

SHOPFRONTS & ADVERTISEMENTS

The appearance of town centre shopping streets is shaped by the design and quality of the shopfronts and advertisements as much as the variety and style of the buildings themselves.

The original design of many towns did not envisage a shopping centre of any great size and comparatively few shops were provided. As a result shops and shopfronts have grown as additions to existing buildings, often attached as single storey extensions to the front. Not all of these have been achieved with visual success; indeed the majority lack both quality and a pleasing appearance. The result can often be a jumble of mixed designs, with over-large fascias and little respect to the original building behind the shopfront. This detracts from the character of the conservation area.

In order to redress this and preserve the special quality of the conservation area, a shopfront and advertisement policy is proposed.

Where existing shopfronts do not make a positive contribution to the street scene, or actually detract from it, a substantial visual improvement will be required when proposals for replacements are made. A simple 'like for like' replacement will not be acceptable. A shopfront in sympathy with its host building and the character of the conservation area will be required and enforcement action will be taken, where necessary, to ensure this.

Elements of a Traditional Shopfront

The design of a shopfront should take account of the rhythm and characteristics of the street: the width of buildings, the horizontal or vertical emphasis, the variety of styles and the architecture of the building itself. It should not, for example, attempt to divorce the ground floor from the rest of the building, nor impose over-large and brash signs and advertisements.

Where a shopfront would span more than one building, the individual identity of each building should be retained. Each part of the shopfront should relate to the building to which it is attached. Where the shopfront continues to another building, a change in its design may be required. The purpose of a shopfront is to frame the shop window and entrance, to announce the shop and frame its display. It is there to attract custom and can make a significant impression. It follows that a shopfront that is tawdry in construction and materials or discordant in its colour scheme will not project a good image or enhance the display of the items for sale. The same is true of the whole of the shopping street.

Where a shopfront of traditional design is appropriate, it is necessary to be aware of the essential principles upon which such designs were based. Within these principles, there is still scope for originality and variety.

The Shop Window

Large, single plate glass windows are rarely appropriate, particularly when they are framed in aluminium or plastic. Visually boring, they often show no respect to the style of upper floor windows. The use of moulded, timber transoms and mullions to divide the areas of glass adds interest, as do curved glazing bars and other embellishments, provided they are authentic and not overdone.

The Entrance

Many shopfronts have recessed entrance doors and these should be retained. Not only does this enable the overall area of glass to be reduced visually, it may also assist in improving disabled access. It will certainly add interest to the street scene.

The design of the door and any fanlight above should respect the form of the shop window. Fanlights frequently follow the line of similar features in the display window and whilst the design of the door itself is almost limitless, it will usually incorporate a solid timber panel below a glazed upper part with glazing bars matching similar features within the shop window.

The Stall Riser

The purpose of the stall riser is to provide a solid base to the shopfront and to protect the shop window. A simple, plain stall riser which is rendered gives a solid look, but where decorative tiled or timber panels survive, they should be kept.

A minimum height of 500mm is usually required and this would be a useful guide for new proposals. However, heights do vary and it is sometimes important to match adjacent shops.

The Frame

The shop window is framed by a cornice and fascia, supported by columns or pilasters. The cornice often contains the box for an awning or blind and may provide concealed lighting, whereas the fascia provides the space for the shop name.

Cornice and Fascia

The cornice is usually moulded and overhangs the shop front to give it some protection and is itself protected with a lead top. Many have a classical design, though others can be quite plain, particularly where they incorporate the awning box. It is the cornice which crowns the whole shopfront and surmounts the fascia.

The fascia is below the cornice and provides the space to advertise the business. The depth of the fascia is traditionally around fifteen inches (380mm) and though they should be designed in proportion with the rest of the shopfront, they should not normally exceed 450mm.

Excessively deep fascias should be avoided. Perhaps more than anything else they disfigure the whole shopfront and the problem of 'fascia creep', where the gradual increase of fascia depth obscures the upper floor windows, needs to be rectified. The Borough Council will seek to encourage the replacement of over-large fascias. The existence of a former deep fascia will not be allowed to influence the design of the replacement and in no circumstances should original first floor windows be altered or compromised.

The top of the cornice should be at least three brick courses (225mm) below the first floor window cills.

Similarly, modern boxed fascias which project from the face of the building are clumsy and should be avoided. The Borough Council will encourage their replacement.

Pilasters and Columns

Pilasters provide the side frame of the shopfront, denoting its outer limits. Constructed in timber, they may be plain, fluted or panelled, perhaps with a capital to support the fascia or a corbel or console bracket of various designs, often as an elaborate scroll or acanthus leaf. It is important to keep these details where they survive, or recover them where they have been obscured by later alterations. The width and size of these features should equate to that of the pilasters they surmount.

Cast iron columns are also found in traditional shopfront design and can incorporate a charming 'verandah' style with decorative spandrels.

Advertisements

The use of poor quality materials and design in advertisements can have a detrimental effect on the street scene. The use of garish colour, bright plastic, inappropriate illumination and poor quality window displays detracts from the character of the conservation area.

The choice of colour is often used as a form of advertising in its own right. A broad range of colours are acceptable as long as they are not harsh, but soft in tone and finish. In general, the colour scheme should not detract from the overall façade and should have regard for the setting of the building. Gilding or strong tones on a dark background reflect light and are clearly visible at night. Rich effects can be obtained by shading and blocking of letters.

Fascia Signs

Signs should be confined within the fascia and fascias should not be expanded simply to accommodate advertising space. The lettering should be in proportion to the size of the fascia. There will be a preference for hand painted signs direct onto the timber. It may be acceptable to use applied transfer letters, which can be almost indistinguishable from paint, and applied metal letters of an appropriate size may be used to effect, especially where there is no fascia.

The use of plastic based materials which tend to be glossy and highly reflective will be discouraged and the use of projecting box signs on fascias will not be acceptable. Such boxes are almost always bulky and incongruous.

In general, fascia signs should be kept simple and limited to the name of the premises or occupier only, but perhaps incorporating the property's street number. Additional information, logos etc. should be avoided.

Hanging signs

A well designed hanging sign can add considerable interest to a shopfront and the street scene. Mostly of timber, but sometimes of metal, they hang from projecting iron brackets. Occasionally they take the form of a symbol denoting a particular trade, but they should not be used as a means of advertising brand name products. Free standing pole signs should be avoided. They are only appropriate for public houses and the forecourts of garages.

The size and position of hanging signs depends on the building involved. They should not be positioned where they may cause a hazard and too many hanging signs can result in visual clutter. Only one hanging sign should be fitted to any shop front regardless of the number of businesses in the building. A modest name plate adjacent to the entrance doors to upper floors is adequate to serve commercial uses at these levels.

Normally a hanging sign should not exceed 500mm in any direction and should be of a high quality of design.

Mounted sign boards/Applied lettering.

Where properties do not have or need a fascia, it may be possible to apply lettering directly to the wall or fix a sign board. The same principles will apply as for fascia or hanging signs. In addition, care must be taken to ensure that any interesting/architectural details are not covered and that the building is not damaged by the fixings.

Illuminated signs

The lighting of shopping streets requires a co-ordinated approach. It can contribute to a lively and safe environment. Shop signs do not need special illumination if the level of street lighting and the light from the shop windows is adequate. The use of excessively lit signs and advertisements (whether internal or external) can detract and they should be restricted to businesses which rely on night time trade (eg. restaurants, bars). In these cases, the source of illumination should be discreetly positioned and not pose a highway hazard.

The use of internally illuminated box signs on fascias will not be acceptable nor will 'swan neck' projecting lights. Individual halo-lit letters and externally mounted trough lights need careful consideration. Trough lights, downlighting a fascia can sometimes be discreetly positioned below the cornice, but they need to be sensitive avoiding harsh light and being too bright. The daytime appearance of these lights and their wiring needs to be carefully considered.

Projecting signs should only be illuminated where they advertise a public house, restaurant or other late opening premises. Illuminated, projecting box signs are inappropriate in the conservation area.

Corporate signs and logos

Many large organisations wish to project a corporate image in their retail and businesses premises. This does not always suit historic areas and buildings and may detract from the character of the conservation area. There is a need for flexibility to adapt the corporate image to suit the building and its architectural style.

Awnings, blinds and canopies

Traditional cloth awnings which retract into a box forming part of the design of the shopfront should be kept and repaired where they survive and they provide an exemplar of how to shade a shopfront from strong sunlight. Shading will not be necessary where the shopfront faces north, but where it is required, non-retractable blinds or continental style canopies are inappropriate. They are often erected to increase advertising space, but tend to obscure the fascia and introduce a dominant shape which is out of character with the conservation area. The use of plastics, wet-look or stretch fabrics for blinds is strongly discouraged.

The use of tinted glass or plastic film inside the shop are alternative means of protecting the display with no need for obscuring the shopfront.

Security shutters

The traditional way of securing a shop was by using wooden shutters or revolving iron roll shutters, housed in a box behind the fascia. In contrast, the blank unappealing appearance of modern security shutters can have a deadening effect on the character of shopping streets at night.

Where it can be shown that shutters are necessary, grilles located behind the glass will be preferred, but where external shutters are needed, good quality timber panels or open grilles may be considered, provided they are demountable and the fixings and housings can be mounted without compromising the appearance of the shop.

It may be possible to improve security by introducing toughened glass or perhaps by inserting additional glazing bars so that window sizes are reduced. Externally fitted electronic surveillance or CCTV could be a better solution in some circumstances.