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Storefront Design: Considerations When Using Historic Tax Credits

By John Tess, Heritage Consulting Group

When I first began my career in historic preservation I learned that there were two important views of a historic downtown building, the ground level - a dynamic area, ever changing with the influx of people, permanent and passing retailers and tenants, basically a barometer of the economic conditions in country, and the upper floors, which gave permanence and a sense of place to downtown.

Many of you probably have been told to look up if you want to get a full appreciation of the built environment. I have told many to do that also with the warning that it can be hazardous to your health. On more than one occasion I have found myself bumping into a sign post or falling off a curb.

When walking down any street the first impact usually comes from the ground level. For example, governmental buildings usually have monumental ground levels that haven't changed much over time except for code required access. With downtown residential buildings, entrances to lobbies provide access for the tenants and these ground levels usually have not seen much alteration either except for the code-required changes, doors and sometimes canopies. In historic hotels, one usually finds largely unaltered grand or modestly designed entrances. Again, most common alterations here will be entrance canopies and door alterations.

In rehabilitation projects that retain the original or a similar use of a building, i.e., a hotel to a hotel, an apartment building to a hotel or an office building to an of-



Photo: Courtesy Heritage Investment Corporation
The 1929 Charles F. Berg storefront was designed by Grand Rapids Store Equipment Company and replaced the buildings storefront from 1902.

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fice building, alterations to the historic ground level are usually minimal and meeting the Secretary of the Interior's Standards is generally not problematic. The ground levels that pose the most issues in meeting the Secretary's Standards are those found in historic commercial buildings.

Needless to say, storefronts are one of the most important architectural features of many historic commercial buildings. Because storefronts play such a critical role in a retailer's advertising and merchandising, it is no surprise that this is the most commonly altered feature on historic commercial buildings. What might work for one tenant typically will not work for another in such competitive commercial and retail environments. For example, what works for Williams and Sonoma may not work for Nike. In the process of altering ground level storefronts one may argue that these alterations completely change a building's historic character or, on the other hand, one might view these changes as ongoing, changes that will continue to happen as long as tenants change.

Historic Perspective

Early commercial establishments of the 18th and early 19th century were often indistinguishable from surrounding residential structures except for the occasional large display windows or bays and awnings. As time went on, storefront design for the most part followed technology. The availability of architectural cast iron and advances in the production of glass are largely credited with storefront design as we know it today, such as large expanses of glass framed by thin structural elements.

In the 1920s and 1930s, storefront design again followed technology that introduced new materials including aluminum and stainless steel framing elements, pigmented structural glass, tinted and mirrored glass, glass block and neon. This was also the era of the introduction of proprietary products being introduced into storefronts including Aklo, Vitrolux, Vitrolite and Extrudalite.

Other experiments in storefront design also included recessed entries, floating display islands and curved glass. Signs were often incorporated at the transom levels of the storefronts, quite often integrating neon lighting. Large buildings, especially department stores, incorporated fixed metal awnings, not only at the delivery entrances but along entire ground floor levels.

Over time storefronts have clearly responded to their users, climate and economic environments usually with little consideration for the architecture of the upper floors. However, one could argue that designers of certain commercial buildings anticipated this adaptability given that the storefronts that were often designed in the original plans were never built as designed or they were left out entirely.

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In other cases, façades of buildings were replaced completely, as in the instance of the Charles F. Berg Building in Portland, Ore.; its facade underwent a complete replacement, from masonry to black terra cotta with gold leaf. Other examples of ground floor changes have included three or four changes to the façade over the years – all of which could be determined as significant. The key to all appropriate design changes is that mere economics do not trump good architectural design that respects the existing structure. That said, with early planning and consultation, a win-win situation for the property owner, tenant and approval bodies generally can be reached.

The Decision Making Process

Once a decision is made to rehabilitate a historic commercial building, a series of questions should be asked including:

- ♦ Is the original storefront intact or have the alterations that have occurred over time gained significance?
- ♦ What design is appropriate, i.e., should one look to restore the historic storefronts or should a new compatible design be looked at?
- ♦ Will any major tenant's corporate design requirement fit into the existing building?
- ♦ If the building's original storefront use is to be changed, can it be done in a manner compatible with the building, while accommodating the new use?

The Actual Design

According to the National Park Service:

"Where an architecturally or historically significant storefront no longer exists or is too deteriorated to save, a new front should be designed which is compatible with the size, scale, color, material, and character of the building."

But what does that really mean? As you might guess, storefront design is not an exact science as some would lead you to believe. Thus, what is approvable at a local level may not be at the state or federal level for the use of preservation incentives. Early consultation is always recommended, especially in the case of a multi-tenanted building.

Other Considerations

Also remember there are many elements to storefront design and be sure your design review process is inclusive so as not to disappoint or anger a tenant. Other considerations that should be included in a storefront design review package are:

- ♦ **Awnings:** they come in many colors, shapes and sizes, so be sure to pay special attention to materials.
- ♦ **Signs:** signs not only play any important role for the tenant, they also play an important role in defining the character of any commercial business district. Not only will one have to

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seek local, state and federal approval for a signage package, but neighborhood approval or business district rules might also come into play.

- ♦ **Paint color:** I don't know why, but paint color is one of the most highly contested elements of any design scheme. Color schemes come into play especially with national tenants with corporate identities that need to be played out in a storefront design. If you are at your wits end, always remember you can claim color blindness.
- ♦ **Windows:** again always an issue, especially as to the tint of the glass.
- ♦ **Code requirements:** quite often code requirements for public safety, handicap access and fire codes are major sticking points in any storefront design but especially in the case of historic storefronts that have not been altered. Be sure that consideration is given early in a project, to give ample time for negotiation and appeals if necessary.

Conclusion

The key to the successful rehabilitation of historic commercial buildings is good design. Sensitivity is probably the key element along with maintaining the commercial character of the building. Storefront design is one of the few areas where the designer has considerable freedom of expression in the rehabilitation process. Good storefront design will not only enhance the architectural character of the street and the existing building, it will quite often have a positive ripple effect on adjoining properties. Hopefully through good storefront design, business districts and neighborhood will be revitalized and hopefully will lead to the successful use of historic preservation incentives. ♦

John M. Tess is president and founder of Heritage Consulting Group, a national firm that assists property owners seeking local, state and federal historic tax incentives for the rehabilitation of historic properties. Since 1982 Heritage Consulting Group has represented historic projects totaling more than \$1 billion in tax credits. He can be reached at 503-228-0272 or jmtess@heritage-consulting.com.

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