



Office of Business Development  
City of Boston  
Martin J. Walsh, Mayor



# COMMERCIAL DISTRICT DESIGN GUIDELINES

Boston Main Streets





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# INTRODUCTION TO BOSTON MAIN STREETS AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

## BOSTON MAIN STREETS

The Boston Main Streets program provides merchants and community residents with the tools and information necessary to assist their neighborhoods' historic commercial centers to compete in today's market. The program helps neighborhood Main Streets organizations capitalize on their unique historical, cultural, and architectural assets while addressing the key economic development needs of small business retention and recruitment.

The City of Boston has long believed that creating an environment where businesses can flourish begins in our own backyards. Successful neighborhood businesses create jobs, foster strong community relationships and help the neighborhood and the city thrive. This belief has yielded tangible results since establishing the award-winning Boston Main

Streets program in 1995. Today, Boston Main Streets districts follow a unique and comprehensive map to success: providing the tools and support necessary to create, build and sustain viable commercial districts throughout Boston's neighborhoods. From new storefront designs and innovative marketing and promotion, to creative events that drive foot traffic, instill pride and create a sense of community, Boston Main Streets districts are not only helping existing businesses grow – they are attracting new businesses and residents to their districts.

The Boston Main Streets Network is funded through City resources, as well as through the generous support of Boston's business community and area residents. The Network also receives assistance through financial and in-kind support from local corporations and institutions.



## DESIGN GUIDELINES

The following Design Guidelines were developed by Boston Main Streets as a way to encourage good design by addressing issues that business and property owners face in planning commercial and retail improvements. This document represents a means of improving the physical environment of the city's shopping districts. The Design Guidelines address the physical aspects of a healthy commercial area from storefront design to maintenance of buildings.



# STOREFRONTS IN NEIGHBORHOOD SHOPPING DISTRICTS

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STOREFRONTS IN THE STREETScape

Storefronts and building facades are not only the chief means of identifying businesses in the commercial district, but part of a larger concept of the streetscape. The overall presentation of a commercial district that is thriving can be undercut by poor lighting, bad signage and general disrepair. The streetscape is the true face of the business district, and the storefronts within it need to represent it well so that all can thrive.

This does not mean that each storefront needs to look exactly the same, but there should be a kind of harmony that is achieved in relationship to the overall commercial district. In order to improve the image of a commercial area, there needs to be a basic understanding of the typical buildings in the district. Identify quality building elements and distinguishing traits of existing storefronts and look for businesses or buildings that look 'tired' and in need of attention. New buildings should reflect the unique qualities of the established business district. When carrying out improvements, care should be taken to ensure that new treatments and new design elements are sensitive to the historic form and/or material used previously.

The character of storefronts and window displays, as well as the quality of the streetscape experience, define the feel of a neighborhood. It is to the advantage of every member of the community to promote good storefront design.



## THE HISTORY OF BOSTON'S NEIGHBORHOOD COMMERCIAL DISTRICTS

Any business district in a residential area needs to be a balance of shopping and essential services, as well as institutional and recreational places that provide core support for neighborhood activity. The goal is to provide these amenities on a scale suited to pedestrian use, and to promote the use and enhance the convenience and accessibility of the neighborhood business districts to the larger residential area.

Many of Boston's neighborhoods have a commercial crossroads located on what were once a village's main streets. Boulevards such as Washington Street in Roslindale, which connects several Main Streets districts, were once the main tie between central Boston and its outlying towns and villages. Throughout the later part of the 19th century, the streetcar system and the development of the city's larger roadways for car traffic supported new commercial development, and not just within the city confines. The population boom during the latter half of the 19th century strengthened commercial and retail centers as streetcar lines made new neighborhoods accessible. Areas like Allston and Brighton experienced significant growth in this period. With the majority of the city's employment downtown, the expanding streetcar service gave people a way to get to work while still allowing Boston's neighborhood commercial districts to become both social and economic centers.

Commercial and retail buildings quickly multiplied along streetcar lines to meet the retail and service needs of the growing residential areas of the city. The 'taxpayer block' became the standard building type across the city. These commercial/retail structures were conceived as a cost-effective means of generating enough income to pay the taxes on the property while the building owners waited to develop larger, more profitable buildings on their property.

Typical taxpayer blocks are one story in height with shops occupying individual structural bays. The length of these buildings ranges from as few as two or three storefronts to as many as twelve, and can occupy a full city block. Multiple stores which fit within the repetitive elements of these buildings provide Boston's neighborhoods with a visual diversity and mix of uses that is central to their vitality. Often covered by subsequent building alterations, many taxpayer blocks remain the core of Boston's neighborhood commercial district architecture.

These still existing taxpayer blocks have gone through generations of successive use, and have benefited from the current push for transit-oriented development, and walkably-scaled neighborhood amenities. Spurred by the rise in gas prices, and the cost of maintaining an automobile in the city, there has been a rise in demand for affordable living options near public transportation nodes, whether bus, subway or train lines. This movement is strengthening both new and older commercial districts where commercial development had declined or been fallow.

The rise of the Boston Main Streets program in the 1990s gave individual communities a way to organize themselves and help their district reflect the character of the surrounding neighborhood and the diverse mix of the people who live there. The varied mix of businesses, buildings, and uses from district to district set each neighborhood apart as a unique destination and convenient residential shopping area. By addressing their specific economic and physical needs, Boston's main streets are once again becoming vibrant commercial and social centers. In addition, strengthening neighborhood business districts continues to enhance and complement Boston's economy by strengthening the neighborhoods, and creating jobs.

# HOW TO ENHANCE THE BUSINESS DISTRICT

Focusing on good site design early in the development process is important in maintaining the character of a neighborhood retail district. The relationship between a building, the sidewalk, and the street edge is the key to forming a successful urban shopping area that is a safe and inviting to pedestrians. A well- designed building allows pedestrians on the sidewalk to easily view window displays as well as activity within the business. New projects are most successful when the siting of a building matches the existing pattern of the neighborhood.

For example, traditional storefronts maintain consistency through the use of similar building elements. Boston's larger commercial buildings typically have three vertical zones. The first zone is the street level retail/commercial space which is often characterized by taller ceiling heights, larger windows, distinct building materials, and storefront areas that are defined by the buildings structural framework. The second zone is usually used as office space or housing. The top zone of commercial buildings is capped with a cornice which may be decorative.

While development does not need to copy historical styles, it should be compatible with the older, existing buildings in the district. Regardless of the intended

use, designs should maintain the pattern of building elements in a district such as the location of doors, windows and bays. In some areas of the city there is a building pattern of storefronts meeting the edge of the sidewalk while in other areas storefronts are set back with a small fenced in green space out front.

The condition of businesses and commercial property plays a key role in the overall image of the shopping area. Storefront and building maintenance and renovation greatly enhance a business district. The last thing a person shopping in the district should see is graffiti on buildings, or boarded over, broken windows. In addition to improvements to private storefronts, attention to the public area of a district, like the sidewalk and street, is crucial to sustaining a healthy business district. Attention must be paid to details like trash collection, sweeping sidewalks, shoveling in winter and creating green spaces, big and small. All of this can make an enormous difference in people's perceptions of the commercial area. Careful design of public places includes the recognition of patterns of use within a district and the development of public amenities which support or enhance desired activities. The street should be a setting in which the pedestrian feels safe from crime and able to find essential goods and services.





## DID YOU KNOW?

Visually appealing commercial districts attract more customers, thus increasing foot traffic. When you have more people walking, shopping and seeking services in the commercial district the district becomes more economically successful, safer and more vibrant.



Elements which impact the visual image of a neighborhood street include:

- Building maintenance and repairs which are the responsibility of the building owner
- Storefronts and signage
- The location and maintenance of trees, lights and way finding/sign posts
- The overall brightness of lighting in a shopping area and in public parking areas
- The removal of solid roll-down grates
- Permitted uses of sidewalks, such as cafes and fruit or flower stands
- Planned and maintained green space
- Enhancements such as benches, bike racks, informational kiosks and public art
- Public gathering areas like plazas or small 'pocket parks'
- Taking pride in the condition of the sidewalk in front of stores by sweeping and shoveling.

Residents can play a role in a district's image by participating in clean-up efforts, community watch programs and by reporting graffiti, vandalism and broken street lights. Main Streets district offices can strive to work with building owners to encourage them to keep up their property, and with business owners to encourage good window displays and appropriate signage. Building a positive pedestrian experience in a neighborhood takes the combined effort of committed residents, businesses, building owners, and city agencies.



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# STOREFRONT COMPONENTS

## BUILDING PARTS

The first step in carrying out storefront renovations is identification of the parts of a building. Each piece of a storefront poses a set of options that together contribute to the overall image of a business. Consistency of the storefront windows and base heights within one building helps provide continuity in the streetscape. If the building is on a slope, however, then the alignment of the window heights might vary. Careful planning of an entire project provides a strong business image and can be cost effective at the same time.

### KEY

1. Knee wall/window base
2. Door
3. Display window
4. Transom window
5. Sign band
6. Blade sign
7. Parapet
8. Pilaster

## BUILDING PARTS

# KNEE WALL / WINDOW BASE

The window base supports and protects the display window from damage and weathering. The base also raises the display area to a more easily viewed height. Typical knee wall materials include wood, marble, brick, concrete, cement board and exterior grade ceramic tile. The window base is often simplified in new storefronts; however, it should retain the storefront line and proportions.



**DO**

- Respect a building's scale, size, architectural period and original materials.
- Ensures that the height of the base is consistent with adjacent storefronts in the same building.
- Retain, maintain, restore or uncover original materials.
- Ensure that replacement material matches or exceeds the quality of the originals.
- Use materials that are both durable and easily maintained.
- Provide an opaque knee wall in businesses that have seating at the window wall, as in restaurants and waiting rooms. Customers and clients feel less exposed if they have some degree of privacy.



**DON'T**

- Use materials that are easily damaged or that deteriorate quickly.

## DID YOU KNOW?

A deep exterior window sills or deep exterior knee wall caps can cause a problem by creating a 'seat' or ledge that can attract loiterers, birds and debris.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28



# DOORS & WINDOWS

Doors and windows are often referred to as a 'storefront system'. Together they establish the visual relationship between the interior of the shop and the sidewalk. Well-maintained windows and display areas are critical as they are the way for people to see into the business and get a preview of what the business sells or what services it offers.

Entries are best recessed and must comply with all zoning and accessibility requirements. Recessed entries serve as sheltered areas that protect customers from the weather and prevent doors from swinging onto the sidewalks. Conversely recessed doorways can cause the accumulation of debris and security issues. If the business does have a recessed doorway, then there should be strong lighting in the recess to deter people from using this area for shelter or illicit activities while the business is closed.



**DO**

- Use signs to clearly mark the entry to your business.
- Install appropriate commercial-grade doors with large glass panels to provide the most visibility into a business.
- Install doors and windows that are compatible with a building's overall character.



**DON'T**

- Put loading docks and services entrances on the front side of your business.
- Use your main customer access as a service entrance.
- Use residential doors on a commercial property.
- Add new or secondary entrances that are incompatible in size, scale or material.
- Enclose old entrances with solid materials such as wood or masonry.
- Block one side of a double door entry with merchandise.
- Construct doors that swing onto sidewalks.



## DID YOU KNOW?

Clutter-free windows attract more shoppers as they can see what you have to offer.

Clear windows allow workers in a business to keep an eye on the street and look out for potential problem situations.

If your windows are clutter-free and you leave lights on in your shop at night the public can 'police' odd behavior in your store while you're not there.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28



## BUILDING PARTS

# DISPLAY WINDOWS

Display windows are the link between the pedestrian and the business. They are the character-defining element of a retail or commercial building and their original size, division, and shape should be preserved when possible. Neglecting windows that are broken or boarding them up for any period of time results in a negative image for both the business and the commercial district.

**DO**

- Use transparent glass instead of tinted or textured glass. Neighborhood business district zoning requires 70% of your storefront be clear glass.
- Create a cohesive storefront appearance by aligning window heights and unifying window sizes.
- Consider mullion patterns, thickness and spacing in relationship to existing or historical building elements/design.
- Identify and preserve historic features such as frames, special glazing and decorative molding.
- When using aluminum storefronts and windows use the best quality aluminum to insure thermal insulation and to prevent condensation.
- When using wood frame windows take advantage of the ability to add detail and color.

**DON'T**

- Cover or block a display window by filling it with non-transparent material like cases, fliers, advertising or non-product items.
- Fill a window opening with glass block that does not allow views into the business.
- Cover or obscure existing window trim with metal or other materials including sign backing boards.
- Remove historic windows or window components.
- Insert new lowered ceilings inside that block windows or modifying exterior.
- Use Plexiglas instead of glass.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28

## DID YOU KNOW?

Massachusetts State Building code requires safety glazing in hazardous locations, including glazing of swinging doors and adjacent to walking areas, like the front glass window on the storefront.

The minimum transparency requirements for storefronts and windows are regulated by the Boston Zoning Code.

When people can clearly see into your business they are more interested in coming in to shop or use your services.

Clear windows with good displays inside the windows are good marketing.



# TRANSOM WINDOWS

A horizontal band of small windows above display windows and doors, transom windows were historically operable and provided ventilation as well as brought daylight deep into the interior. As a design feature the transom window is an important element in the proportions of the storefront.



**DO**

- Retain the original pattern of transom windows even when the transom windows are hidden by awnings. They are visible when customers approach the storefront or if awnings are removed.
- Make the transom window frames of a material and design compatible with the window and door frames.



**DON'T**

- Cover or block the transom windows with any non-transparent material such as signs or wood panels. Only replace with opaque panels if there is a need to hide what's behind the transom.
- Fill transom area with masonry, glass block or other non-transparent material.

## DID YOU KNOW?

A soffit which steps down can be built to transition the ceiling over a tall display window to a lower dropped ceiling inside the store.

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## BUILDING PARTS

# SIGN BANDS

The sign band area of a commercial building is a horizontal segment of the storefront located above the display window and below the second floor windows, or building cornice. In many storefronts this area is designated by a distinct band of precast concrete, plaster, wood, or other materials and is the typical location for the business's sign. In some buildings a change in the pattern of bricks marks this space on the storefront.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28

## DID YOU KNOW?

As part of general maintenance, the sign band should be stripped of extraneous pieces of wood or metal when each tenant leaves so that new signs can be mounted flush against the surface. This measure prevents weathering of signs and minimizes nesting places for birds.







 **DO**

- Create a sign that fits within the original space designated for it.
- Locate signs or sign panels in a consistent location and align signage with adjacent storefronts in the same building when possible. When buildings are built on a slope and the entries of each shop are at different elevations then the sign panels may need to step up or down with the slope.

 **DON'T**

- Install oversized and/or inappropriately placed signs (or awnings) that obscure architectural details of the building or extend beyond the sign band area.
- Install signs that go above the cornice or roof line of the building.



# SIGNIFICANT SIGNS

## FLAT SIGNS

A flat sign refers to a sign mounted flush to the face of a building. A flat sign should be horizontal and mounted above the storefront's windows. These signs should be attached within a designated sign area. In older buildings this is the 'sign band' area of the façade. In newer buildings where no designated sign band area exists, a specific area should be designated as the appropriate place for mounting flat signs. Other words for flat signs include: panel signs, wall signs, flush-mounted signs, and building signs.

Flat signs can have decorative printed vinyl faces and/or lettering mounted on them.

## MOUNTED LETTERS

This refers to dimensional letters that are mounted either to the face of the building or onto the face of a flat sign or perpendicular sign. Mounted letters have differing prices depending upon what they're made out of.

**DO**

- Design legible signs and graphics.
- Scale signs to fit the design of the building and storefront.
- Place signs on clearly defined architectural sign band areas.
- Remove all old, non-functioning signs, brackets, and/or sign clips from previous businesses.
- Create a designated area where panel, flush mounted or wall signs form a clearly articulated band on the face of the building.
- Mount all flat signs at the same height and make them the same size.
- Use durable material types such as MDO plywood, metal, or molded letters.
- Use projecting 'blade' signs mounted perpendicular to the sidewalk in areas that have heavy pedestrian and automobile and/or bus use.
- Keep hours of operation, phone number and/or web address on the entry door in the form of window graphics and not on the signage itself.
- Restore historic signs if they contribute to business image.
- Create iconic, graphic or three dimensional signs.
- Use matte or satin finishes.

**DON'T**

- Use excessive external illumination of signs.
- Obscure or remove building elements such as cornices or decorative architectural details to accommodate signs.
- Cover too much of the window area with signage.
- Create neon signs with brand name advertising.
- Install internally illuminated sign boxes.
- Allow exposed electrical raceways.
- Use glossy finishes.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The Boston Zoning Code, Boston Sign Code and Neighborhood District Regulations define the size, type and placement of signs, dimensions of projecting signs and awnings, and the amount of window area that can be obscured by window graphics or sign.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28



## SIGNIFICANT SIGNS

# FLAT SIGNS & MOUNTED LETTERS

## FLAT SIGNS

A flat sign refers to a sign mounted flush to the face of a building. A flat sign should be horizontal and mounted above the storefront's windows. These signs should be attached within a designated sign area. In older buildings this is the 'sign band' area of the façade. In newer buildings where no designated sign band area exists, a specific area should be designated as the appropriate place for mounting flat signs. Other words for flat signs include: panel signs, wall signs, flush-mounted signs, and building signs.

Flat signs can have decorative printed vinyl faces and/or lettering mounted on them.

## MOUNTED LETTERS

This refers to dimensional letters that are mounted either to the face of the building or onto the face of a flat sign or perpendicular sign. Mounted letters have differing prices depending upon what they're made out of.

**DO**

- Explore a variety of ways to fabricate the same sign, different materials have different prices.
- Find a way to make your sign stand out by making some part of it dimensional.
- Use the best materials you can afford.
- Plan your lighting to highlight your sign/s.

**DON'T**

- Use cheap materials that neither look good nor weather well.
- Use large internally illuminated cabinet 'box signs' where the whole surface of the sign is illuminated.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28



# GREENHILLS



## SIGNIFICANT SIGNS

# BLADE SIGNS & PENDANT SIGNS

## BLADE SIGNS

A blade sign is a sign that projects out from the face of the storefront over the sidewalk, perpendicular to the building. These signs are also called projecting signs and 'fin' signs. Blade signs are mounted on a bracket that is attached to the face of the building. The bracket can be simple and modern or decorative and old fashioned.



DO

- Make sure that the sign has two identical faces, one on each side.
- Explore a variety of ways to fabricate the same sign, different materials have different prices.
- Find a way to make your sign stand out by making some part of it dimensional.
- Use the best materials you can afford.
- Plan your lighting to highlight your sign/s.
- Mount signs so that the bottom of the sign is at least 8 feet from the sidewalk.



DON'T

- Use cheap materials that neither look good, nor weather well.
- Use large internally illuminated cabinet 'box signs' where the whole surface of the sign is illuminated.
- Drill into a significant architectural detail that can't be easily repaired if the business leaves and the sign is removed (for examples don't mount a perpendicular sign by drilling into a granite column or pilaster or by drilling into a precast or terracotta decorative element).
- Projection over sidewalk should be +/- 30 inches unless with special permission in part dependent on the width of the sidewalk.
- Hang signs from long chains that allow them too much movement on windy days and become a hazard.

## PENDANT SIGNS

A pendant sign is a sign that is top-mounted to a bracket by chains and hangs down.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28.



## SIGNIFICANT SIGNS

# ICONIC SIGNS & BANNERS

## ICONIC SIGNS

An iconic sign is a unique, three-dimensional object that shows a store's product or service in a symbolic way. A good example is a toothbrush shaped sign in front of a dental office.

## BANNERS

A banner is a tall, narrow sign that is oriented perpendicular to the building's face. It must be located above the ground level storefront. They are rarely used in our commercial district since the scale of our commercial properties is too short to support their use. Banners are usually seen as temporary and require a special permit.


**DO**

- Check with City agencies for the permissions needed to erect an iconic sign or banner.
- Make sure that banners are attached to the building face by a bracket both at the top of the banner and at the bottom of the banner.
- Make sure that you have the money to maintain a banner as they can need frequent replacement and are subject to damage from weather.
- Make sure that the banner is made of a porous material that will allow air to move through it so it does not act as a sail, catching wind and causing damage.
- Make sure that you have the money to maintain an iconic sign and the symbol or object that is iconic is fabricated to withstand the elements.


**DON'T**

- Allow banners to project more than 36 inches from the face of a building.



## SIGNIFICANT SIGNS

## WINDOW GRAPHICS

Window graphics are text and/or decorative graphics that are applied to the window as a supplement to standard signage. They are usually printed as vinyl transfers and installed inside windows. Traditionally, these graphics were used on front doors and stated the hours of operation of the business as well as the telephone number (and now, web addresses). Currently, merchants have expanded their use to be whimsical as in the case of a pink dragon wrapping around the several windows at a Chinese restaurant, or as a means of reinforcing the brand with logos blown up and repeated. The cost of window graphics is significantly lower than that of other building signage.



DO

- Use window graphics to reinforce the business branding.
- Use window graphics to draw peoples' eyes to your storefront.
- Use window graphics to offer some screening for the lower part of the window; as in a waiting room.
- Use window graphics to list some of the services and/or goods you offer.
- Keep in mind that you want to have your window clear enough that light can flood out of your storefront onto the street making the pedestrian experience safer and more pleasant.



DON'T

- Cover more than 30% of the window with window graphics or any other signs.
- Completely block the window; customers need to see into your space and you need to see out to follow the activity on the street.



## DID YOU KNOW?

Window graphics work best if mounted in the bottom third of the window where they are easy to read but don't block site lines.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28



# AWNINGS

Awnings, sometimes called canopies, can affect the overall image of the building. Awnings cover the area between the building and the sidewalk and protect pedestrian from rain, snow and sun. They also protect window displays from excessive sun and help regulate the temperature within a store. Awnings add depth to the building surface and can embellish entrances. Awnings should be located to respect the storefront framework in order to maintain a visual connection with the upper floors and reinforce the rhythm of the streetscape. When used in appropriate locations, awnings can be an effective investment, as on south facing storefronts, over outdoor seating areas, or over entrances. Proper maintenance and repair of awnings are important in conveying a positive visual image.



## DO

- Fabricate awnings out of a solution-dyed acrylic fabric, like Sunbrella.
- Keep awning shapes simple.
- Awnings with open ends are preferable.
- Lights that illuminate the sidewalk can be located under awnings.
- Install awnings on a single building that are consistent in size, profile, and location, whether they are for the same business or not.
- Separate awnings located within each storefront opening so that the building frame and the architectural details of the building are revealed.
- Design canopies/overhangs to ensure proper drainage and shedding of rain and snow and not put under undue structural stress.



## DON'T

- Install awnings made out of vinyl or plastic material.
- Conceal architectural details of a building with continuous or oversized awnings.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28

## DID YOU KNOW?

The Massachusetts State Building Code requires projections over a sidewalk be at least seven feet (7') above the sidewalk. The City of Boston prefers that fixed awnings be mounted at least eight feet (8') above the sidewalk. Fixed awnings should project no more than four feet (4') from the building.

Fabricating awnings with enclosed sides/ends and warm lighting underneath creates an ideal environment for birds to roost. This is something you want to avoid.





# SECURITY & LIGHTING

# SECURITY

Storefront security is paramount in any successful retail environment and any neighborhood. However, common security elements such as metal bars and metal roll-down grates create a sense of fear and suggest a crime-plagued area. These perceptions, whether real or not, result in a decrease in popularity and prosperity of a commercial zone.

Solid grates are a liability for the same kind of reasons: they detract from the neighborhood quality of the street, they make pedestrians feel unsafe, they conceal the interior from view, and they are hard to keep free of graffiti. When open-mesh grates are an absolute necessity, they are best built into the interior of the storefront ceiling where they may be concealed during the day.

There are a variety of ways of securing a business without these kinds of exterior fortifications. Large, transparent windows and doors allow pedestrians and traffic to visually monitor business safety. Security measures can also be enhanced through discrete solutions such as quality locks, internal alarms and notification systems, laminate safety glass and community watch efforts.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28

## DID YOU KNOW?

The removal of solid grates or, at a minimum, their conversion to the open-mesh type is required of all Boston Main Streets and all Department of Neighborhood Development commercial projects.

The Boston Zoning Code does not allow the installation of new solid type grates. Some neighborhood zoning prohibits any grates mounted on the exterior. Refer to Neighborhood district Regulations for requirements of an area.



- Remove exterior roll-down grates and grate boxes whenever possible.
- Mount new mesh grates inside the windows, if they are needed for security, making sure that the grates and their housing is located as unobtrusively as possible.
- Add extra lighting on the building and/or street to deter crime as well as using motion activated lights to illuminate dark areas at night.
- Add decorative metal grates to secure a vestibule area.
- Consider installing electronic alarm systems in combination with laminated safety glass to provide an extra measure of security.



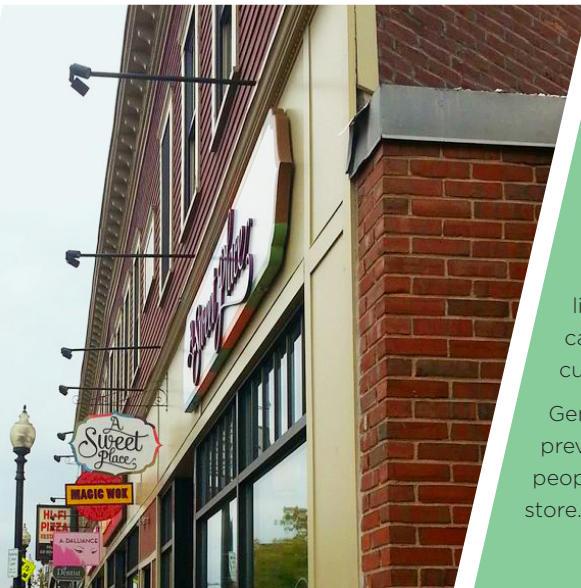
- Don't install solid roll-down grates.



# LIGHTING

Lighting has two purposes, both illuminating the business and also, discouraging crime. Lighting creates a feeling of security for the passerby and is an important factor in a commercial setting. Well-lighted entrances to businesses are more welcoming. Lighting can create a sense of layering from the street to the interior of the store which welcomes the customer to come inside. Good lighting can also create a focal point as well as highlight a display area.

When carrying out storefront renovations, a variety of light sources and locations should be considered. General light is used for overall illumination. It helps fill spaces and soften shadows. Task light is concentrated light for particular tasks like the kind of lighting that is installed to illuminate a building's business directory. Accent lighting highlights objects, plants, and artwork and is equally important in exterior as well as interior applications. Sign lights, display window lights, architectural lighting, and general area lighting is encouraged to advertise the business, highlight building features, and to illuminate dark corners of the property or street. In some cases, where general area lighting is sufficient, a storefront may require minimal illumination.



## DID YOU KNOW?

Certain types of sign lights, such as neon or dynamic light, are regulated by the Boston Zoning Code. Refer to Neighborhood District Regulations for specific requirements of an area.

Replacing outdated or residential style lighting for interesting commercial lighting can catch people's eye and attract new customers.

General interior lighting of display areas helps prevent break-ins by allowing both police and people passing by see the activity inside the store.

## DO

- Help make the pedestrian experience safer in poorly illuminated parts of the commercial district, by not only illuminating the storefront, but the area around the building.
- Encourage indirect lighting.
- Make the scale and style of the lighting fixtures in keeping with the storefront design.
- Do use decorative fixtures, such as sconces, and general building lighting to accent the storefronts and enhance a building's architectural details.
- Use lighting to attract attention to signs.
- Make sure to specifically direct new lights as they are being installed.
- Supplemental security lighting, such as floodlights, should be hidden or shielded to avoid glare.
- Use lighting in conjunction with color to enhance and define public vs. private areas.

## DON'T

- Use exposed electrical conduit on the face of a building.
- Let light spill over into residential units above commercial storefronts. Lighting mounted on buildings should be placed with care to avoid lighting 'over splash'.
- Use too many light fixtures.

# GENERAL MAINTENANCE

General Maintenance is a first step in the improvement of existing buildings and in changing the appearance of a neighborhood business district. Deferred maintenance of items such as peeling paint, torn awnings, or broken window panes, contributes to a look of overall deterioration. Studies have shown that fixing broken windows in a timely fashion helps to deter subsequent vandalism by asserting ownership.

In carrying out improvement projects, the use of quality materials appropriate for the job can save costs over time because of their durability and low maintenance requirements. Good materials also keep buildings watertight and impervious to problems caused by severe New England weather (snow and ice). Basic tasks such as cleaning, repairing, or washing windows can transform a building and have a large impact at a low cost. Businesses with clean windows and fresh paint convey a sense of pride in a business, building and neighborhood.

Identifying and engaging building owners is the first step in getting them to see themselves as part of a community. They are responsible for the maintenance of their building's structure. Their building is their investment.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR DISTRICT MAINTENANCE

- Organize businesses and volunteers for regularly scheduled district cleanups, or encourage groups to 'adopt' portions of the district.
- Arrange partnerships with City agencies for maintaining plantings, trash cans, and sidewalks.
- Sweep, clean, and shovel in front of businesses on a regular basis.
- Remove all fliers from sign poles and lamp poles.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR BUILDING MAINTENANCE

- Clean and repaint a storefront regularly, typically every 3-5 years.
- Wash windows and sidewalks regularly.
- Use durable materials and hire reputable contractors.
- Remove outdated signs and information from storefronts in a timely manner.
- Remove all old, non-functional signs, brackets, fixtures, and wiring.
- Maintain window boxes, bushes, and other plantings.
- Immediately remove or paint over graffiti to discourage repeat vandalism.
- Owners should inspect their building's roof, masonry and parapet regularly and make repairs as soon as necessary.

# MATERIALS AND COLORS

Materials and color are two of the most important aspects of storefront design as they can convey an image of quality and care. Materials and color contribute to a business's advertising strategy as well as to the building's overall image. Depending on the character of the district and its architectural stock, recommended materials and colors will vary. Consistency or compatibility with existing adjacent and/or historic structures in the shopping district is important.

Paint is a relatively inexpensive but dramatic way to define a business or storefront. Even though color selection is the owner's choice, the color scheme should be compatible with neighboring businesses and should set a standard of quality. Protection and maintenance of building features are important on a regular basis and in rehabilitation work. Appropriate repair and restoration techniques ensure a quality, durable storefront finish and ease maintenance needs over time.

**DO**

- Retain or uncover original materials wherever possible.
- Repair items like parapet walls, decorative cornices, and pilasters.
- Make sure replacement materials match originals as closely as possible and are of a compatible quality, color, texture, finish, and dimension to those common in the building.
- Use highly durable and easily maintained materials at the base of a building, and at entrances (think of damage that can be caused by bikes, shopping carts and skateboards banging into buildings).
- Use high quality materials, such as stone and brick, which are durable in nature and convey a feeling of permanence.
- Repoint and repair deteriorating brick.
- Highlight the architectural details of a building with lighting and/or color.

**DON'T**

- Remove quality materials from a building.
- Use materials that cover or alter original architectural features of the building.
- Use artificial materials like imitation stone and imitation brick or aluminum or vinyl siding.
- Use materials that are easily damaged or that deteriorate quickly, for example low grade plywood or rough-sawn wood paneling.
- Paint brick unless absolutely necessary to prevent further deterioration.
- Arbitrarily paint decorative lines, bands or graphic designs directly on to wall, if not related to the building's architectural character or detailing.

FOR ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES, GO TO PAGE 28.



SUCCESSFUL DESIGN

# PHOTO EXAMPLES



# SIGN FABRICATION DEFINITIONS



## FLAT SIGN

A flat sign refers to a mounted flush to the face of a building. These signs should be attached within a designated sign band area (which most older commercial buildings have) or similar flat area of the façade if no designated sign area exists. This type of signage can continue over the whole storefront. Other terms for flat signs include panel signs, wall signs and flush-mounted signs.



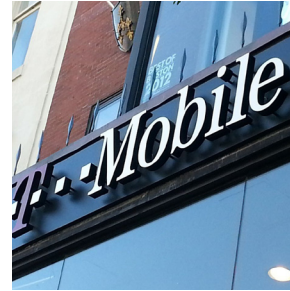
## PENDANT SIGN

The clearest example of a pendant sign is the traditional Starbucks green and white illuminated sign that usually hangs inside their front window. Pendant signs are top mounted and is usually installed inside or in recessed entries.



## BLADE SIGN

A blade sign is a sign that projects out from the façade over the sidewalk perpendicular to the building. It is sometimes called a fin sign or a projecting sign. Blade signs are mounted on a bracket that is perpendicular to the building. The bracket can be simple or decorative. It should be mounted near the entry of the business.



## MOUNTED LETTERS

These are letters that are mounted directly onto the face of a building in the place of a flat sign. They can also be mounted on a sign backer board. These letters are normally dimensional and sometimes use a spacer to give help them sit off the building.



## BANNERS

The City of Boston views most banners as temporary signs and they have a specific amount of time that they can be up on a building. Some large commercial buildings are allowed very large banners that run horizontally up the side of the building. These need special permissions that are difficult to obtain.



## PAINTED SIGN

These are words and sometimes logos that are painted on a building. In Boston these usually need special permissions.



## AWNING/CANOPY AS SIGNAGE

For businesses that don't have a definite sign band area and want something more than a blade sign an awning/canopy is a good alternative. The shape of the awning should conform to the architecture of the building as in fit over doorways or window openings. Text and logos can be applied to the awnings surface. The Office of Business Development will only fund

awnings that are created out of a solution dyed acrylic that looks like canvas, like a Sunbrella fabric. OBD favors slanted awnings with open ends but does allow a valance with some writing on the front of the awning. OBD will not pay for vinyl awnings.



## NEON

Neon signs can be used in non-Landmarks designated buildings as long as they get special permission and include a logo or graphic of some sort. In general the City of Boston does not encourage these signs.



## LIGHTING

Signs can be illuminated internally or externally. Internally illuminated signs have very specific rules about how they can be constructed. The City will not fund tradition light box signs where the whole face of the sign is illuminated. Where possible the City encourages LED lighting.



## WINDOW GRAPHICS

Window graphics are text and/or graphics that are applied to the window as a supplement to standard signage. Creative window graphics can enliven pedestrian walking experience and engage a potential patron. Window graphics can be used as a sole source of signage if the store has large windows. The graphics are usually made of applied vinyl and are sometimes referred to as window decals or vinyl

decals. The Boston Sign Code states that only 30% of any window can be covered with signage or graphics unless the business falls in a special category like banks. We often encourage businesses to add their hours or operation and phone numbers as a window graphic on their entry door



## BRACKETS

The City encourages the use of brackets that are simple and do not detract from the signage.



## SIGN CODES FOR BUILDINGS

The City encourages building owners to establish a set of sign specifications for their businesses. The building owner should have the sign specs be a part of the leasing agreement with their tenants and should make tenants comply with the specifications.

# BEFORE & AFTER

## CARAMELO

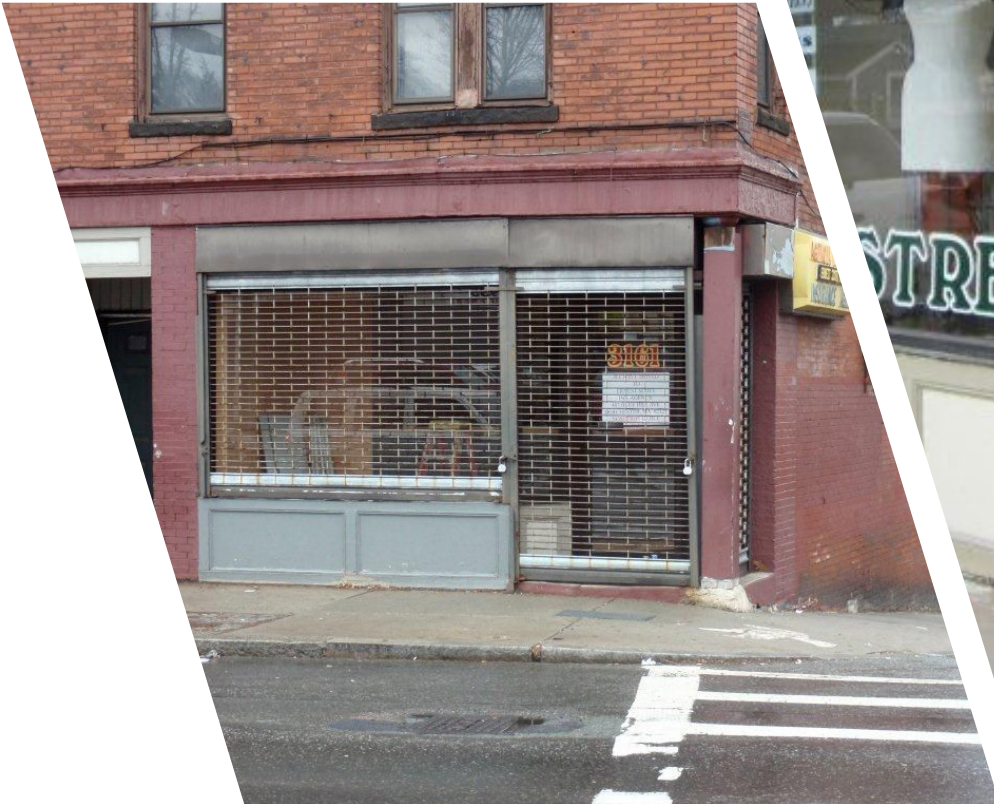
Caramelo in the Centre/South Main Streets district dressed up their menswear storefront by adding an awning, a blade sign, window graphics and attractive decorative plantings near their doorway.





# DESIGNS BY REY

Designs by Rey in the Egleston Squae Main Street district brought attention to this tailor's shop by freshening up the storefront's exterior with new paint and adding a colorful awning.



## LENOX CLEANERS

The Lenox Cleaner's Building in the Fields Corner Main Street district freshened up the building's appearance by adding new window and door systems, as well as decorative flat signs and eye catching blade signs.



## STEPHANIE CAVE DESIGN STUDIO

Stephanie Cave Design Studio in the Centre/South Main Streets district used a new blade sign with a colorful bracket and a small awning over the doorway to catch your eye. The new logo for the store is repeated on the window graphic on the entry door as well as on the blade sign.



## MAINTENANCE & MATERIALS

# REGULATORY AGENCIES & DOCUMENTS

Projects must comply with all City of Boston zoning codes for signage, property use, parking and new construction, as well as all Massachusetts State Building Codes and Federal guidelines for accessibility. The Boston Main Streets central office and the local Main Street office can provide information on accessing the agencies and documents listed below.

## AGENCIES

### **BOSTON LANDMARKS COMMISSION (BLC)**

Conducts design review for historic structures and structures in designated districts in conjunction with other City agencies.

### **BOSTON MAIN STREETS (BMS)**

The design staff at Boston Main Street administers the design guidelines and reviews building improvement projects in designated Main Streets districts.

### **BOSTON REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY (BRA)**

BRA reviews and approves projects, including architectural design and development reviews, and comprehensive sign design review.

### **PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT (PWD)**

PWD administers awning permits, sidewalk use permits, curb cuts, and banner permits.

### **INSPECTIONAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT (ISD)**

ISD issues building construction and sign permits. Projects requiring design or sign review are forwarded to the BRA.



## DOCUMENTS

### **BOSTON ZONING CODE AND ENABLING ACT**

The Zoning Code and accompanying maps regulate the planning of use, lot size, building location and bulk, parking, open space, and development impact. Small project review, which encompasses substantial storefront improvements, is addressed in Articles 31 and 80, and Neighborhood District Regulations.

### **MASSACHUSETTS STATE BUILDING CODE (780 CMR)**

The code should be consulted for all matters affecting or relating to buildings and structures. Provisions of the code address building construction, alteration, or repair as a means of insuring public safety, health and welfare.

### **FEDERAL ADA AND THE STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS' CHAPTER 521CMS**

The Federal Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Chapter 521 of the Code of the Massachusetts Regulations, administered by the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board, and Article 30 of the Boston Zoning Code provide

regulations regarding handicapped accessibility requirements. These **REGULATIONS APPLY TO** all new construction and renovation of existing structures.

### **HISTORIC BUILDINGS AND LANDMARKS DISTRICTS**

Buildings with historic designation or those in an eligible district must comply with the requirements of the Boston Landmarks Commission. When receiving public funding, projects are subject to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings (U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Parks Service, and Preservation Assistance Division). Information on this publication is available through the Boston Landmarks Commission at Boston City Hall. Information on the Investment Tax Credit for historic buildings can be obtained through the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

## HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS

### **ARCHIVES AND REFERENCES**

In addition to your neighborhood historical society, the following institutions have archives which contain historic photographs of neighborhoods and buildings: the Boston Landmarks Commission, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, the Bostonian Society, and the Boston Public Library.

Boston Main Streets is a public-private initiative of the City of Boston to revitalize its neighborhood commercial districts through locally established organizations. Main Streets is a comprehensive approach to providing merchant groups and community residents with the tools and information necessary for their commercial center to compete in today's marketplace. Its key areas of work – organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring – help Main Streets districts capitalize on their unique historical, cultural and architectural assets while addressing the economic development needs around business retention, growth and recruitment.

The Boston Main Streets network is funded through City resources, as well as through the generous support of Boston's business community and area residents. Boston Main Streets receives assistance through financial and in-kind support from local businesses, corporations and institutions.

Visit Boston Main Streets at [www.bostonmainstreets.com](http://www.bostonmainstreets.com).

