

MAIN STREET

A Publication of the National Trust for Historic Preservation

Keeping Up Appearances

Storefront Guidelines

What makes for a successful Main Street business? It can't be measured exactly; there is no single success formula. Product, price, display, service, location and market all play a part. So too does the appearance of the store, the outside image of the business.

Many store owners seem to regard appearance as secondary to the more immediate concerns of running a business. Too often, the building is neglected or mishandled.

Yet experience shows, time and again, that appearance is important to a healthy business downtown. With merchants working together to create an attractive image, downtown as a whole can benefit.

The 20th century brought changes for Main Street. The automobile brought new competition from commercial strips and shopping centers. Downtown merchants turned their attention to passing cars, erecting shiny new storefronts and eye-catching signs. Main Street stores tried to imitate their modern competitors.

In many ways, the result has been a sorry one. Down-

town now appears as a curious cross between neglected old buildings and a commercial strip. It presents a confused image to the shopping public.

The idea of visual relatedness is crucial to the goal of an integrated Main Street. Historically, Main Street facades complemented and reinforced one another. Compare the drawings on this page. Notice how the remodeling of the old facades has destroyed their continuity. They are no longer visually tied together. Each facade is unrelated to the next, and the character of the building group as a whole suffers.

With its buildings, history, setting and place within the community, downtown is unique and special. It makes sense to acknowledge these resources and take full advantage of them—to develop the qualities that are already present downtown.

What improvements can make your building work better for you? How can you make it more attractive to shoppers? The following pages present suggestions for improving appearances as well as ideas for prolonging the life of old buildings.



The traditional commercial storefront can be considered the cornerstone of Main Street. Dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries, these buildings share a remarkable similarity—a consistency that creates a strong visual image for the downtown.

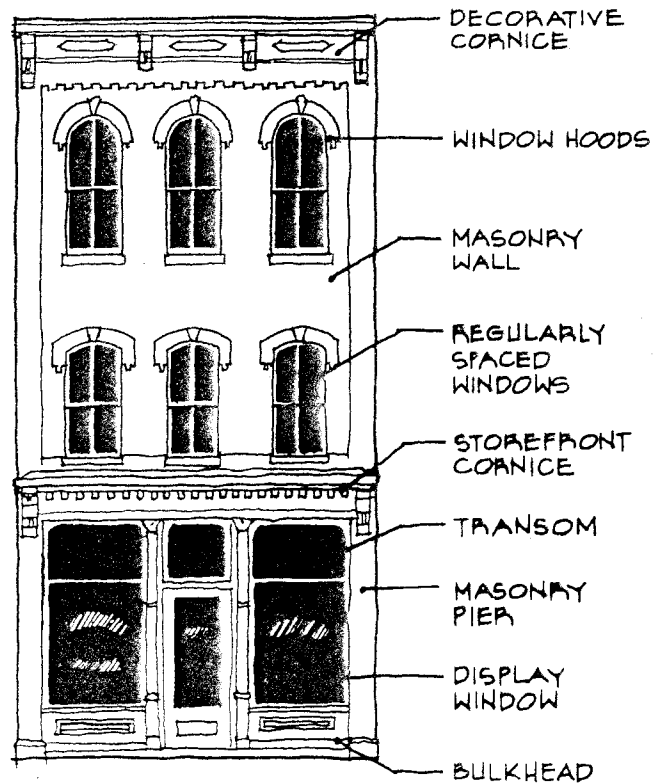
Because they were composed of similar parts, the blocks have a consistent, organized and coordinated appearance. Any one facade is visually related to its neighbors.

The parts of the facade were often compatible enough to be interchangeable. A commercial building from the mid 1800s could be easily modernized by inserting a new 1900s storefront. Although the styles and details changed, the proportions remained the same.

Technological developments, coupled with changing tenants and merchandising trends, encouraged frequent storefront changes, while the upper facade stayed the same, deteriorated or was covered over.

The storefront became increasingly transparent, but it still fit into the framed opening provided by the original building.

The basic commercial facade consists of three parts: the storefront with an entrance and display windows, the upper facade usually with regularly spaced windows and the cornice that caps the building. These components appear in many shapes, sizes and styles but result in essentially the same facade.



TYPICAL UPPER FACADES



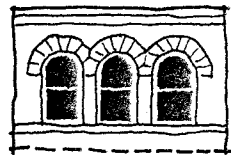
Early to Mid 1800s

- SIMPLE CORNICE
- LINTELS OVER WINDOWS
- SMALL WINDOW PANES



Mid to Late 1800s

- BOLDLY DECORATED CORNICE
- WINDOW HOODS
- 2 OVER 2 WINDOWS



Late 1800s to Early 1900s

- CORBELLED BRICK CORNICE
- LARGE, ARCHED WINDOWS



Early 1900s to 1930s

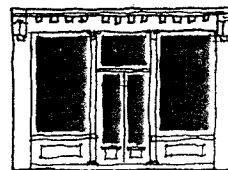
- SIMPLE BRICK CORNICE
- LARGE WINDOW OPENINGS WITH MULTIPLE UNITS

TYPICAL STOREFRONTS



Early to Mid 1800s

- POST AND BEAM FRAME
- DIVIDED DISPLAY WINDOWS
- SIMPLE DECORATION



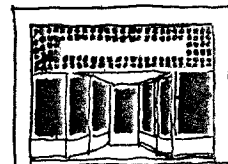
Mid to Late 1800s

- BOLDLY DECORATED CORNICE
- CAST IRON COLUMNS
- LARGE DISPLAY WINDOWS



Late 1800s to Early 1900s

- SIMPLE CORNICE
- TRANSOM WINDOWS
- RECESSED ENTRANCE



Early 1900s to 1930s

- METAL WINDOW FRAMES
- STRUCTURAL GLASS
- RECESSED ENTRANCE

The appearance of downtown is the result of an evolutionary process in which buildings either stay the same, are altered or are completely replaced. This process is continuous and inevitable. But its success or failure depends on how sensitive these changes are to the existing framework of buildings.

The typical Main Street facade inherently exhibits some basic qualities resulting from its architectural style, construction materials and composition.

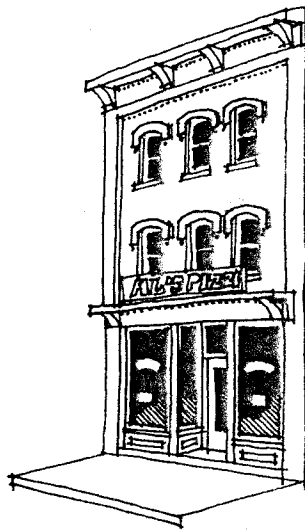
Sensitive change accepts these facade qualities and builds on them. The result is a harmonious blending of

new design elements within the existing facade. Insensitive change, on the other hand, ignores and often eliminates the design qualities of the original building and creates an unnecessary clash between new and old.

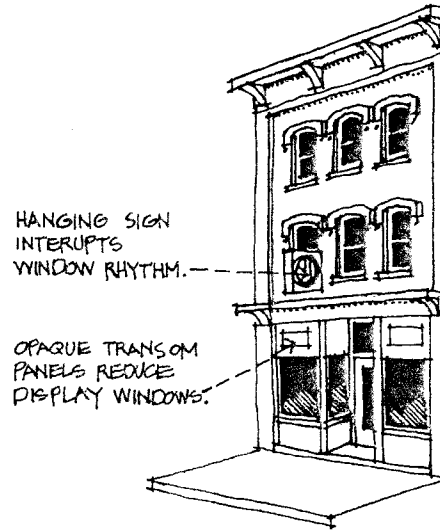
The series of drawings below shows how a typical facade might have changed over time.

Changes happen gradually and have a cumulative effect on a building's appearance. While some alterations are hardly noticeable, change upon change over the years can completely ignore the original facade.

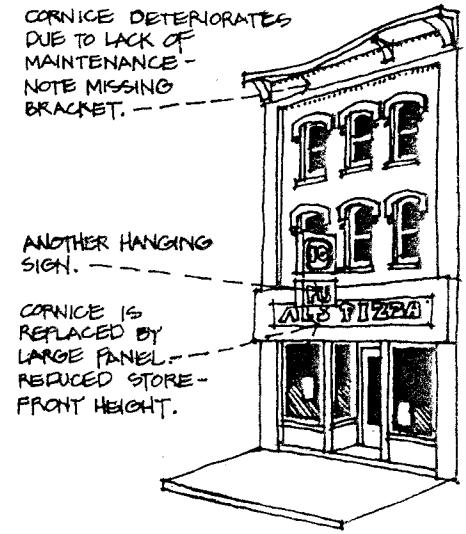
1. THE ORIGINAL FACADE—
THE VISUAL RESOURCE



2. MINOR FACADE CHANGE



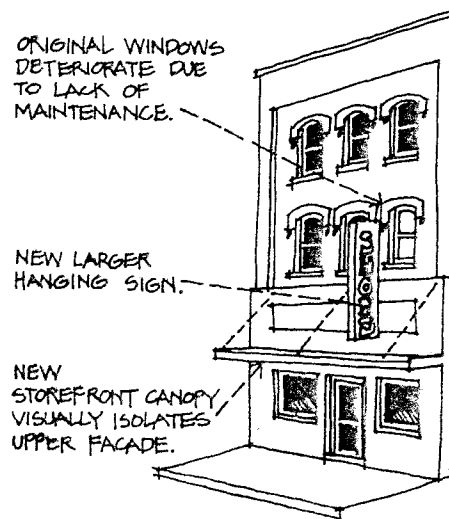
3. MORE MINOR FACADE CHANGE



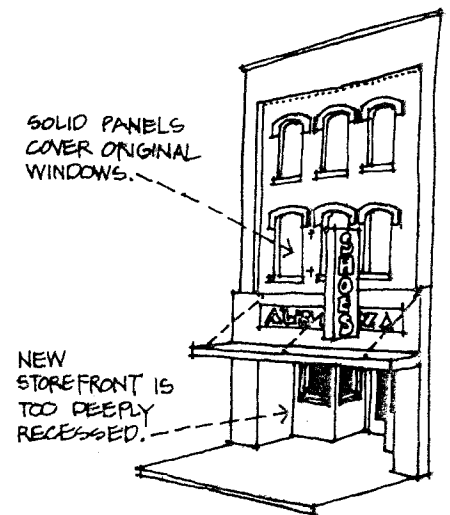
4. STOREFRONT REMODELING—
THE FACADE LOOKS CUT IN HALF.



5. MORE STOREFRONT CHANGE



6. ANOTHER STOREFRONT REMODELING



MAINTENANCE

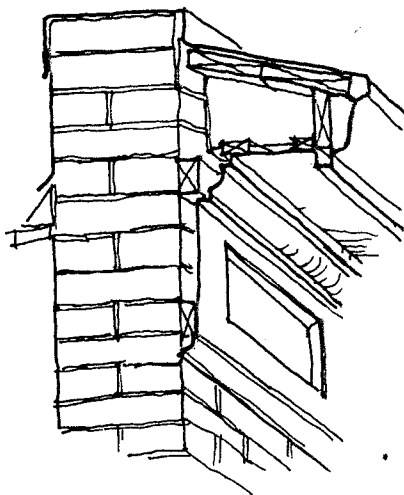
Improper maintenance often results in an insensitive change. Broken windows are boarded over; deteriorated cornices are removed rather than repaired; and walls with peeling paint are covered with aluminum. Proper maintenance is better than any quick-fix approach. It prolongs the life of the building while relying on the quality of the original materials and intended design.

A typical commercial building is composed of a number of materials, each with its own characteristics and problems.

CAST IRON AND SHEET METAL

Cast-iron and sheet metal decorations were often applied to a brick facade; sometimes entire facades were made of a combination of the two.

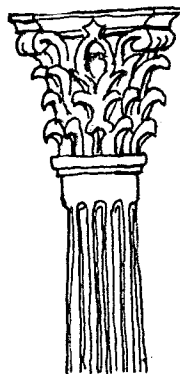
Cast iron is quite permanent and has been used extensively for storefront columns and window lintels. Regular painting will prevent corrosion. A chemical paint remover or low pressure dry grit blasting (80–100 psi) can be effective for removing built up paint and rust. Missing parts can be recast in aluminum or fiberglass from existing pieces or substituted by wooden pieces.



SHEET METAL
CORNICE

Stamped metal is much lighter and bends easily. Elaborate cornices are often made of stamped metal nailed to a wooden framework attached to the building. Stamped metal usually is coated with zinc to retard rusting although it is very susceptible to rust if the surface is scratched or left exposed. It must always be painted. If stamped metal must be cleaned, use a chemical paint remover. Never use dry grit blasting.

Missing parts can be duplicated by a sheet metal shop.

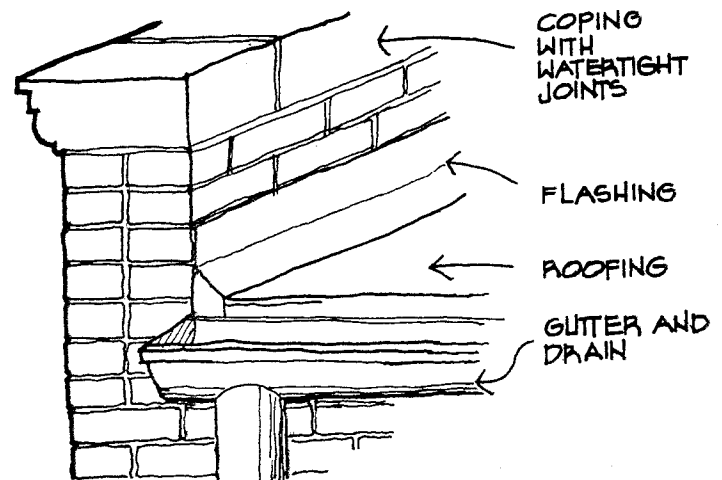


CAST IRON
COLUMN

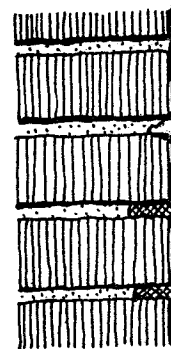
MASONRY SURFACES

Brick or stone walls can be very durable although they are susceptible to moisture, pollution and age. The most frequent problems to look for are deeply recessed mortar joints and crumbling masonry units.

Moisture. The appearance of mold or discoloration of a masonry surface may indicate a moisture problem. Moisture commonly enters through the top of a wall or where the wall meets the roof. Damage can also be caused by moisture from a clogged drain spout, a broken gutter or from water splashing up from the pavement. The roof, flashing, wall coping and drainage system should be periodically checked for water tightness.



Repointing. Mortar disintegrates with age and weathering. When the mortar joints are loose or crumbling, or have recessed more than a half inch, they should be repointed with new mortar to keep out water and continue to hold the masonry units in place. Repointing deteriorated sections should be done with care; new mortar joints should match the style, size, composition and color of the originals. Typical mortar for older buildings contains one part Portland cement to two parts lime to nine parts sand. Never allow a high content of Portland cement to be used. It is very hard and can crack older brick, which is softer. Pick a reputable masonry contractor and examine other repointing jobs the contractor has completed.



SOLID MORTAR

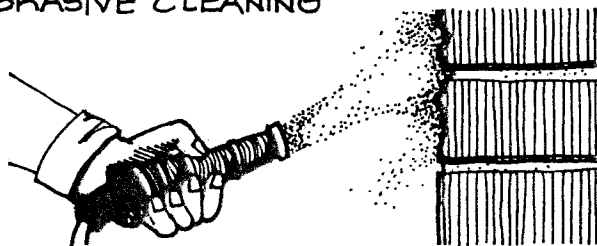
DETERIORATED
MORTAR JOINT

REPOINTED MORTAR
MATCHING ORIGINAL
STYLE, SIZE, COLOR
AND COMPOSITION

Cleaning Masonry. High pressure water or steam cleaning should be considered for unpainted masonry buildings. Masonry cleaning can give the surface of a building new life by removing pollutants and restoring the natural qualities of the brick or stone.

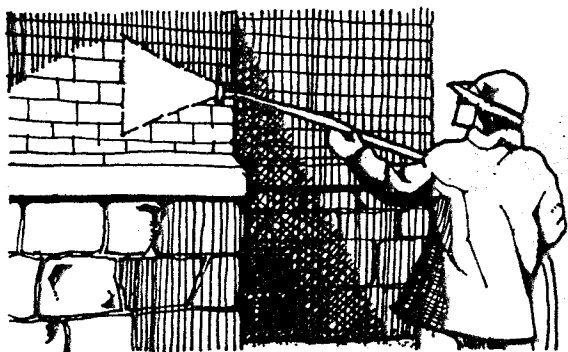
Improper cleaning can result in further deterioration of masonry. Sandblasting or other abrasive cleaning methods should never be used. They erode the surface of the masonry material and can permanently damage the building. Once the outside skin of the brick has been removed, water can saturate the surface and deteriorate the brick. Sealants can not effectively replace this outer surface.

ABRASIVE CLEANING



Low pressure water cleaning (not more than 600 psi), scrubbing with a bristle brush and the use of gentle detergents is usually sufficient to clean dirt and grime from a masonry surface. Be sure to use only natural bristle brushes, not metal. Metal can disturb the mortar and damage masonry.

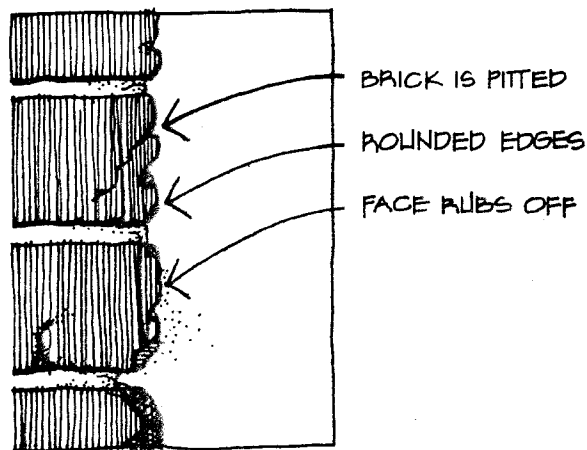
HIGH PRESSURE WATER CLEANING



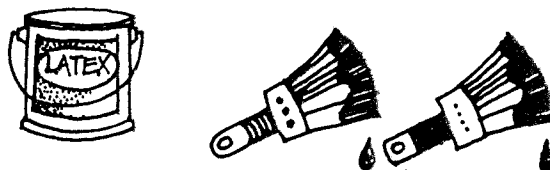
In some instances, a chemical cleaner is required if paint or heavy grime must be removed. The masonry is usually prewet to soften any dirt. Then a chemical paint remover is applied and allowed to remain on the building surface. Finally, the chemical is rinsed off, usually with water. This process may be repeated several times to remove built up paint.

Finding the right chemical for the job is the biggest challenge. Every company seems to have its own solution. One thing to remember is that chemical cleaners can be either alkaline or acidic. Be sure the right chemical is chosen for your building. Acidic products should never be used on limestone or marble.

Cleaning should only be undertaken by experienced professionals. It may be necessary to look outside of your town for the right company. Check the Yellow Pages under "Building Cleaning—Exterior." After identifying potential contractors, investigate examples of their work and ask for a test patch on your building in advance to see how effective the cleaning method will be. Look for possible damage to the mortar joints and any residue on the wall surface caused by the cleaning process. Also look for any damage to the masonry units. Are the edges more rounded? Does the face rub off? Some masonry surfaces may be too soft to be cleaned.



Remember never to clean a building if there is any possibility of frost because the moisture may crack the masonry if it freezes.



Painting. Unless it is necessary to protect the surface, exposed masonry should be left unpainted. A previously painted surface should be repainted rather than chemically cleaned.

Before painting a masonry surface, the mortar should be checked and repointed as needed. Loose paint should be scraped off. The building may be cleaned with a low pressure water wash. Then a masonry primer should be applied to the entire area and one or two final coats of semigloss or flat latex paint applied to the wall surface.

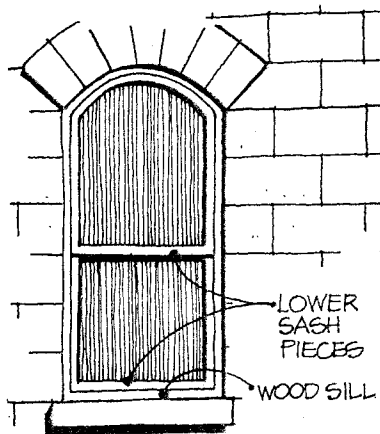
UPPER-STORY WINDOWS

The visual importance of upper-story windows is evident in their steady march down Main Street. They give buildings an appearance of vitality and use, even if the upper floors are vacant. They create a repeated pattern that helps tie together the facades.

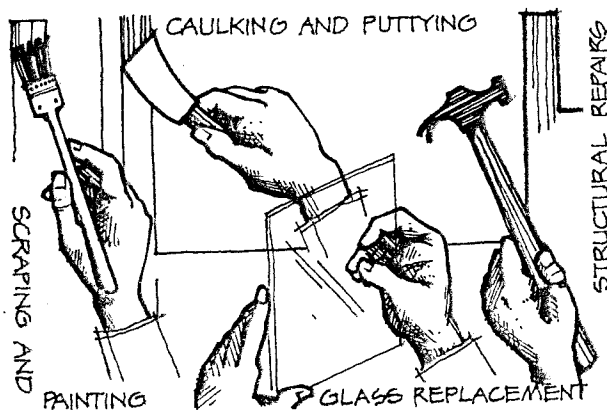
Often, deteriorated upper-story windows have been inappropriately replaced or boarded up. This treatment cheapens not only the character of the building but the streetscape as well—a negative image that can be avoided through proper maintenance.

Window Maintenance Checklist

- Check the wood parts of the window. Are there portions that are soft, cracked or split? Pay particular attention to the window sills and bottom of the window sashes where water has collected. If sashes or frames are deteriorated, window glass can fall out and endanger pedestrians below.



- To maintain the windows properly, all deteriorated wood should be replaced with new pieces and the old paint scraped off. All cracks should be filled with caulk or wood putty and the surfaces sanded. Loose glazing put-

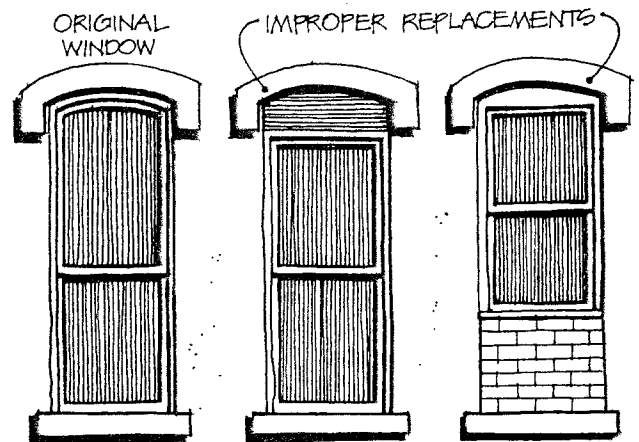


ty should be replaced and the frames primed with a good quality oil-based primer and painted with one or two coats of latex or oil-based paint.

- Loose or broken window panes can be easily fixed. First remove all broken glass and old glazing putty. Replace the glass with new panes similar to the existing glass and, using glazier's points and putty, reglaze both the new glass and loose panes. It may be easier to remove the window sash from the frame to perform these activities.
- The joints between the window frame and the masonry opening should also be checked. Loose caulk should be removed and the joints recaulked to prevent air and water infiltration.

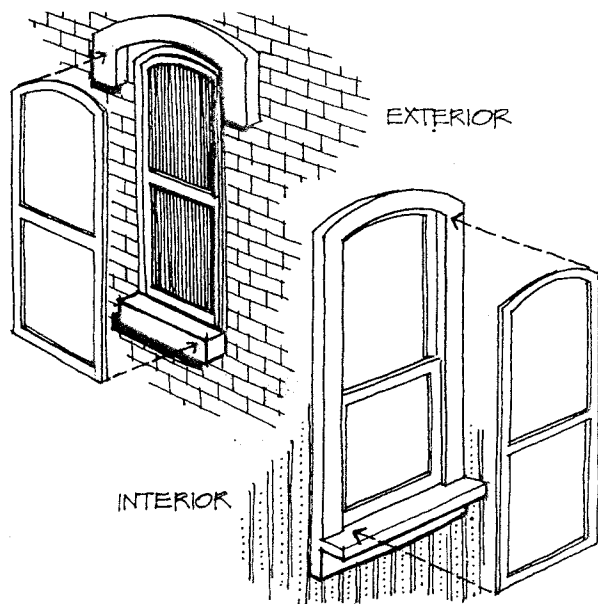
Window Replacement

- If a window has deteriorated beyond repair or is missing, the replacement should match the original window. Replacement windows should always fill the entire opening and duplicate the original pattern. For example, a double hung sash window should not be replaced by a single fixed pane of glass. Avoid the use of windows and shutters that are not in keeping with the style of the building.
- If possible, match the material as well as the design of the original windows. Standard wood windows are relatively easy to buy or have made. They may not be as expensive as you might think, averaging between \$100 and \$350 each. More unusual styles can be custom ordered.



- In some instances double-glazed aluminum frame windows may be desired. If aluminum must be used, it should duplicate the design of the original window. It should be in a dark anodized or baked enamel finish rather than a light metallic color.

Storm Windows. Storm windows are a good idea for conserving heat and energy, especially on upper floors. When mounted on the exterior, these windows should be painted to match the color of the window sash and should duplicate the shape. On the front of a building, it may be desirable to install storm windows on the inside where they will not be seen. Care must be taken that they are ventilated to prevent moisture from accumulating and damaging the wood.



WOOD

Wood is often used for cornices and storefronts and sometimes for upper wall surfaces. Always try to retain any original exterior woodwork. Deterioration can be prevented with regular maintenance, and decayed portions can be repaired. Check for soft, rotted areas, areas where the wood has split and places where nails have corroded. Up to a point, these problems can be fixed by re-nailing, filling and caulking the wood and then by using an oil primer and painting the wood with latex or oil-based paint.

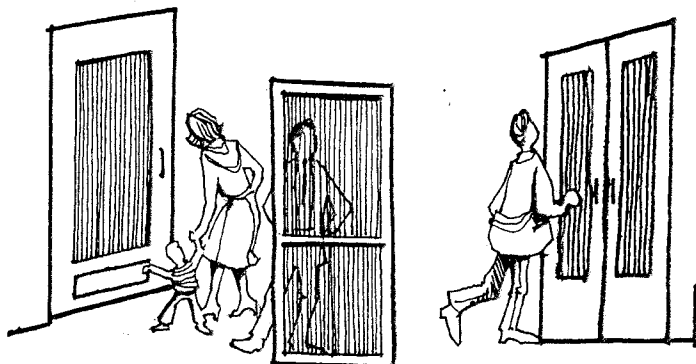


Sometimes it will be necessary to have a carpenter replace some pieces that have rotted or are missing. Any replacements should match or at least complement the existing details.

DOORS

Every storefront has a door or pair of doors that enter into the place of business. Traditionally, the entrance door was made of wood with a large glass panel. Every effort should be made to maintain and repair an original door, if possible.

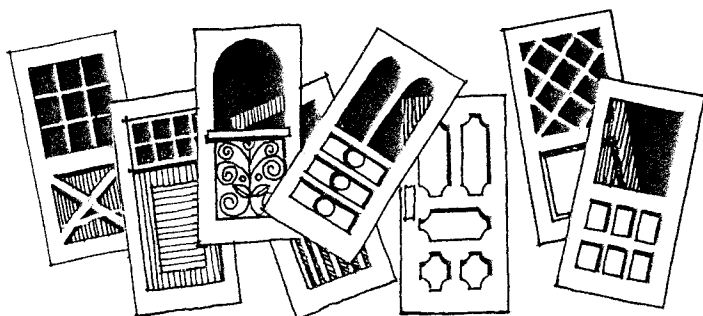
Painting Aluminum. Many original doors have been replaced by standard aluminum and glass commercial doors. Although lacking in historical character, they are generally unobtrusive. Aluminum doors and storefronts can be made more compatible by painting them a dark color. An exposed aluminum surface must be cleaned and prepared for a zinc chromate primer or metal primer, followed by appropriate finish coats as recommended by the primer manufacturer. New aluminum should be exposed to weather for at least two months before painting.



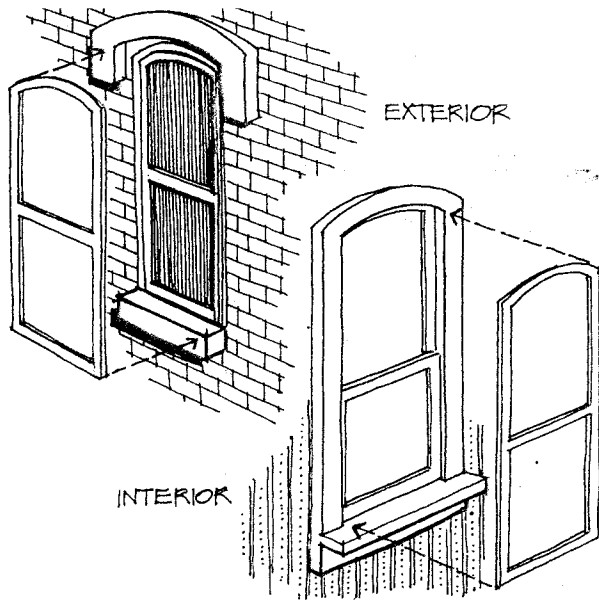
Door Replacement. If a door is to be replaced there are three basic options:

- Have a new door built with the same design and proportions of the original.
- Find a manufactured wooden or steel door that resembles the traditional store door.
- Use a standard aluminum commercial door with wide stiles and a dark anodized or baked enamel finish.

Do not use doors decorated with moldings, cross bucks or window grills. These doors are more residential in character and can look out of place on commercial buildings.



Storm Windows. Storm windows are a good idea for conserving heat and energy, especially on upper floors. When mounted on the exterior, these windows should be painted to match the color of the window sash and should duplicate the shape. On the front of a building, it may be desirable to install storm windows on the inside where they will not be seen. Care must be taken that they are ventilated to prevent moisture from accumulating and damaging the wood.



WOOD

Wood is often used for cornices and storefronts and sometimes for upper wall surfaces. Always try to retain any original exterior woodwork. Deterioration can be prevented with regular maintenance, and decayed portions can be repaired. Check for soft, rotted areas, areas where the wood has split and places where nails have corroded. Up to a point, these problems can be fixed by re-nailing, filling and caulking the wood and then by using an oil primer and painting the wood with latex or oil-based paint.

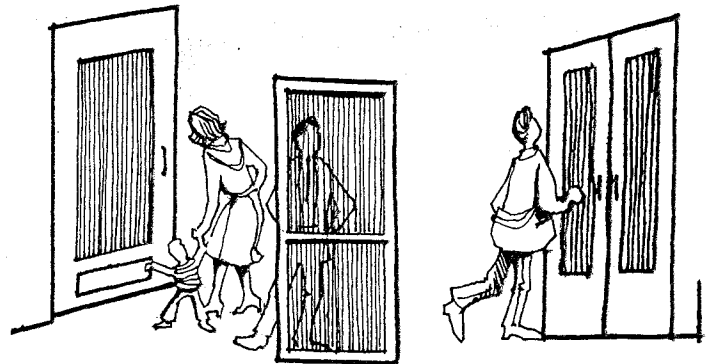


Sometimes it will be necessary to have a carpenter replace some pieces that have rotted or are missing. Any replacements should match or at least complement the existing details.

DOORS

Every storefront has a door or pair of doors that enter into the place of business. Traditionally, the entrance door was made of wood with a large glass panel. Every effort should be made to maintain and repair an original door, if possible.

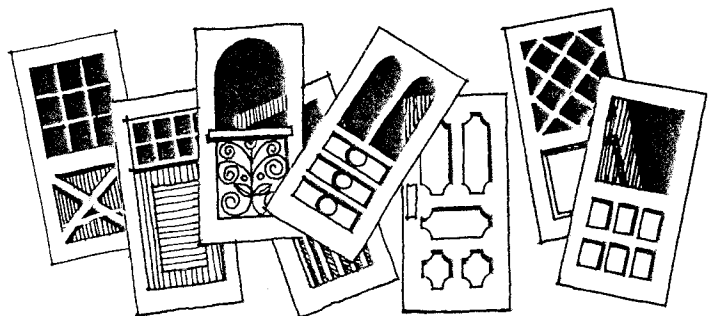
Painting Aluminum. Many original doors have been replaced by standard aluminum and glass commercial doors. Although lacking in historical character, they are generally unobtrusive. Aluminum doors and storefronts can be made more compatible by painting them a dark color. An exposed aluminum surface must be cleaned and prepared for a zinc chromate primer or metal primer, followed by appropriate finish coats as recommended by the primer manufacturer. New aluminum should be exposed to weather for at least two months before painting.



Door Replacement. If a door is to be replaced there are three basic options:

- Have a new door built with the same design and proportions of the original.
- Find a manufactured wooden or steel door that resembles the traditional store door.
- Use a standard aluminum commercial door with wide stiles and a dark anodized or baked enamel finish.

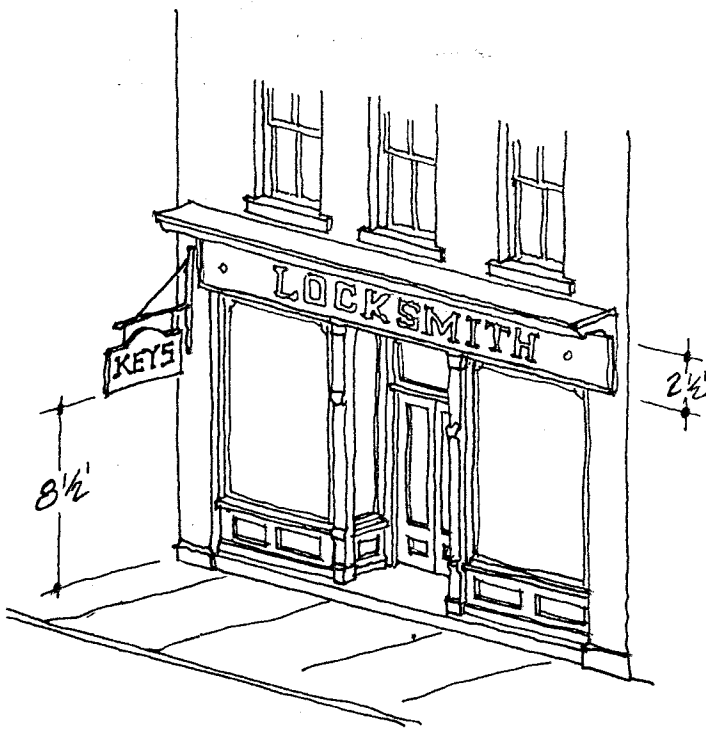
Do not use doors decorated with moldings, cross bucks or window grills. These doors are more residential in character and can look out of place on commercial buildings.



SIGNS

Signs are a vital part of any Main Street. With a sign, you call attention to your business and create an individual image for your store. But it is often forgotten that signs contribute to an overall image as well. Merchants try to out-shout one another with large, flashy signs. A successful sign can reinforce the image of the downtown as well as serve the needs of the business. Consider the following guidelines:

- A sign should express an easy to read, direct message: Keep it simple.
- A storefront should not have more than two signs—one primary and one secondary.
- A flush-mounted sign board may extend the width of the storefront but should not be more than 2½ feet high. The sign should be mounted somewhere above the storefront display windows and below the second-story window sills. Generally, lettering should be 8 to 18 inches high and occupy only about 65 percent of the sign board.



- A hanging sign should be mounted at least 8½ feet above the sidewalk and should project no more than 5 feet. The size and location of a hanging sign should be carefully considered so that it does not interfere with neighboring signs.
- Window signs should not obscure the display area. The color of the letters should contrast with the display background. Light colored letters or gold leafed letters with dark borders are effective.

- Awnings can also serve as signs with contrasting letters painted or sewn onto the valance. Usually, 6 to 8-inch letters are sufficient.
- There are hundreds of letter styles available. A letter style should be chosen that is easy to read and that reflects the image of the business it represents.

Helvetica Palatino

Benguiat Korinna

Arnold Franklin

Clarendon Goudy

Bookman Souvenir

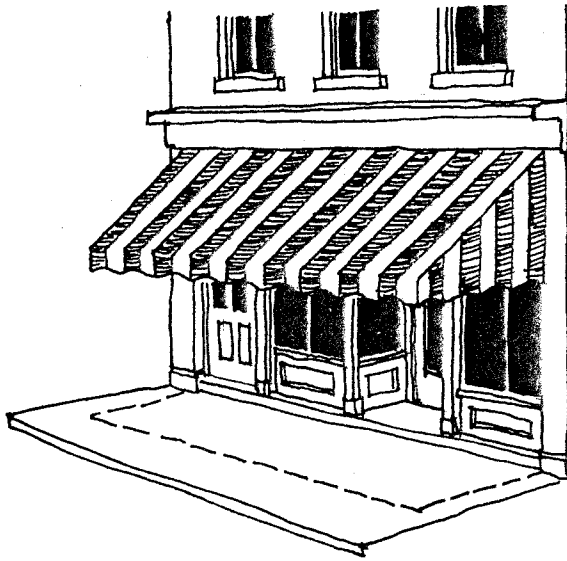
Broadway

- Letters can be painted or mounted directly on a sign board, storefront or wall. Three dimensional letters are available from sign makers in wood, marine plywood, metal and plastic. Remember, letters should not be too large.
- Sign colors should complement the colors of the building. Light colored letters on a dark background are easier to read.
- Illuminated signs can be appropriate downtown if they respect the proportions of the storefront and the guidelines outlined above. Painted signs can be directly illuminated with florescent or incandescent lights. Internally lit signs are most effective with light letters on a dark opaque background. Exposed neon letters can also be effective, adding color and vitality to the street.
- Choose a sign maker carefully. Quality of workmanship and construction is as vital as any of the considerations just discussed. Ask where you can see examples of previous work.

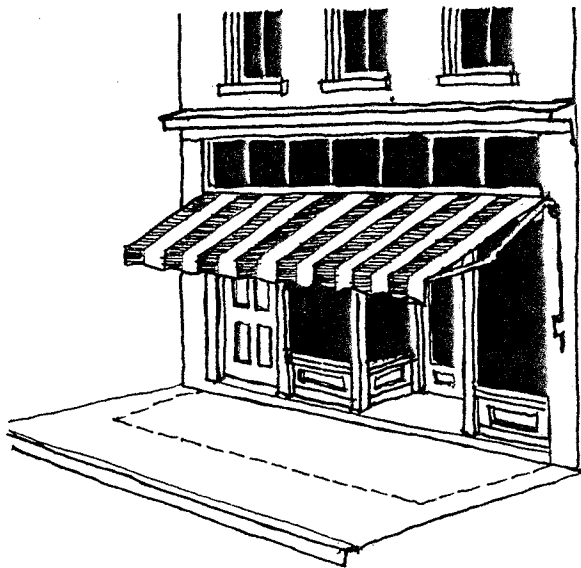
AWNINGS

The canvas awning was an important design element in the traditional storefront. It provided cover, added color and served as a transition between the storefront and the upper facade. Most buildings that face the sun had awnings. Look at old pictures of your building to see how awnings were used.

A standard street-level awning should be mounted so that the valance is about 7 feet above the sidewalk and projects out between 4 and 7 feet from the building. A 12-inch valance flap is usually attached at the awning bar and can serve as a sign panel.



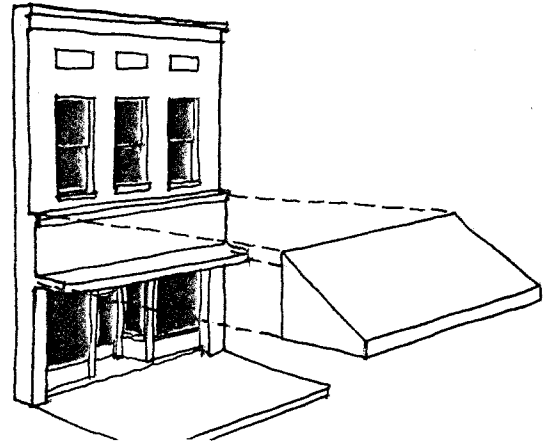
An awning can be attached above the display windows and below the cornice or sign panel. Sometimes it is mounted between the transom and the display windows, allowing light into the store while shading the merchandise and pedestrians from the sun.



An awning should reinforce the frame of the storefront and should not cover the piers or the space between the second-story window sills and the storefront cornice.



Inappropriate storefront alterations can be effectively disguised by mounting an awning over the alterations while maintaining the proportions of a traditional storefront.



Aluminum awnings or canopies generally detract from the historic character and should not be erected. If a flat canopy exists, it can be dressed up with a 12- to 24-inch awning valance.



Various awning materials offer different colors and patterns. There are several to choose from: canvas, vinyl-coated canvas and acrilan, a synthetic material. Each varies in cost and relative durability.

