DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR HISTORIC COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

D.C. HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Introduction

Washington's historic commercial buildings and the corridors in which they reside have a rich legacy that reflects the city's history and economic vibrancy. These commercial buildings have served people from every profession and from all parts of the world, and the businesses and organizations they have housed celebrate Washington's international flavor and cultural heritage.

Maintaining the vibrant architecture of Washington's commercial buildings and creating lively, inviting storefronts and streetscapes is a shared responsibility. These guidelines are provided for business owners, property owners, architects and designers, developers, contractors, neighborhood historic preservation groups, city revitalization organizations, and city agencies who all play a role in ensuring that the District's commercial areas are attractive, dynamic and successful.

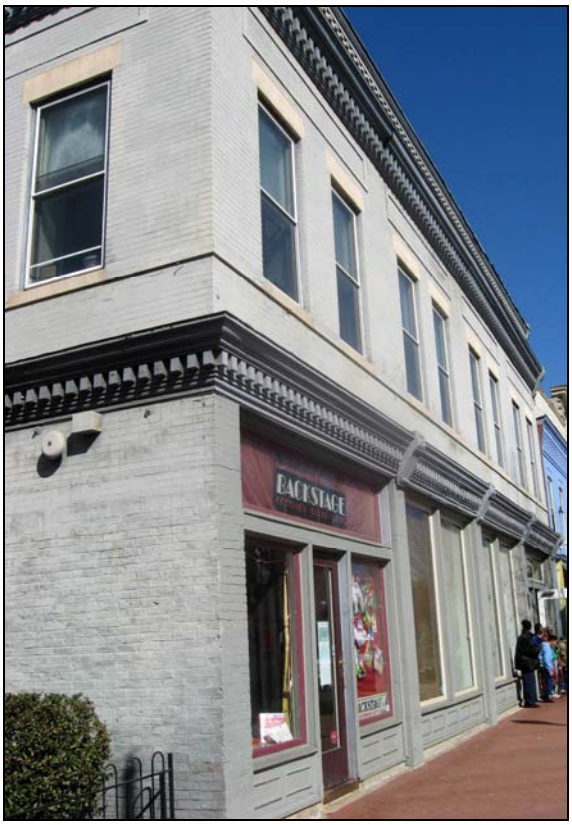
A commercial area's identity is defined in large part by its physical design – the overall layout of the streets and sidewalks, the physical placement of buildings and public spaces, and the design of individual commercial buildings. Washington's commercial areas are defined not by rigid consistency but by variations in height, architecture, and materials that reflect the style, era of construction, and flavor of the surrounding neighborhood. These character-defining features of historic commercial buildings should be preserved, and new construction in commercial areas should be compatible with the overall design characteristics and scale of surrounding buildings.

Commercial Building Types

Washington's commercial buildings are diverse in style and era of construction, ranging from elegant, Italianate buildings of the 1870s to brick-front buildings from the 1890s to more modest one- and two-story structures from the early twentieth century. This rich variety contributes to the vitality of the city's commercial corridors and evidences Washington's growth over time. Accordingly, there is no one design response that is appropriate for all historic commercial buildings. Alterations should respect the character of the individual design qualities of each structure and its immediate context, commonalities among building typologies, and the respective historic district.

The **Italianate** storefront was popular during the 1870s and 1880s and is distinguished on the upper levels by tall and narrow windows with segmented or rounded decorative lintels and a bracketed cornice generally made of wood or metal. The storefront level was visually demarcated from upper stories by an ornamented beam and featured tall storefront windows with low paneled kickplates of wood or metal, which reflected the refined, vertically-oriented style of the building.

The **brick-front** was common from the late nineteenth century forward and included office or apartment space on one or two stories above a ground-floor business. Upper stories are detailed with articulated brick or stone lintels and sills and brick corbelled cornices.



Brick-front commercial buildings can be found in variations of late nineteenth century Victorian styles such as the Queen Anne (which may include multi-light upper story windows), early twentieth century Neoclassical styles (with bold classical details such as large denticulated cornices and oriel bays on the second floor), and mid-twentieth century Colonial Revival styles (with restrained classical detailing and multi-light upper story windows).

Washington also has many **"blond" brick-fronts**, which were constructed from the 1920s through the 1940s.

Although modest in ornamentation, this type of building often features multi-light windows and classical or Art Deco pre-cast decorative relief panels below the cornice line.

One-story commercial buildings from the early twentieth century can be found in most neighborhood and central business district commercial corridors. Their facades are clad in brick or limestone and may be capped with a stepped or shaped parapet.

This building type is distinguished by its horizontality, derived from the buildings' low height and wide street frontage. Display windows were partitioned into panels of glass with thin mullions, topped by a line of continuous transom windows above.

Corner stores and other buildings that included a ground-level storefront with an apartment above were once common in many rowhouse neighborhoods.

Conversely, many of the city's commercial corridors contain **rowhouses originally constructed as residences** that have been fully adapted to commercial use.

Many of the city's commercial corridors include specific **purpose-built buildings** that have been converted to new uses, including banks, automobile showrooms, warehouses, and garages.

These buildings may have specific character-defining features related to the original use, such as garage entry bays on car showrooms, classically-inspired columns and inscribed signage on banks, and steel awning or casement windows on warehouses.

New construction in historic commercial areas and **additions** to historic commercial buildings should enhance vitality along streetscapes, showcase interesting and thoughtful contemporary design, and contribute to neighborhood revitalization.

New construction should be contextual in nature, respecting the character of surrounding buildings in such aspects as massing, height, materials, storefront configuration and upper story fenestration.

Additions to historic commercial buildings need not replicate historical styles; creative interpretation of traditional elements, respect for established design characteristics, and the use of contemporary elements are encouraged.

Storefronts

More than almost any other part of a commercial area's built environment, storefronts reflect the city's evolution over the years. In Washington's early years, most of its stores were tucked into the ground floors of two- and three-story residential buildings. As glass manufacturing technology improved, it became possible to manufacture larger pieces of window glass, and storefront display windows became larger. By the mid-nineteenth century, purpose-built commercial buildings of two to four-stories were being constructed, with offices and apartments in the upper floors over a ground-floor retail space. By the early twentieth century, a single sheet of glass could span a storefront, opening up huge display areas and flooding store interiors with light.

With the advent of trolley lines, Washington's businesses added signs that would appeal not only to pedestrians but that would also attract attention from people speeding by in trolley cars. As new building materials were introduced in the twentieth century – pigmented structural glass, porcelain enameled metal panels, steel frame construction, and sleek aluminum trim, for example – business owners quickly incorporated them into their storefront designs to reflect the latest in merchandising style.

In many ways, storefronts are the most dynamic aspect of a commercial building's façade. While the building's upper façade may change less often, the ground-floor storefront evolves over time. These changes often acquire significance of their own and should be carefully evaluated in proposed storefront alterations.

Storefront Anatomy

QUICK TIPS

- Historic storefront elements should be identified, preserved, and repaired.
- Storefronts should be kept in good repair. If repair or replacement of storefront elements is needed, high-quality materials that are compatible with the existing building should be used.
- The original size, shape and proportion of display windows and entrances should be maintained. Storefront windows should not be enclosed or reduced in size.
- Unpainted masonry should not be painted, and brick and masonry should not be sandblasted or cleaned with harsh chemicals.

A "storefront" is the ground-floor section of the façade of a commercial building. Framed by the sides of the building, the storefront functions as a business's public interface through the entryway, store display, and sign.

Even though the buildings and storefronts in a neighborhood commercial area might date from different eras and be of different architectural styles, these basic elements – window base, display window, transom window, frieze, cornice – provide a strong sense of visual continuity along the streetscape.

Window base (kickplate): The window base (or kickplate) is the short wall below the display window, separating the window from the sidewalk. Window bases are generally between 18" and 24" high.

Typically made of wood or masonry, window bases are sometimes surfaced with metal panels, ceramic tiles, marble, brick, or other materials.

Original window bases should be preserved or repaired in-kind whenever possible. Replacements should replicate the design of the original or a close approximation and should align at roughly the same height as those of other storefronts in the block.

Display windows: Display windows are the most prominent characteristic of storefronts and the primary element establishing visual continuity along the street.

The size, shape, and proportions of original storefront windows should be maintained, and new windows should match the originals as closely as possible. Unless they are replacing originals, replacement windows should be fixed (not operable); should not be divided up into smaller panes; and should have a thin window frame profile.

Transom windows: Transom windows – the horizontal windows that span the storefront above its display windows – provide ventilation and allow additional light into a building's interior.

Transom windows often have a decorative function as well, featuring stained glass ornaments, building numbers, signage and other decorative features.

If a transom window must be replaced, its original proportions and any original materials should be retained. If the transom window's framing has been removed, it should be replaced, with the window opening aligning with those in adjacent buildings. If possible, replacement transom windows should also reflect the original design (using stained glass or individual panes of glass, for example, if those were used originally).

Storefront entries: Some of Washington's historic storefronts have recessed entries, providing shelter for customers and creating a pattern and rhythm along the streetscape.

Recessed entries are distinctive design characteristics that should be preserved when original to the building.

Original storefront doors should be maintained when possible, and replacements should reflect the style and materials of the storefront. By city code, doors cannot project out from the surface of the façade of the building; they must be flush with the façade or be recessed into the façade. All doors must comply with the District's accessibility requirements.

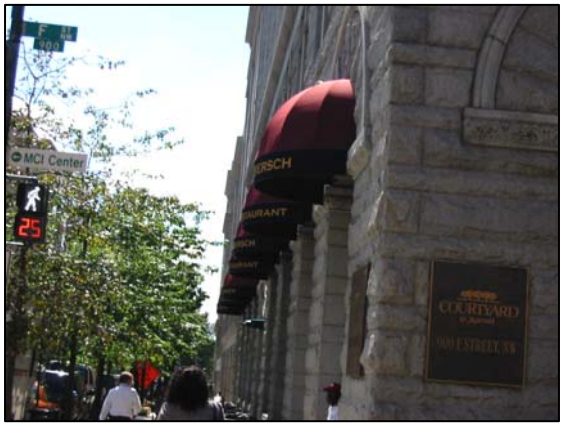
Awnings and canopies: Awnings (which are usually retractable) and canopies (which are always fixed) should span the width of the door or storefront window, fitting snugly within the storefront opening and thus reinforcing the storefront's design.

Historically, awnings were used almost exclusively to help regulate the temperature inside a storefront (rather than for decorative purposes).

Awnings and canopies should be made of treated, weather-durable fabric such as canvas or woven acrylic. Vinyl, metal, and plastic are not appropriate awning or canopy materials.

Awnings should relate to and fit within the masonry or frame openings of a window or door and should not cover over character-defining features of a historic building. Awnings or canopies that cover or obscure transom windows or that are used primarily for signage rather than for providing cover are generally not permitted. Backlit and internally illuminated awnings and canopies, which detract from the design cohesiveness of the streetscape, are also not appropriate.

Shed-style awnings and canopies are generally the most appropriate form for a flat-topped opening. Awnings and canopies should only be attached to a building in a manner that does not cause permanent damage, generally not through masonry. Awnings and canopies should have a minimum clearance height of 8'.



Barrel-vaulted awnings and canopies are only appropriate for arched openings.

Architectural ornamentation: Historic storefronts are often rich with architectural details and ornamentation – cornices, moldings, decorative stamped panels, tile entryways – that give the storefronts distinctive visual identities and that enliven the streetscape.

These architectural details should be preserved and repaired. If a storefront's decorative elements are severely deteriorated or damaged beyond repair, they should replaced by matching the profiles, finishes and colors of the original ornamentation as closely as possible.

Lighting: Lighting is a critical element in storefront design, enhancing the storefront's visual appeal and creating a sense of safety and security for pedestrians and customers.

Lighting can be used to highlight architectural details of the building, to illuminate signs and storefront display windows, and to make entries more inviting.

Lighting should fit within the storefront and complement the overall design of the storefront and the streetscape. Lighting should not overpower the design of the storefront nor detract attention from neighboring buildings.

ATM Installations

Installation of ATMs on the interior of historic property is preferable and encouraged in order to maintain the character of commercial storefronts.

Cutting through historic masonry to insert an ATM is not appropriate, but cutting through masonry on non-contributing buildings or additions may be acceptable.

Removing a primary door on historic property or inserting an ATM through a door is not appropriate. Removal or modification of a secondary door may be acceptable.

ATM installations should be reversible without permanent alteration to historic masonry or storefront framing. Typically, the most appropriate method of installation results only in removal of storefront glazing that could be reinstalled if the ATM is removed.

ATMs in storefronts should result in the removal of glass only the width and height of the ATM unit itself. Installing glass above and below the ATM is encouraged to retain the open quality of the storefront.

Alteration of original or character-defining storefront framing to accommodate an ATM is not appropriate; installation should result in removal of glass only.

Alteration of storefront framing that is non-contributing for installation of an ATM may be acceptable. However, retention of framing and removal of glass only is preferred.

Installation of ATMs within projecting storefronts is discouraged. If appropriate, ATMs in projecting storefronts should maintain visibility into the building and should generally not affect more than 25% of a storefront's glazing.

If detachable and not integral to the ATM unit, eliminating the advertising perimeter surround of the ATM machine should be considered to reduce its size and visual impact.

Digital, flashing, or back lit signs for ATMs are not appropriate for historic property.

Hanging or projecting signs must have a minimum clearance of 8' clear above the public sidewalk and can project no more than 42" from the building line (most projecting storefronts already project from the building line and need to be considered when calculating the allowable projection).

Signs

QUICK TIPS

- The District's Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs regulates the design and installation of signs, controlling the number, size, location, and materials of signs and all other aspects of sign design and placement. More information is available online at www.dcra.dc.gov.
- Signs should reflect the scale of the storefront and the building and should not obscure the building's architectural features (windows, cornices, piers or ornamentation).
- Signs attached to the surface of a masonry building should be attached through mortar joints, not through the masonry itself.
- Signs should be oriented primarily towards pedestrians rather than vehicular traffic.
- Graphics should be easy to read. Type styles can be traditional, contemporary, or whimsical. Sign design should reinforce the business's overall marketing image.
- Signs should generally be on the front of a building. There are a few instances in which the District permits signs on the side of a building, but generally only situations in which the side wall faces a public street, alley, or parking lot and the business has a door on that wall.
- Roof signs, revolving signs, and television and video monitors are not permitted on historic property, except for vintage, historic, or replica signs.

More than perhaps any other storefront component, signs provide an opportunity for whimsy, creativity, and expression that respects the building to which the signage is attached and the flavor of the neighborhood.

Different historic districts and neighborhoods have specific characteristics and qualities that may require varied signage solutions.

For instance, Chinatown, Downtown, 18th Street in Adams Morgan, Georgetown, U Street, and many other commercial strips throughout the city have their own historical traditions and distinctive current characteristics that must be recognized.

The quality and design of a business sign is influenced by its location, materials, size, scale, color, lighting, and typeface.

Well-designed and well-maintained signs add interest and variety to historic building facades.

Historic storefronts offer a number of sign placement options to businesses. Signs work well on signboards spanning the top of the storefront opening, above the transom windows; on awnings or canopies; painted on display windows; projecting from the building, above the entry; or as a small sign in the transom window.

Types of Signs

Awnings and canopies: Awning signs may be silk-screened directly onto the awning fabric or made of fabric or translucent material stitched into the fabric. Signs may be placed on the valance of the awning, but not on the slope.

The District's building code requires that signs on awnings and canopies have individual, freestanding letters without backgrounds. The letters cannot exceed 12" in height.

On canopies, signs can be mounted above, applied to, or cut into the fascia or front of the canopy. Signs on canopies are typically not illuminated, except for signs cut into the fascia. In this case, they are usually backlit with fluorescent light.

Friezes and Signboards: The frieze above a storefront's transom and storefront windows is one of the most common and appropriate locations for business signs.

For optimum visibility, the sign's lettering, graphics or logos must be at least 8". If raised freestanding letters are used, they cannot be mounted more than 12" from the surface of the building.

Illumination may be provided from top-mounted or spot lit external incandescent or halogen lighting.

If individual freestanding or channel letters are used, they may be individually lit or backlit. Internally illuminated box signs are inappropriate for historic commercial buildings.

Light sources should be shielded to avoid creating glare for pedestrians and motorists.

Projecting signs: Projecting signs are suspended over the sidewalk, extending perpendicular to the building façade.

Typically located above storefront entrances, projecting signs must be positioned at least eight feet above the sidewalk. Projecting signs should also be a minimum of 1' behind the plane of the curb.

With the exception of banners and flags, the building code requires that projecting signs be rigid (meaning that they cannot pivot or swing back and forth).

Wood and metal are generally the best materials to use for projecting signs – they are durable and easy to paint or die-cut.

Projecting signs cannot extend more than 42" from the storefront or the face of the building.

Plastic, vacuum-formed, internally illuminated signs, which typically overwhelm the design balance of the storefront, are generally not appropriate for historic buildings.

Display windows: Display window signs can be painted onto the storefront glass, or signs can be hung inside the display window.

The District's building code requires that signs painted onto glass storefront windows not cover more than 10% of the total window surface and that signs hung inside display windows not cover more than 15% of the window.

Transom windows: Depending on the design of the transom window, signs might be painted onto glass, made of colored or stained glass and incorporated into the design of the transom itself, or applied on a signboard and attached to the transom window cover.

Historic and ghost signs: Many historic commercial buildings retain signs from earlier or longtime current building uses – painted on the side of a building, carved into the façade itself, or affixed to the building's exterior.

These are character-defining features of a building and should be retained and, if necessary, repaired.

Painted ghost signs are a significant part of the history of a building and neighborhood. They should be retained and repaired.

Outdoor Seating Areas

QUICK TIPS

- A District Department of Transportation (DDOT) Public Space Permit should be obtained in order to use public space for outdoor seating, and all outdoor seating areas must also conform to zoning regulations. Consult www.ddot.dc.gov and www.dcoz.dc.gov for more information.
- Elements of an outdoor café in public space (including seating, tables, umbrellas, greeting and serving stations, and barriers) must be removable and should be made of durable materials that can withstand weather well.
- The design of the outdoor seating area should complement the design of the storefront itself so that the two components appear visually related. All options should be considered for creating outdoor seating – not just the front of the building, but also an interior court or the back of the building.
- Trash containers should not be stored in the outdoor seating area.

Outdoor seating gives a commercial district a sense of energy, with activity spilling out of a store or restaurant and onto the sidewalk. Sidewalk cafés and restaurants stimulate pedestrian activity in commercial areas and create a lively, dynamic atmosphere that strengthens neighborhood identity and enhances business activity.

In most instances, outdoor seating areas are located in public space, the primary purpose of which is to facilitate pedestrian movement. Thus, it is important that outdoor seating areas be designed in ways that do not obstruct movement, create safety hazards, or restrict other public activities.

Property owners in the city's commercial corridors may rent public space from the District to use for sidewalk cafés, flower stands, and other commercial activities related to the business immediately abutting the public space.

All commercial uses of public space must conform to the city's Public Space requirements, which include meeting guidelines for design and accessibility, paying applicable fees and rents, and maintaining required insurance coverage. These regulations include the location and size of outdoor seating areas, the amount of area that can be enclosed, and materials that can be used. The District's zoning regulations also regulate placement, storage, and other conditions of outdoor seating areas.

Most outdoor seating areas are located in front of buildings, where they benefit most from pedestrian activity along the sidewalk.

A sidewalk dining area in front of a building should be compatible with the building's façade and with neighboring buildings and businesses. The materials, finishes, colors and other character-defining elements of temporary fences and planters or plantings should complement the storefront.

In public space, decking and alternative paving materials other than what is part of the public sidewalk are not permitted. Garbage containers should not be located in outdoor seating areas and should instead be located inside the building itself or in a secondary outdoor location on private property.

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