

2. Storefronts

Context & Character

Storefronts are often the most prominent or important architectural feature of a historic commercial building. They attract attention, provide effective display space, invite pedestrian activity, allow natural light into the store and enhance the character of the street scene. A storefront's distinguishing design, architectural details and materials are character-defining features of the building and often help to convey its architectural style.

Historically, a storefront comprises the first story of a commercial building's primary facade and is visually separated from the upper floors of the building through design and architectural details. Common components of storefronts include awnings, display windows, bulkheads, pilasters, entrances, beltcourses and cornices. Large display windows allowed proprietors to showcase their merchandise and entice prospective customers into their stores. Many storefronts of the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries featured recessed entrances, which simultaneously helped to extend the display area and draw pedestrians inward.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, signs were an integral component of storefronts. Today, signs continue to play an important role in promoting a business and attracting attention, and usually contribute to the character of an area. Refer to the Design Guidelines for Signs for more information.

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Traditional storefronts tend to comprise similar design elements. (68 N. 'K' Street)



The bowed display windows at 140 E. South Temple Street are a unique feature of the building facade and district.



The Carrara glass is a distinctive characteristic of the storefront at 432-434 E. South Temple Street.

With changes in merchandising trends, technology and tenants, original storefronts were particularly vulnerable to remodeling. Storefronts from the 1920s to the 1940s reflect an important movement in merchandising and sales of the period and also are highly decorative in their designs. Materials such as marble, tile, and colored glass, commonly known as “Carrara” glass, were all used to update storefronts during these decades. Commercial buildings constructed in the 1950s and 1960s may also possess storefronts with historically significant materials and detailing. See also Chapter 2 on materials and repair.

Storefronts on older buildings which were altered within the past fifty years are often not compatible with overall building character and their removal may be appropriate when rehabilitation is undertaken. Later materials that may cover or conceal original or early storefront elements, should be removed with care to avoid damage to underlying historic materials.

Design Objective

Historic storefronts should be retained, repaired and restored if necessary. Later alterations that have achieved historical significance should be retained and preserved.

General

2.1 Historic storefronts and their components should be retained and maintained.

- Storefront components include display windows, bulkheads, transoms, doors, cornices, pillars and pilasters.
- Deteriorated or damaged storefronts and their components should be repaired to retain their historic appearance.
- Covering or concealing historic storefront components with modern materials should be avoided.

2.2 If a historic storefront has been altered or components are missing, consider reinstatement.

- Consult historical evidence like photographs and drawings to help determine the design and style of missing components.
- Carefully remove later materials that obscure original designs, detail or materials and restore the original if possible.
- Alterations that have acquired historic significance in their own right should be retained and preserved.

2.3 An alternative design that is compatible with the remaining character-defining features of the historic building should be considered where an original facade is missing and no evidence exists of its original appearance.

- The new design should take into consideration the proportions, dimensions and hierarchy of the historic building.
- A simplified interpretation of a traditional storefront is appropriate.
- The new design should be subtly differentiated so that a false historical appearance is not created.



A simple one-part commercial block at 779 South 500 East.



This simply detailed storefront is typical of the early 20th century.



This is one design approach for replacing a missing storefront.



The distinctive Luxfer glass transom on the New Grand Hotel at 369-379 S. Main Street is intact and not concealed by the awning.



The awning fits within the window opening at 501 East 300 South.



The distinctive canopy on the New Grand Hotel at 369-379 S. Main Street defines an entrance and provides shelter.

Awnings & Canopies

Historically, shopkeepers commonly used awnings on their storefronts. Not only did they provide shelter for shoppers, but they also helped in climate control. Awnings were simple in design, sloped in form and fit within the opening they covered. Canvas fabric was most common for awnings prior to the 1940s, when metal awnings became prevalent. Awning use declined as air conditioning became more common after the 1940s. Today, they maintain a significant role in solar shading, regulating the amount of sunlight that penetrates building windows.

Early canopies were generally modest in detail and reflected the character of the building to which they were attached. As the design of buildings grew to be more elaborate, the detailing of canopies also became more sophisticated. Usually horizontal, they provided shelter and shade for the entrance or across the front of the building.

2.4 Preserve a historic awning or canopy when feasible.

- Maintain and repair existing original elements of awnings and canopies.
- Replace in kind only those parts that are beyond repair.
- Substitute materials may be considered if they convey the same visual appearance of the replacement part.

2.5 If a canopy has been altered or is missing consider restoring it to the original design.

- Use photographic evidence to determine the original design of the canopy.
- Where an original canopy is missing, and no evidence of the original design exists, consider using a simplified interpretation of a traditional canopy as a replacement.

2.6 Replacement awnings of historical designs should be selected.

- Simple shed awnings are appropriate for rectangular openings.
- Arched awnings may be appropriate for arched openings.
- Awnings may be retractable or fixed in place.
- The use of bubble, concave, or convex awning forms is discouraged except where used originally.

2.7 New awnings should be designed and placed so that they do not span or detract from character-defining details and features of the building.

- Storefronts are an appropriate location for awnings.
- If pilasters or columns define the storefront, place awnings within this framework rather than overlap the entire storefront.
- Transom lights of prism glass or stained glass are important features of a building and should not be covered with an awning.

2.8 Awnings should be of materials used historically such as canvas.

- Alternative materials may be considered if they resemble canvas in appearance.
- Metal awnings may be appropriate for some building styles.
- Internally lit awnings and vinyl awnings are generally inappropriate.

2.9 Solar panels should not be placed on front facade awnings or canopies.

- Solar collectors should be installed in an unobtrusive location.

2.10 Refer to the Design Guidelines for Signs for appropriate advertising space.



This shed awning draws attention to the window at 736 North 300 West.



Awnings are generally simple in design, angled and fit within the building opening.



An original display window at 82 N. 'Q' Street.



Original transoms contribute to the character of this historic storefront at 271 N. Center Street.



Original wood bulkheads such as those at 361 N. Main Street are central elements of historic storefronts.

Windows & Bulkheads

Display windows and bulkheads are essential elements of traditional storefronts which provide a sense of scale and aesthetic quality to the facade of a commercial building. The arrangement, proportions and design of openings (“fenestration”) are important design elements of the architectural composition. Traditional storefronts of the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries featured large plate glass windows at the street level of the facade to display merchandise. The lower panels or bulkheads on which the display window rest are often of wood or brick.

Transoms are traditional components of storefronts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Transoms appear above display windows and doors and are key architectural features of storefronts and entrances. On the practical side, transoms allowed additional natural light and often ventilation in stores. They also offered additional opportunities for visual interest and decorative detail especially decorative glass such as Luxfer glass or other divided glass.

2.11 Original window configurations and bulkheads should be preserved and maintained.

- Original features should be repaired rather than replaced.
- Replacement should only be considered if the original is irreparably damaged.

2.12 Design a replacement window and bulkhead that reflects the traditional hierarchy of storefront elements.

- If original display windows or bulkheads are missing or deteriorated beyond repair, replace with new to match the originals.
- If the original window design is unknown, a replacement window should maintain the traditional proportions and transparent quality of a storefront.
- Where the original bulkhead design is unknown, a complementary replacement design in wood, masonry, metal or other material that is compatible with the facade may be used.
- Tinted glass is only appropriate if it was used historically.

2.13 Transom lights should not be obscured.

- Covering or concealing transoms with signs, the introduction of new materials, or other items should be avoided.
- Awnings may be appropriate as they do not obscure transoms from complete view.



An original tile bulkhead at 422-426 North 300 West.



Bulkheads act as a platform for display windows.



Wood doors on the Utah Commercial & Savings Bank Building at 22 East 100 South.



Traditional storefronts consisted of recessed single or double doors flanked by display windows.



These three center bays are framed by four freestanding Ionic columns. Salt Lake Stock and Mining Exchange, 39 Exchange Place.

Doors & Entrances

As points of entry, doors and entrances are important visual elements of commercial buildings. Common door designs for commercial properties of the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries are single-light wood or metal forms, varying from simple flush or paneled designs to those with elaborate decorative detail. Double doors are common, and many entrances feature transoms of a decorative nature. Traditional materials include wood and various metals, often with glazing. Because they are a key focal point of commercial properties, major alterations to entrances or replacement with inappropriate doors can severely affect the character of a historic building.

2.14 The decorative and functional features of an original primary entrance should be preserved and maintained.

- Primary doors, or those on the main facade, should be preserved.
- Original framing such as jambs, sills, and headers of openings should be retained and maintained.
- Removing or altering original doors, surrounds, transoms, or sidelights should be avoided.
- Filling or partially blocking historic door openings is inappropriate.

2.15 Repairs to deteriorated or damaged historic doors should maintain the historic materials.

- When repairing historic doors, use methods to retain their historic fabric and appearance wherever possible.
- Epoxy is helpful in strengthening and replacing deteriorated wood.

2.16 Replace historic doors that are beyond repair or missing with new doors that are consistent with the style of the original door or building.

- Match replacement doors to the historic door in materials and size; ensure they are consistent for the style and period of the building.
- Ideally, a replacement door will have the same series of panels and have a frame of the same dimensions.
- Refer to documented research and/or historic photographs when replacing doors.

2.17 New openings should be located on side or rear facades rather than the main facade to minimize visual impact.



Salt Lake City's commercial buildings have a variety of doors and entrances.



Staircases & Steps

Because of changes in grade along Salt Lake City’s streets, not all commercial entrances are at street level and some commercial buildings have exterior steps or staircases as part of their original design. Staircases and steps that are original to a site are therefore important character-defining features of a historic property.

2.18 Original staircases and steps should be retained.

2.19 Repairs should be made with similar materials.

- Repair wood, stone and concrete stairs with materials to match the original.
- If tile or stone was used historically, its use in repair work is appropriate.

2.20 If the original steps are beyond repair, replacement stairs should match the originals or complement the character of the building.

2.21 Adding exterior staircases or steps to key building facade where none historically existed should be avoided.

2.22 The design of additional handrails should contribute to the architectural character of the building.

- Historic stairs or steps that never had handrails may have wood or metal handrails added if they are compatible with the style and design of the building.
- New or replacement stairs or steps can be designed to include handrails that are simple in design.



A progression of spaces between the street and the building, including a walkway, steps and landscape features, is typical of most buildings along South Temple.

Lighting

Adequate exterior lighting has long been an important consideration for business owners. The advent of electric lighting enabled store owners to call attention to their entrance and display windows and permitted shopping at night. Original light fixtures contribute to a building's unique historic character and detail, and help to convey a sense of time and place.

2.23 Historic light fixtures should be preserved and maintained.

- Deteriorated or damaged historic light fixtures should be repaired using methods that allow them to retain their historic appearance.

2.24 Replacements for missing or severely damaged historic light fixtures should replicate the originals where possible.

- Original light fixture design may be documented through photographic or physical evidence.
- If evidence of the original design is missing, a design that is compatible with the character-defining features of the historic building is appropriate.



Historic lighting provides distinctive detail to the Kearns Building at 136 S. Main Street.



Architectural lighting provides illumination as well as ornamentation on the Commercial Club Building at 32 Exchange Place.

Additional Information

Jandl, H. Ward. *Preservation Briefs 11: Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts*. Washington, DC: Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. 1982

www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/brief32.htm



Good lighting choices for historic buildings are simple and unobtrusive, such as this example at 361 N. Main Street.

2.25 New exterior light fixtures should be simple in design and appropriate to the scale and character of the building.

- If modern light fixtures are desired as replacements or where light fixtures previously did not exist, ensure that they are unobtrusive and shield the light source.
- The use of exterior spotlights on a key character-defining facade is discouraged.
- Light fixtures that are installed in a way that damages or obscures architectural features or other building elements should be avoided.
- Lights should be positioned in a manner that enhances visibility without detracting from the building's historic character.