

STOREFRONT DESIGN

The evolution of traditional storefront design in downtown buildings reflects changes in architectural styles, social norms, and commercial practices over time. Traditionally, Main Street facades complemented each other in style as many were built in similar time periods. Historically, these buildings were related to each other in height, width, setback, proportions of openings, and composition. Here's a brief overview of how these storefront styles have evolved in historic districts in Missouri:

Mid/Late-19th Century:

- **Architectural Style:** The rise of industrialization brought a change in the style of storefronts, with more decorative elements like ironwork, ornate moldings, and elaborate cornices associated with Greek Revival and Italianate styles.
- **Materials:** Cast iron and steel began to be used more frequently, allowing for larger windows and more elaborate facades.
- **Design:** Larger glass windows became common, which allowed for more displays, showcasing goods and attracting attention. The concept of storefront windows as visual merchandising began here.
- **Storefront Features:** Awnings and decorative window displays became popular. Many storefronts had large plate-glass windows, creating a sense of openness and inviting potential customers inside.

Early 20th Century:

- **Architectural Style:** The rise of the Beaux-Arts and Art Deco movements influenced commercial building designs, with ornate stonework, sleek facades, and detailed window treatments.

- **Materials:** Reinforced concrete, glass, and aluminum became more common. The use of large glass windows with thin metal window frames to display products became a standard design feature.
- **Design:** Storefronts featured more standardized designs, often using large windows to showcase the goods inside. The idea of "storefront branding" emerged, as the exterior design began to reflect the type of business inside.
- **New Elements:** Neon signs, better lighting, and the use of standardized awnings for uniformity.

Mid-20th Century:

- **Architectural Style:** The International Style and Mid-Century Modern style influenced downtown storefronts, with clean lines, minimal ornamentation, and a focus on functional design.
- **Materials:** Glass, steel, and concrete continued to dominate the market. Aluminum frames and bright, colorful signage were common.
- **Design:** The emphasis was on simplicity, and storefronts began to be larger with expansive glass windows. Stores like chain retailers (e.g., department stores) were designed to be visually appealing yet straightforward.
- **Commercial Trends:** Drive-thru windows, self-service models, and larger signage systems became prominent in the evolving commercial landscape.



However, over time, facades changed and were altered in ways that fit more with the architectural style of the time or to make repairs to the facade. If a building owner is looking to restore the original storefront, a few things should be considered. First, is the building listed on the National Register and/or when, in its history, was the building significant? Research into the original design and/or the period of significance of the building can be invaluable as this can set the direction of the work to be done on the building. In addition, if renovations to the building are

appropriate for the time it was renovated, the best course of action may be to restore the updated storefront as opposed to attempting to restore the building to its original design. According to Preservation Brief 11, "If the storefront design is a good example of its period and if it has gained significance over time, it should be retained as part of the historical



evolution of the building (this architectural distinctiveness could also be an economic asset as it may attract attention to the building)."¹

Second, building materials and design elements that exist with the building should be preserved and retained. These unique features not only give the building character but help to tell the story of the historic district's development over time. Work with a professional who understands historic architecture and how to preserve it properly when doing this work.



If deterioration of the material is severe and requires replacement, it is always recommended to match the original material as much as possible to complement the historic character of the building.² When no evidence of the original storefront design remains, a contemporary design that helps tie the building together may be preferred. If no physical or photographic evidence is available of your building's original storefront design, mimicking design elements or salvaging historic materials from neighboring buildings of different time periods and styles is never recommended.

For more information on storefront and best practices for rehabilitation, please refer to Preservation Briefs 11 and 17.

Bibliography:

¹Jandl, H. Ward. "Preservation Briefs 11: Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts." National Park Service, September 1982. <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/upload/preservation-brief-11-storefronts.pdf>.

²"The Rehab Yes & No Learning Program. the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation." National Parks Service. <https://www.nps.gov/crps/tps/rehabyes-no/rehabstandards.htm>.

Communities Pictured:

Joplin, MO - Picture on front.

Independence, MO - Picture top right

Clinton, Mo - Picture Bottom left



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