

A Guide to Good Practice in Shopfront Design

Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas

There are 25 conservation areas within the Medway area and in the region of 1400 listed buildings. It is especially important that the design of new shopfronts preserves and enhances the character and appearance of listed buildings and conservation areas by the sensitive use of appropriate designs and materials. Grant aid may be available to assist with improvements and restoration of shopfronts in listed buildings or conservation areas. Further information can be obtained from the Conservation and Urban Design Group.

The Importance of Shopfront Design

This leaflet provides supplementary guidance to policies set out in the Local Plan. It gives general guidance on the design of shopfronts and signs and security shutters with particular reference to 'traditional' design elements. It sets out broad principles and illustrates some examples of appropriately designed shopfronts to help developers, retailers and shop fitters.

For the purposes of this leaflet, 'shop' is defined as all street premises having a fascia sign and/or a display window, and includes non-retail premises such as banks, betting offices, restaurants, estate agents and building societies.

In Medway the overall scale of streets and buildings is relatively small so that inappropriate details can have considerable impact and more easily affect the character and become offensive from an amenity point of view. There is an essential difference in character between historic shopping streets and modern shopping malls which needs to be acknowledged in the design of shopfronts. These differences of necessity require different responses from both the applicant and the Council. *Proposals in Conservation Areas should preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Area and the Council will not normally approve schemes that do not achieve this.*

The alteration or replacement of a shopfront presents owners and occupiers with an ideal opportunity to consider the future of the whole building. Therefore the Council welcomes any proposals to utilise presently vacant upper floor areas for residential or other suitable purposes and the opportunity to discuss with applicants the means of achieving this. *Permission to remove staircases or permanently block off access to the upper floors of historic buildings will not normally be granted.*

Shopfront Design

Shopfronts and their signage play a key role in defining the character of a place. Well-designed shopfronts create an atmosphere that is good for business and reflects the quality and attractiveness of an area. An emphasis on good quality design of shopfronts and advertisements will in turn encourage investment and spending and will ultimately benefit all traders and shoppers. Therefore, *the Council will expect proposals for shopfronts and signs to enhance not only the building but also the surrounding street scene.* This means that new shopfronts in modern buildings

adjoining older properties should take into account the scale and character of the latter. It does not mean that new work should be pastiche but that detailing should be appropriate to the heights, proportions and materials of the older buildings. Almost every shopfront project will require individual treatment, with reference where necessary to other authentic local historical models.

Many modern replacement shopfronts are out of character with the historic building above and obliterate original architectural detail and decoration. Modern shop windows can be large and out of proportion with the building, while the slender dimensions of the supporting framework appear visually weak. Deep and bulky fascias can appear over dominant and out of scale. All this may be compounded by the use of shiny, brightly coloured modern materials that are out of place in historic areas. However, *where good quality modern designs do exist especially in modern buildings their replacement by poorer quality and inappropriate designs will be resisted.*

History

Traditional Shopfronts

The Medway Council area has many historic buildings with good examples of shopfronts of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Original features such as pilasters and fascias often survive hidden under later work. Missing features may require reinstatement. *Where quality shopfronts survive it is important to retain and repair rather than replace.* In exceptional cases, where the fabric is beyond repair, the replacement should be designed as a replica of the existing shopfront in respect of its design, form, detailing and materials. For accuracy, original mouldings should be stripped of paint before their profiles are measured.

Georgian Shopfronts

The typical shopfront combined classical precedents of proportion and detail with pre-existing traditions of shop use. The front was divided by pilasters or columns and incorporated either a central or a side entrance and sometimes a separate entrance to the floors above. In the 18th century the bay window made its appearance; developed to enclose goods previously set on the pavement. The stall board supported by a stall riser is a reminder of the days when goods were sold across an unglazed opening. The main feature of original Georgian shopfronts is the subdivision of the shop window into small panes. The panes have a vertical emphasis and glazing bars are often moulded on the outside. Other details also reflect correct classical detailing. Shopfronts from this period usually had wooden shutters externally fixed.

Victorian and Edwardian Shopfronts

The development of plate glass radically changed shopfront design and the removal of excise duty on glass in 1845 further encouraged the tendency towards larger paned windows. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries the use of imaginative and elaborate forms of design emerged, examples include mosaic paving, etched or coloured glass, cast iron grilles and ornate glazing bars. The shopfront was set on the

face of the building so as not to obstruct the public footway. The display 'bay' was often created by inseting the doorway. Improved methods of artificial lighting meant that the importance of the shop window as a source of natural light diminished by the end of the 19th century, thus leading to the introduction of deeply recessed fronts and lobby entrances. Shop windows were still tastefully framed with pilasters at either end, a fascia and cornice above and a stall riser at the base.

Modern Shopfronts

In the 1920s traditional classically designed shopfronts began to die out and decline in quality and craftsmanship. Utilitarianism was the basic form and architectural decoration was considered an unacceptable eccentricity. Emphasis was placed upon the shop opening being as large and uninterrupted as possible. The sign was to be as eye-catching and horizontality was emphasised. Today some such designs are considered damaging to the character of historic buildings, as they have no relationship with the original environment or interest in themselves

New Shopfront Design

A Guide to Details

Shopfront design demonstrates a wide variety of styles and details but certain basic rules apply everywhere. To be successful new shopfronts need not necessarily be pastiches of 19th century designs. But the Council will normally only give sympathetic consideration to alter, extend or provide new shopfronts if they comply with the guidelines contained in this leaflet. *Consent will not normally be granted where original historic architectural features are to be removed or concealed.*

- A shopfront should not be designed in isolation but considered as part of the architectural composition of the building.
- The design should reflect the period and style of the building onto which it is fitted.
- Shopfront elements should emphasise the division of the building and visually suggest a method of support for the façade above.
- Shops operating from more than one or adjacent units should retain the subdivision of shopfronts to respect the integrity of the individual buildings.
- Improvements to the shopfront should, wherever possible, be accompanied by an improvement to the total façade. This includes removing redundant fixtures and fittings, including signs.

Shop Windows

Existing historic openings should be retained wherever possible and if alteration is necessary it should only be to the minimum extent required. Large inserted plate glass shopfronts without any visual support for the upper part of the premises can have a detrimental effect. Their retention or insertion in historic buildings will be strongly resisted. The window should be slightly recessed within the frame and reflect the proportions of the building. Corbels and pilasters are a traditional feature and provide vertical emphasis between adjacent shopfronts while the cornice defines the top of the

shopfront. Timber mullions and glazing bars should be used to break up the window into smaller compartments where appropriate.

Stall Risers

The stall riser provides a visual and structural base for the shopfront and is an essential element of the traditional design, the height varying depending on the style adopted. Later Victorian pattern stall risers are generally lower in height. Traditional stall risers are an effective deterrent to 'ram-raiders'.

Stall risers should usually be between 450mm (18ins) and 700mm (2ft 4ins) high and should have a moulded projecting cill to provide a strong junction with the glass. They are often panelled in timber but later, lower patterns can take the form of a deep moulded skirting and can also be made from glazed tile or marble.

Doors should be part glazed with a timber panel to reflect the height of the stall riser. Modern aluminium door furniture is not appropriate for timber doors and brass is preferred. This level of detail is important to the overall visual quality of the shopfront. Where appropriate, the door should be recessed to give relief to the shopfront and any window ventilation or extraction taken through this recess.

Fascias

Fascias should be proportioned so as to avoid visual dominance, it is the goods within the window that are the main attraction. The fascia must fit the frame and architectural details such as corbels and pilasters must not be obscured. The depth of the fascia should not be greater than one quarter the height from pavement level to the bottom of the fascia. As a general rule fascia boards should be about 600mm (2ft) high and never more than 900mm (3ft) high (measured from top of cornice to window frame below).

A shop may occupy several units and it is therefore important that fascias should not extend uninterrupted across a number of buildings. An existing or adjoining unsuitable fascia should not be allowed to influence the design of a replacement shopfront. New fascia boards should not project forward of the face of the original. A previous non-original fascia may have to be removed to accommodate the new one. Where the original fascia is canted, the new one should be also.

Where a false ceiling is proposed inside a shop it may not be acceptable to alter the fascia depth in line with it. Careful detailing of the transom with opaque glass or setting the false ceiling back within the shop can be ways of dealing with the change of level.

The colours used in the fascia should not clash with colours of adjacent fascias. The use of Day-Glo or fluorescent materials in signs is inappropriate. Large areas of acrylic or other shiny material should be avoided. *Internally illuminated fascia boxes are seldom appropriate for historic buildings and will not be allowed on listed buildings or in conservation areas.*

Traditional Lettering and Sign Writing

The design and positioning of signs and advertisements affect the character of buildings and the appearance of streets. If designed with skill, advertisements can give a sense of quality and permanence. The fascia is an integral element of the shopfront design. Only the name or trade and street number of the property should appear on it. *The lettering should reflect the proportions of the fascia and the quality and character of the shopfront.* Hand painted or individually fixed lettering (eg brass or other metal) will be encouraged. The style should be simple and easy to read. Where individual letters are to be mounted they must stand proud of the fascia by no more than 50mm (2ins). Simple solid shapes are to be preferred. Full size samples of lettering should be supplied with applications.

Highly reflective and brightly coloured plastic signs, which are common in many town centres, are considered to be inappropriate for Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas. The use of standard corporate advertising and signs can be damaging in some locations. *Organisations will be required to show flexibility and consideration to their building and its surroundings.*

On certain buildings there is no opportunity for a fascia. Wall or window signs may be a suitable alternative. In some cases a limited amount of additional signage may be provided at sub fascia level by well designed window signs painted on the glass. Duplication of information on shopfronts is not necessary.

Blocking large sections of shop windows with information, lettering or adverts is unacceptable. Advertising stickers or banners draped across fascias or on elevations above ground floor level is not normally acceptable. However, there are occasions when some additional advertising material may be warranted for limited periods but these should normally be confined within the shop window and sales area in such a way that views into the shop are maintained.

Signs for upper floor businesses should take the form of discreet lettering applied directly to the window panes.

Where a building has a domestic elevation but is now used for commercial or professional offices, the most appropriate form of sign is usually a small brass or bronze nameplate positioned at the side of the entrance door. This type of sign must not be illuminated. No more than one sign may be displayed for each business and the size should not exceed 300mm x 500mm (1ft x 1ft 8ins).

Projecting and Hanging Signs

The cumulative effect of projecting signs repeating information already given on the fascia can lead to visual clutter. However, historic towns have a tradition of symbol signs whose quality can upgrade the visual interest of an area and create an identity that gives it an appeal especially to visitors. Therefore hanging signs may be acceptable providing the sign and bracket are appropriate to the style of building and appropriately proportioned.

Signs should be hand-painted, either timber or metal and attached to cast or wrought iron brackets produced by competent craftsmen. Only one sign should be fixed to each shop and its positioning must not obscure or damage architectural features. The method of fixing and the position of signs, particularly if above fascia level should be agreed prior to commencement of work in order to avoid potential damage to the building.

There is an historical precedent for painted or appropriately sized board signs to be positioned on the side elevation of corner properties in certain circumstances. Proposals for such signs should be discussed prior to application.

Plastic and projecting box signs are not considered to be appropriate on traditional buildings or in conservation areas and may not be permitted.

Blinds and Canopies

The design and material of blinds and canopies is an important element in the character of shopfronts. They protect goods from damage by sunlight, can provide interest and colour in the streetscene and shelter for shoppers in bad weather.

Canvas blinds or canopies of the traditional flat or fan type are usually appropriate but they must be capable of being retracted easily into a recessed area without the use of tools. Existing original/traditional canvas blinds and blind boxes should be retained and refurbished. Where new work is carried out the materials used should also be traditional, wood for the frames and batten with matt material for the blind itself. Blinds and canopies should usually cover the whole shopfront and be the same width as the fascia, but should not cover architectural details. The colour should be in character with the buildings.

Advertising lettering may be acceptable where a retractable roller blind obscures the fascia when in use. When included, lettering or symbols should be limited in size. Consent under the Advertisement Regulations may be required.

Plastic or fixed blinds are not acceptable in a historic location neither are 'Dutch' blinds. Blinds and canopies at first floor and above are rarely satisfactory and their use will be resisted.

Security Shutters

Whilst it is clearly desirable that shop displays should remain visible after opening hours the security of shop premises is seen by many people as an increasingly important issue today in view of the necessity to combat not only theft but also vandalism and ram raiding. All aspects of security should be an integral part of the design of a shopfront. Any proposal for a roller shutter, whatever the style, should be carefully designed to ensure that its external appearance is as unobtrusive as possible.

The installation of 'solid' external security shutters of the metal roller type covering shopfronts will not be acceptable in historic streets, or Conservation Areas or on Listed Buildings. Although they are seen as quick and easy to install they have a

number of drawbacks for both the shop and the community. The installation of roller shutter or grille boxes to the exterior of retail premises at fascia level can have a detrimental effect on both the building and the street scene in general. It is not possible to see if anything is happening inside the shop through a solid shutter so thieves may be 'at work' unobserved. Window shopping out of hours is impossible, leading to possible loss of future trade. A street of solid shutters creates a lifeless and hostile environment suggesting that the area is vulnerable to crime, thereby discouraging people from using the street and increasing the chances of crime.

If a physical barrier is vital for security, internal grilles of a delicate mesh design can be discretely installed behind the window. It is important that the shutter does not cover the whole of the shopfront, only the glazed areas. For a large shop frontage the combination of a number of smaller shutters applied to individual window openings will be preferable to a large single shutter. Separate grilles may sometimes be allowed across recessed entrance areas.

For added security, it should be remembered that smaller paned glass, transoms, mullions and stallrisers can be more difficult to break into than large areas of glazing (and smaller panes of glass are cheaper and easier to replace!). Timber glazing bars can now be strengthened by using 'T' section steel bars and a brick or concrete wall can be built behind the stall riser to provide extra strength in vulnerable situations.

Traditional wooden panelled shutters in demountable sections were common from the 18th to the early 20th century and these may be acceptable in certain circumstances to give a more traditional and acceptable appearance. They should be painted to suit the shopfront colour scheme.

Burglar alarms

All items of security, including burglar alarms and camera surveillance systems should form an integral part of the design and be located in unobtrusive positions that avoid interference with any architectural detail. Owners/occupiers may wish to seek advice should be sought from the Conservation and Urban Design Team before installing any systems as each building will be considered individually. Wiring should be internal as far as possible, but if external, should not be visible. Listed Building Consent will always be required.

Access for the Disabled

Shops should be accessible to people with mobility problems wherever reasonably practical. New shopfronts should always allow access for the disabled. Alterations to shopfronts on listed buildings or within historic areas can create access problems that are difficult to overcome because features such as doors and steps may be an important part of the building's character and merit retention.

The ideal solution is to have a flush surface rather than a step but this may be difficult and each shop will have to be considered on its own merits and qualities. Where it may be necessary to provide entrance ramps, they should be no steeper than a gradient of 1 in 12. External works will require the agreement of the Highways section.

Doorways should be easily identifiable and user friendly, allowing easy access for wheelchairs and push chairs. Where doors have two leaves, it should be possible for a wheelchair to obtain access without having to open both doors. Frameless plate glass doors can be dangerous to children and partially sighted people and conversely solid doors may need a glass visibility panel positioned so that children and people in wheelchairs, as well as adults can be seen. In certain circumstances self-opening doors controlled by a pressure mat may be necessary. Forecourt displays must under no circumstances block the pavement or cause an obstruction, particularly for the disabled or partially sighted.

Lighting

Internally illuminated letters or fascias often conflict with the design of historic shopfronts, are incongruous in historic areas and will be resisted there. Shopfronts can be disfigured by a clutter of long stemmed projecting lamps or crude internally lit fascias. If a fascia is to be lit it must be discreet so as not to detract from the character of the building. The form of illumination must be carefully designed to ensure that the spread of light is controlled.

Illumination of fascia and signs may not be appropriate on Listed Buildings or in conservation areas. Street lighting levels in some shopping locations are such that additional forms of illumination may be of limited benefit. Where lighting is proposed full details of the fitting, method of fixing and luminance will be required in support of the application.

A Guide to Materials

Traditional materials should normally be used in historic buildings and in conservation areas. Timber is an appropriate material as it is versatile, durable, easily and cheaply maintained and altered. It is important that well seasoned softwood is specified for shopfront joinery in order to provide a good quality of standard and finish. Wrought and cast iron was used on Victorian shopfronts for decorative grills, railings and structural columns. Stone, glazed tiles, leadwork and decorative glass are also found on traditional shopfronts. *Traditional historic shopfront materials should be preserved in all cases.* Advice on the use and repair of traditional materials can be obtained from the Council's Conservation Officers.

Modern Materials

New timber used in replacement shopfronts should where possible be from sustainably managed sources and reuse of materials will be supported where appropriate. High standards of construction and installation are particularly important, it is therefore recommended that experienced shopfitters and installers are always used when altering or installing shopfronts.

Modern materials such as plastics, aluminium, perspex and stainless steel may be appropriate for modern shopfronts, although they should be used with discretion. The quality and detailing of modern materials is important. These materials are not normally acceptable for listed buildings or in conservation areas because of their

incompatibility with traditional building materials and their tendency to disrupt the visual unity of the street scene.

Corporate Colours and Styles

Corporate housestyles that reflect the company image through the use of standard shopfronts and advertisements are not always appropriate for historic buildings and may have to be adapted to fit in with the age and character of the building in which the shopfront is situated. *Housestyles will not be permitted to override the established principles of good design.* The prestige value of listed building premises and their distinctive detailing should be emphasised instead.

It is important that colours harmonise with the detailing and character of the building and surrounding area. Gaudy colours and colours which ‘clash’ create a jarring effect and should not be used.

Do I Need Permission?

Whether or not permission is needed depends on whether the proposed alterations fit into any of the following categories but most alterations are likely to require some kind of consent. *It is essential that all information submitted in support of applications is of a satisfactory standard.* Clear and accurate information will enable the proposals to be considered with confidence and the application to be processed with the minimum of delay.

- Scaled drawings should be submitted showing *all existing architectural detailing*, plus relevant details of the buildings on either side at a scale of 1:50.
- Applications will also be expected to show clearly *all details of the proposed shopfront* and its relationship with the whole elevation, including any existing features that are proposed to be altered or removed.
- Plans, elevations and sections should be at a scale of 1:20 and it may be necessary to show architectural detailing at a scale of 1:2.
- At least one sectional drawing of the shopfront should show its profile and relationship to the upper part of the building.
- The size and design of all letters and symbols should be accurately shown together with details of the colour scheme.
- The materials and colours proposed to be used should be indicated either by the submission of samples or photographs, and by reference to British Standard numbers where appropriate.

Even when consent is not needed it is hoped that the advice in this leaflet will be followed and prove useful to shopowners. It is not intended to inhibit imaginative and sensitive design. It should be noted that more than one type of consent may be required.

1. Listed Building Consent

Any alterations affecting the character or appearance of any part of a listed building requires Listed Building Consent. This includes the shopfront as well as

internal alterations, repainting involving a colour change and installation of fascias, signs, blinds, lights, shutters and burglar alarm cases.

2. Conservation Area Consent

Consent may be required for substantial demolition and/or rebuilding of the main elevation of unlisted buildings in Conservation Areas.

3. Planning Permission

Most alterations to the exterior of a building also require planning permission. This could for example include the erection of a shop blind, a security screen, alterations to the shop door or window or the insertion of a complete new shopfront.

4. Advertisement Consent

Fascia signs, blinds and other external features of a shop may require Advertisement Consent, particularly if they are illuminated.

5. Building Regulations

Building Regulations approval may also be required for structural changes.

WHERE WORKS ARE CARRIED OUT WITHOUT CONSENT THIS MAY RESULT IN ENFORCEMENT AND PROSECUTION. IT IS ALWAYS ADVISABLE TO CONTACT THE PLANNING AND TRANSPORT DIRECTORATE TO DISCUSS ANY ALTERATION TO SHOPFRONTS AT THE EARLIEST STAGE.