

## RETAIL DETAIL

The traditional shop front originates in the Middle Ages, with stalls that were standalone or partly enclosed by a building. Awnings were common, and sometimes the opening was protected by two horizontal shutters, the top one folding up to form an awning and the lower one folding down to form the stall board.

By the mid-18th century, the familiar shop had emerged, with small-paned windows appearing in the more prestigious retail areas of London. Hanging signs were introduced earlier on, growing larger to vie for attention, until they were banned in the City of London in 1764. In the prevailing spirit of classicism, large shopfront openings in ordinary urban terraced houses developed ornamentation unique to shop fronts. Classical columns, pediments or scrolled corbel brackets were introduced to give visual cohesion, and the beam that supported the façade above was disguised by an “entablature” – perfect for displaying the name of the shop, and the frieze or fascia was enlarged accordingly.

Early Georgian shop fronts are rare – typically paired, bow-fronted oriel windows on either side of a central, half-glazed door – but in the Georgian period, designs covered the spectrum of popular taste, from the cool classicism of the Greek Revival to the pointed arch glazing pattern of the Gothic. Shop fronts designed to display fashionable products reflect the fashions of the period, and many interesting designs were destroyed with every change of ownership.

Victorian urban expansion resulted in a proliferation of retail developments. Manufacturers offered wide ranges of standard catalogue designs. Typical examples included tall shop windows, often incorporating a decorative cast iron ventilator underneath the timber- or glass-covered fascia. Sunblinds were often incorporated in the cornice, and towards the end of the century, timber roller security shutters replaced detachable ones. At the window base, the timber frame included both a bottom rail and a deep sill, a detail frequently overlooked by modern interpretations. Panelling of the door and stall-riser was usually raised and fielded. Machine-produced plate glass was available from around the turn of the century, but was rarely used in shop fronts until the 1840s, when tall panes unbroken by horizontal glazing bars became popular. The production of larger sheets was limited more by cost than by technology. The variety of designs increased rapidly, with cast iron appearing early, followed by finely detailed brass- and bronze-clad timber around the middle of the century.

In many older buildings, traditional shop fronts have been replaced or altered. Local authorities are increasingly concerned by the disastrous effect of modern shop fronts and signage on our historic buildings, conservation areas and town centres, and are imposing tight controls on new designs. Altering the exterior of buildings requires planning permission. Older examples should be conserved whenever possible; all original components have an historic value comparable with the finest antique. If original or character shops (both

within and outside Conservation Areas) are unlawfully altered, the owners will be forced to reinstate the original features.

### **GETTING THE APPROACH RIGHT**

- A suitable replacement for some components, including glass and metalwork in particular, may be hard to find. Often, apparently new shop fronts may contain enough original details for accurate restoration of the original.
- New fascias may hide the original cornice and the upper part of the window head. In such cases, restoration results a far more impressive design than a standard modern replacement.
- Where no original designs survive, a modern solution is the most honest approach, but a high-quality, traditionally detailed design may also be appropriate, and often preferred. In both cases the quality of detail is crucial. Crude, square mouldings and planted mouldings are now common, often applied with little understanding of how a frame is constructed.
- Secondary fascias are often incorporated, disrupting the rhythm of tall shop windows along the street, and the concrete floor slab is often exposed.
- Before aluminium systems arrived, shop fronts almost always filled the opening from the pavement to the underside of the fascia.
- Internally illuminated box fascias and projecting signs, added in the mistaken belief that they grab attention and increase trade, merely clutter the street scene and guzzle electricity.
- Shop security must as unobtrusive as possible. External solid roller metal shutters are unsightly, alienating, attract graffiti and reduce lighting. Generally, open security grills can be placed behind the shop screen to provide further security by allowing clear views into the shop.
- Shop window displays promote trade and encourage shoppers. They affect the external appearance and can be required to be retained when a shop changes use – for example to a taxi office, betting office, solicitors, sauna or amusement arcade.
- Hanging signs supported by scrolled brackets are better than projecting box signs, which detract from the character of a traditional building or street scene. There should be only one hanging sign per shop unit, properly proportioned and within the traditional fascia area – never above the ground-floor storey. Advertisement control applies, subject to Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG).
- For shops extending across more than one building or bay, the character of the individual shop-units should be retained or reinstated as separate

units. This may be achieved by retaining individual features such as intervening columns and separate fascias

All local authorities publish SPG and leaflets advising on the design principles and planning-permission procedure for adding or adapting shop fronts. In conservation areas, almost every shop front project will require individual treatment, referring where necessary to other authentic local examples.

New owners wanting a fresh image may want to rush through their planning applications to start trading immediately; but enhancing the quality of their street is to their commercial advantage, and applications are processed more quickly if they conform with regulations right from the start.

A well-designed shop front respects the architecture of the entire parade of which it forms a part, and blends traditional styles and fabrics with a modern presentation. The best way to design a new shop front is to integrate it into the architecture of the entire building. Bad modifications include:

- Installing oversized fascias
- Replacing wooden frames with aluminium or PVC-u
- Removing original doors
- Removing traditional recessed porches
- Allowing pilasters and other surrounding features to fall into disrepair
- Destroying traditional window arrangements and designs. For example, destroying the proportions created by mullions and transoms, which emphasise the vertical and horizontal character of building and parade
- Losing detailed woodwork, cornices, modillions and fanlights
- Covering clerestories (the horizontal glazed section located below the fascia and above the main shop window and door) with oversized fascias
- Replacing traditional hanging signs with projecting box signs, particularly garishly illuminated neon boxes
- Losing original timber shutters, or installing bare-metal shutters mounted in visually intrusive, or poorly located, shutter boxes
- Losing metal ventilation grilles below the fascia or below the stall riser, the stall risers themselves, or the protective stall-riser grilles.

***As all new work to shop fronts requires planning permission, building owners make an application for approval to the planning department of their local authority prior to the commencement of any work.***