

Woburn Square Revitalization Plan

Storefront Façade Guidelines

A. Introduction: Historically, most retail storefront façades incorporate certain traditional elements which over decades have served both an aesthetic and functional purpose. The most successful storefront designs are those which properly utilize and work within those elements, rather than defeat them. A good storefront will attract attention, provide effective display space, allow natural light into the retail space, and contribute to the overall appearance of the downtown. A well-designed façade will both work within the aesthetic unity of the building, and still reflect the individual character and personality of the business. The overall goal of these guidelines is to preserve the traditional character of Woburn Square, while respecting the variety of traditional architectural styles represented there, including Colonial, Victorian, and Art Deco.

The façade renovations proposed in the Busy Bend Design Study follow a simple set of guiding principals, which will also provide the basic guidelines for storefront façade renovations throughout Woburn Square:

1. Where the original historic façade remains largely intact, it should be repaired and restored, replacing only the missing features;
2. Where original historic elements have been covered by later, modern installations, the original façade should be uncovered and restored, if possible.
3. Where the original façade elements have been completely removed, or are beyond repair, the new storefront façade should be designed as much as possible to complement and blend with surrounding façade designs.
4. A façade design should employ a limited palette of complimentary colors, which if possible do not clash with the schemes of adjacent buildings. Extremely bold color schemes should be avoided.

B. Elements of the Storefront Façade: Most storefront façades constructed from the mid 19th through the early 20th century shared certain typical components which worked both stylistically and functionally. These would generally include:

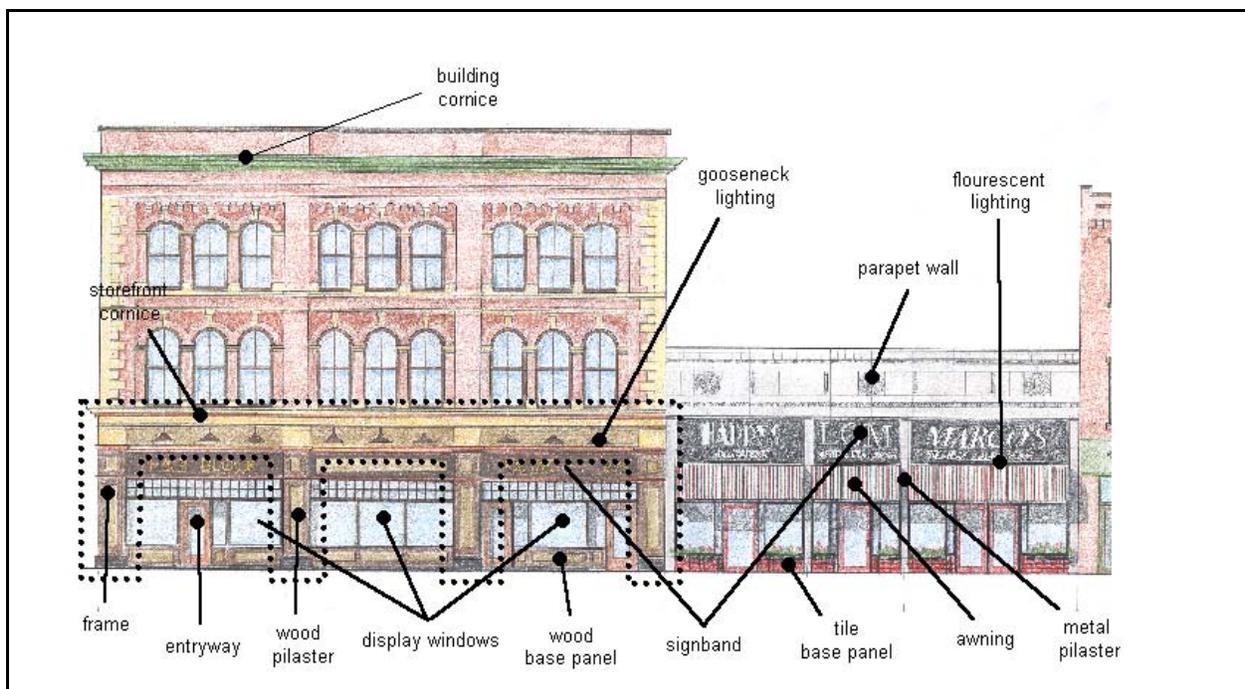
1. *The Structural Frame:* In the overall building design, each individual storefront is generally inserted within an encompassing frame, which provides the common structural and design element linking together each storefront façade. The frame includes dividing piers, columns or pilasters, the sign band, and a storefront cornice or parapet. These elements could be constructed of brick, stone, precast concrete, metal, or wood.

2. **The Storefront:** The storefront itself is inserted within the structural frame. The storefront includes a base panel, which could be brick, metal, wood panel, or structural glass, depending upon the style and period. Above the base panels are the display windows. The entryway was generally recessed, which provided an area for the entry door to swing without interfering with the sidewalk, and also provided a small amount of lateral display area visible to pedestrian in advance of the front display windows. Above the entryway, but below the signband, there would often be a space of sufficient height to provide an area for an awning. Retractable awnings were a typical feature of the traditional storefront.

The first step in planning façade improvements is the careful identification and inventory of the overall style and the individual components of the original storefront which have survived, whether visible or covered by later façade alterations. Those historical elements should be utilized and restored, if feasible.

C. Design Guidelines: In the discussion below, the applicable design principals for each component of a façade will be reviewed in detail. While not every building will include each possible component, overall the guidelines provide a basis for designing the restoration or reconstruction of virtually every storefront.

1. **The Basic Frame:** The basic structural frame of a façade provides the important visual basis for separating and distinguishing individual storefronts. It will usually include vertical piers, columns or pilasters, which often provide critical structural support as well as the aesthetic function, and a cornice or parapet.



- The frame elements should remain visible and not be obscured by other façade elements, such as signage, awnings, or other additions.
- The frame elements should be consistent throughout, although individual components of the frame may be of different materials. For example, the columns may be of brick, while the parapet could be of wood or masonry.
- A facade should be designed to emphasize the frame’s vertical elements, to highlight the identity of individual stores. Horizontal emphasis, which obscures the divisions among storefronts, should be avoided.

2. *The Parapet or Cornice:* Most storefront facades include a prominent architectural element, which boldly defines the top of the storefront, and clearly separates the first floor businesses from upper stories. One-story buildings tend to have parapet walls, which generally extend well above the roofline. In the Busy Bend, there are four Art deco style facades, which date to the mid-thirties and early forties, which have decorative pre-cast concrete parapets typical of the period. One of those, at 405 Main Street, includes brick as an accenting element.



In a multi-story building, some type of cornice or other substantial architectural element would have been employed to set off the storefront from the upper floor façade. All of the multi-story buildings within the Busy Bend have long had their cornices removed, to allow for the installation of large-scale signage.

- The existing cast concrete parapets are an important historical feature, and should be preserved, if feasible.
- Cast concrete parapets can be cleaned and restored with the natural color, or sealed and stained with a palette of compatible colors.

3. *The Signband:* In most traditional storefronts, there is a signband located below the cornice or parapet.

- Each principal business sign should fit within the applicable signband, if one exists, and not protrude over or cover the basic frame elements.
- If possible, individual signs should be of similar construction, design, and color.
- All signs must meet the requirements of the City of Woburn Sign Review

Ordinance, as described further, below.

4. *Awnings:* The use of awnings as a storefront device was virtually universal in the 19th Century. Awnings shade the sidewalk and window display area, provide shelter from rain, and protect the interior of the business from the glare of direct sunlight when the sun is near the horizon.

- If possible, awnings should be located in the area between the signband or cornice, and the top of the entryway door. Awnings should not cover elements of the building frame or other significant architectural features.
- Awnings should be of a substantial fabric, such as Sunbrella, resistant to fading, and should be uniform in color and pattern for each storefront within an individual building.
- Awnings must conform to the requirements of the Sign Review Ordinance. Under the Ordinance, an awning may include a commercial message in the valance, provided lettering does not exceed six (6) inches in height. A commercial logo is allowed in the face of an awning dormer.
- Awnings may be fixed or retractable.
- Interior lit awnings are not permitted; however, lighting beneath the awning, which solely illuminates the sidewalk, is permitted.
- A dormer, if employed on a fixed awning, should be located over the entryway, if possible.

5. *The Storefront Base:* Virtually all storefronts will contain a base panel below the display windows, which were constructed of a variety of materials, mentioned above. The base panel provides a strong anchor for the storefront, placing the display area at an effective viewing height, and also acts as a kick-plate.



Awnings were a typical feature of the 19th Century storefront.

During the 19th Century, most storefronts had bases of wood panel construction, regardless of whether the frame of the building was wood, brick, or masonry. While a wood panel restoration is often the most historically appropriate, wood construction is also relatively high maintenance compared to some other construction materials. Building owners or proprietors undertaking restoration should be cognizant of the ongoing maintenance requirement.



- Base panels should utilize a material which is historically and aesthetically compatible with the frame of the façade. Colonial and Victorian storefronts look best with brick or wood panel bases, while Art Deco and other classic contemporary designs will look best with pigmented structural glass (often used on the original), tile, granite, or similar material.
- When wood panel construction is employed, wood should be exterior grade, properly sealed, and primed and painted with a good quality exterior grade paint, one coat of primer, and two finish coats, or stained and sealed with multiple coats of an exterior grade clear finish of polyurethane or spar varnish.
- Trim moldings of soft pine, intended for interior use, should not be used in exterior façade applications, as the wood will not maintain a durable finish when exposed to weathering.
- The design, construction and color of the base panels should be uniform throughout a multi-unit façade.
- Base panels should be flush or slightly recessed (6" to 12") within the building frame, and should not be more than 30 inches in height.

6. *Display Windows:* The display windows are the most important feature of the storefront. An inviting display window encourages window-shopping, provides a view of the inside of the store, and allows daylight to enter the store interior. The display window visually connects the business with the street.

- Display windows should not be reduced in size or blocked off. If it is important to restrict the view of the interior of the store, vertical blinds, screens or shades should be employed in the storefront interior.
- The windowsill should not be higher than 30 inches from the sidewalk, and the top of the window should be a minimum of 8 feet in height.

Overall, glazing of windows and doors should represent at least 70 percent of the total storefront area.

- Small glass panes were historically used in 19th Century facades, as the technology for manufacturing large glass panes was not yet available. Small panes can obscure a retail window display, but are appropriate for some types of businesses, such as restaurants. In retail situation where smaller panes are historically appropriate, they can be employed as an accent at the top, sides and/or bottom of the window frame, so that the open view of the display area is still maintained.



- As with the base panels, display windows should be flush with the frame, or recessed no more than 6 to 12 inches.

7. Entryways: The storefront entry and door is the gateway into the business, and will make an important impression on the customer. Typically, entryways are recessed from the front of the façade through the construction of an alcove. This provides additional shelter from the elements, and an area for the doorway to swing out without interfering with sidewalk pedestrian traffic. The entryway also provides an area of additional window display along the sides, which is visible upon approach from the sidewalk. The floor of the entry was sometimes of decorative tile or terrazzo, as can still be seen in the storefront at 397 Main Street in the Busy Bend. Entryways generally taper from the front to the door, which can represent a problem for restoration design. Modern handicapped access codes require 18 inches of clearance on the pull side of the door, which is not always possible within the confines of the existing recess.

- All entryways and doors should comply with the Mass. Architectural Access Code and the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, where feasible. The entryway slope must be a minimum 1 in 12 grade, and thresholds must not exceed ½ inch in height. Doors must be a minimum of 36 inches in width, with a clearance of 18 inches on the pull side. Doors must pull out. Door hardware must be of a type approved by the Code.
- A recessed entry should be maintained if possible. The floor of the entry should use a material compatible with the storefront design, which resists expansion and contraction, is impervious to water penetration, and offers adequate traction.
- Avoid the installation of a solid entry door. Entry doors should have at least 50 percent of the surface glazed, and should be compatible in design



with the overall façade.

8. *Signage:* In Woburn Square, signage is regulated by the City of Woburn's Sign Review Ordinance. Before a new storefront sign can be installed, or an existing sign altered, an application must be submitted to and approved by the Woburn Sign Review Board. All signs must be installed in accordance with the requirements of the Ordinance, and be aesthetically designed. Among the more important criteria of the Ordinance:

- Only one principal sign is allowed per business.
- Signage must be installed in the façade signband, or other architecturally appropriate location, and must not cover important architectural features of the facade.
- The total area of the storefront signage must not exceed one square foot for each linear foot of storefront. In situations where individual letters are being installed directly onto the signband, the Sign Review Board has calculated the area of the sign to be the smallest rectangle which would encompass all of the lettering.
- No interior lit or neon signs are permitted.
- Overhanging signs are not permitted.
- Window signs must not exceed 20 percent of the total area of each display window.
- Window signs and awning lettering are not included in the calculation of total permitted sign area, above.
- In general, signs should be aesthetically pleasing in design.

9. *Lighting:* Exterior lighting is an important component of storefront design, in particular for the illumination of signage, especially when considering that interior lit signs, and exterior neon signs, are prohibited by the Sign Review Ordinance.

- A façade lighting design may employ either incandescent gooseneck fixtures or vertical fluorescent fixtures, or a combination of both. Fluorescent fixtures often work best, and are least obtrusive, when placed below the signage and light in an upward direction.
- Lighting which highlights the sign and display areas is generally superior to lighting the entire storefront.
- In a multi-unit storefront, a uniform lighting scheme should be employed throughout.