

4.7 Sign and Lighting Design Guidelines



Signs were an important aspect of late 19th and early 20th century storefronts and today play an important role in defining the character of a business district. In examining historic streetscape photographs of Grapevine, one is struck by the number of signs - in windows, over doors, painted on exterior walls, and hanging over (and sometimes across) the street. While this confusion was part of the character of late 19th and early 20th-century cities and towns, today's approach toward signs in historic districts tends to be much more conservative.

Removal of some signs can have a dramatic effect in improving the visual appearance of a building; these include modern backlit fluorescent signs, large applied signs with distinctive corporate logos, and those signs attached to a building in such a way as to obscure significant architectural detailing. For this reason, their removal is encouraged in the process of rehabilitation.

When new signs are designed, they should be of a size and style compatible with the historic building and should not cover or obscure significant architectural detailing or features. For many 19th century buildings, it was common to mount signs on the lintel above the first story. Another common approach, especially at the turn of the century, was to

4.7.1 INTRODUCTION

paint signs directly on the inside of the display windows. Frequently this was done in gold leaf. New exterior hanging signs may be appropriate for historic commercial buildings, if they are of a scale and design compatible with the historic buildings. Retention of signs and advertising painted on historic walls, if of historic or artistic interest (especially where they provide evidence of early or original occupants), is encouraged.

4.7.2 HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF SIGNS

Signs are everywhere. And everywhere they play an important role in human activity. They identify, direct, decorate, promote, inform, and advertise. Signs allow the owner to communicate with the reader, and the people inside a building to communicate with those outside of it.



EXAMPLE OF A SIGN THAT GRAPHICALLY COMMUNICATES A MESSAGE

Historic signs give continuity to public spaces and become part of the community memory. They sometimes become landmarks in themselves, almost without regard for the building to which they are attached, or the property on which they stand. Furthermore, in

an age of uniform franchise signs and generic plastic "box" signs, historic signs often attract by their individuality: by a clever detail, a daring use of color and motion, or a reference to particular people, shops, or events.



REPRODUCTION OF HISTORIC SIGN AND MARQUEE AT THE PALACE THEATRE

4.7.3 HISTORIC SIGN TYPES

Projecting Signs are thought of as the predominant sign type in commercial areas. While this is true, there are several other ways that businesses historically have kept their name before the public.

Awnings: have been used for business signs. The fringe or skirt of the awning, as well as the panel at the side were the usual places for a name or street number.



AWNINGS

Flags: particularly hung from the upper floors, and banners, sometimes stretching across the sidewalk, also appeared on buildings.

Marquee signs: typically used in association with amusement facilities or theatres, marquee signs protrude from the building façade over the sidewalk. These signs were lighted and had a changing message, and also offered protection from the weather for customers.

Rooftop signs: appeared with greater frequency in the late nineteenth century than previously. Earlier rooftop signs tended to be relatively simple--often merely larger versions of the horizontal signs typically found on lower levels. These later rooftop signs were typically found on hotels, theaters, banks and other large buildings.

Painted signs at doors and windows: signs painted on the glass of doors, windows and storefronts. Typically, black and gold colors were used for these signs which noted the business name, and often gave opening hours and other information about the business.

Painted signs at buildings: signs painted onto the front or side of masonry buildings. Signs at the front of buildings were typically located in the parapet, or above the storefronts in recessed panels. These commonly advertised the building owner or occupant at the front of a building; painted signs at the side of a building also advertised the business or a product, and sometimes both. When these remain, although in poor condition and may be barely visible, they are called 'ghost signs.'



PAINTED SIGN

Sandwich Boards: signs on boards that are put on the sidewalk outside a place of business during the business' open hours. These were painted or were chalkboards (with a message that changes daily).

The sign types described here were not used in isolation. Window and awning signs attracted sidewalk pedestrians and people in the street. Upper level signs reached viewers at greater distances. If signs were numerous, however, they were nonetheless usually small in scale.

The advent of the twentieth century approximately coincided with the coming of electricity, which gave signs light and, later, movement. Electricity permitted signs to be illuminated by light shining onto them, but the real revolution occurred when lightbulbs were used to form the images and words on signs. Lightbulbs flashing on and off made new demands on the attention of passersby. Lightbulbs blinking in sequence could also simulate movement. Add this property to the mix, and a dramatic transformation of American streets resulted.

As the century advanced, new styles took hold. The late 1950's brought signs with fins, star bursts, and other images reflecting a new fascination with outer space.

In the decades after World War II signs were also transformed by a group of materials now known generically as "plastic." Plastic had several advantages over wood, metal and other traditional sign materials; as the name indicates, "plastic" can take almost any shape and color. It is relatively durable, inexpensive, and can be mass produced;

for these reasons it quickly became the dominant sign material.

4.7.4 PRESERVING HISTORIC SIGNS

Historic signs can contribute to the character of buildings and districts. They can also be valued in themselves, quite apart from the buildings to which they may be attached. However, any program to preserve historic signs must recognize the challenges they present: aesthetic concerns, retaining diverse elements from the past, encouraging artistic expression in new signs, zoning issues, and reconciling business requirements with preservation.

Preserving historic signs is not always easy. But the intrinsic merit of many signs, as well as their contribution to the overall character of a place, make the effort worthwhile. Historic signs should be retained whenever possible, particularly when they are:

- 1) associated with historic figures, events or places.
- 2) significant as evidence of the history of the product, business or service advertised.
- 3) significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district. A sign may be the only indicator of a building's historic use.
- 4) characteristic of a specific historic period, such as gold leaf on glass, neon, or stainless steel lettering.
- 5) integral to the building's design or physical fabric, as when a sign is part of a storefront made of Carrara glass or enamel panels, or when the name of the historic firm or the date are rendered in stone, metal or tile. In such cases, removal can harm the integrity of a historic property's design, or cause significant damage to its materials.
- 6) outstanding examples of the signmaker's art, whether because of their excellent craftsmanship, or use of materials.
- 7) local landmarks, that is, signs recognized as popular focal points in a community.
- 8) elements important in defining the character of a district, such as marquees in a theater district.

Maintaining and Repairing Historic Signs:

Maintenance of historic signs is essential for their long-term preservation. Sign maintenance involves periodic inspections for evidence of damage and deterioration. Lightbulbs may need replacement. Screws and bolts may be weakened, or missing altogether. Dirt and other debris may be accumulating, introduced by birds or insects, and should be cleaned out. Water may be collecting in or on sign cabinets, threatening electrical connections. The source of water penetration should be identified and sealed. Most of these minor repairs are routine maintenance measures, and do not call for special expertise. All repairs, however, require caution. For example, electricity should be turned off when working around electric signs.

More extensive repairs should be undertaken by professionals. The sign industry is a large and active one. Sign designers, fabricators and skilled craftsmen are located throughout the country. Once in danger of being lost altogether, gold leaf on glass and porcelain enamel are undergoing revivals, and the art of bending neon tubes is now widely practiced. Finding help from qualified sources should not be difficult. Before contracting for work on historic signs, however, owners should check references, and view other projects completed by the same company.

Major repairs may require removal of the sign to a workshop. Since signs are sometimes damaged while the building is undergoing repair, work on the building should be scheduled while the sign is in the shop. If the sign remains in place while work on the building is in progress, the sign should be protected.



VARIOUS OLDER BARBER SIGNS

Reusing Historic Signs: If a building or business has changed hands, historic signs associated with former enterprises in the building should be reused if possible by:

- 1) keeping the historic sign--unaltered. This is often possible even when the new business is of a different nature from the old. Preferably, the old sign can be left in its historic location; sometimes, however, it may be necessary to move the sign elsewhere on the building to accommodate a new one. Conversely, it may be necessary to relocate new signs to avoid hiding or overwhelming historic ones, or to redesign proposed new signs so that the old ones may remain.
- 2) keeping the old sign is often a good marketing strategy. It can exploit the recognition value of the old name and play upon the public's fondness for the old sign. The advertising value of an old sign can be immense. This is especially true when the sign is a community landmark.
- 3) relocating the sign to the interior, such as in the lobby or above the bar in a restaurant. This option is less preferable than keeping the sign outside the building, but it does preserve the sign, and leaves open the possibility of putting it back in its historic location.
- 4) modifying the sign for use with the new business. This may not be possible without destroying essential features, but

in some cases it can be done by changing details. In other respects, the sign may be perfectly serviceable as is.

If none of these options is possible, the sign could be donated to a local museum, preservation organization or other group.

4.7.5 NEW SIGNS AT HISTORIC COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

Determining what new signs are appropriate for commercial historic buildings is very important to the character of the historic district. New signs should focus on the merchandise, not the building. Signs which compete for attention detract from the historic district as a whole. Signs should be unique and have diversity in their design – size, type, color, lighting, letters, support and relationship to the building and other qualities. Business owners should choose signs that reflect their own taste, values and personalities yet are compatible with the historic building.



**NEW PROJECTING SIGN
MOUNTED ON SIMPLE METAL
PIPE**

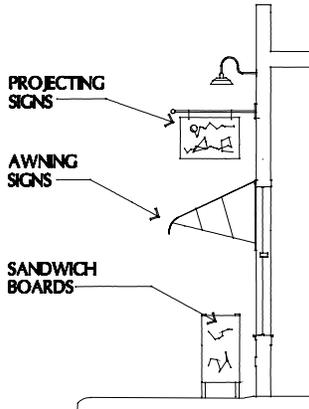


REPLICATION OF HISTORIC SIGN

The following points should be considered when designing and constructing new signs for historic buildings:

- 1) signs should be viewed as part of an overall graphics system for the building. They do not have to do all the "work" by themselves. The building's form, name and outstanding features, both decorative and functional, also support the advertising function of a sign. Signs should work with the building, rather than against it.
- 2) new signs should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building. Often features or details of the building will suggest a motif for new signs.
- 3) sign placement is important: new signs should not obscure significant features of the historic building. (Signs above a storefront should fit within the historic signboard, for example.)
- 4) new signs should also respect neighboring buildings. They should not shadow or overpower adjacent structures.
- 5) sign size and materials should be compatible with those of the historic building and district. Materials characteristic of the building's period and style, used in contemporary designs, can form effective new signs.
- 6) new signs should be attached to the building carefully, both to prevent damage to historic fabric, and to ensure the safety of pedestrians. Fittings should penetrate mortar joints rather than brick, for example, and sign loads should be properly calculated and distributed.
- 7) font style and size of new signs should be appropriate to the sign and the historic building. Font size should be in proportion to the sign and historic building, and in no case

exceed 16” in height for attached, projecting or marquee signs.



COMMERCIAL SIGN TYPES

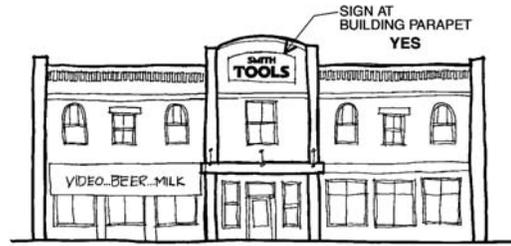
In general signs shall be small and limited to one per buildings, including buildings with multiple tenants. This includes projected signs, painted signs, signs at awnings or canopies, marquee and rooftop signs; painted signs on glass are allowed in addition to those noted. Avoid garish colors or patterns, and use the detail and style of the building’s architecture to speak for the business. Locate signs so that they relate to the architectural features of the building.

Signs which compete for attention detract from the historic features as a whole. Sign lettering and graphics should be consistent with or complement the style of the architecture.



INAPPROPRIATE SIGN

Signs shall not cover glass transoms or horizontal components of a historic building.



SIGN TYPES: at AWINGS, BUILDING PARAPET

Signs may be constructed of painted wood or metal; vinyl or plastic are not recommended for sign materials.

Awning and projecting signs were common in the late 19th and early 20th century Grapevine. Small projecting signs, at an appropriate scale in relation to the building are encouraged.

Neon can enhance a retail and restaurant area by creating a sense of fun and festivity, but excessive use can also detract from a district. Neon shall be used inside the windows only, and occupy a limited amount of space within that window.

Painted signs and murals on buildings are discouraged.

Lighting of signs can be done with incandescent bulbs on the sign, or gooseneck front lighting using fixtures appropriate to the style and period of the building.

No roof signs, off premises signs, flashing signs and plastic backlit signs shall be used. Free-standing signs may be used in front of the building, when appropriately scaled and placed to minimize visual interference with the significant features of the property.

Generally serif signs may be used for late 19th and early 20th century commercial buildings, and serif for Art Deco and buildings from the later modernism movement.



NEW PAINTED SIGN AT GLASS OF DOOR AND TRANSOM

Neon marquee signs are allowed only for buildings with theatrical uses.

Sandwich boards are typical of the historic retail style, but they must be well maintained and removed after business hours. They are allowed for displaying changing messages such as menus; no changeable letters on tracks may be used. Chalkboards may be used for daily used for daily changing messages. Sandwich boards may not be wider than 24". Or be placed to extend more than 24" from the building face. The height is restricted to 36" and shall be within 30" of the front door. No more than one per building will be allowed.

4.7.6 NEW SIGNS AT HISTORIC RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS

In residential areas, the pedestrian's focus should be directed toward buildings, landscape and the streetscape, not signs. Signs for commercial uses should be visible and legible, but the choice of appropriate design, details and materials and proper location is more effective than the size of the sign. Signs that compete for attention detract from historic areas as a whole.

Free-standing, monument-style signs placed in front yard areas of houses used for commercial use are the preferred type of sign for historic residential properties. The signs should be appropriately scaled and placed to minimize visual interference with the significant features of the property.



MONUMENT SIGN THAT IS COMPATIBLE w/ BUILDING

In general, signs should be small and limited to one per building; this includes buildings with multiple tenants. Where several businesses share a building, content and design of the sign should be coordinated.

Avoid clutter and limit the size of monument and other signs at residential buildings. Signs should not obscure historic building features such as cornices, gables, porches, balconies or other decorative elements. Monument signs should be aligned with those of neighboring buildings to avoid visual clutter and enhance readability.

Avoid garish colors or patterns, but use the detail and style of the building's architecture to speak for the business. Locate signs so that they relate to and do not compete with architectural features of the building.

No roof signs, off premise signs, flashing signs or plastic backlighted signs shall be used.

Signs should be constructed of painted wood or metal. Lighting of signs can be done with incandescent bulbs on the sign, or lights in the ground which illuminate the sign. Exposed lighting fixtures should be appropriate to the

style and period of the building.

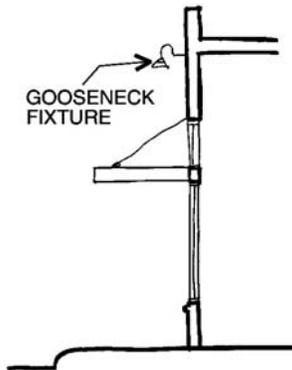
Lighting of building entryways is encouraged. Where entryways are recessed, fixtures should be located in the ceiling of the recess and shielded to direct light downward.

4.7.7 LIGHTING

Lighting is an important element in commercial areas. The design and materials of lighting fixtures should be consistent with the historic character of the area.

Illumination of facades to highlight ornamental detail may be permitted. Fixtures should be small, shielded and directed toward the building rather than toward the street, so as to minimize glare for pedestrians. Incandescent white light is encouraged. Exposed conduit is discouraged.

Fully recessed downlights, gooseneck lights or other incandescent fixtures appropriate to the style and period of the district may be used. Avoid “Colonial” fixtures, which are inappropriate for 19th and 20th century buildings. Avoid exposing electrical conduit and junction boxes.



**COMMERCIAL LIGHTING:
GOOSENECK FIXTURE**



GOOSENECK FIXTURE