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building improvements declined with it. Today, as building owners upgrade their downtown building as part of a revitalization effort, they are often faced with a storefront with multiple personalities. How can owners today in historic downtowns look at storefronts and determine whether they are original or if later alterations are worth keeping? If the storefront area has been covered up, what did it look like? Are original materials still intact?

**STOREFRONT DESIGN:
From Charming to Alarming...and then back again!**

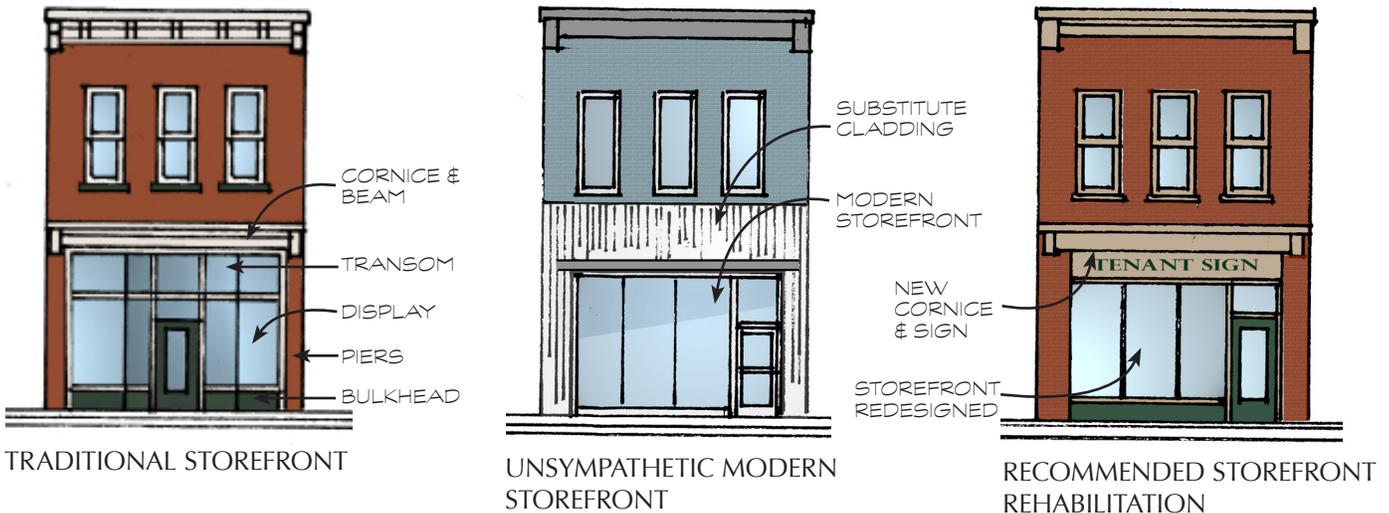
As the face and primary entrance, the storefront historically has changed more than any other part of a historic downtown commercial building. There are many different reasons for these alterations: merchants remodeled their storefronts to keep pace with changing styles or modernization; new, non-retail businesses remodeled in order to eliminate vast areas of unneeded display windows; or as original materials deteriorated new materials were introduced that were thought to be maintenance free. A typical building may have gone through several alterations over the years, leaving the facade with missing architectural features, cladding over the original surface, and relocated or removed windows and doors.

When Main Street was the center of retail activity, the original design and materials of a building and its subsequent changes were generally high quality. As the center for shopping activity moved away from downtown and the economic viability of downtown declined, the quality of

Evolution of the Storefront

In order to answer these questions, a brief history of storefronts is helpful. The structure of most storefronts consists of a void framed by two piers and a beam which supports the upper portion of the building. Sometimes this beam is wood, in most cases it is steel. Decorative elements of early storefronts around the turn of the century were constructed of wood. Wood was easily shaped, turned and carved to create dramatic and finely detailed storefronts. Metal was also used for decorative details, especially at cornices and window hoods. Cast iron may have been used for supporting piers. Beginning around 1915, metal was introduced as framing for display windows. Its thin profile gave glass a continuous appearance, and allowed for larger retail display area. Later, carrara glass panels were used to face storefront piers, bulkheads (the area at the bottom of storefronts) and transom areas. This high quality material was used to create dramatic art deco storefronts in the 1930s as well as to reface bulkheads and piers. Just as important as the materials was the way that

STOREFRONT ELEMENTS & EVOLUTION



materials were put together to create a harmonious facade appearance: the storefront was set back within the piers and beam; a decorative cornice was part of the design; there were often transom windows; and, in most cases, entrances were recessed.

As modern architecture grew in popularity various components produced for new construction were introduced to the faces of historic commercial buildings. Commonly found features include corrugated metal, enameled steel panels, aluminum display window framing and aluminum framed store doors. Later still, more economical materials were introduced such as vinyl or aluminum siding and vertical wood paneling. In many cases these materials were appropriate for other types of buildings but when introduced to historic commercial buildings they often created a jarring and disjointed appearance on Main Street.

Rehabilitation Goals

What should the goals be for building owners who want to rehabilitate their commercial storefront?

1. Remove materials that do not seem to be in keeping with the character of the original building. Old photographs and a little physical exploration on the building itself, will help determine what is original and what is not.

2. Locate the original storefront beam and piers. Piers will most likely be the same material as the wall of the upper facade and should be the same color if painted. The beam should be concealed by the storefront cornice which may be either wood, metal, or brick. Retain original cornices.

3. Retain any old elements of the storefront such as transom windows, bulkheads, or storefront framing that are found after removing layers of added materials. Base the design of repairs or replacement on these elements.

4. If the budget allows, design a new storefront that fits the opening, uses existing original elements, is based on old photographs, or is a sensitive new design that respects the opening, proportions and elements of a traditional storefront. The design generally should include a cornice, transom windows, display windows and bulkhead.

5. If a new storefront is not economically feasible, make some changes to make the existing one a better "fit". Many times when new aluminum framed storefronts were installed, they were not as tall as the original storefront opening. The area between the top of the display and the beam (the old transom area) was framed in and covered up. Create a sign area and cornice that fits this area. This will help a standard modern storefront better fit the proportions of the original building.



Economic Impact of Facade Improvements

Now that you have figured out what your storefront probably looked like, and you have outlined your goals for rehabilitation, you may be wondering, "Will a facade improvement really make any difference in sales and traffic for my business?" The answer is YES!

That's right, several studies have been conducted that support the economic facts we have all known intuitively for some time: *an improved exterior appearance is going to improve the image of a downtown business, attract more shoppers and increase sales.*

In 1986, the University of Wisconsin-Extension conducted a study titled the *Economic Effects of Storefront Improvement* and in 1993 Main Street West Virginia conducted a similar survey titled *The Economic Impact of Storefront Improvements*. In each study, interviews were conducted from a sampling of over 100 merchants in a total of thirty different communities (twenty in Wisconsin and ten in West Virginia).

- In both studies, roughly 70% of the businesses reported an increase in sales after making facade improvements.
- In both studies, roughly 85% of the businesses also made interior improvements including new inventory and product lines, merchandising and window display.
- In both studies, a majority of improved buildings were owner occupied or locally owned
- Costs for facade improvements ranged from \$500 to \$60,000 and included everything from signs to total restoration.
- Well over 90% of all participants were very pleased with the renovations and had experienced favorable comments from customers.

"Wow!" you say. "But how much do sales increase? Are they just a flash in the pan and are those increases sustained over time?"

This Franklin building features a sensitive new storefront and enhancement of existing historic elements.



To answer those questions Brenda Spencer prepared her Master of Architecture thesis in 1995 titled *An Analysis of the Economic Impact of Physical Improvements on Retail Sales*. Ms. Spencer looked at six downtown businesses that had implemented physical improvements and could provide actual cost and sales data before and after the improvements. In the previous studies only the opinions of the business owners were used and the actual numbers were not available.

Here is a summary of her study:

- The scope of physical improvements in all case studies included three common elements -- storefronts, signs and/or awnings, and interior improvements.
- Most of the businesses were retail with one being service and one being a restaurant
- The cost of facade improvements ranged from \$10,000 to 60,000 with over half being in the \$10,000-20,000 range. Typically the cost of facade improvement was 20-30% of total rehabilitation costs.
- The most common concurrent business improvement was of a physical nature -- merchandise layout and displays
- All businesses experienced an increase in the annual percentage increase in gross sales the year after improvements -- an average of 272%
- The majority of businesses sustained an increase in sales -- an average increase of 222% in the average annual percentage increase in gross sales--after improvements.
- A majority experienced an increase in sales after improvements above their own business's average before improvements, and above the performance of other local businesses for the same period.
- Two- thirds of the business owners stated that the physical improvement significantly impacted the increase in sales.
- All of the businesses experienced favorable customer response and considered the improvements worth the investment.

Main Street is economic development within the context of historic preservation and there are numbers to clearly show the impact of physical improvements on the success of downtown business.

Interested in Storefront Rehabilitation?

Virginia Main Street can help!

Send all requests for design services to:

- Jeff Sadler, Program Manager: Jeff.Sadler@dhcd.virginia.gov (804) 371-7030.
- Kathy Frazier, AIA, VMS Design Consultant: kfrazier@frazierassociates.com, (540) 886-6230
- Deneen Brannock, VMS Design Consultant, Designer: dbrannock@frazierassociates.com, (540) 886-6230

A STUDY IN STOREFRONT REHABILITATION



- MISSING CORNICE
- OBSCURED STOREFRONT OPENING & PIERS
- INCOMPATIBLE SUBSTITUTE WOOD SIDING
- INCOMPATIBLE WINDOWS & DOORS

EXISTING STOREFRONT



- REBUILD CORNICE
- NEW WINDOWS, DOORS & BULKHEADS IN PROPORTION TO OPENING
- NEW PAINT SCHEME
- WORK WITHIN ORIGINAL STOREFRONT OPENING
- PIERS REVEALED

DESIGN FOR NEW STOREFRONT



REHABILITATED STOREFRONT

THE RESULT:
Improved Building For Downtown...
Improved Image For The Business Owner...
A SUCCESS STORY FOR MAIN STREET!