HOW TO WORK WITH STOREFRONTS OF THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

A Mid-Twentieth Century Storefront Components Guide

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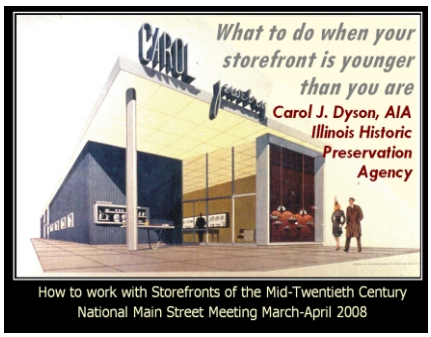

Mid-20th Century Storefront Components

Main Street changed dramatically in the mid-twentieth century as new buildings were constructed and older storefronts were modernized in appearance. In many towns the first architectural expression of Modernism was often the bank, specialty shop, cinema, or pharmacy. Mid-century storefront designs were completed by some of the most talented architects and designers practicing in the United States. The storefronts they designed set trends in downtowns across the country, while their numerous publications on store design had an even greater impact.

Meanwhile, the companies that produced glass and aluminum storefronts also promoted renovation. Glossy brochures showing sophisticated shoppers coaxed store owners to modernize in order to match new styles of goods, and fashion. The results were striking. Glassy storefronts spilled light onto busy sidewalks for evening shoppers. Redesigned buildings were honored by special events, celebrating up-to-date looks worthy of an optimistic post-war age. With new signs, shopfronts, display windows or slipcovers, Main Street became modern.

And yet, as time has passed, the dramatic signs have been removed, shiny materials have been painted over, and many of these storefronts are under-appreciated and unrecognized for their former elegance. Unfortunately, many, if not most, of these "recent-past" resources are swiftly disappearing before their importance is understood. Downtowns will always continue to embrace change, but a preservation-based Main-Street approach suggests that change be guided to help preserve the best and the brightest from every important era.

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The preservation of these mid-century commercial downtown buildings is complicated by both their familiarity and their incongruity. These historic resources from the 1940's, 50's and 60's often are ignored by preservation efforts because they are just too "new" for many to see them as culturally or historically significant. Furthermore, the sleek lines and smooth facades of post-war construction often contrast sharply with the earlier historisict downtown buildings that all preservationists warmly embrace. To further complicate the issue, the new materials, technologies, and design assemblies of the mid-century often require new approaches to building repair and conservation. Yet these buildings reflect important developments in style, design, economics, and technology that swept across a newly consumer-oriented America in the mid-century.

The marketplace has always been a continuum of architectural change. Commercial business owners have regularly updated and "modernized" their shopfronts since the time of the ancient Greek agora. Important marketing, business and commercial changes that took place throughout the 20th century were clearly reflected in stylistic changes in downtown stores throughout the century. But many of the changes of the mid-century were especially profound. To ignore the built evidence of these vibrant mid-century changes during a time many consider the apex of the downtown seems inconsistent. These mid-century buildings reflect what was the brightest, newest ideas of commerce and style. Let's give them another look before we give up on them. To assist you, the following Mid-20th Century Storefront Components Guide identifies some of the most common features of these storefronts and finishes with several Main Street Modernism case studies.

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Mid-20th Century Storefront Components
The storefront layout:

Asymmetrical and angled storefronts

In the mid-century asymmetrical display windows and recessed entries provided room for additional display and a small "exterior lobby." Symmetrical arcaded entries were popular in the 1920's. In the mid-century "exterior lobbies" were usually asymmetrical in plan and location.

The angled front was a very common feature in post-war storefronts. They provided additional display and a small exterior lobby. The storefront would usually angle towards the asymmetrical entrance door, to sweep the buyer into the store.

Angles were everywhere. Sometimes the front plane of the store was angled in towards the entrance, providing shading for the recessed entry, and a more dynamic approach.

In this example the side wing-walls angled.

As the front wall of the storefront was opened up, straight, round, freestanding columns were exposed both within and outside the glassy storefront and became a design element on their own.

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Exaggerated-modern massing and experimental structure

In some of the most dramatic downtown modernistic entries, pylon signage activated simple planar facades

Some designers experimented with new developments in roofing technologies. This barrel vaulted roof protected the sidewalk as a canopy.

Other buildings expressed their structure as does this Villa Park, Illinois bank influenced by Mies van der Rohe.

Canopies

Canopies intersected the front facade to project out over the sidewalk and protect the exterior lobby and the shop windows.

Canopies

Jutting canopies replaced traditional fabric awnings. Some were supported by rods, and columns, while other steel and concrete canopies were cantilevered without visible support. They were made of steel, aluminum, concrete or wood. These canpopies provided sun screening and also a location for individual letter signs, attached either above, or suspended below the canopy. Although most canopies were rectilinear, some incorporated sweeping curves.

Awnings

Retractable fabric awnings were still used in mid-century to shade the shop windows. However, fixed awnings or canopies became popular too.

Some storefronts were shaded by fixed aluminum awnings.

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Display cases

Picture-framed display boxes showcased the latest goods and turned the display window into a work of art. Sleek aluminum or steel surrounded smooth plate glass surfaces. Here a large projecting picture frame is especially suited to this photography studio.

Other picture-framed display boxes were inset into the front or side walls of the storefront. Sometimes, as was in this case, the exterior lobby "accent wall" would continue into the store with more inset displays.

Cantilevered display windows projected beyond their base to further deconstruct the storefront plane. By recessing the base, the display seemed to float, and the exterior lobby felt more spacious.

Other cantilevered display cases boxes were mounted on walls and freestanding on three walls.

Freestanding display cases were well suited to shoe stores. The smaller goods were brought out beyond the storefront lobby to the sidewalk.

Mid-20th Century Storefront Components
Signs

As upper floors often went unused the whole facade sometimes became an advertising "billboard" for the store. Giant signage proclaimed the name and was easily readable by a new fast-moving, driving customer-base.

Channel-set neon tubing was set within metal letters with the neon tubes left uncovered and visible. Since the 1970's most new channel-set letters had their neon hidden by a cover of translucent plastic.

Reverse channel-set letters had neon tubing housed within, or set behind, metal letters. The letter fronts were opaque and backs were open to create a halo of light silhouetting the letter shapes.

Programmatic signs communicate the function of the business by imitating the form of the product sold or the name of the business. They can be hanging or flush-mounted.

Internally illuminated back-lit use a metal box to hold a light source (either fluorescent or white neon) that is covered by a translucent plastic or glass face onto which graphics were printed. New internally illuminated plastic signs are generally not recommended for historic districts; however, some internally illuminated plastic signs may be old enough or integral enough to the building design or business to consider their preservation.

Mid-20th Century Storefront Components Signs:

Individual letters

Individual letters were available in a variety of mid-century clean-lined scripts. Made out of stainless steel, painted sheet metal, aluminum or bronze, they were usually pinned to the wall or mounted to a canopy or

These porcelain enamel letters with channel-set neon are also individual outline letters.

These elongated letters are mounted to a screen above the storefront

Here, base-mounted lettering stands on a projecting canopy. Others on Main Street were hung pendant-like below canopies.

Dramatic script fonts were also utilized for neon and signs in the period.

Mid-20th Century Storefront Components

Projecting signs were mounted above the sidewalk and perpendicular to the building facade and were usually suspended from a decorative bracket.

Post signs were more commonly associated with buildings set back from the street or in a more suburban setting. The Dell Rhea Chicken Basket in suburban Chicago is listed on the National Register of Historic Places due to its association with Route 66.

As storefronts opened up to the sidewalk, tempered glass doors were also used. As the doors became minimal, the handles and hardware became more important and were usually sleekly designed.

These sculptural door handles decorate this clear bank door.

Lighting

Recessed lighting was utilized in display windows to offset the glare from sunlight and to provide night exposure.

Mid-20th Century Storefront Components

Slipcovers and new buildings

This handsome theater in Taylorville, Illinois is still showing movies. The front facade combine an open lobby topped by a curvilinear stainless steel canopy, a polychrome porcelain terra cotta upper facade and a dramatic porcelain enamel pylon sign. Another curvilinear canopy sits atop the facade, and its curve reverses the lower one. Recessed lighting illuminates the lobby, and upper lighting emphasizes the terra cotta. Other buildings also had structural glass, porcelain enamel facades, or screen slipcovers as below.

Porcelain enamel was utilized frequently on storefronts. The Hub store had a granite-faced porcelain enamel slipcover and porcelain enamel signs. The Hub facade was demolished to create a new facade that looked "old."

This multi-color porcelain enamel slipcover turned a Belleville, Illinois department store into a dramatic focal point for downtown. Although the original sign is has been painted over, the facade is still striking.

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This storefront in Danville, Illinois is in great condition, and has it all. Gold anodized slipcover, projecting backlit sign, tile transom area and side piers, a cantilevered projecting display case, an asymmetrical shopfront, and a projecting canopy. This well-designed and completely intact storefront, makes this building a very significant example of mid-century commercial design. This storefront clearly exemplifies *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabiliation, "Number 3: Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved."*

Not all striking modern facades of the mid-century were slipcovers over earlier buildings. Many stores were built in the 1950's. New construction and slipcovers alike could be covered with opaque materials of glass, steel, aluminum or porcelain enamel, or with perforated metal screens that let in sunlight to upper floors. The screens were usually anodized aluminum and were made in a variety of colors.

Metals

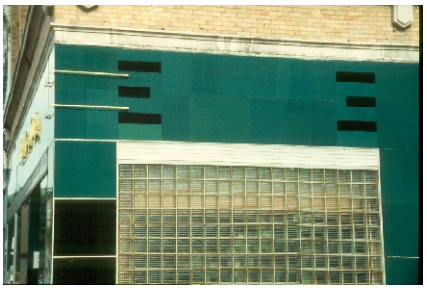
Aluminum, stainless steel, bronze, copper, brass, monel and nickel silver were utilized on storefronts during the mid-twentieth century. After WWII aluminum and steel were the primary materials.

Gold anodized aluminum was less common than clear anodized aluminum, but still quite popular on main street. Anodized aluminum also came in a Champagne finish, both light and dark, and also several other colors. Dark bronze anodized aluminum did not become widely popular

Flat Glass

The "open front" utilized large sheets of plate glass to open up the interior store to the sidewalk. Perfectly flat and polished, plate glass provided completely clear views into the store. Plate glass could come in pieces as large as 10′ by 24.′ Traditional plate glass is no longer made in the United

Opaque structural glass was used on storefronts beginning in the first decade of the 20th century. Often known by the proprietary names of Vitrolite and Carrara, by 1940 the glass was available in a variety of colors, patterns and finishes. Highly durable and elegant, the glass was popular up until the 1960's as a glossy way to modernize existing storefronts. The thinness of the glass meant that it could be attached to a variety of substrates with mastic.



Structural glass contrasted well with aluminum storefronts. Different colors of glass were sometimes used as accents within larger fields of color.

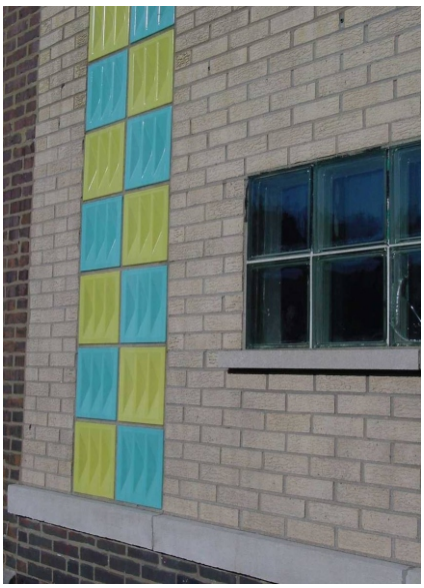
By the 1950's spandrel glass started to appear in Main Street in curtain walls. These panels were clear glass back-enameled with color.

Mid-20th Century Storefront Components

Glass Block and Decorative Glass

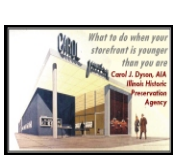
Occasionally corrugated glass was used on main street. Special gaskets and frames that custom-fit the corrugation were marketed by the glass companies.

Glass block first appeared on Main Streets in the United States during the 1930's. Although most common during the 30's and 40's, it was still used frequently until the 1960's.



Glass block with colored ceramic frit was used less frequently, but made a dramatic statement when it did appear on main street.

Valle de Verre was colored art glass set in concrete and is occasionally found on main street.



Mid-20th Century Storefront Components

Masonry

Unusual and textured masonry surfaces were utilized. Often as a contrast to smooth metals and sheets of plate glass. Brick was often stacked in a vertical bond. This provided clean vertical lines for the modern aesthetic.

Although used less frequently than brick, stone, or tile, terra cotta was also used on commercial buildings mid-century. This unusual gold-glazed, striated terra cotta is set against highly textured Roman brick, a much more common mid-century material.

Tile was a popular bulkhead and wall surface. The variety of color and textures could create abstract modernistic patterns. Small tiles in mosaics were most common.

Stone

These sample display panels of stone showcased the mid-century possibilities for wall surfaces. The rough-faced veneer was used to provide a more rustic, or suburban look to storefronts.

Smooth panels of marble, granite, limestone and other stone served as a more elegant setting for transparent glass and metal lettering. Polished stone projected an expensive image for jewelry stores, banks, or wedding dress shops.

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Substitute materials

Substitute materials to replicate authentic materials found their way to mid-century storefronts just as terra cotta imitated stone on turn-of-the-century facades. This panel replicates tile pieces, yet there were other panels of materials copying stone, stucco or concrete.

Terrazzo

Terrazzo flooring began to be used downtown in the first decades of the 20th century. By mid-century, the smooth surfaces and large stylized patterns well matched the designs of the overall storefront. Just as late nineteenth-century vestibule floors would spell out the business name in encaustic tile, by mid-twentieth century, the more durable and easily cleaned terrazzo did so. Tile in a variety of larger sizes and colors was also

Wood

Although some storefronts of the 40's and 50's used woods and rough-faced stone to achieve a relaxed, casual and "suburban" look, those materials became even more popular in the mid 1960's when a more natural look was often favored.

Credits

The photos in this guide and in the associated presentation by Carol J. Dyson for the 2008 National Main Streets Conference are from the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA) Photo Archives. They were taken by IHPA architecture staff from 1983 to the present. The photographers include current and past IHPA staff: Mike Jackson, FAIA, Carol J. Dyson, AIA, Anthony Rubano, Assoc. AIA, Darius Bryjka, Assoc. AIA, Anna Margaret Borntrager, Associate AIA, Doug Gilbert, AIA and Bryan Lijewski, Assoc. AIA. Photos from the 1970's and early 1980's were taken by Mike Jackson, FAIA, Chief Architect at IHPA. Several of the sign descriptions above are based on a sign glossary by Darius Bryjka. The following case studies were designed by Anna Margaret Borntrager and Darius Bryjka. For more information and additional case studies please go to: http://www.illinois-history.gov/ps/midcentury.htm

The former Block & Kuhl Furniture Home Store shopfront was designed by the famous designer Raymond Loewy and Associates in 1947. IHPA staff consulted with the Main Street Manager and the owner to explain the significance of the storefront, and Darius Bryjka created this design. The proposal is to remove the artificial siding over the wooden plank transoms, and restore the historic 1947 entrance. The sign picks up on the character of the historic sign. The existing interior of the first floor still reflects the Loewy design as shown by the photo of the inside storefront on the upper left. Overall this storefront is very intact. For more information and to view an archive of IHPA Main Street facade designs for mid-century storefronts go to: Http://www.illinois-history.gov/ps/midcentury.htm.

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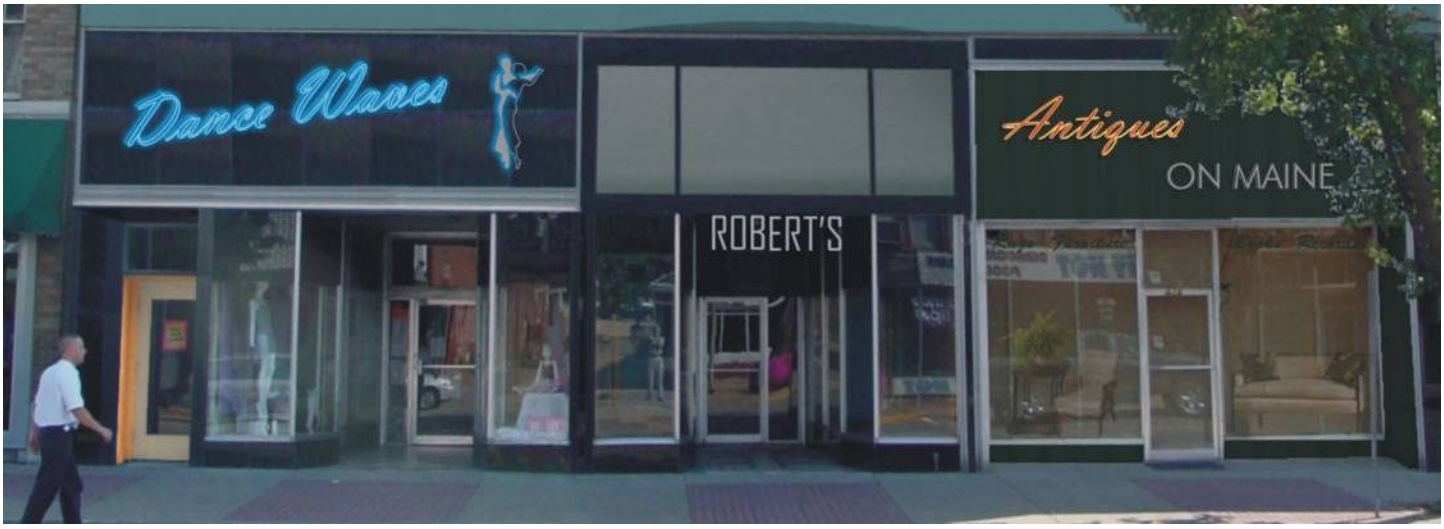
This rustic modern storefront is part of a series of 1960's ground-floor alterations of an late nineteenth century building. The original wood siding and trellis had been painted primary colors by a previous owner. The original stone veneer wall remained unpainted. The damaged, internally-lit plastic sign was not original to the design.
When a new business moved into this storefront they wanted a completely new look . Anna Margaret Borntrager designed this paint scheme in more natural tones. She recommended preserving and highlighting the horizontal trellis above the door, and retaining and restoring the original globe light fixtures. The design incorporated strong colors to contrast with the light stone and to highlight its texture. The owner now loves their new "old" storefront. This storefront is now the most attractive on this block.
For more information and to view the complete archive of IHPA Main Street facade designs go to:

This row of storefronts in Quincy date from the mid 20-century. Quincy Main Street asked IHPA for design assistance. The new designs by Darius Bryjka will uncover and preserve the structural glass and upper transoms. The new signs are a combination of neon and cast aluminum with period appropriate scripts. Of note is the pendent Roberts lettering and the stainless, neon-lit dancing couple. For more information and to view an archive of IHPA Main Street facade designs for mid-century storefronts go to: Http://www.illinois-history.gov/ps/midcentury.htm.