



Design  
Guidelines

Commercial Building  
Facades

Provided  
by

Community Development  
Program  
of  
Beaver County

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## INTRODUCTION

*“The storefront is the most important architectural feature of commercial buildings. It also plays a crucial role in a store’s advertising and merchandising strategy to draw customers and to increase business.” (Preservation Briefs, U.S. Department of the Interior.)*

The attractiveness of property and commercial buildings is important to the revitalization of a Central Business District.

A downtown’s image and the design character of its buildings are products of the time in which it was built. This image and character were created through the arrangement of form and type of detail. Over the years, age, neglect, or attempts to modernize may have caused the arrangement of form and type of detail to be altered, slip covered, or removed. New construction, additions, and building façade rehabilitation should complement, not detract from the original form and detail.

Commercial buildings at the turn of the century were typically two to three story buildings. Brick or masonry was the predominant construction materials. The commercial use was on the ground floor, and the upper floors were used for residents or storage. Storefront design was part of the original architecture. The storefront façade was arranged in concert with the façade of the upper floors through a series of architectural bays. See accompanying illustration. Roofs were generally flat and not visible from the street. The top of the building façade was highlighted by a detailed cornice and sometimes a pediment. Windows on the second floor were typically double hung, one-over-one or two-over-two. The first floor storefront was separated from the upper story façade by a horizontal signboard cornice, which accommodated the store sign. The doorway was flanked by large display windows, which sometimes were recessed to provide additional display area. The display windows were raised off the ground by a lower panel. A series of transoms were placed above the door and windows. Column, piers, or wood trim framed the storefront.

The guidelines for commercial building façade, commercial signs, and landscaping are proposed to enhance this turn of the century character. However, the guidelines do not advocate or impose a specific architectural style on the business district. The approach is to reinforce the existing design character and to encourage new construction and rehabilitation, which is compatible with the arrangement of form and type detail found within the Downtown.

## **FACADE PROGRAM GOALS**

1. To encourage coordinated façade improvements and maintenance.
2. To enhance the business district's and the City/Borough's image.
3. To develop a system that encourages property owners, business people and merchants to invest in the properties.
4. To develop a system that encourages new businesses to locate in the central business district.
5. To encourage the formation of a community identity around the business district and the opportunities created by its proximity to the Beaver/Ohio River.
6. To accentuate the positive aspects of the business district.

## **REHABILITATION VERSUS RESTORATION**

The guidelines presented within this report are rehabilitation guidelines that have been created to assist local merchants and property owners in respectfully rehabilitating their commercial buildings. Respectful rehabilitation means the sensitive improvement of the buildings, particularly the façade. It involves building on the architectural qualities of the existing structure and its visual relationship to the rest of the business district.

These are not restoration guidelines. If you are considering a restoration project for a historic building and you intend to take the investment tax credit, these guidelines do not apply. You should contact the Pennsylvania Historic Museum Commission for the rules and regulations applicable to restoration.

## **EVALUATION OF THE STOREFRONT**

The most important key to a successful rehabilitation of a commercial building is planning and selecting treatments that are sensitive to the architectural character of the storefront.

1. Identify and evaluate the existing storefront's construction material; architectural features; and the relationship of those features to the upper stories of the building (Were the storefront and the floors above created as an overall design?)
2. Examine the storefront's physical conditions to determine the extent and nature of rehabilitation work needed.
3. Determine if there are surviving decorative elements such as molded cornices, columns, brackets, etc.
4. Review the neighboring commercial building to look for similarities as well as differences in architectural designs.

## **THE COURSE OF ACTION**

The best course of action for rehabilitation work is to follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standard Rehabilitation which include the following:

1. If the original or significant storefront exists, repair and retain the architectural features using recommended treatment for metal, wood, and masonry.
2. If the original or significant storefront no longer exists or is too deteriorated to save, undertake a contemporary design, which is compatible with the balance of the building in scale, design, materials, color, and texture; or undertake an accurate restoration based on research and physical evidence.

## **REHABILITATION GUIDELINES**

1. Every reasonable effort should be made to find a compatible use for the building and a minimum amount of alteration is required.
2. Make every effort to maintain distinguishing historic nature of the building.
3. Distinctive architectural features of the building should be repaired, rather than replaced. When replacement is necessary, the new material should match the original in composition, design, and texture.
4. Replacement of missing architectural features should be based on accurate duplication of the original features as much as possible.
5. Major alterations to the building over a period of years are part of its history and may have developed significance in their own right. They should be maintained and alterations to create earlier appearance should be avoided.
6. Building additions or alterations should be designed so that if they are removed in the future, the original building's integrity will not be severely damaged.
7. The original lines, proportions, texture, and decorative features of the building should be retained. New additions should be sympathetic to these important architectural features.
8. Elements that conceal or detract from the historic character of the building should be replaced with ones that enhance its original architectural features.
9. The surface cleaning of structures should be undertaken with the gentlest means possible.
10. When possible, existing trim and details should be retained. Decorative and window trim is particularly important.
11. The lower and upper floors of the building's main façade should be unified. A successful storefront design reinforces the overall proportions of the building by carrying the rhythm of the upper stories into the new storefront design.

12. Colors compatible with the streetscape and appropriate to the architectural style of the building should be used. Keep the number of colors used to a minimum and avoid the primary colors (red, yellow, and blue), which are usually too bright to be compatible with the streetscape. Select colors for trim which contrast with the wall surface, i.e. light versus dark but in the same color family.
13. Sign locations should be incorporated into the overall design for the façade.
14. Mechanical equipment such as television antennae, air conditioner, and trash dumpsters should be placed where they are not visible from the street.

**GUIDELINE**  
**MASONRY, BRICK, STONE, TERRA COTTA, CONCRETE, AND MORTAR**

1. The original masonry surface and mortar should be retained.
2. All deteriorated masonry work should be repaired to match the original. New mortar duplicated the original mortar in composition, color, texture, joint size, method of application, and joint profile. Only hand tools should be used to remove old mortar. High Portland Cement content should not used to repoint.
3. Masonry should be cleaned only when necessary to halt deterioration or to remove graffiti and stains. Sandblasting shall not be permitted. Steam or water applied under pressure (200-800 psi) is an acceptable means of cleaning masonry. Some chemical cleaning products can have an adverse chemical reaction with masonry surfaces, e.g., acid on limestone and marble. Brickwork may be cleaned with hydrofluoric acid in a concentration of not more the five percent or equivalent.
4. Applying waterproof or water repellent coatings or other treatments is discouraged.
5. Stucco should be repaired with a stucco mixture that duplicated the original as closely as possible in appearance and texture.
6. Missing significant architectural features such as cornices, brackets, railings, and shutter should be replaced.

**GUIDELINES FOR WOOD**

1. Important architectural features such as siding, cornices, brackets, window architraves and doorway pediments should not be removed.
2. Owners are encouraged to repair, restore, and, if necessary, replace existing wood siding with similar wood siding materials. Replacement materials, such as wood paneling, aluminum or vinyl siding are discouraged.

## **GUIDELINES FOR ARCHITECTURAL METALS:**

### **CAST IRON, STEEL, PRESSED TIN, ALUMINUM, AND ZINC**

1. Necessary architectural metals should be cleaned with the appropriate method. Cleaning methods, which alter the color, texture, and tone of the metal, should not be used. Cast iron and steel are normally not affected by mechanical cleaning methods while pressed tin, zinc, and aluminum should be cleaned by the gentlest method possible.
2. Paint on metal surfaces which is discolored or on which the finish is peeling, flaking, chalking, rusting, or eroded should be cleaned or refinished.

### **GUIDELINES FOR ROOFS AND ROOFING**

1. The original roof shape and important architectural features (e.g., dormer, cupolas, cornices, brackets, chimneys and crestings) should be preserved, these features should be retained and repairs or reconstruction shall be to presently existing dimensions. Existing roof pitches should be retained.
2. The original roofing material should be retained when visible from the street. Deteriorated roof covering should be replaced with new materials which do not differ to such an extent from the old in composition, size, shape, color, and texture that appearance of the building is altered.
3. Roofs, if sloping and visible from a public street or walkway, should meet the following requirements: If metal, other than copper, they should be painted or integrally colored an approved color. Roofing material of any kind should be black, gray, brown, or dark red. All visible metal work in such roofs, except copper, should be painted or integrally colored an approved color.
4. All box gutters should be retained. All façade downspouts should be copper or aluminum (painted or anodized) or galvanized and painted with an approved color.

### **GUIDELINES FOR WINDOWS AND DOORS**

1. All existing windows and door openings should be retained, i.e., window sash, glass, lintels, sills, architraves, shutters, doors pediments, hoods, steps and hardware. Structures whose window and door openings have been altered in the past are encouraged to restore these openings to their original sizes or to approximate those of their neighbors (duplicating the material, design and hardware of the older window sash and doors if new sash and doors are used).
2. Duplicate the material, design and hardware of the older window sash and doors if new sash and doors must be used.
3. Infilling of window and door openings to accommodate smaller or stock window units shall not be permitted.
4. Exterior mill finish aluminum storm windows shall not be permitted. Wood or vinyl clad storm windows may be installed if the basic shape of the original window is not altered.

5. Introducing new window and door openings into the principal elevations or enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes shall not be permitted. Altering the size of windowpanes or sash changes destroys the scale and proportion of the building. Inappropriate new window or door features such as aluminum storm and screen window combinations that require the removal of original windows and doors or the installation of plastic or metal trip awnings or fake shutters that alter the character and appearance of the building shall be discouraged.
6. Existing transoms and other embellishments characteristic of the structure should be retained, restored, or duplicated.
7. Improve the thermal performance of existing windows and doors through adding or replacing weather-stripping and adding storm windows and doors which are compatible with the character of the building and which do not damage window or door frames.

### **GUIDELINES FOR AWNINGS**

1. Awnings are appropriate only if they are constructed of a canvas-like material. They may be utilized on all windows.
2. Aluminum awnings shall be prohibited.
3. Select fabric colors that shall be compatible with the colors of the building's exterior.
4. Lettering and/or symbols incorporated into a ten to twelve inch wide valance or drop flap on the canvas awning is encouraged.

### **GUIDELINES FOR PAINTING**

1. If possible, discover the original historic paint colors and finishes and repaint with those colors to illustrate the distinctive character of the building.
2. Repaint with colors that shall be compatible with the street and neighborhood. Do not use bright or primary colors.
3. Storefront and sign colors should be related to the color of other structures on the block.
4. The color of your building should be related to the colors of other structures in the business district.
5. Generally, no more than three colors should be used on the façade.

### **GUIDELINES FOR STOREFRONTS**

1. The scale and proportion of the existing building, including the bay spacing above the storefront, should be respected in the storefront.
2. The selection of construction materials should be appropriate to the historic storefront assemblage.

3. The horizontal separation of the storefront from the upper floors should be articulate.
  - a. Storefront cornice shall be of wood, cast iron, or sheet metal.
  - b. The side piers shall be of the same material as the upper façade.
4. The placement and architectural treatment of the front entrances should differentiate the primary retail entrance from the secondary access to the upper floors.
5. New materials, which cover the original architectural features, should be removed.
6. The design of the storefront should relate to the historic elements above.
7. The storefront shall have more glass area than wall area:
  - a. Framing of the glass area display windows shall be thin framing of wood, cast iron, or anodized aluminum.
  - b. Display windows shall be clear glass.
  - c. Transom windows may be clear, tinted or stained glass.
  - d. Bulkheads may be wood panels, polished stone, glass, tile or aluminum panels.
8. The use of mansard roof, wood shingles, rough textured siding, fake stone, or fake brick is prohibited.

### **GUIDELINES FOR SIGNS**

Signs are a vital part of any Main Street. With the use of a sign one calls attention to the business to create an individual image for the 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.

1. A sign should express an easy to read, direct message: Keep it simple.
2. A storefront should not have more than two signs – one primary and one secondary.
3. A flush-mounted signboard may extend the width of the storefront but should not be more than 2 ½ feet high. The sign should be mounted somewhere above the storefront display windows and below the second-story windowsills. Generally, lettering should be 8 to 18 inches high and occupy only about 65 percent of the signboard.
4. 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.
5. Awnings can also serve as signs with contrasting letters painted or sewn onto the valance. Usually, 8 to 8 inch letter are sufficient.

6. A letter should be chosen that is easy to read and that reflects the image of the business it represents.
7. Letters can be painted or mounted directly on a signboard.
8. Sign colors should complement the colors of the building.
9. Plastic, back-lit signs are prohibited, however, back lighting of individual letters of a sign is permitted.
10. Signs may be directly illuminated with appropriate lighting.
11. No signs shall be painted directly on the wall surface of a building.
12. All signs and sign treatments need to conform to the city/borough sign ordinance.

### **GUIDELINES FOR THE REAR ENTRANCE**

1. The rear entrance façade should be cleaned utilizing the previously noted guidelines.
2. The doors, windows, and architectural trim should be maintained or replaced utilizing the previously noted guidelines.
3. A small sign at the rear door should identify the store.
4. Refuse containers should be visually screened from the street and rear entrance.
5. Awnings for visual identification are recommended; however, they should conform to the previously noted guidelines.
6. Back windows should be considered as secondary display windows.

### **NEW CONSTRUCTION AND NEW ADDITION GUIDELINES**

New Construction on vacant lots or new additions to existing buildings is encouraged. The design of the new construction of building should be compatible in size, scale, pattern, and spacing building materials and texture to the adjacent buildings and the entire central business district. New buildings shall maintain the alignment at the sidewalk. No setback shall be allowed. Additions or new construction should be within a range of 10 percent of the mean building height found on the block. New parking lots shall also maintain alignment with the sidewalk with the construction of columns, plantings, low walls, or other vertical projections along the sidewalk. All specifications and requirements for new buildings are on record at the City/Borough Manager's Office.

In addition, the selected building façade shall be consistent with the other facades on the same business block. It is also recommended that the building materials, architectural detailing, and colors utilized should relate to the adjoining structures without creating conflict or clutter.

### **SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR'S STANDARDS FOR REHABILITATION**

(See following page)