

*Photos courtesy of Mike Dixon.*

## **Storefront Design**

### **Traditional Facade**

The traditional commercial storefront can be considered the most important element that sets apart and gives historical significance and character to the downtown. The majority of our historic buildings date from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. When originally constructed, our downtown buildings shared a consistency in design and proportion that was a key element to creating a strong visual image. This consistency was and is still important in conveying how our downtown is perceived by the customer seeking goods and services. A visually unified downtown is a powerful tool for attracting people to our downtown, as well as to the individual shops and businesses that are located here.

Changes have occurred to our buildings during the years in response to various merchandising trends, technology and changing tenants. In most cases, the changes affected the storefront area while the upper facade remained intact. In some of these cases, the original storefronts may still be in place but covered over or in need of maintenance and repair.

The traditional commercial facade consists of three parts: the storefront with an entrance and large display windows; the upper masonry facade with regularly spaced windows; and the decorative cornice that caps the building. These components may appear in various shapes, sizes and styles, but the result is essentially consistent with the traditional facade. In the Downtown St. Charles business district, the typical building facade consists of a two-story masonry construction.

## Design

The traditional downtown building facade has a well-defined opening that the original storefront filled. The opening is bounded on each side by piers, which were usually constructed of masonry. It is bounded on top by the storefront cornice, which is the structural member supporting the upper facade, and bounded below by the sidewalk.

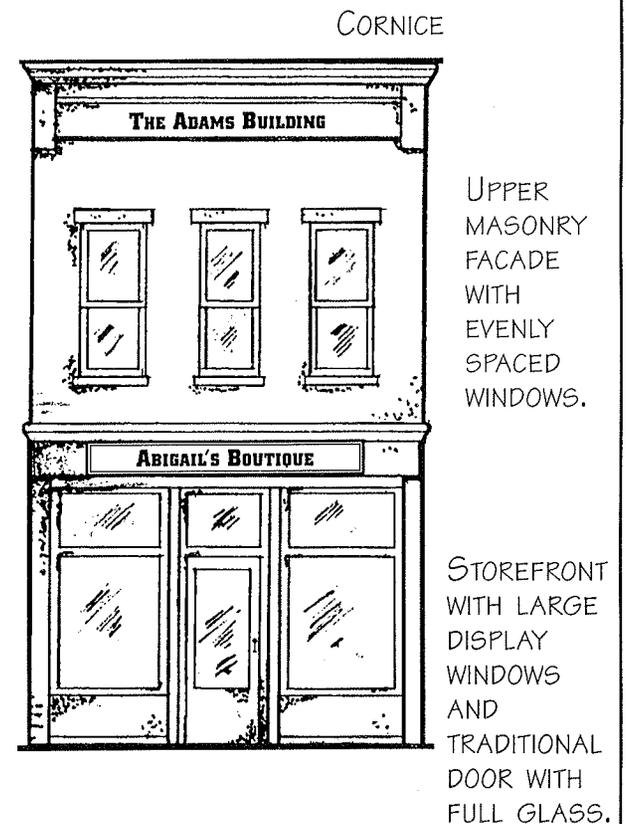
The storefront was composed almost entirely of windows. The large glass opening served to display goods the store or business had to sell, as well as to allow natural light deep into the store, thus minimizing the need for artificial light sources.

The visual transparency of the storefront also is important because it is part of the overall proportion system of the facade. The proportion of window-to-wall areas in the traditional facade calls for more glass and less wall at the storefront level, balanced by more wall and less glass on the upper facade. When these buildings were constructed, the importance of maintaining these proportions so that Downtown St. Charles would be unified by a consistent design theme was recognized, thus making it an attractive place for customers to do business.

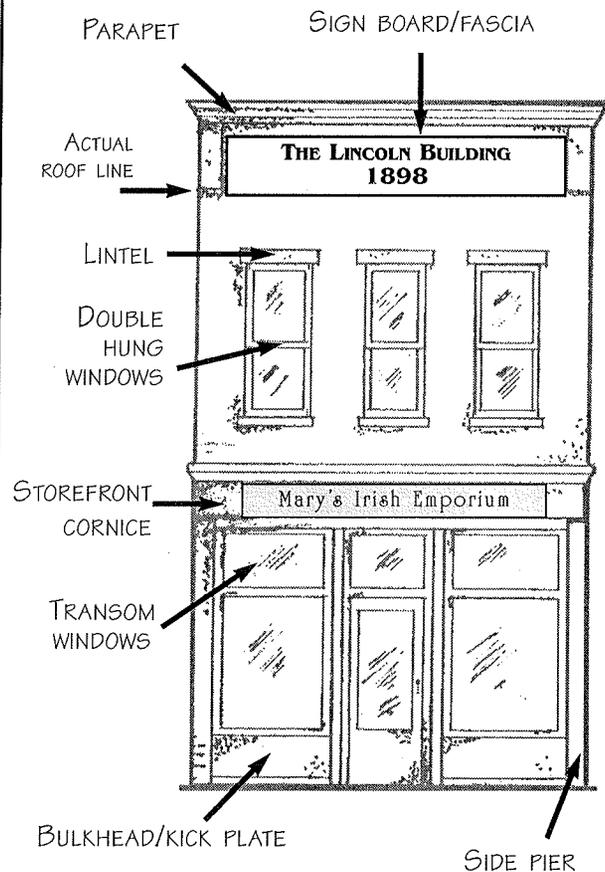
## Improvements

In considering improvements to the storefront, it is very important that the original opening be recognized and maintained. The remodeled storefront should be designed to fit inside the original opening and not extend beyond or in front of it.

THE TRADITIONAL, COMMERCIAL FACADE CONSISTS OF THREE PARTS, AS SHOWN.



FACADE SHOWING UNIFIED, DESIGN ELEMENTS OF THE WHOLE.



### Key Points to Consider:

- ◆ The storefront should be composed almost entirely of glass. If glass is not appropriate, consider the use of window treatments as a solution, such as blinds or drapes.
- ◆ The entry should be maintained and restored in its original location and configuration. If the original entry is gone, the new entry should be designed and placed with consideration to traditional design themes and their relationship to the overall building facade and symmetry.
- ◆ Transom windows that are covered or blocked should be reopened and restored.
- ◆ Storefront bulkheads should be restored or renovated.
- ◆ Original elements should be restored, such as cast iron columns, cornices, entry doors and lighting fixtures.
- ◆ Signage should be integrated into the storefront design.
- ◆ Lighting should be integrated into the storefront design.
- ◆ Awnings, if required, should be integrated into the storefront design.

The storefront design should be true to the time period in which the building was constructed. Renovating late 19th century buildings, such as we have in St. Charles, with colonial motifs and mansard roofs is certainly inappropriate.

When planning the storefront renovation, it could be very helpful to contact the St. Charles Heritage Center, the Downtown Partnership and the Historic Preservation Commission for information regarding your building. Old photographs can be valuable tools in determining original design, materials and signage used on your building.

## Storefront Materials

When designing a new storefront or renovating an existing one, remember the goal should be a transparent facade. Keeping the materials simple and unobtrusive will help you achieve this goal. There is no need to introduce additional types of building materials to those that originally existed. Whether building new or renovating existing storefronts, use materials that perform their intended function well, and use them consistently throughout the design. Utilizing this approach will enable you to achieve simplicity in the design and uniformity in the overall storefront appearance.

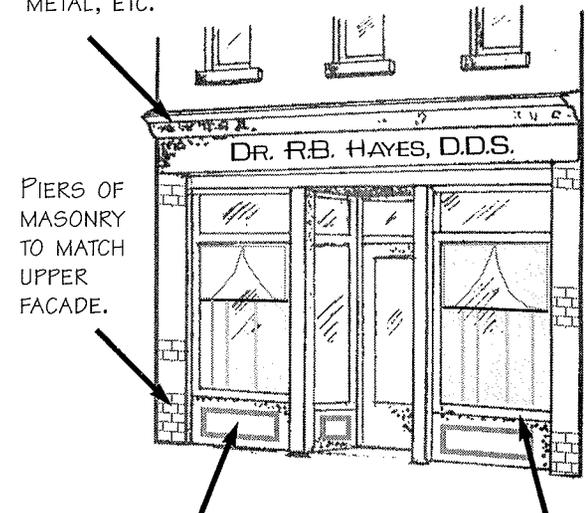
Utilize existing materials whenever possible, repairing rather than replacing. Typical examples of materials and their location on the storefront include:

- ◆ Storefront Frame—wood, cast iron, anodized aluminum.
- ◆ Display Windows—clear glass.
- ◆ Transom Windows—clear, tinted, stained or etched glass.
- ◆ Entrance—wood or aluminum with a large glass panel.
- ◆ Bulkheads—wood panels, polished stone, glass, tile, metal-clad plywood panels.
- ◆ Storefront Cornice—wood, cast iron or sheet metal.
- ◆ Side Piers—should be the same material as upper facade, typically brick or stone.

Certain materials never should be used on the traditional, commercial building where they have no relationship to the original design themes and, therefore, violate the consistency of the building's appearance and the downtown area. Such inappropriate materials may include: Cultured stone, imitation brick, rough textured wood siding, wooden shingles on mansard roofs, gravel aggregate and/or stucco materials.

## COMMON STOREFRONT MATERIALS.

CORNICE OF  
CAST IRON,  
WOOD,  
SHEET  
METAL, ETC.



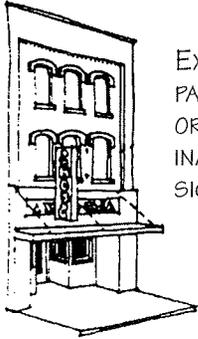
PIERS OF  
MASONRY  
TO MATCH  
UPPER  
FACADE.

BULKHEAD OF  
WOOD, POLISHED  
STONE, TILE OR  
ALUMINUM PANELS.

STOREFRONT FRAME  
OF WOOD, CAST  
IRON OR STEEL.

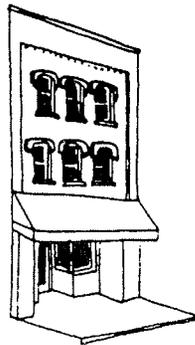
DISPLAY WINDOWS OF CLEAR, FULL GLASS  
SHOWING USE OF CURTAINS WHERE OPEN  
VIEW WOULD NOT BE APPROPRIATE.

### THREE APPROACHES TO FACADE IMPROVEMENTS.



EXISTING FACADE SHOWING PAST CHANGES FROM THE ORIGINAL, INCLUDING INAPPROPRIATE AWNING & SIGN.

MINIMAL REHABILITATION SHOWING APPROPRIATE AWNING.



MAJOR RENOVATION SHOWING PARTIAL RESTORATION OF STOREFRONT.

RESTORATION SHOWING REPRODUCTION OF ORIGINAL CORNICE, STOREFRONT CORNICE, STOREFRONT WINDOWS & BULKHEAD.



### What to Do?

Depending on the building's condition and the amount of money you have budgeted, there are three basic approaches you may want to consider.

#### Minimal Rehabilitation:

This preservation approach to rehabilitation requires basic maintenance, necessary replacement, removal of extraneous materials and simple design improvements. Cosmetic treatments can help to unify the building by covering a time-worn storefront with an awning or painting a contemporary storefront a dark receding color to minimize its effect.

#### Major Renovation:

This approach retains the facade's existing original elements while using contemporary and traditional design and materials for replacement of inappropriate elements. In all major renovations, care must be taken to insure that the design of improvements is understated so as not to compete with the overall character of the facade. For instance, when installing a new storefront, any of these alternatives would be appropriate:

- ◆ A contemporary design in wood or anodized aluminum.
- ◆ A simplified version of a traditional storefront in wood or aluminum.
- ◆ A traditional period storefront constructed in wood.

#### Restoration:

This approach restores the facade to its original condition. It involves the exact duplication of the original storefront, including its architectural detail, color scheme and sign placement. If a building has undergone only minor alterations, restorations may be relatively inexpensive and most desirable.