design should "read" as a storefront; filling in the space with brick or similar solid material is

inappropriate for historic buildings. Similarly the creation of an arcade or other new design element, which alters the architectural and historic character of the building and its relationship with the street, should be avoided.

The following guidelines can assist in developing replacement storefront designs that respect the historic character of the building yet meet current economic and code requirements.

1. **Scale:** Respect the scale and proportion of the existing building and adjacent buildings in the new storefront design.



2. **Materials:** Select construction materials that are appropriate to the storefronts; wood, cast iron, and glass are usually more appropriate replacement materials than masonry which tends to give a massive appearance.
3. **Cornice:** Respect the horizontal separation between the storefront and the upper stories. A cornice or fascia board traditionally helped contain the store's sign.



STOREFRONT SHOWING
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
STOREFRONT AND CORNICE

4. **Frame:** Maintain the historic planar relationship of the storefront to the facade of the building and the streetscape (if appropriate). Most storefront frames are generally composed of horizontal and vertical elements.

5. **Entrances:** Differentiate the primary retail entrance from the secondary access to upper floors. In order to meet current code requirements, out-swinging doors generally must be recessed. Entrances should be placed where there were entrances historically, especially when echoed by architectural detailing (a pediment or projecting bay) on the upper stories.
6. **Windows:** The storefront generally should be as transparent as possible. Use of glass in doors, transoms, and display areas allows for visibility into and out of the store.
7. **Secondary Design Elements:** Keep the treatment of secondary design elements such as graphics and awnings as simple as possible in order to avoid visual clutter to the building and its streetscape.
8. **Materials:** retain and re-use materials typical of other commercial storefronts. Wood shingles, board and batten or other rough textured siding, fake brick, stone or gravel aggregate materials shall not be used.

4.3.6 AWNINGS

Awnings were often used at commercial structures to provide protection from the elements; like canopies, they help shelter passersby, reduce glare, and conserve energy by controlling the amount of sunlight hitting the store window. Today's canvas awnings have an average life expectancy of between 4 and 7 years. In many cases awnings can disguise, in an inexpensive manner, later inappropriate alterations and can provide both additional color and strong store identification.



METAL AWNING

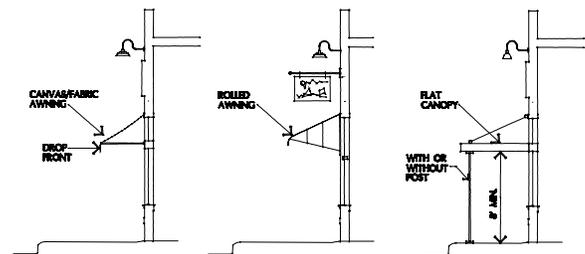


CANVAS AWNING

Rolled, flat or sloping awnings, similar to styles formerly used in grapevine, may be used at existing buildings where based on historic precedent. Awnings may be also used at new commercial construction.

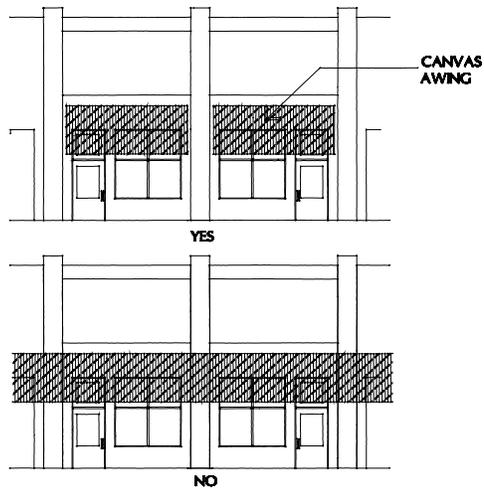
Fixed aluminum awnings and awnings simulating mansard roofs and umbrellas are generally inappropriate for older commercial buildings.

If awnings are added, they should be made from soft canvas or fabric rather than wood, vinyl or metal; plastic or back-lighting of awnings are not permitted. The modern bubble design, often used on commercial buildings, detracts from the historic architectural styles and is not permitted on commercial structures. Install awnings such that they do not damage the building or visually impair distinctive architectural features and can be operable for maximum energy conservation effect.



AWNING AND CANOPY STYLES

Awnings should be attached to the building either above the transoms or between the transoms and display windows. They should provide at least 8' (eight feet) of clearance above the sidewalk.



COMMERCIAL AWNING RHYTHM

The above rhythm of awnings is typical of historic commercial styles, and provides greater interest to pedestrians; long continuous awnings are more appropriate for strip retail centers which relate to automobile traffic.

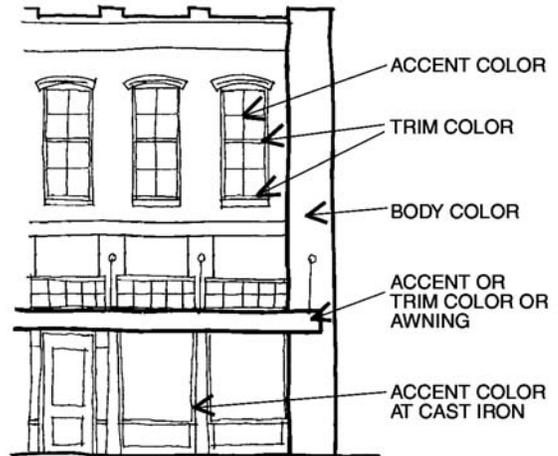
The Historic Preservation Commission shall adopt, as necessary, a paint palette(s) appropriate to the district character, which may be proposed and approved through the Minor Exterior Alteration application process. Any colors proposed outside the adopted palette may be reviewed by the Commission in the regular Certificate of Appropriateness process.

Canopies were also used at storefronts; see the chapter on *Porches, Canopies and Porte-cochere Design Guidelines*.

4.3.7 STOREFRONT PAINT COLOR

Paint analysis can reveal the storefront's historic paint colors and may be worth undertaking if a careful restoration is desired. If not, the paint color should be, at a minimum, appropriate to the style and setting of the building. This also means that if the building is in a historic district, the color selection should complement the building in question as well as other buildings in the block. In general, color schemes for wall and major decorative trim or details should be kept simple; in most cases the color or colors chosen for a storefront should be used on other painted exterior detailing (windows, shutter, cornice,

etc.) to unify upper and lower portions of the facade.



STOREFRONT COLORS

4.3.8 STOREFRONT WINDOWS

Glass windows are generally the most prominent features in historic storefronts, and care should be taken to ensure that they are properly maintained. See *Door Design Guidelines* and *Window Design Guidelines* chapters for detailed rehabilitation and repair information.

If the glass needs replacing, the new glass should match the original in size, color and reflective qualities; mirrored or tinted glass is generally inappropriate replacements for historic storefronts. Tempered glass must be used at replacement doors, windows that are adjacent to doors and certain other conditions for safety reasons; refer to the building code for specific requirements. 'Old glass' can often be purchased from salvage yards and re-used in historic storefronts as well as doors and windows.

4.3.9 CODE AND ACCESSIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Alterations to a storefront called for by public safety, handicapped access, and fire codes can be difficult design problems in historic buildings. Negotiations can be undertaken with appropriate officials to ensure that all applicable codes are being met while maintaining the historic character of the original construction materials and features. If, for instance, doors opening inward must be changed, rather than

replace them with new doors, it may be possible to reverse the hinges and stops so that they will swing outward.

The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that entries to all public spaces, including commercial establishments such as retail stores, restaurants and offices be accessible to those with disabilities. Particular requirements that affect commercial storefronts include threshold heights (1/2" maximum), door width (32" clear opening typically requires a 34" or 36" wide door be used), slope at and leading up to entry doors (2% maximum).

If entrances cannot be made accessible, access to an alternative entry with a ramp that complies with local, state and national accessibility requirements should be considered. This ramp can be provided at a side or rear entry in many instances. Owners are encouraged to obtain a copy of the *'Texas Accessibility Standards'* and the *'Americans with Disabilities Act'*.

Additional Technical information on the stabilization and repair of historic storefronts and entries is included in *'Technical Guidelines'* (Part 5).