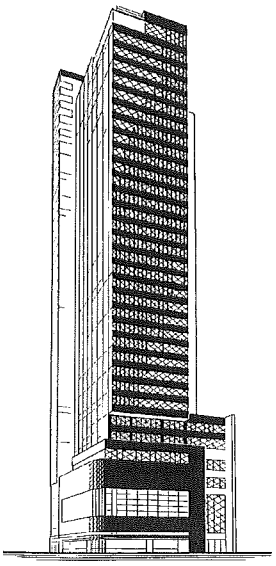


Preserving the Recent Past 2

Editors
Deborah Slaton
William G. Foulks

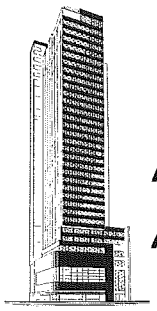
Historic Preservation Education Foundation
National Park Service
Association for Preservation Technology International
Washington, D.C.
2000

Copyright © 2000 by Historic Preservation Education Foundation
Washington, D.C.

Preserving the recent past 2 / editors, Deborah Slaton and William G. Foulks
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Twentieth-century structures - preservation. 2. Historic structures - conservation and rehabilitation.
3. Twentieth century landscapes - preservation. I. Slaton, Deborah, 1954– . II. Foulks, William G., 1945– .
2000

The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Historic Preservation Education Foundation or of the co-sponsoring organizations of this publication. Neither the Historic Preservation Education Foundation nor the co-sponsoring organizations make any warranty, expressed or implied, or assume any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, product or process disclosed, or represent that its use would not infringe upon privately owned rights. References to any commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise, does not necessarily constitute or imply endorsement or recommendation by the co-sponsoring organizations of this publication.

Portions of *Preserving the Recent Past 2* are protected by copyright law. Inquiries about reprinting should be addressed to the Historic Preservation Education Foundation, P.O. Box 77160, Washington, D.C. 20013 USA.



"Storefronts of Tomorrow": American Storefront Design from 1940 to 1970

Mike Jackson, FAIA
Illinois Historic Preservation Agency
Springfield, Illinois

The architectural history of the storefront is one of continuous evolution, with the mid-twentieth century as one of the most dynamic periods of innovation. Changes in architectural fashions and construction technologies allowed commercial property owners to use storefront design and alteration as a method of improving their niche in the American marketplace. This transformation was never more rapid than in the mid-twentieth century. The forces prompting these changes were physical, psychological, and economic, and intensely promoted in the architectural and retail publications. Merchants, by their very nature, are prompting buyers to stay current by purchasing new things. Architects and architectural product makers promoted a similar need for merchants and commercial property owners to keep their buildings up-to-date and appealed to the same marketing impulses that merchants use to woo their customers.

Background

The acceptance of European-derived modern architecture during the 1930s is well documented in the major structures of America's cities, but in most of America, the first local example of this new expression was likely to be a storefront. While there had always been an American antecedent for European modernism in industrial structures, the diffusion of new expressions for storefronts in the 1920s and 1930s can be directly traced to European architecture antecedents of the 1920s. Innovative storefronts, like private residences, have often been the architectural turf for experiments in design. Gerrit Rietveld's Schroder House has its commercial equivalent in Jacob Oud's Café de Unie storefront in Rotterdam (Figure 1), which married graphic design and abstraction into one carefully unified architectural expression. This singular architectural example and the explosion of new designs in the Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs of 1925 were well known to American architects.[1]

Isolated examples of this new commercial architecture could be found in America during the late 1920s and early 1930s, but the sluggish economy meant that architects would have to do a little more promotion to increase the demand for this new look. They found a willing partner in Libby-Owens-Ford Glass. In 1935, *Architectural Record* magazine and Libby-Owens-Ford Glass sponsored a major architectural competition to "Modernize Main Street."[2] Libby-Owens-Ford Glass, which was one of the largest national manufacturers of plate glass, was also trying to promote a new line of structural glass, which could be used as an architectural facing material. A jury of well-known architects selected from hundreds of submissions and published the results in the magazine and a large format monograph. Their efforts along with the popular interest in Art Deco architecture created in 1932 to 1933 by the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition would help thousands of merchants get the design confidence to take on a building makeover.

The storefronts of the 1930s have several primary characteristics, but the single common element is that of the smooth architectural surface, with carefully placed display windows, entrances, and

Figure 1. Café de Unie, Rotterdam, Netherlands, 1924–1925. Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud. This urban storefront with its series of flat planes and projecting panels presages the storefront architecture of the 1930s–1960s. It is strongly related to innovative graphic design of the 1920s, hence the extreme two-dimensional quality. Photograph by the author.

graphics (Figure 2). The two-dimensional quality of this new architecture lent itself to the quick makeover. The flush, smooth surfaces were easily fabricated with standardized components that could be assembled over a frame or base that put new skin over old bones. Porcelain enamel panels[3] and structural glass were two product lines that were marketed for their ease of application in remodeling. Recessed entrances and projecting signs were the only three-dimensional elements of these designs. Sometimes referred to as "streamlined," these storefronts grabbed the attention of many leading merchants during the 1930s and continued to find a place in the marketplace until 1960.

Storefront of Tomorrow: 1940 to 1970

In a major competition sponsored by *Pencil Points* magazine in 1942, architects around the country were invited to submit designs for the "Storefront of Tomorrow" (Figure 3). The winning entries to this competition all explored the display window as both a window and an architectural form, released from the normal bounds of the wall. The storefront became far more three-dimensional than the Art Deco and Art Moderne designs promoted in the Modernize Main Street competition just seven years earlier. The jutting, floating, jewel-box quality of the display window was emphasized. The same effort was placed into the manipulation of the signs and canopies. The overall effect seemed to defy gravity, since the structural elements that held it together were minimized in the expression. The limits of glass as a self-supporting material were explored. Manufacturing advances in glass technology, including tempering (higher strength) and improved attachment details, allowed more glass and less framing.

The "open front" or "visual front" was the name attached to this new generation of storefronts. While the earliest versions date to 1940, the limits of the wartime economy meant that this form did not gain center stage until the 1950s and 1960s, when the last of the Art Moderne and streamline designs were fading from popularity. In its ideal variation, the "open front" was integrated with an interior renovation so that the entire interior of the store became the "display window," not just a front window zone The principal design characteristics of the "open front" included large display windows that were often cantilevered (Figure 4), nonsymmetrical and angular plans, angled or jutting support structures, projecting flat canopies, floating elements such as signs, (often used with free-form cutouts or silhouettes), and a picture-frame motif instead of a structural expression. This design celebrated the display window as the most prominent design element, a marked contrast to the storefront designs of the previous decade, which placed much more emphasis on the wall and graphics framing the display window.

In addition to form changes, the palette of construction materials changed. Clear polished plate glass was the largest single surface, but the front bulkhead and enframement could be brick, stone, or tile. The smooth monolithic surfaces of the streamline era gave way to textured surfaces or those made of very small tile. Brick, in a blond color as well as the traditional red, with a stacked bond pattern was particularly popular. Regional stone was used for the bulkhead panels and sidewalls, including simulated stone of cement and asphalt in the most utilitarian versions. The storefront framing was almost always tubular aluminum, with varying finishes. Beginning in the mid-1950s, a light tan-colored ("champagne") aluminum gained popularity. In the 1960s, a yellow color that was a poor attempt at "gold" was popular. Natural bronze as a storefront material was popular during the 1920s and 1930s and found its equivalent in bronze anodized aluminum

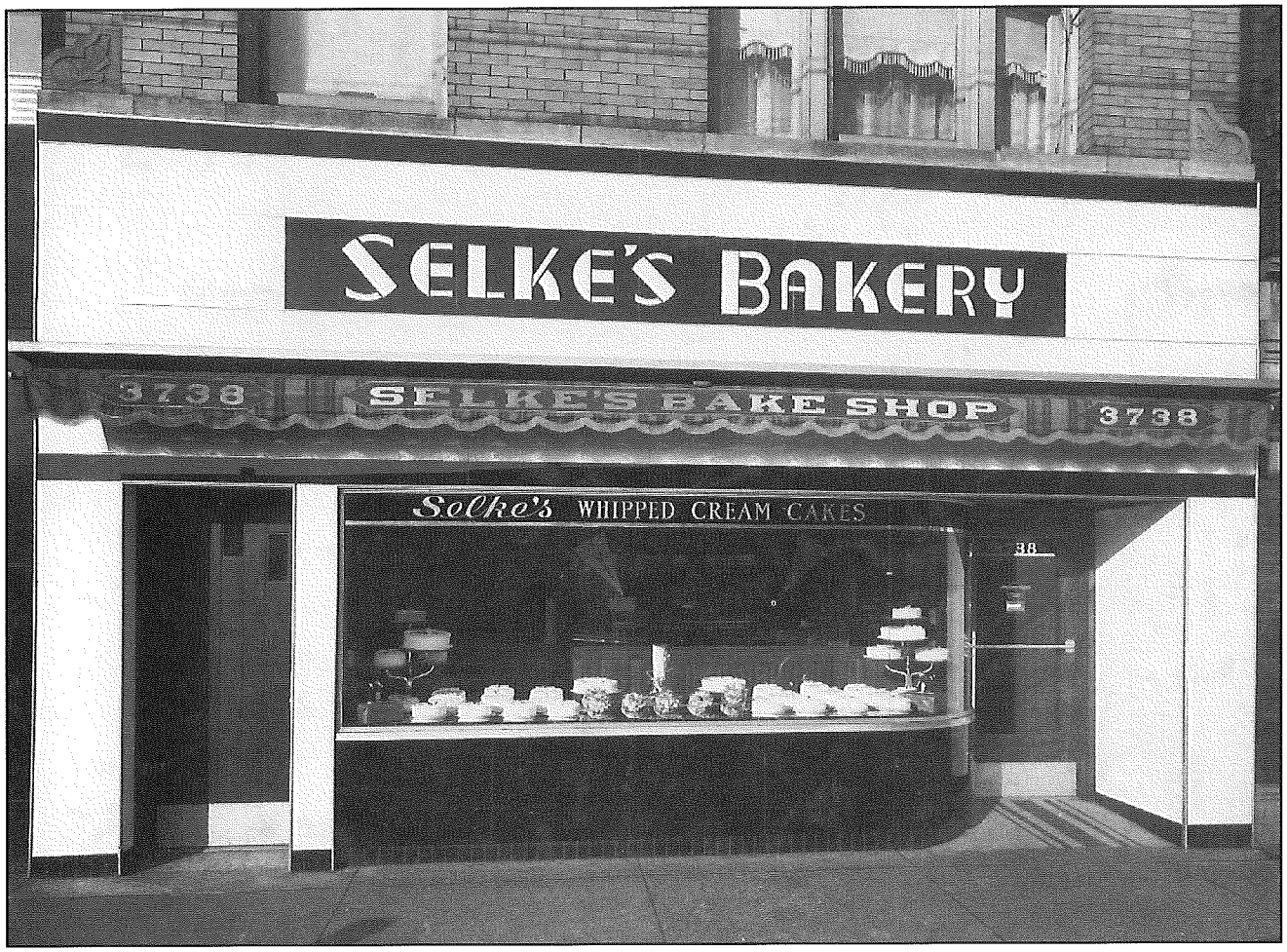


Figure 2. Selke's Bakery, Chicago, circa 1941. Architect unknown. This renovated storefront on an older building is typical of thousands in the Art Moderne style. The smooth flat panels of structural glass and the curved recessed entrance are hallmarks of streamlined design. Photograph by Hedrich Blessing Studio, Chicago; photograph from the author's collection.

beginning in the mid-1960s. During the 1970s bronze anodized aluminum storefront framing was virtually universal in the storefront industry. It is still widely available today.

The front canopy as both a shading device and integral part of the architectural composition was a major difference from previous generations of commercial structures. It replaced the fabric awning, which had served for centuries. The canopy separated the display window from the structure or from the surface above and could be extended into the interior in a similar design capacity (Figure 5). In its most utilitarian form, the canopy was a thin, cantilevered horizontal line in the overall composition. In its most complex form, the canopy could be curved up, in, or out and could become the supporting element for bold and colorful silhouetted letters.

Variations on the "Open Front"

The use of the "open front" structures was equally popular in new buildings as well as in renovated structures, but it was in the renovations that some interesting variations occurred. New commercial buildings in most areas of the country were one-story structures that allowed the designer to use compositional devices such as flat surfaces, vertical dividers, asymmetrical panels, canopies, and signs on a horizontal proportion. In older buildings, the shop designer was often forced to deal with a more vertical proportion, including upper stories of buildings that may have limited use for the building owner. A separate design form was needed for the large upper story, one that would integrate with the open front below. This was not a universal need, since many owners felt it appropriate to renovate the

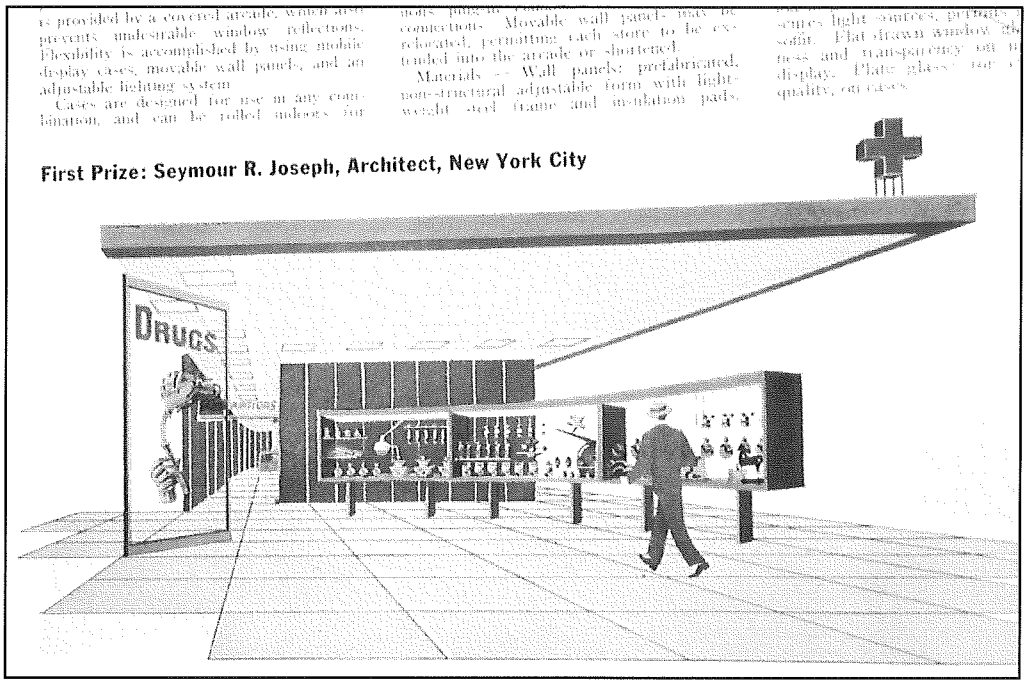


Figure 3. Storefronts of Tomorrow, 1943. First Prize, Seymour Joseph. Pencil Points *magazine sponsored a national architectural competition in 1943 for storefront designs. The first-prize winner showcases the principles of the "open front" design: a horizontal cantilevered roof or canopy, an angular plan, display windows that appear to float, and silhouetted graphics. From* Pencil Points *magazine.*

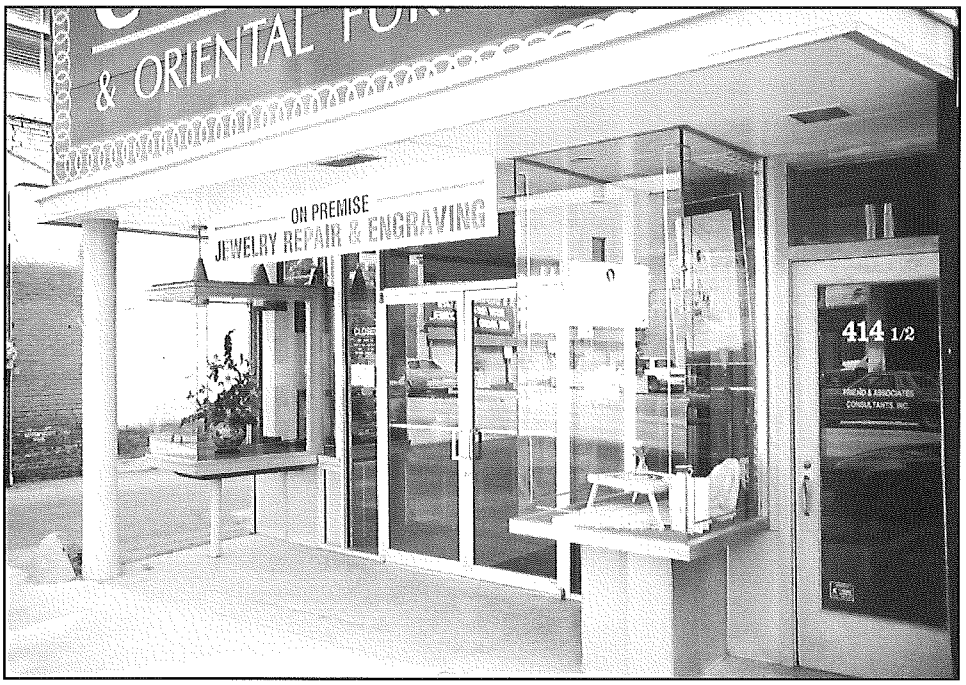


Figure 4. Springfield, Illinois. Corso Jewelry, circa 1960. This small shopfront is a well-preserved example of the "open front" with "floating" display window boxes that project so far out they required supporting columns. The display windows are framed with a mullionless system of clips to maximize the display window viewing. Photograph by the author.

storefront without touching the upper story. However, for those owners who wanted a more comprehensive look, the storefront makeover could include the entire building facade (Figure 6). The form of this resurfacing was two-dimensional and largely devoid of window openings, though they could be accommodated. The biggest feature of the wall was the covering materials, which tried to be monolithic, either through the use of larger panels or through small-scale units such as tile. The biggest variation in the design of upper facade walls was the placement and character of the sign. It could be a vertical pylon on the building or projecting from it, or it could be arranged on a panel carefully placed on the wall. A panel with a curving ameoba-like shape was one dramatic variation.

Beginning in the 1960s, less expensive screen walls made of metal strips begin to show up in the marketplace. These strips could be easily applied to the flat upper stories of a building with few changes to the existing structure or materials. When projecting cornices and window hoods existed, these were often removed or damaged to allow the installation of these architectural "slipcovers." Prefinished metal interlocking strips applied vertically were the least expensive of these systems. Variations included using vertical stripes in alternating colors or integrating the strips with lattice screens or grills that let light into interior windows.

The use of wall coverings on upper stories was often integrated with a new canopy system, as the construction expediency of these two items was linked. The use of a flat cantilevered canopy over the entry or display window was an early feature of the "open front" (Figure 7). The commercial marketing of flat canopies that could be attached to any existing storefront was a particularly popular choice for an owner who did not totally renovate his building but sought a design improvement that met the practical need for sun control. These systems were particularly popular in the southern and western states were the hot sun shone nearly year-round. These flat metal canopies were marketed both for their function and longevity—a metal canopy would last three or four times as long as a cloth awning. The use of a cantilevered or tension-supported canopy inevitably brought with it a need to cover the transom area of the storefronts, presenting the ideal opportunity to include a new sign in the design equation. Another popular variation was the use of flat canopies with posts along the front of the sidewalk.

Signs

Storefront signs in this era are an extensive topic. New materials, popular typefaces, and even new technologies all found quick expression in the post-World War II sign industry. For the small shopfront, there were three major signs to be considered—the major store sign, usually horizontal; a projecting sign, to capture the attention of passing motorists, and a pedestrian-oriented sign, either on the display window or beneath the canopy. Regardless of the location, typeface selection and materials played a major role in the design process. At its most basic, the sign could have a standard block typeface on a stock metal box with internal illumination. This type of sign was readily available by 1950 and is still available today. Fortunately, many store owners and retailers understood the importance of distinctive graphic identity and placed great care in the selection and design of signs. Block, cursive, and ornamental typefaces were all used. The most distinctive sign type was a silhouetted metal letter with a neon insert mounted on top of a wall or canopy.

The published architectural solutions to the makeover were easily understood by business owners and became powerful marketing tools for design professionals and storefront product companies.[4] However, makeovers were not always complete architectural solutions as promoted by the architectural media. The sale of neon signs exploded during the 1930s and 1940s.[5] This single new architectural item, mounted on an existing building, showed that the merchant was up-to-date, without burdening the merchant with the expense of a complete architectural makeover. Architectural publications exhibited a strong bias for showing only the most complete makeover projects, even though many owners were pursuing less complete and more cost-effective transformations. In addition to projecting neon signs, another simple transformation during this era was the covering of the transom area on an older storefront with a flat band to which signs could be applied, while all other areas of the storefront were retained.

Pathology

Glass, aluminum, and masonry[6] used in this era have proven to be very durable materials, and many of these storefronts remain. The most critical issues facing preservationists are posed by the changing retail culture. The evolving use of these buildings meant that every new owner had a different identity

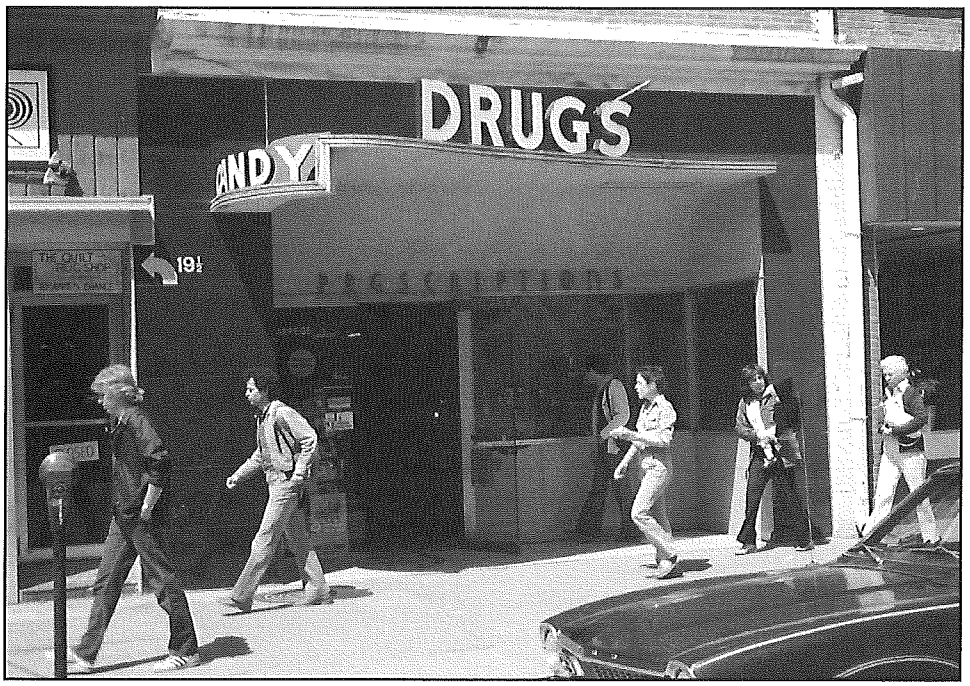


Figure 5. Iowa City, Iowa. Drug Store, circa 1950. This small drugstore front is an excellent example of the "open front" adapted to an older commercial structure. The curving canopy with silhouette letters above, the recessed letters, tempered-glass doors, and cantilevered display windows are all arranged within a frame of structural glass in three separate color planes. Photograph by the author.

to project and a new sign to go with that identity. If the original signs were integral with the architectural fabric, providing new signs meant replacement of missing pieces or repair of numerous holes. This is particularly an issue for smooth, flush materials such as metal panels, for which there are no easy patching options. New sign boxes that cover areas where individual sign letters were previously placed, although serving as a practical solution to material problems, can compromise the original design integrity.

Energy Conservation

Another factor causing owners to consider changing their storefronts is energy conservation. Most of these fronts were constructed with single sheets of plate glass. Today, insulated glass is often used for its superior energy and sound insulating properties. The additional cost of installing insulated glass does not pay for itself in reduced energy costs, so most owners are not replacing this glass for energy purposes alone. A single broken window, regardless of the cause, can be the impetus for a complete glass replacement. The large pieces of plate glass that were such an important part of the selling window may not be as critical to a new business that may be more of an office than a retailer. The unfortunate result can be downsized display windows, smaller pieces of glass with additional mullions, or tinted glass that greatly reduces the ability of the display window to display. One appropriate renovation strategy for commercial owners concerned about energy costs, particularly solar heat gain, is a new system of window films. Clear materials that substantially reduce radiant heat gain and ultraviolet radiation with minimal effect on visibility are now available. These materials also offer additional security protection. Thick films are available that make windows more resistant to higher wind load pressures such as those found in hurricane zones.

The Plate Glass Problem

Polished plate glass was the most common material for store windows from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1960s. The development of float-glass technology eliminated the need for the expensive polishing process that made polished plate glass exceptionally smooth. In many cases, modern float glass is an acceptable replacement for polished plate glass, but it is not an equal product that truly matches

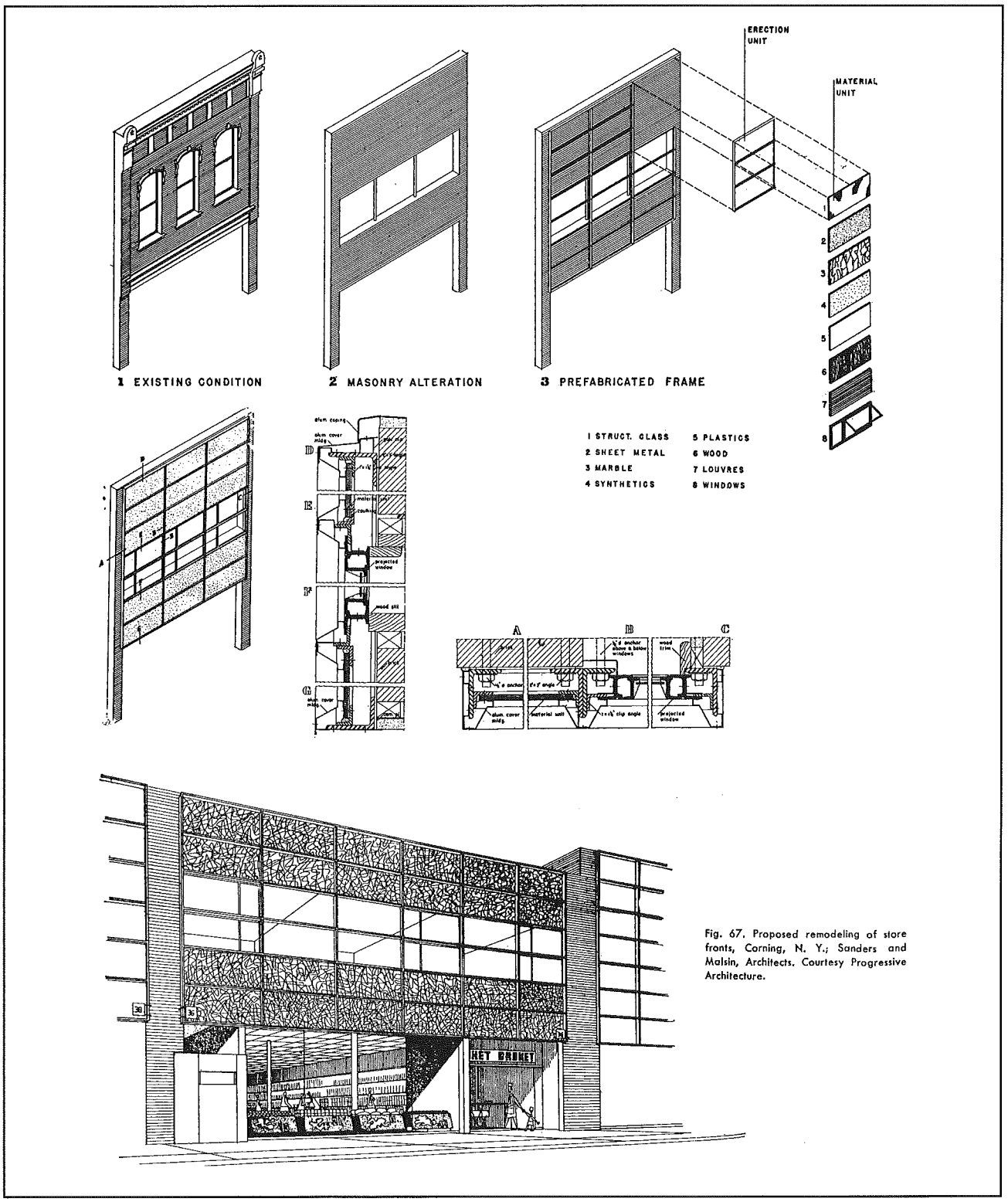


Fig. 67. Proposed remodeling of store fronts, Corning, N. Y.; Sanders and Malsin, Architects. Courtesy Progressive Architecture.

Figure 6. Wall Systems, circa 1948. The renovation of an entire building facade instead of just the shopfront was promoted in the architectural press. A wide range of materials was available for the upper facade covering, but lightweight materials that could be attached to a simple frame were the most economical. From Shops and Stores, *Morris Ketchum Jr., 1948.*

The store front is the silent salesman working on the street 24 hours a day. It is a newspaper advertising plaster across Main Street. Few indeed are the shops that are entered through a self-effacing door. These shops are the ones that have established a reputation for exclusiveness and customer selectivity, which marks them as the extreme minority in the retail field. Mr. and Mrs. America and their children have been educated to shopping habits in which the store front plays a stellar role. Window shopping is probably the greatest single pastime of men, women and children throughout the country. Millions of dollars are spent on window display, and retailers today are much too canny to spend their money on anything that does not produce an ample return on investment. To my mind, store fronts are the catalysts which turn window shoppers into customers and as such are a vital part of the retailer's selling equipment. As an architect who has spent may years in the store field, I feel that nothing contributes more to the quick and continued recognition of a retailing establishment by the public than the store front.

Morris Lapidus, Designs for Modern Merchandising, *1954*

the original. When viewed at an angle, float glass has a wavy and irregular sheen that is very different from the nearly perfect smoothness of polished plate glass. Many storefront installers still salvage polished plate glass in renovation projects, so salvaged old glass is often available. However, finding it in large sizes can be a problem.

Accessibility

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 created a new national goal for accessibility. For many commercial properties, including small shops of this era, accessibility has not been a problem because these buildings were designed for easy pedestrian access from the beginning. However, there are many recessed entries where the barrier to design is not the sidewalk but the area beside the door. An accessible door must have an eighteen-inch-wide area adjacent to the door handle, to provide maneuvering room for someone in a wheelchair. When this space does not exist, which is common with recessed entrances, one alternative is the installation of automatic door openers. This is often less expensive than remodeling the entire storefront and meets the accessibility requirements of federal and state statutes. However, this is not always easy to do, because the thin size of the window framing system does not provide an easy place for the installation of accessible controls. The use of a control button on a short bollard in the entry is one design solution that is economical and has minimal physical impact on the original framing.

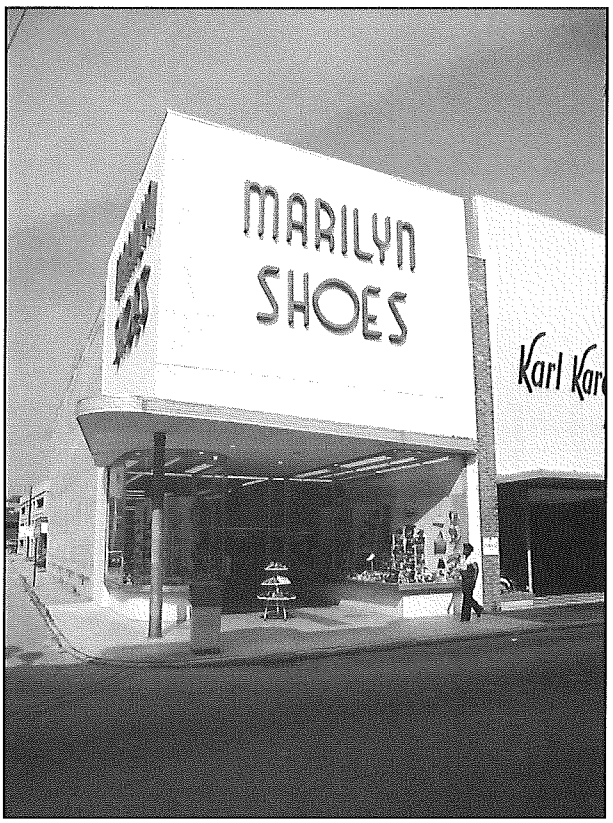


Figure 7. Charleston, South Carolina. Marilyn Shoes, circa 1955. The complete refacing of an older building could be done with more permanent materials, as in this example with marble wall panels. The projecting canopy is carefully designed to align with the interior ceiling to emphasize the flow of space from within. Photograph by the author.

Aluminum

Most store owners and design professionals of this era probably assumed that aluminum was maintenance free. While aluminum is a very durable material, it must be periodically cleaned to minimize accumulation of dirt and surface pollutants that can lead to long-term damage. Regular cleaning with detergents followed by surface polishes can extend the service life of aluminum indefinitely. In most cities, there are metal maintenance contractors who do this work for larger commercial buildings. In smaller commercial markets, this is not as common a service.

For most of this period, aluminum was finished in a manner that left its natural color. The extrusion process tends to leave a fine trail in the surface, which could be brushed or polished without affecting the color. The advancement of anodizing, in which the surface is electrically treated, allowed color to be permanently imbedded into the surface. It is an extremely hard and durable treatment. While virtually

any color is possible, only a few options have gained widespread acceptance. Anodized aluminum should be cleaned and polished on the same cycle as regular nonanodized finishes.

Conclusion

The storefronts of the postwar era are now rapidly reaching their depreciable life and will require investment if they are to continue to survive. Their materials and designs are often easily adaptable to the changing retail landscape. The biggest challenge to their survival is the movement of retailers from small shops to larger structures. As such, the small shopfront is likely to be re-used as an office rather than a store, a function that it handles quite well. There are even examples of residential conversion, testing the limits of design and expression. For the preservationist, emphasis should be placed on selecting storefront examples that are exceptional as first efforts, but also on identifying more ordinary examples that are equally worthy of preservation. The largest priority is the education and training of commercial property owners toward the goal that any renovation project should give resource conservation, both historic and architectural, equal standing with other renovation goals. The "open front" storefronts should be just as well appreciated as the Art Deco and Art Moderne designs. The challenge is to recognize many generations of storefront designs for their place in the historic collage of America's commercial streetscapes.

Notes

[1] Ely Jacques Kahn, "The Modern European Shop and Store," ***Architectural Forum*** 50, no. 6 (June 1929).

[2] Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Co. *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass* (Toledo, Ohio: Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Co., 1935).

[3] Thomas Jester, "Porcelain Enamel," in *Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation,* ed. Thomas Jester (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 254–261.

[4] Kenneth Kingsley Stowell. *Modernizing Buildings for Profit* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1935).

[5] Rudi Stern. *Let There Be Neon* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1979).

[6] Thomas Jester, ed. *Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995). There are numerous chapters in this book that cover specific material conservation treatments for aluminum, glass, and storefront facing systems such as structural glass.

Bibliography

Architectural Record. *Design for Modern Merchandising: Stores, Shopping Centers, Showrooms.* New York: F.W. Dodge Corp., 1954.

Baker, Geoffrey, and Bruno Funaro. *Shopping Centers: Design and Operation.* New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1951.

Burke, Gene, and Edgar Kober. *Modern Store Design.* Los Angeles: Institute of Product Research, 1946.

Davis, Deering. *Contemporary Décor: Restaurants, Lounges, Bars.* New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1950.

Fernandez, Jose A. *The Specialty Shop: A Guide.* New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1950.

Hine, Thomas. *Populuxe: The Look and Life of America in the '50s and '60s, From Tailfins and TV Dinners to Barbie Dolls and Fallout Shelters.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.

Hornbeck, James S. *Stores and Shopping Centers.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962.

Jester, Thomas, ed. *Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995.

Kaspar, Karl, ed. *Shops and Showrooms: An International Survey.* New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967.

Kawneer Co. *Machines for Selling.* Niles, Michigan: Kawneer Co., 1946.

Ketchum, Morris Jr. *Shops and Stores.* New York: Reinhold Publishing Co., 1948.

Lapidus, Morris. *Too Much is Never Enough: An Autobiography.* New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1996.

Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Co. *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass.* Toledo, Ohio: Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Co., 1935.

Longstreth, Richard. *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture.* Washington: Preservation Press, 1987.

"Main Street, USA." *Architectural Forum,* February 1939.

Nicholson, Emrich. *Contemporary Shops in the United States.* New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1945.

Pevsner, Nikolaus. *A History of Building Types.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.

Slaton, Deborah, and Rebecca Shiffer, eds. *Preserving the Recent Past.* Washington: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 1995.

Stern, Rudi. *Let There Be Neon.* New York: Harry Abrams, 1979.

"Storefronts of Tomorrow." *Pencil Points,* February 1943.

Stritch, Thomas. *The Kawneer Story.* Niles, Michigan: Kawneer Co., 1956.

Stowell, Kenneth Kingsley. *Modernizing Buildings for Profit.* New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1935.