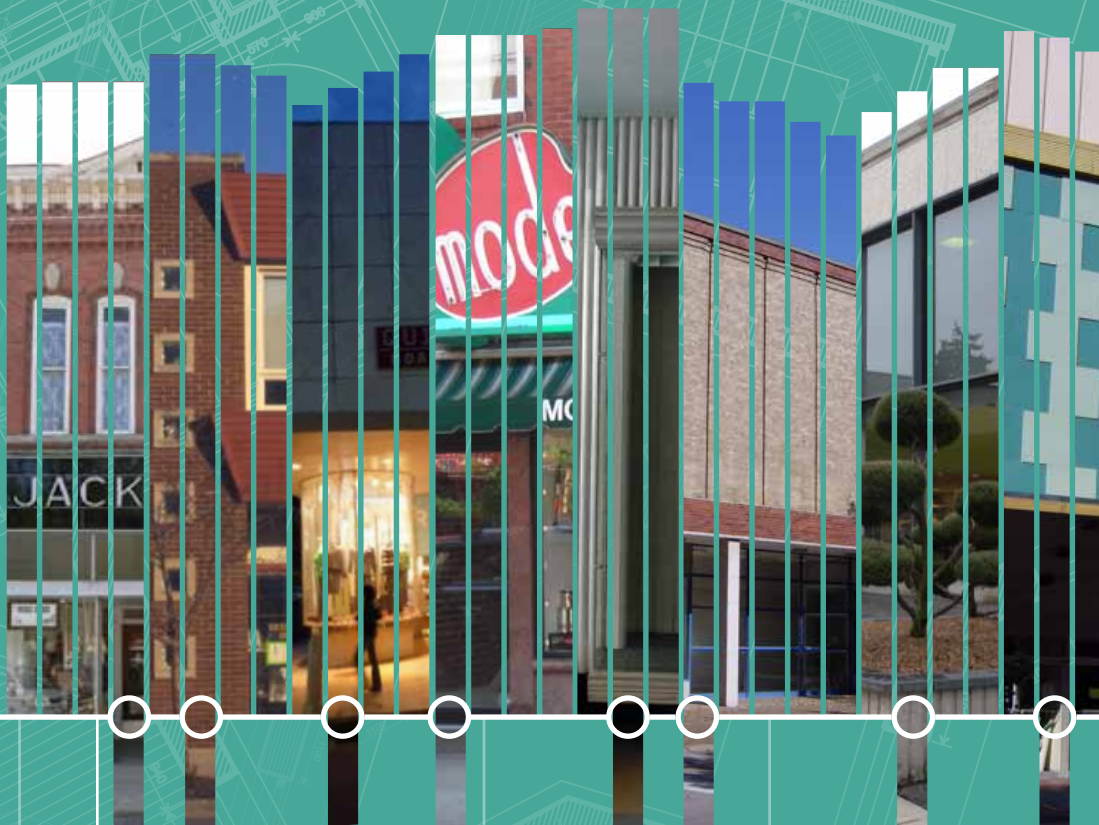


MAIN STREET NOW

The Journal of The National Main Street Center | SUMMER 2014



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1960's

Main Street

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Main Street

MEETS MID-CENTURY DESIGN

BY MIKE JACKSON, FAIA

As the National Main Street program starts a new era, it's time to take a fresh look at design on Main Street. As with all the programs and policies of a national movement, this is no easy task. It isn't something that can be easily summarized in a few broad generalities. Having said that, a great place to start is a history lesson about design on Main Street.

For most Main Streets, the architectural story is more complex than its 19th-century roots, but there is no question that the model of the "Victorian American Main Street" continues to resonate with the public and the program's identity. This is also the image of the Disneyland Main Street, but that's another story. It's time to take another look at the true evolution of storefront designs on Main Street, its architectural history, the forces of change, and the role of preservation in Main Street's continued evolution.



© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

Downtown Galena, in northwestern Illinois, has one of the best preserved 19th-century Main Streets in America.

★ THE CHANGING FACE OF MAIN STREET

The architecture of Main Street is primarily limited to the front façade — what would have been called “street architecture” in the 19th century— a term that has largely gone out of use today. It’s also important to note that changes to the storefront itself do not always go hand and hand with changes to the upper façade. In some ways, the storefront is like the household kitchen, a part of the building that has a much shorter life-span than the rest of the structure.

The storefront did not change that much during the 1800s, when the basic elements of a cast-iron framing structure and wood-and-glass infill displayed

minor stylistic motifs, but the basics remained the same. In the 20th-century, everything changed due to new materials, technologies, design expressions, and merchandising approaches. Given the impact of these changes, it is surprising that so much of the 19th-century face of Main Street remained the same.

Main Street’s urban framework has origins in both town planning and architecture, but I think a great place to begin the American architectural story is Philadelphia. Architect John Notman’s design for the Philadelphia Athenaeum in 1845 is one of the first buildings in the United States to be designed in what we



Athenaeum designed in 1845 in Philadelphia, Pa., by John Notman.

now call the Italianate style. The design derives from the palazzos of Italy, with a stone exterior, cornice, and window ornamentation. The roof is no longer visible from the street and the strong projecting cornice defines the top of the building. Variations of this street front employing brick rather than stone, a wooden or sheet metal cornice, and a ground-floor storefront make this style the architectural beginning for Main Street.

The Italianate style was easily translated from brick to stone. The Cattle Bank Building, built in Champaign, Ill., in 1857, does not feature the typical storefront but the form and upper-story detailing of window hoods and cornice are typical of Main Street buildings throughout the later half of the 19th century.



Several major technological and material changes changed storefront design in the 20th-century. The first and most important of these was the ready availability of steel beams, which could span the entire front façade. These new steel beams meant that structural cast-iron columns on an eight-foot spacing would no longer define structural rhythm as it had throughout the 19th century. The storefront itself could now be constructed of lighter materials, which gave room for more display window space and allowed greater variations in plan.

Two other new technical improvements arrived at the same time: metal glass framing and prism glass, which was used for transoms. This combination of open structure and materials gave designers the ability to create a new type of storefront. At its simplest, a single storefront had a front transom of prism glass, a single center entry, and two flanking display windows. Producing this design in a new building was relatively easy. Removing structural cast-iron columns and inserting a new steel beam was a more difficult challenge, however, so retaining an older structure while adding a

This 1870s building in Galena, Ill., once had two identical storefronts and upper facades. The original storefront (left) contains cast-iron columns and wooden millwork. The second generation storefront (c. 1910) features a prism glass transom and metal window framing (right). Even the upper-floor windows were changed to a larger opening, a rare transformation.

© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency



new storefront infill was equally common. By the 1920s, more elaborate storefront plans with deep display windows, known as the “arcaded” front, had become popular. This storefront style would prevail until the 1930s. It was truly an era of “window shopping” on Main Street or in big city department stores.

The evolution of 20th-century storefront design displayed another substantial variation—the one-story building. During most of the 19th century, in all but the smallest towns, the multi-story building was the defining structure on Main Street. In many communities, it may have been only two stories, with taller structures in bigger towns, but the masonry walls of Main Street are the single most defining architectural element of the “streetwall.”

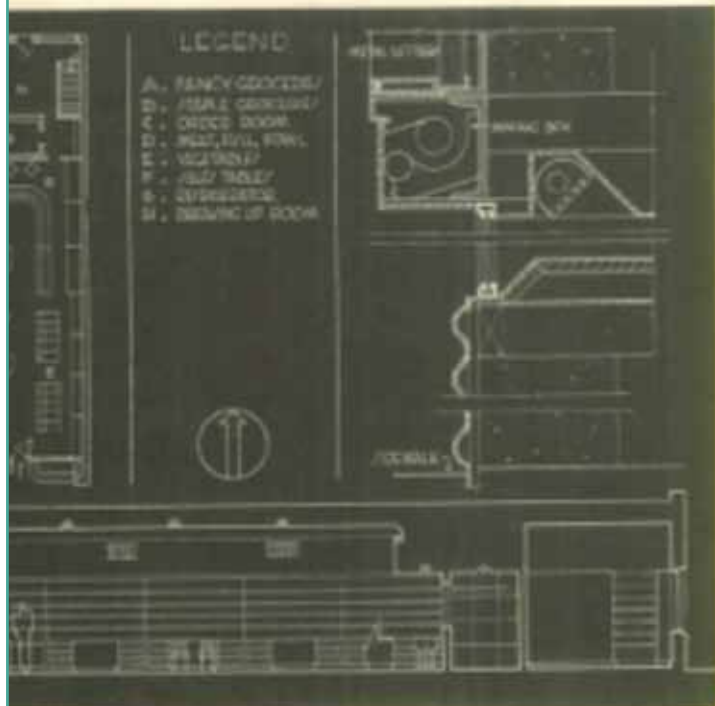
This is no accident, as one of the first building codes adopted in most cities was a “fire district,” which prohibited wooden-framed buildings in the central city. Brick and stone exteriors and party walls were the framework for the street. In smaller towns and city neighborhoods, construction of one-story masonry commercial buildings is a hallmark of the 20th century, whether it’s a streetcar suburb or a small town.

Initially, the one-story Main Street structure used similar motifs for the masonry exterior as those used on multi-story buildings. However, a utilitarian

version of masonry fronts with limited ornamentation soon became common on Main Street. It has not been easy to classify these structures through traditional architectural styles. The origin of this vernacular structure is hard to pin down, but one early promoter of this style was the Radford Architectural Company, which features the design in the 1909 publication, *Radford’s Store and Flats*. This publication displayed simple brick parapets above storefronts with strong transoms. More stylistic variations of the one-story commercial building employed architectural terra cotta to produce fronts in revival styles popular in the 1910s and 1920s and later Art Deco and Art Moderne.

In the 1930s, a design revolution that began in Europe reached America and began a transformation in storefront design that was revolutionary, not evolutionary. New forms of architecture that were not based upon traditional styles and motifs appeared. The first of these styles was Art Deco, which used traditional materials but featured abstract ornamentation that drew upon geometric shapes and imagery. These designs could be readily adapted to existing materials such as brick and terra cotta.

This era also produced many innovative industrial-designed objects, including appliances and furniture. It also had an



Designed by

FOSTER HARRELL, JR.

FIRST PRIZE \$1,000

DESIGN NO. 502

The simple dignity of this store front attracts attention through the pleasing division of its surfaces and the contrast in colors. The placement of the sign is very effective and the use of curved plate glass in the windows invites entrance. The interior plan is straight-forward, providing for adequate circulation and a good arrangement of display space and wall shelves.

The winning entry in the Food Store category of the 1930s national design competition to Modernize Main Street.



impact on the building facades above the storefront level. Because the popularity of the Art Deco style coincided with the Great Depression, it did not make a major impact on the built environment. However, there were a few types of buildings, such as movie theaters and gas stations, where this design prospered.

The design movement now known as Art Moderne had a much greater effect on storefront design. Stylistically, Art Moderne and its streamlined variations were characterized by a lack of ornament, flat planar surfaces, asymmetry, and strong graphic lettering. Two important new lighting technologies also played a role in this revolution: neon signs and fluorescent interior lighting. While fluorescent lighting wasn't used much on building exteriors, its efficiency allowed designers to eliminate the exterior transom, an area that could now be transformed with graphics.

The use of flat planar surfaces offered a great opportunity for new storefronts to be installed over existing structural systems, including upper façades. Two new materials emerged for this purpose. One was "structure glass," marketed as "Vitrolite" or "Carrara Glass." The other new lightweight cladding material was porcelain enamel metal panels, which had the same general effect in producing flat planar surfaces.

Another important factor spurred the success of this revolution in storefront design.

The sluggish marketplace following the Depression forced retailers to work harder to promote their products and stores through both architectural and advertising efforts. Out-of-work architects played into this equation as they eagerly submitted designs for the "Modernize Main Street" competition sponsored by *Architectural Record* magazine in cooperation with America's glass companies.

Everyone had a stake in this effort and it proved a winning combination. The magazine competition and resulting marketing blitz by glass companies in 1935 brought the "modernize" message home to owners of stores both large and small. Add a neon sign to the mix and a store could be brought up-to-date in a hurry.

Another new technology that changed storefront design was the use of aluminum for metal window framing. Aluminum frames presented a sharp contrast to the copper, bronze, and painted wood surfaces of previous generations. The transformation began in the 1930s and continued until interrupted by World War II (WWII). It is also worth noting that the Chicago Exposition in 1932-33 and the New York World's Fair of 1939 helped shape the public's experience with these new building forms. For many Americans, their first encounter with "modern design" was probably a storefront.

While the evolution of modern storefront design continued after WWII, it moved

primarily to the suburbs where there were more opportunities for construction than on Main Street. The major variation in storefront design was that of the “open front,” a design that was mostly glass. The first examples appeared in the 1940s but the style did not catch on until after WWII. In its ideal form, the open front was combined with the interior shop design so that the interior of the store became the complete “display” window.

The use of large planar surfaces continued in the 1950s but was sometimes combined

with rough stone masonry surfaces. Asymmetrical compositions, angular signage pylons, and projecting glass display windows are some of the characteristics of this style. One particular design treatment used metal-panel façades to cover an entire building front. Now called an “architectural slipcover,” lightweight materials were used to cover an entire building and make it look like a new structure from the exterior.

This trend peaked in popularity in the 1960s, just before the beginning of the modern preservation movement. The use of

A new “open front” design for a storefront conversion on Main Street.



© Kawneer Co. Machines for Selling

CORNER GROCERY
 The existing store (shown at left) is a well-established and popular grocery in a good residential neighborhood. Its location is excellent. However, it is not properly planned or equipped to handle its trade on an efficient self-service basis. The present store interior is badly laid out. Sales departments are not well related to each other as to customer traffic routes. Sales fixtures are antiquated, lighting fixtures are a liability instead of an asset.

A new setting of aluminum panels has been installed over the entire sales area. The ceiling projects out over the entrance front on a prominent sign ledge featuring the name of the store. The ceiling ledge is fitted over the adjacent entrance to the second floor apartment on the left and around the sign panel on the side street in order to widen out the entrance width of the store front. White porcelain enamel letters mounted on the red brick panel of the side street give the store additional identification.

The entrance door is repositioned at the street corner, recessed in both streets and doors strategically placed in relation to the interior plan. The remainder of the store floor is a sheet of glass held in place by precision glassing hardware that match the fine hardware and the door frame.

INTERIOR CHANGES
 Customers pick up their groceries at the entry, then follow a counterclockwise route through the store. First, they pass a gasoline sales fixture on their left for oil, kerosene and kerosene, dry groceries and canned goods. On the right are wall fixtures also for dry and canned goods. At the rear of the store, the meat department is the focal department, adjacent to a large refrigerated case and rear service space.

On the way out, there are departments for fruit and vegetables, baked goods and frozen foods—all in the wall—and the other side of the central corridor. At the end of the route, customers pass by the fresh vegetables of the front, and then leave by way of the check and service station.



these “slipcovers” is proving quite ephemeral, as it is just as easy to remove the panels as it was to put them up.

Throughout the post-WWII era, design on Main Street was equally affected by changes brought about by larger stores and by the increasing need to serve the automobile. Larger stores could not be easily adapted to Main Street with its structural bays of brick walls, so they moved out of downtown. In many cases, however, smaller businesses, including offices, were able to fill these voids. Variations such as the drive-up window were another problem for Main Street, with the possible exception of banks where they could be added at the back of an older building.

The stylistic changes in architecture continue to find applications on Main Street. Since the 1960s and the advent of the modern preservation movement, saving and reusing older buildings has become increasingly acceptable as a design approach. Preservation, along with period revival buildings, will be part of the next story in “street architecture.”

★ PRESERVATION GUIDELINES FOR MAIN STREET


The discussion of the evolution of the storefronts and architecture of Main Street

helps set the course for the future. The typical American Main Street has a 19th-century structural framework, with 20th-century modifications and additions. Many of these alterations tell the story of design innovation while other changes are the result of deferred maintenance or neglect.

For a Main Street advocate, recognizing the “change over time” that tells a worthwhile story can be difficult. Through its 50-year rule, the National Register of Historic Places basically established a higher threshold of significance for places that are less than 50 years old. This age limit is not universal. In England, for example, the measuring period is 100 years, whereas New York City uses 35 years. Regardless of the building’s age, it still comes down to making a decision about the built environment and when to use a preservation-based approach. This issue comes up every time the design of a Main Street building is altered.

★ MAIN STREET DESIGN GUIDELINES

Many communities have Main Street design guidelines, which provide a framework for making decisions about changes to buildings. These guidelines first appeared in the 1970s and, by and large, they haven’t changed a lot since. Certain



new topics, such as sustainability, have been added and some address urban design (streetscape) as well as building issues. Most of these guidelines strongly support historic preservation, while a few delve into the evolving nature of Main Street.

Since these guidelines focus on building design, they tend to examine proposed changes rather than evaluating current conditions. The idea that an existing storefront from the 1960s can be a good, functional example of its time is largely missing from the discussion. Certain design features, such as architectural slipcovers, can be the most problematic as they were constructed through a program that pretty much abandoned the upper stories of a building for anything other than storage or signage.

We have now reached the point in evaluating historic assets where ephemeral elements such as “ghost signs” can be identified and classified as cultural resources worthy of preservation treatment options. The same courtesy needs to be extended to a range of resources that fall outside the current comfort zone. The minimal mid-century storefront that appears merely “utilitarian” to us today misses the point. If it has great integrity of design and function, it should not be a candidate for replacement.

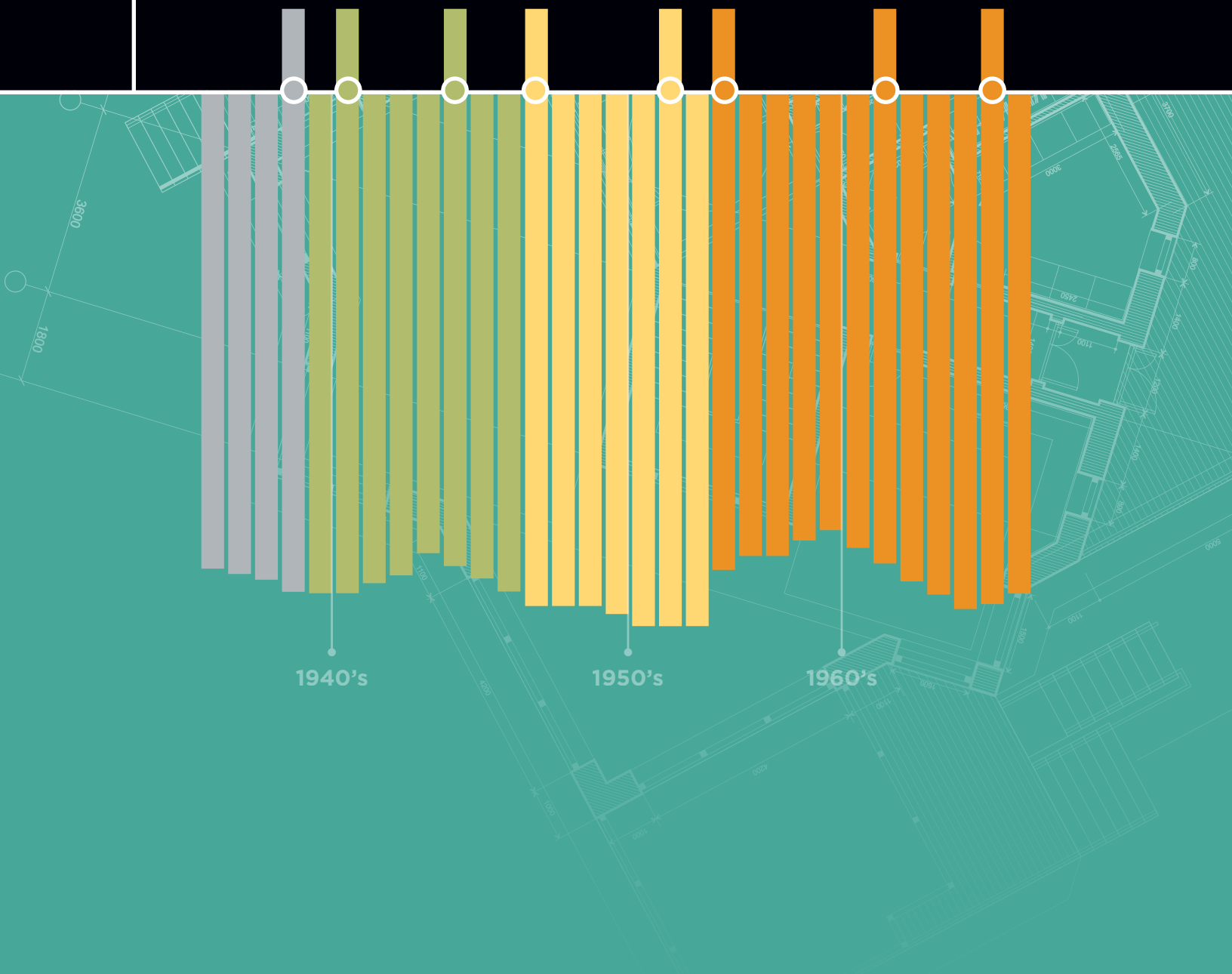
THE MOST
ENDANGERED
BUILDING
(OR EVEN
STOREFRONT)
IS AROUND
40 YEARS OLD.


Let’s apply a more consistent methodology to evaluating the resources of the recent past. The most endangered building (or even storefront) is around 40 years old. It is fully depreciated and under appreciated. Let’s give it a little more time to mature before making a hasty replacement decision.



○ BUILDING A MAIN STREET

Design Library





While there have only been a few recent print publications on the architecture of Main Street, the new era of online resources has a wealth of information—if you know how to find it. The most important of these collections is the Building Technology Heritage Library, a project of the Association for Preservation Technology, International (APT).

The association, in order to better serve its members and the larger public, has taken on the task of finding and scanning out-of-print architectural trade catalogs and other technical publications and putting them online. APT has partnered with private collectors and institutional collections to locate these materials. The Internet Archive serves as the public access portal; as of 2014, it has made more than 5,000 architectural trade catalogs from various periods available.

The collection can be searched by topic to get a better focus on the architecture of Main Street. A search of the term “storefronts,” for

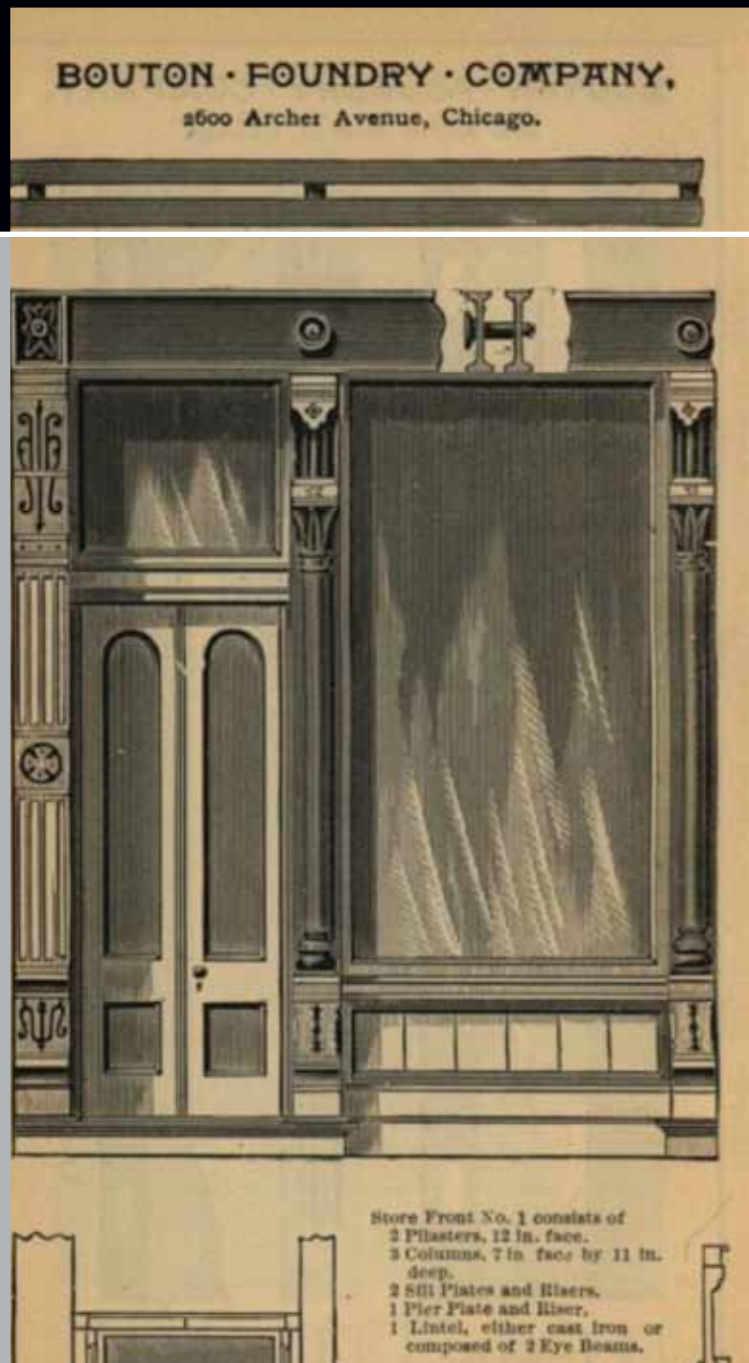
example, brings up more than 40 catalogs, mostly from the mid-20th century. Related topics include awnings, signs, prism glass, display windows, and “tin ceiling.” What was once a destination-based research project for the most serious scholar is now available to anyone with a computer. You, too, can become an architectural time traveler. Many of the following illustrations come from the Building Technology Heritage Library. Because of the interactive nature of this resource, the complete versions of these publications can be viewed on line.

Another online resource is Pinterest, which is fast evolving as the “visual” Facebook. I have created Pinterest pages using architectural trade catalogs from the Building Technology Heritage Library. One of these boards features storefront, signage, and awning catalogs appropriate to storefront design and renovation. There is also a Pinterest board for “tin ceilings,” another common feature in older downtown structures.



○ STOREFRONTS AND TECHNOLOGIES: PRE MID-CENTURY

There are only a few 19th-century catalogs that illustrate the storefront designs of that era. The best of these in terms of architectural illustrations was published by the Bouton Foundry of Chicago in 1887. This company has an extensive line of cast-iron columns, the essential structural element of commercial building facades for virtually a century, from the beginning of the 1800s to the early 1900s.



© Bouton Foundry Co. , Chicago IL 1887

One of the most critical elements of any storefront is advertising, and awnings offered a great way to showcase a store's merchandise. Awnings played a functional role to shade front windows and sidewalk displays while adding seasonal comfort in the summer months. Their potential for creating a graphic identity for a business could be simple or grand. The company storefront on this catalog cover shows the full effect that could be achieved.



© Awnings, tents, camp furniture. Murray and Baker, Chicago IL, 1880



© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

This Central City, Colo., building is a well-preserved example of a late 19th-century street front with cast-iron columns, Italianate style cornice, window hoods, and shopfront millwork.

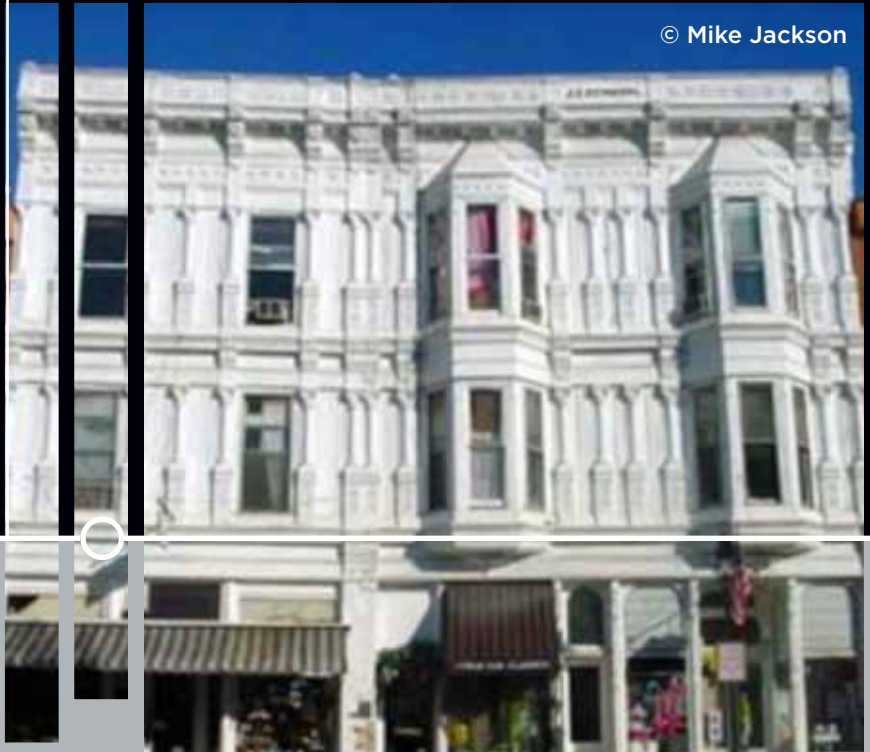
This Vermont, Ill., storefront illustrates a simple one-story Main Street commercial building of the late 19th century. The small upper façade is topped by a sheet metal cornice.



© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency



The Schmoll Building in Galena, Ill., possesses an 1890s sheet metal Mesker front that was placed over an 1850s brick building to “modernize” it.



© Mike Jackson



© George L. Mesker Catalog of 1900

The Mesker companies of Evansville, Ind., and St. Louis, Mo., were catalog merchants of storefronts that featured cast-iron columns, millwork, and upper-story sheet-metal facades. These storefronts were especially popular with building owners in small towns, where lax building codes allowed construction of wood-framed, sheet-metal facades in downtowns with mostly masonry buildings. The elaborate nature of these facades and their relative economy made the companies quite successful. There are literally thousands of examples across the country. A special website has been set up to document and promote their legacy.



© Radford's Store and Flats, 1909

DESIGN NO. 406

Size: Width, 24 feet; Length, 24 feet.

This Plan consists of basement plan, first and second floor plans; all necessary elevations and necessary interior details. Specifications are typewritten and contain all the information necessary for the proper construction of the building.

Price of Plans and Specifications \$15.00

Planned design for store with living rooms above. Building to be constructed of brick with stone trimmings. The entire lower floor is devoted exclusively to store purposes. The large front features are to be kept sight of, and the store room at the back is suitable for surplus using a convenient entrance to the cellar. The second floor consists of parlor, living or dining, three bed rooms, bath, pantry, closets, etc. Estimated cost of construction for a kind is from about \$18,000 to about \$22,000.



Second Floor Plan



DESIGN NO. 403

Size: Width, 22 feet; Length, 20 feet.

Artistic design for a country store building in brick with stone trimmings and glass panes. Large show windows and double doors with recessed effect extending across the entire front. Entire floor devoted to store, but it is noted, partitions can be set up if one or more rooms desired. Although this design is for a country building it does not look exactly on account of the high front obtained by the placing panels on front. This style of building can be built for from about \$10,000 to about \$15,000 under suitable conditions.



Floor Plan

This Plan consists of basement plan, first and second floor plans; all necessary elevations and necessary interior details. Specifications are typewritten and contain all the information necessary for the proper construction of the building.

Price of Plans and Specifications \$10.00

The Radford Architectural Company of Chicago is known primarily for its house-plan books and construction guides. The company produced one storefront publication, which includes plans for the ground floor and upper stories as well as illustrations of commercial facades. This 1909 edition features many one-story designs, illustrating the change from the multi-story Main Street buildings so common in the 19th century.

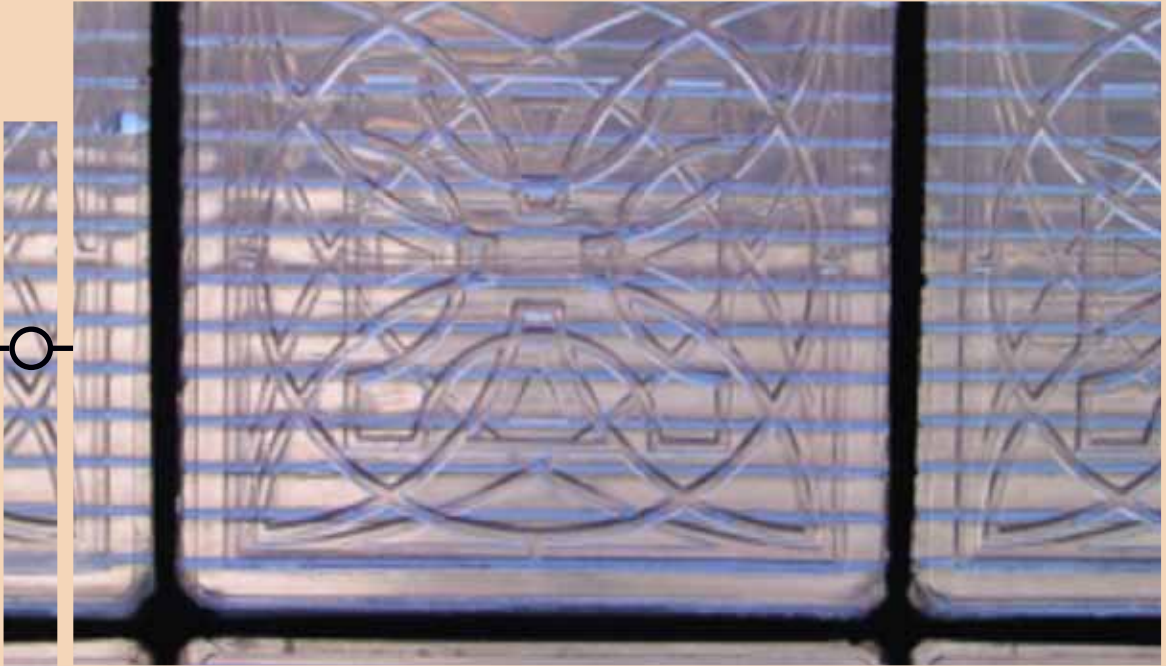


Three new technologies would transform the storefront in the first decades of the 20th century. The first of these was the steel beam, which could span the entire storefront and made the use of intermediate cast-iron columns obsolete. The second was the metal storefront, which was thinner than traditional wood and allowed a greater window area for both merchandise display and interior lighting. The third was the prism glass transom, which provided more interior lighting while reducing direct glare from sunlight. While this storefront originated in the 1890s, its peak popularity was from 1910 to the 1920s.



© Daylight Prism Co. of Philadelphia, 1899

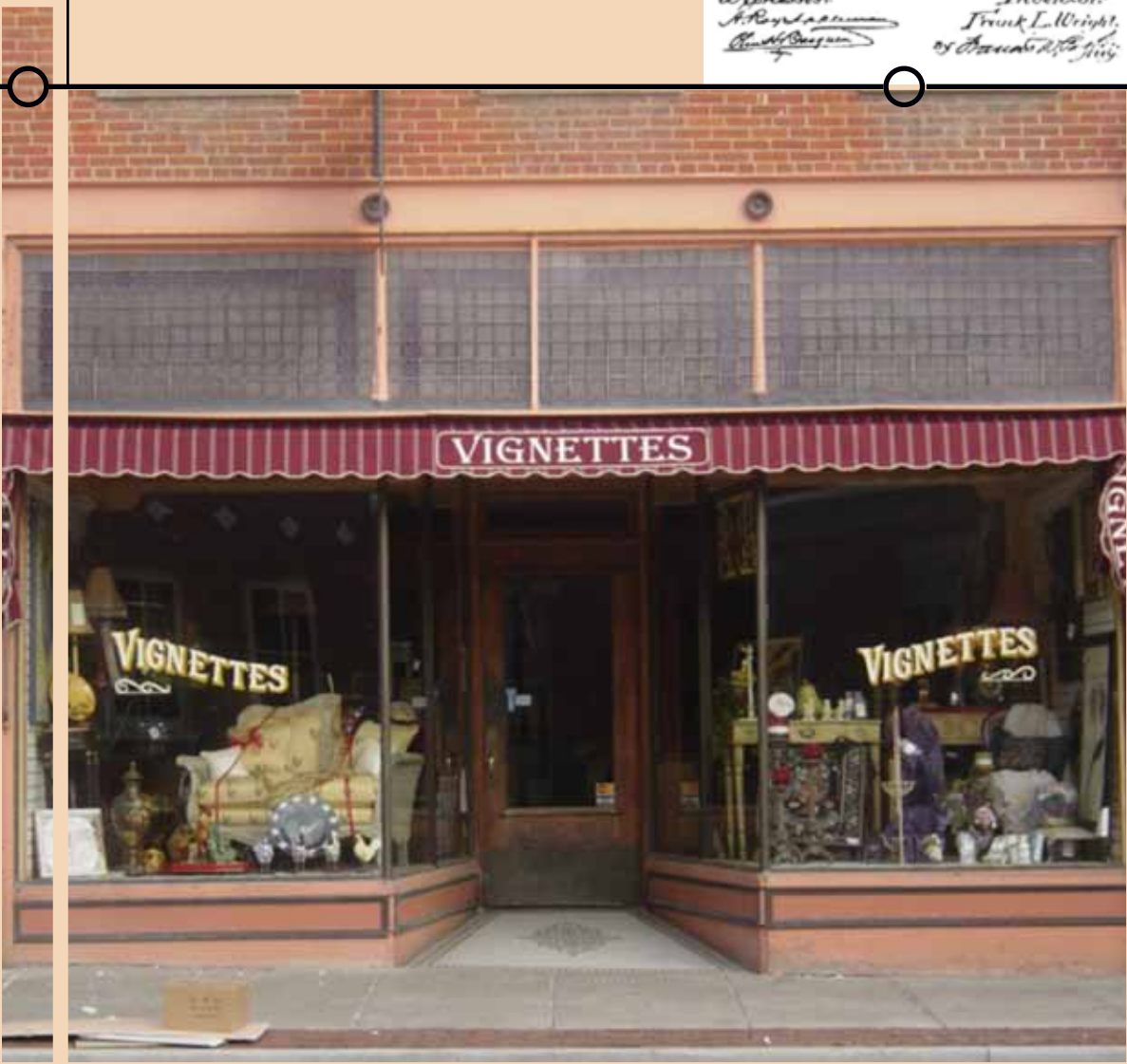
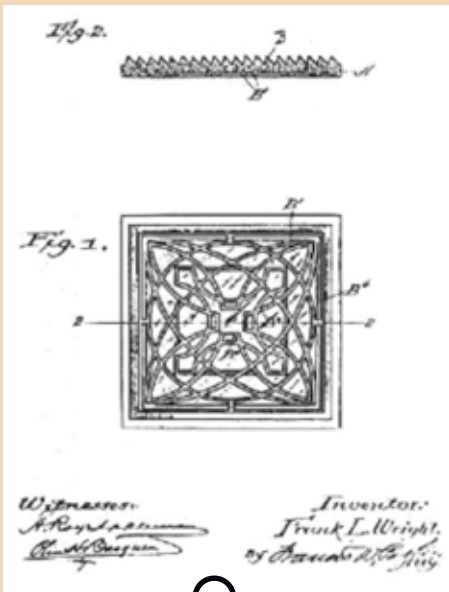
○ FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT ON MAIN STREET



Frank Lloyd Wright not only designed many buildings, he also designed a commercial building product that was extremely popular during the first two decades of the 20th century. Known as prism glass, it was used in the transoms of thousands of shop fronts across the country. In 1897, Wright received design patents for a series of ornamental glass patterns that could be used for the outside of prism glass tiles. The prism glass tiles were usually four inches square and set into a metal frame of zinc came. The concept of these tiles was quite simple—the glass prism shape on the inside diffused and reflected sunlight into the building. The natural light brightened commercial interiors in an era when electric lighting was still in its infancy. These glass tiles were manufactured by the Luxfer Prism Company of Chicago (later American Luxfer Prism Co.) from 1897 to 1930 and distributed nationwide through glass and storefront contractors.



This downtown building in Galena, Ill., features a well-preserved storefront with a prism glass transom, metal-framed display windows, and a center entry. The steel beam above the transom still sits on the 19th-century cast-iron column faces on both sides of the front.



This vernacular masonry storefront displays a panel motif in the transom, a design made popular by the Radford Architectural Co. of Chicago.

© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency





PITTSBURGH PLATE GLASS COMPANY

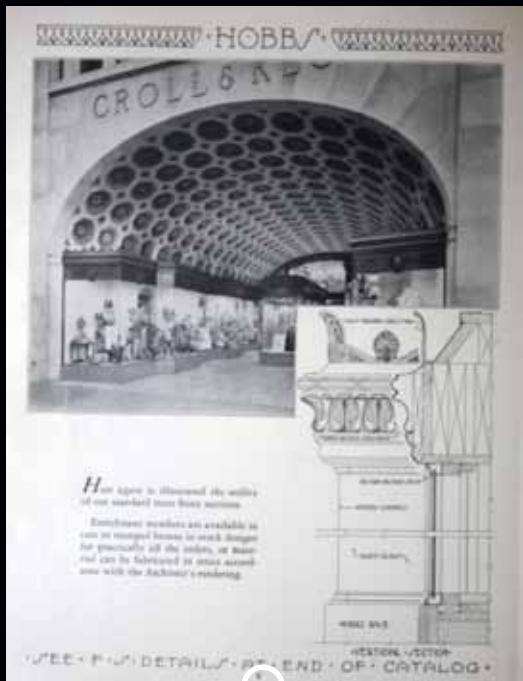


Two Attractive Store Fronts Showing Copper Bullheads

[100]

© "Glass, paints, varnishes and brushes: their history, manufacture and use." Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co., 1923

This comprehensive 1923 catalog published by the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company covers the topics of glass, paints, varnishes, and brushes and is noteworthy for discussing "their history, manufacture, and use." The catalog contains ample illustrations of the "latest" trends in storefront designs, including copper metal framing for prism glass transoms and the incorporation of graphics in transoms.



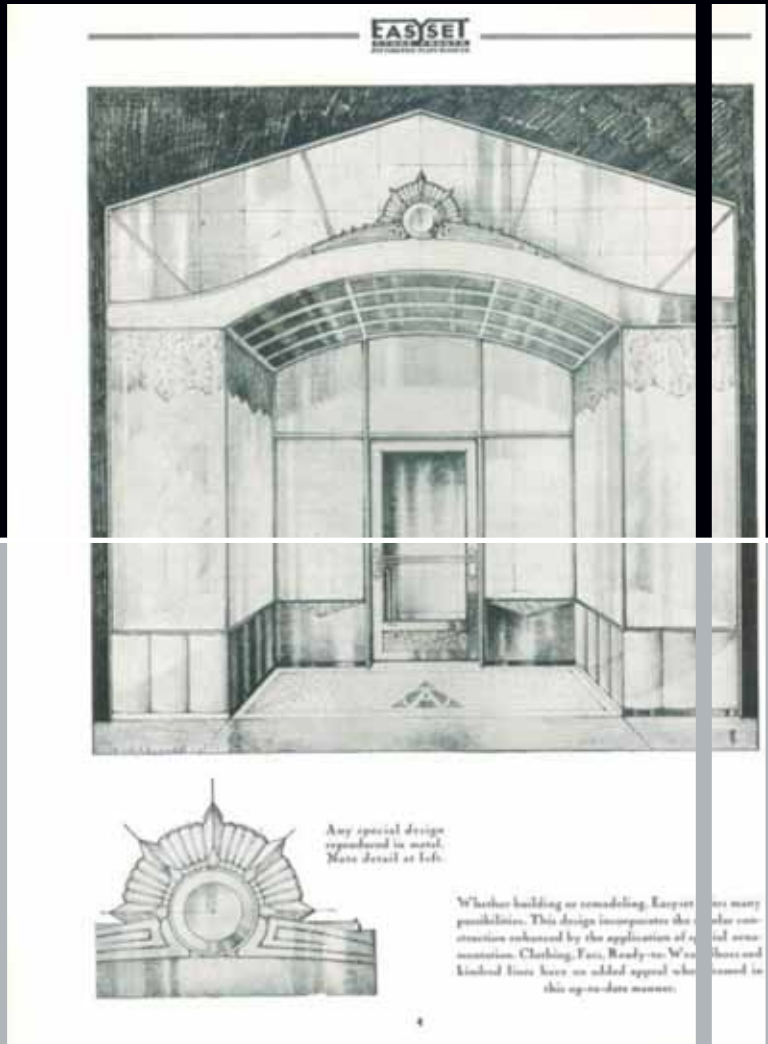
The “arcade storefront,” with its open plan and deep window displays took advantage of metal display window framing materials. The metals could be bronze, copper, or plated steel, all materials designed to give the building prestige during an era when “window shoppers” were a major part of a merchant’s advertising strategy.



The arcaded storefront was a popular style in the 1920s. This is a rather simple plan but more elaborate variations can be found in larger urban structures.



This arcaded storefront in Jacksonville, Ill., also features a decorative art glass transom.



© Modern Storefront by EasySet, 1931. Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co

The design changes that started with European architects in the 1920s and resulted in the Art Deco and Art Moderne architectural styles transformed America's Main Streets. New metal framing combined with architectural finishing materials created a look unlike anything from the past century. America's retailers were among the first to showcase these new designs in their communities. These Art Deco designs from Pittsburgh Plate Glass in 1931 mark the beginning of this era.

ZOURI 12

SPECIAL METAL WORK



ZOURI sign letters are recommended for architectural beauty and durability. Fabricated to special details.





ZOURI Metal Entrance Doors and pilasters create an inviting entrance for this restaurant.

ZOURI craftsmen have had wide and varied experience in fabricating all types of special metal work for store front and other architectural purposes. Such work includes metal sign letters, entrance doors, (also available in standard types) cast ornaments, bulkheads, pilasters, metal paneling, clock frames, and special mouldings, shapes, and decorations.

Since modern store front design is making more and more use of metal, this ZOURI service is especially helpful. Discuss your problems with the ZOURI distributor, or write the factory for specific information. Your details and specifications will be carefully followed.



ZOURI entrance door, special sign, and murals.

ZOURI STORE FRONTS, NILES, MICHIGAN, FOR FURTHER DATA

14

© Zouri Co., Rustless Metal Storefront, c. 1935

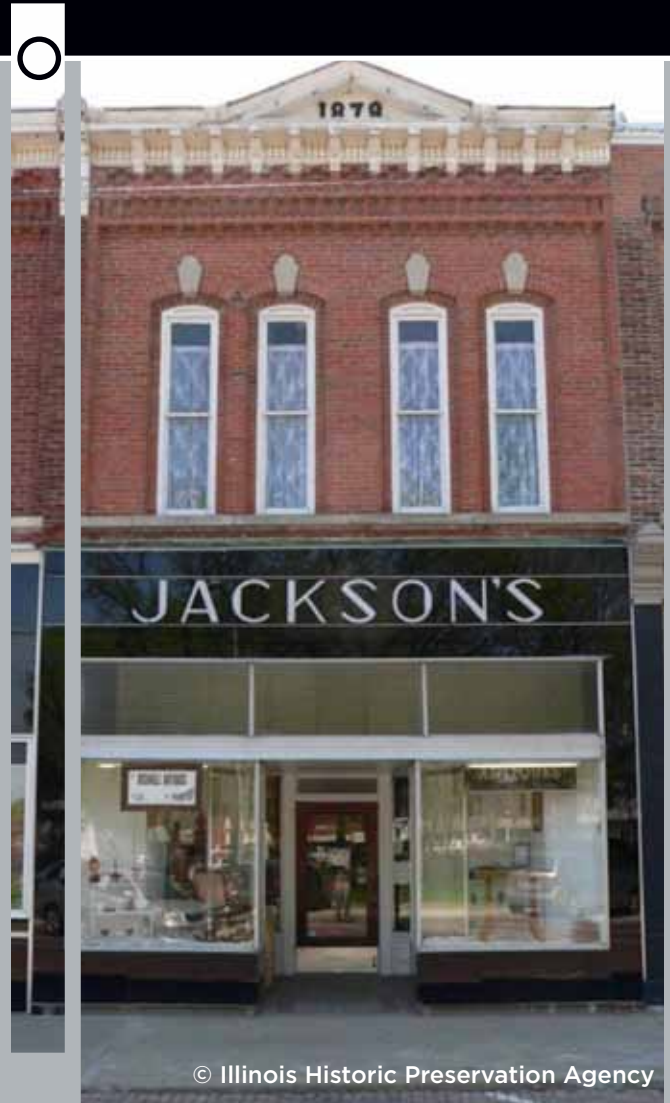
The use of flat planar surfaces, curving entrances, and “white metals” (aluminum) represented a dramatic change from the preceding century. These new materials, when combined with graphics and lighting, created a dramatic contrast between the old and the new. These new storefronts were often combined with upper façades that retained their original design. The contrast between the old and the new was meant to draw the consumer into a new fashion-conscious store.



© L.O.F., How to plan and construct modern store fronts, 1938. Libby Owens Ford Glass Company



The Libby Owens Ford Glass Company (LOF) was a leader in producing design and technical publications to show architects and builders the latest storefront styles and the design materials needed to construct them. Structural glass panels were marketed by LOF under the trade name "vitrolite," one of the most popular materials for an "architectural transformation."



This 1878 building in Rushville, Ill., has a late 1940s storefront, with beautifully intact black structural glass and mill-finish aluminum trim.

© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

© Mike Jackson collection



The Meille System manufactured porcelain metal storefront panels, such as those featured on the Krueger Bakery. This example also features “quilted aluminum” bulkheads, a popular feature on diners of this era.



© Mike Jackson

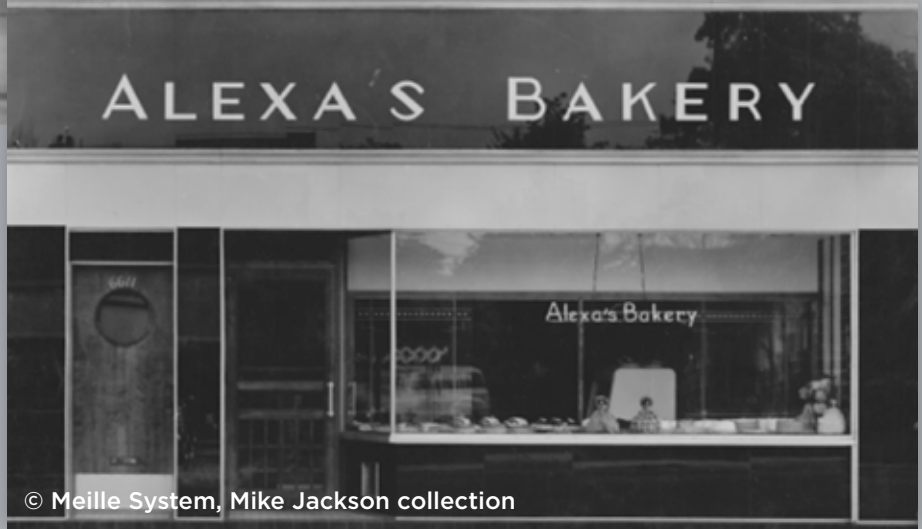
The porcelain enamel panels and curved-glass display windows in this New York City storefront are a direct link to the Modernize Main Street campaign.



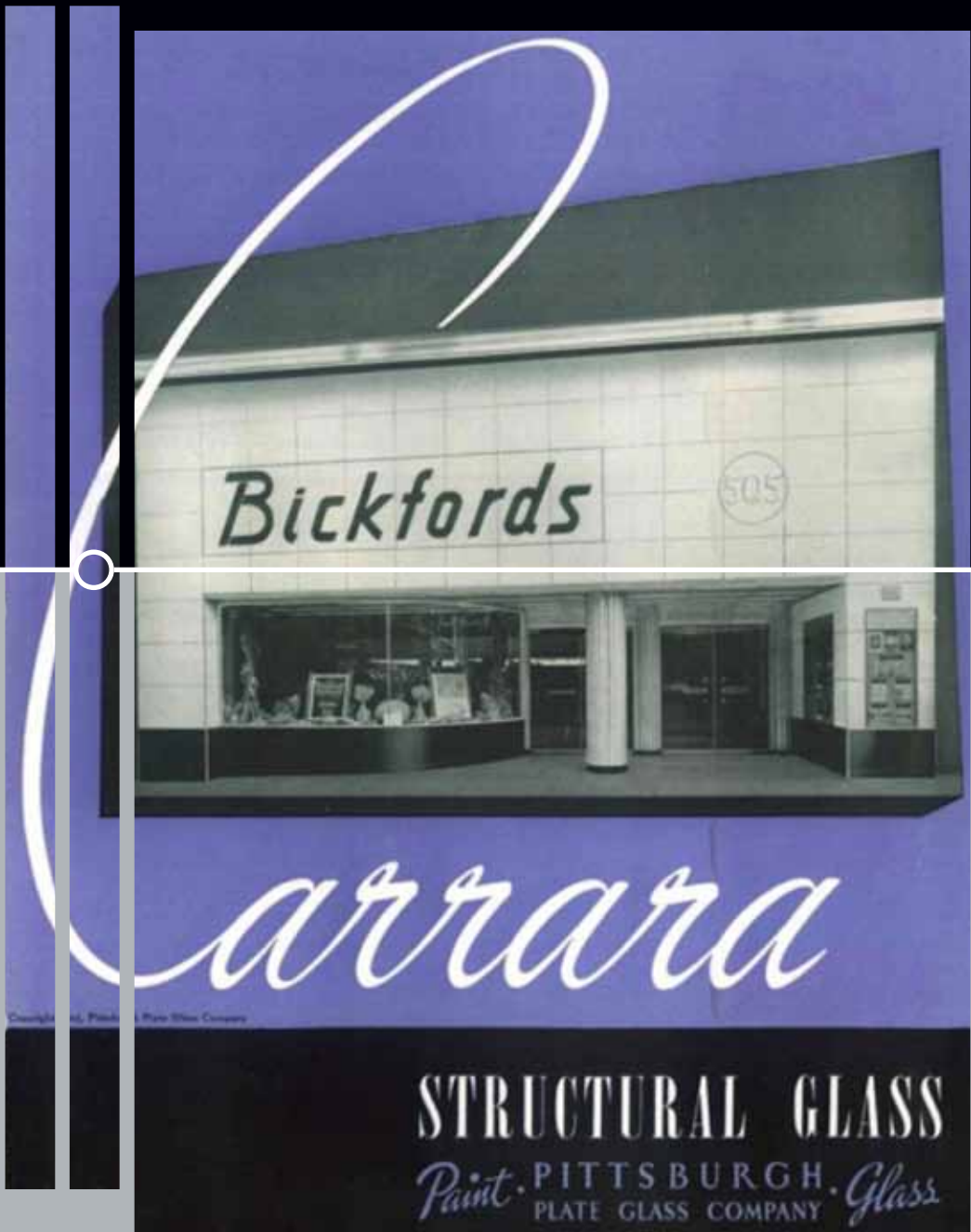
*Before and after of a storefront conversion.
The 1910 storefront of Alexa's Bakery
wasn't even 30 years old when the owner
completely transformed the store by
installing a new Art Moderne façade with
porcelain enamel and structural glass panels.*



©Meille System, Mike Jackson collection



© Meille System, Mike Jackson collection

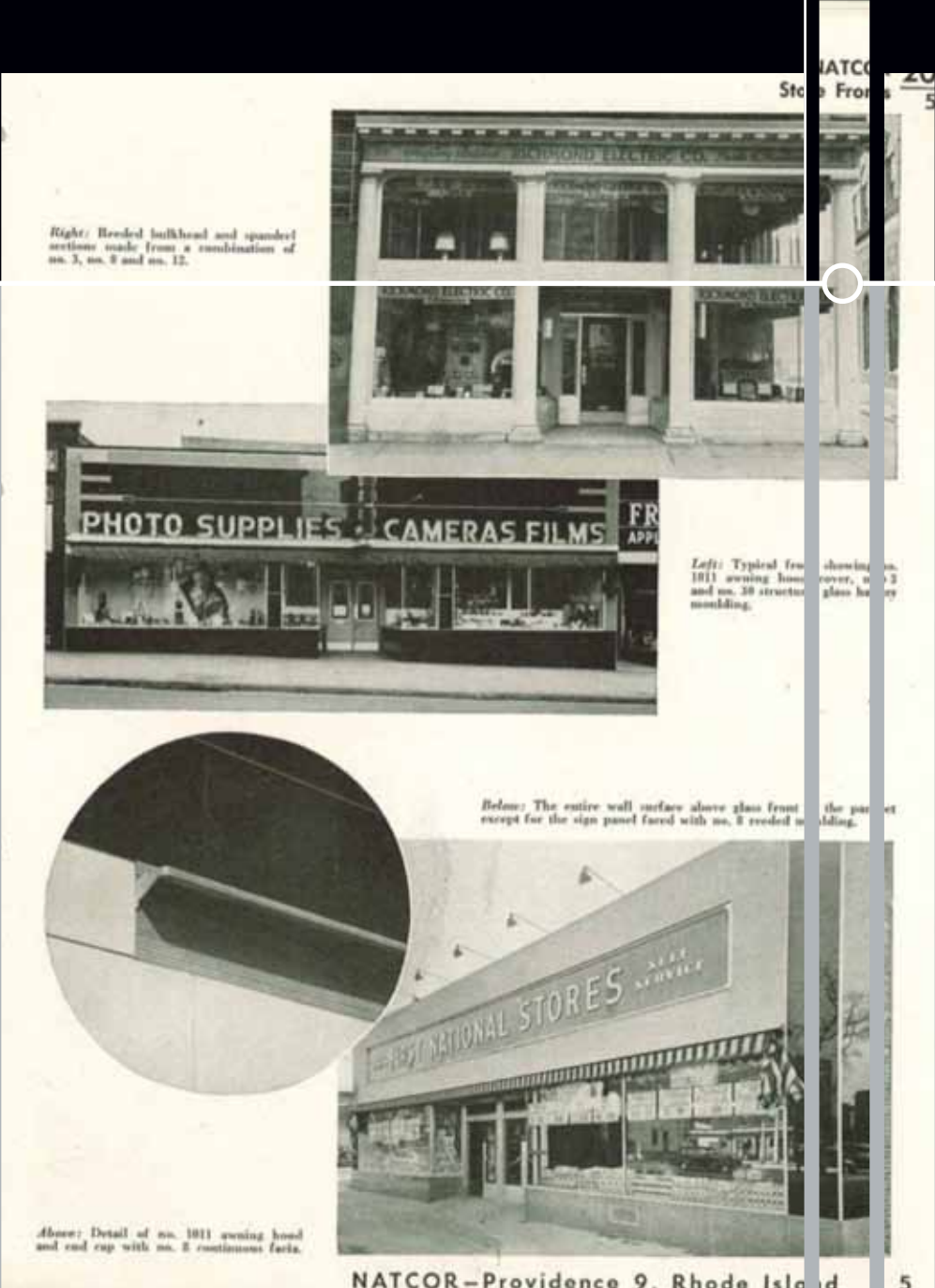


© Carrara Structural Glass, Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co., 1942

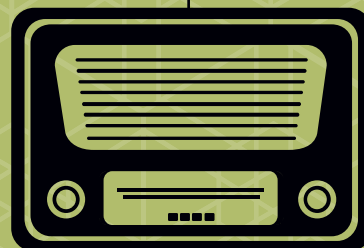
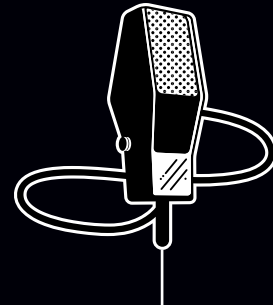
New façade materials in flat panels included both glass and metal. The Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company marketed its structural glass panels under the trade name “Carrara Glass,” a reference to the Carrara marble of Italy. The use of fluorescent interior lighting made the transom obsolete, so the upper exterior of the storefront façade could be used for enhanced signage.



Extruded aluminum storefront glazing systems, such as these produced by Natcor in the 1940s, could be used for both new construction and renovations. Other common trends in this era included elimination of the transom and enhanced signage and lighting.



○ Storefronts of the 1940s



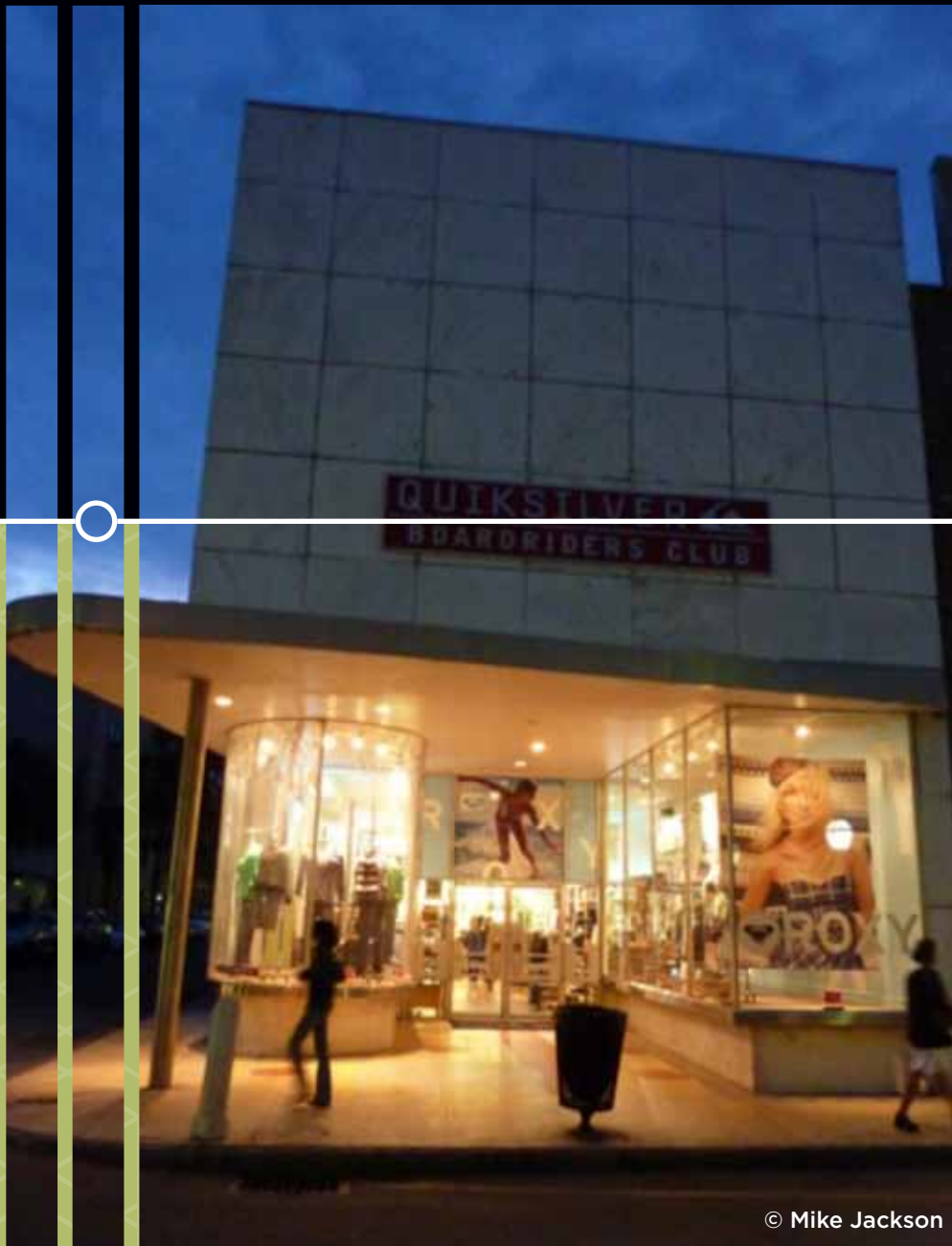
Innovation in storefront design in the 1940s was limited during the years of WWII, but at the end of the decade two important trends emerged. The first of these was the “open front,” which used as much glass as possible so that the whole store became visible from the exterior. This form would flourish in the 1950s and '60s. The second trend integrated the second-story façades as part of the storefront design, particularly the signs. Both of these motifs would continue over the next two decades.



This late 1940s storefront in Westmont, Ill., is a rare example of a two-story masonry front with masonry “pylons” and angled motifs on the windows and façade.

© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency



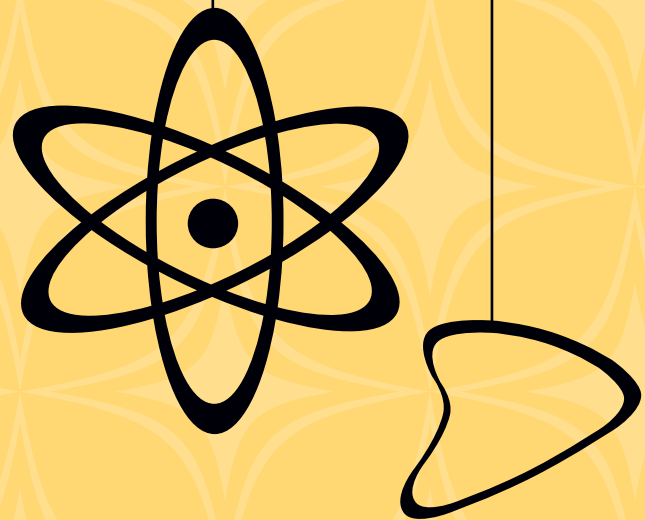
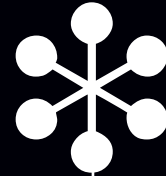


© Mike Jackson

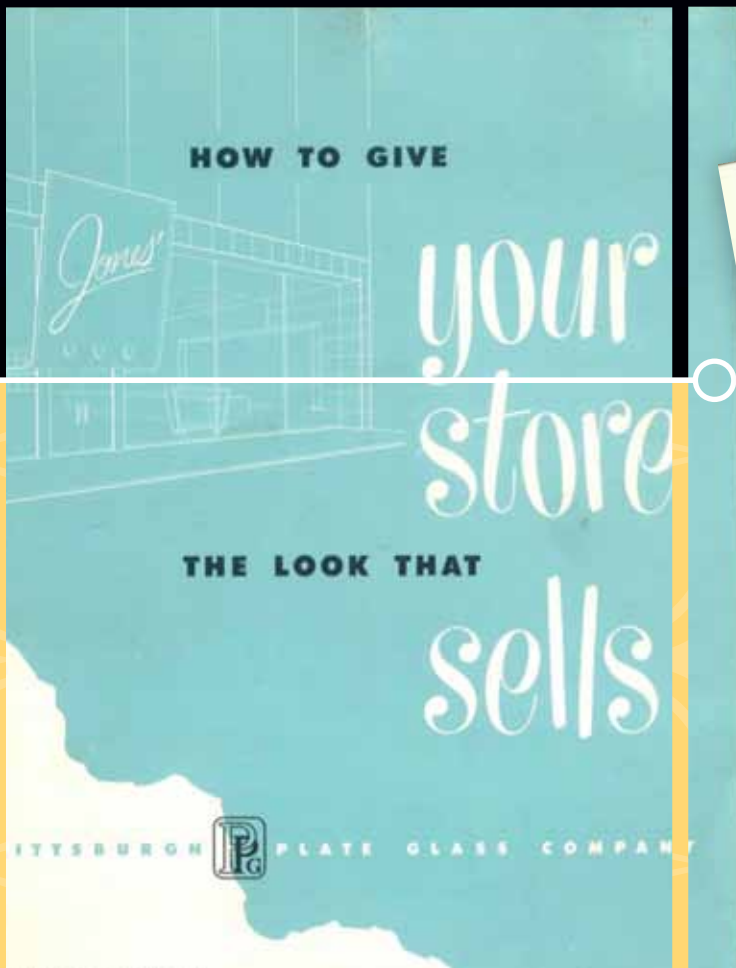
This Charleston, S.C., building with its open storefront and panelized upper-story façade dramatically illustrates the power of the “open front” to make the whole store the display window. The projecting canopy and the freestanding round column add to the drama of this architectural composition.



○ Storefronts of the 1950s



Storefront design in the 1950s was dominated by large display windows made with thin, mill-finished aluminum frames, often set at an angle to the sidewalk. The other storefront materials varied from smooth metal panels to virtually rustic stone walls and panels. The contrast between smooth glass and rough textured stone was particularly noteworthy. Signs included neon and plastic panels with angled pylon signs or “kidney bean” backgrounds that provided visual contrast.



© How to give your store the look that sells. Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co., 1951

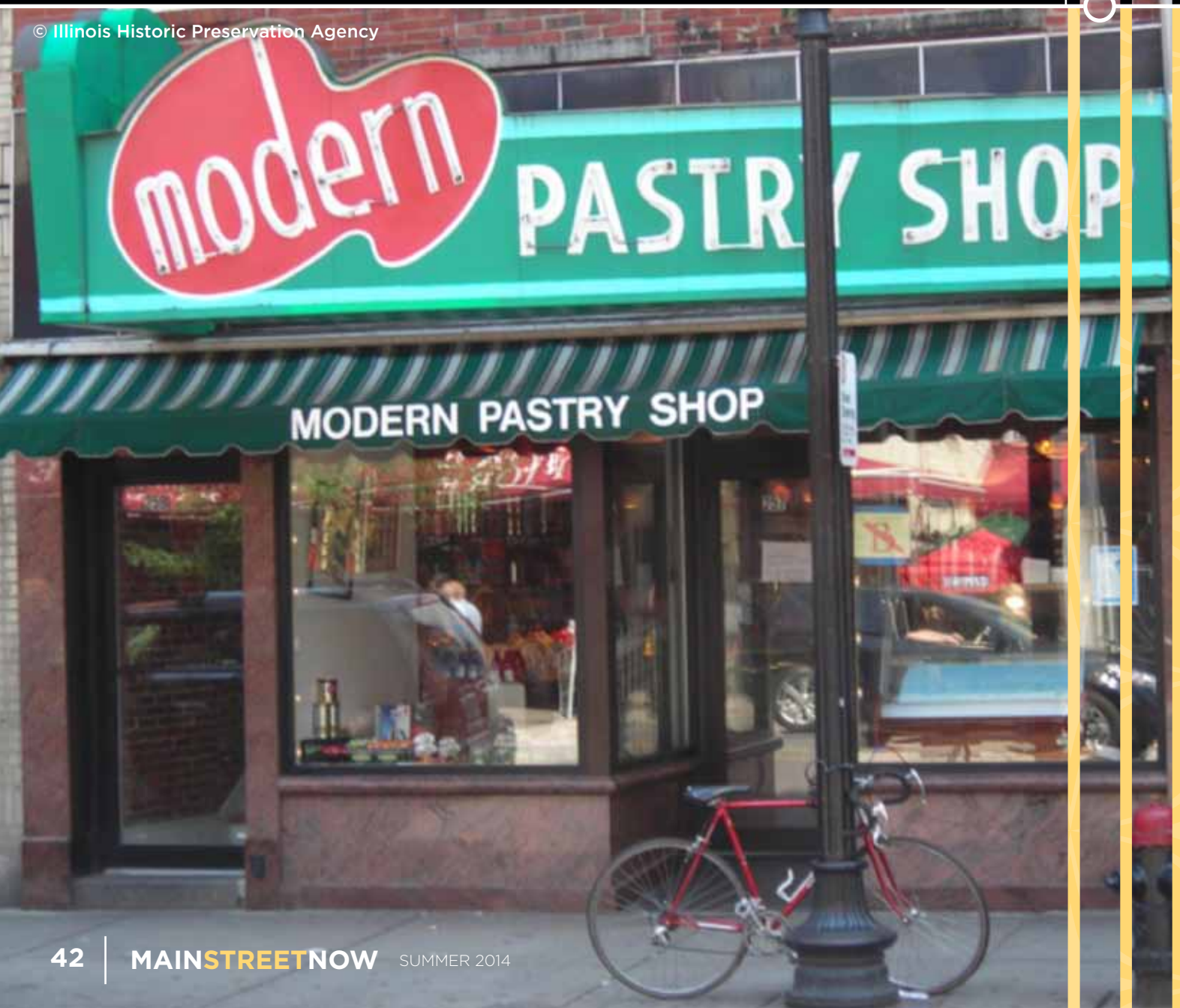


Major glass companies were industry leaders in showing how their materials could be used to renovate storefronts. This volume from 1951 emphasized a comprehensive approach to store modernization that included the upper building façade and the shop interior.



Sometimes, the only major element that was changed to “modernize” a storefront was the sign, as this pastry shop in Boston illustrates. Covering a transom with a new sign was the perfect way to make this transformation, particularly after fluorescent lighting made sunlight a less important factor in lighting store interiors.

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**LIGHTING FOR SHOW WINDOWS
AND OPEN-FRONT STORES**



© Lighting for show windows and open-front stores, 1956. General Electric

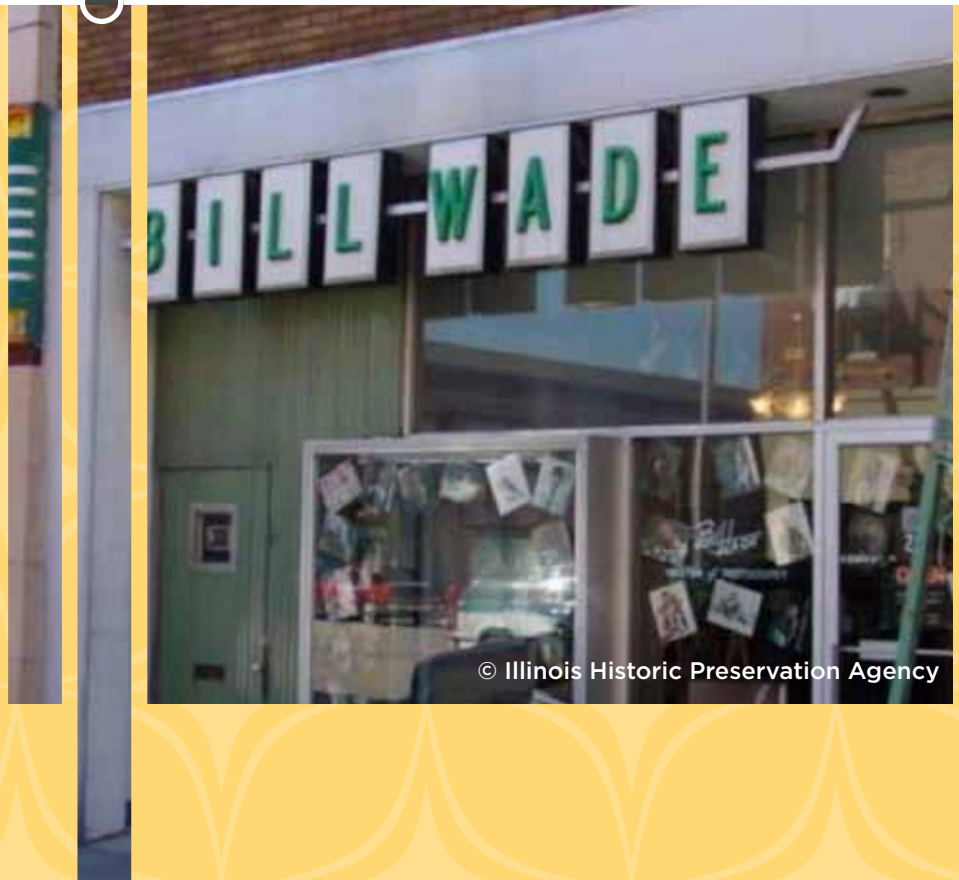
The use of larger display windows and their coordination with the interior design was called the “open front” look. The whole store could be part of the display window, particularly at night, which was why lighting became increasingly important.



© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency



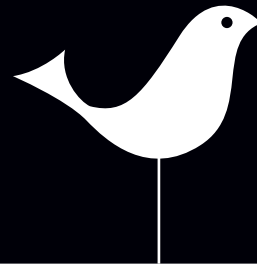
This Main Street shop in Bloomington, Ill., has an “open front” with a variety of display windows, all set against vertical aluminum panels.



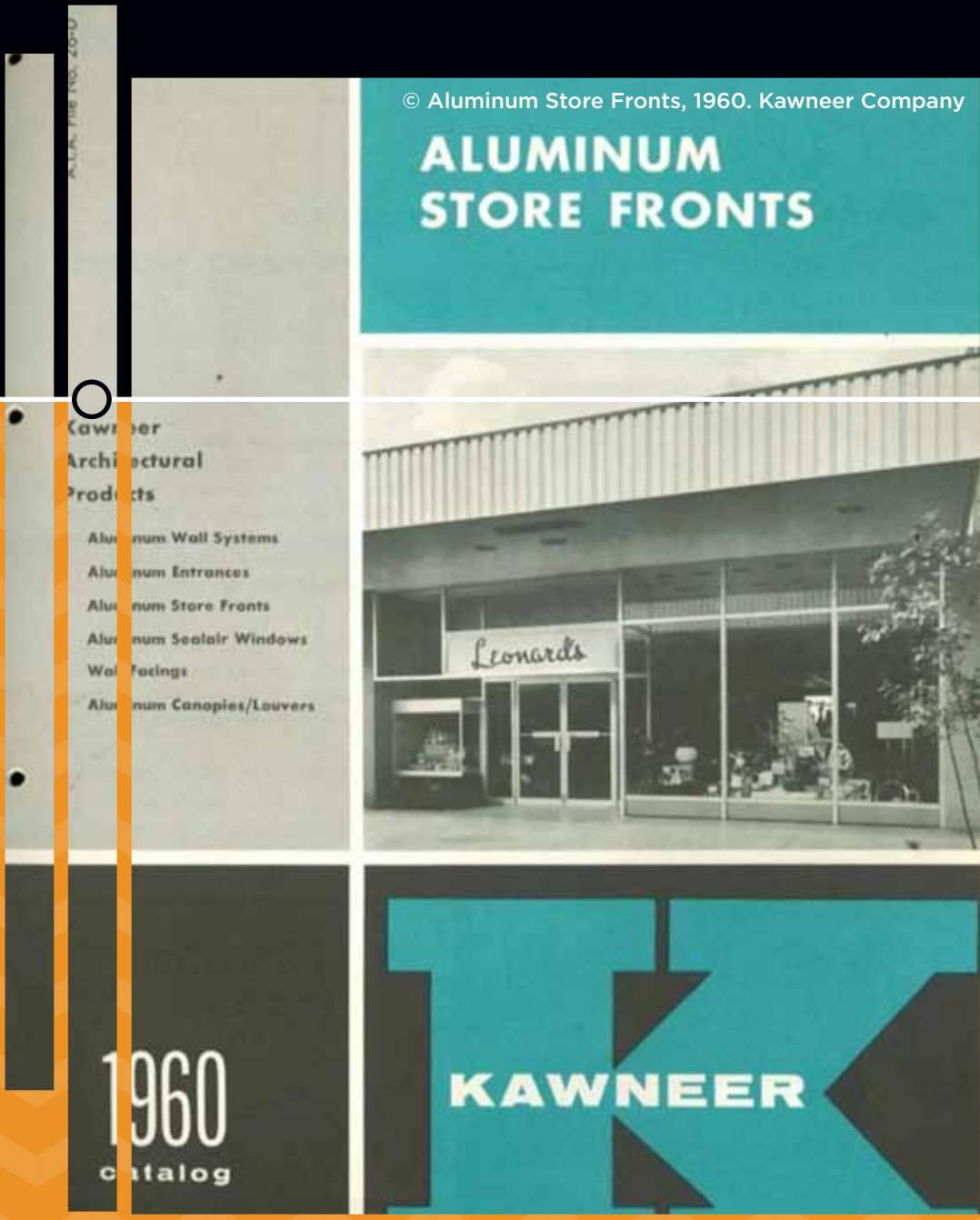
© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

This photographer’s shop in Jacksonville, Ill., features an “open front” with a projecting display window and a sign with individual backlit letters.

○ Storefronts of the 1960s



Storefront design in the 1960s was dominated by the use of commercial systems for the display windows and exterior surfaces. These systems came from a single company. The use of vertical, metal-ribbed panels was a particularly common treatment. The use of the upper-building façade as a large signage band was quite common, with the use of a variety of lightweight panels for easy “cover ups.” Signs using individual large “channel” letters or single back-lit plastic letters provided a bold contrast to the monolithic walls.



© Aluminum Store Fronts, 1960. Kawneer Company

Beginning in 1906, the Kawneer Company pioneered the creation of metal storefronts. By the time this catalog was issued in 1960, the company claimed to have sold more than 2.5 million building fronts.

The striking design of this shoe store in Glen Ellyn, Ill., has a projecting corner bay and horizontal canopy with the main store recessed behind a distinctive landscaped front courtyard.

© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency





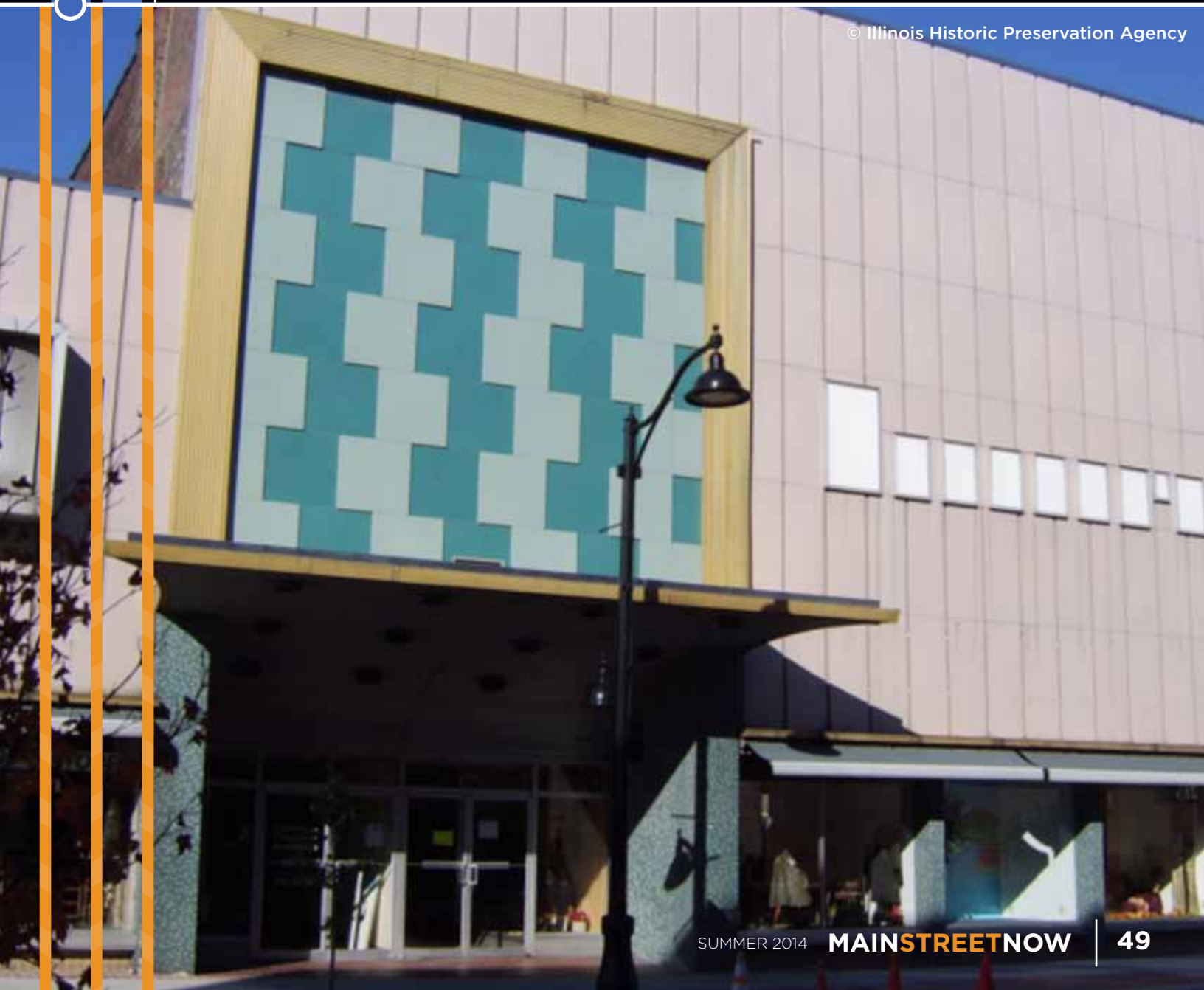
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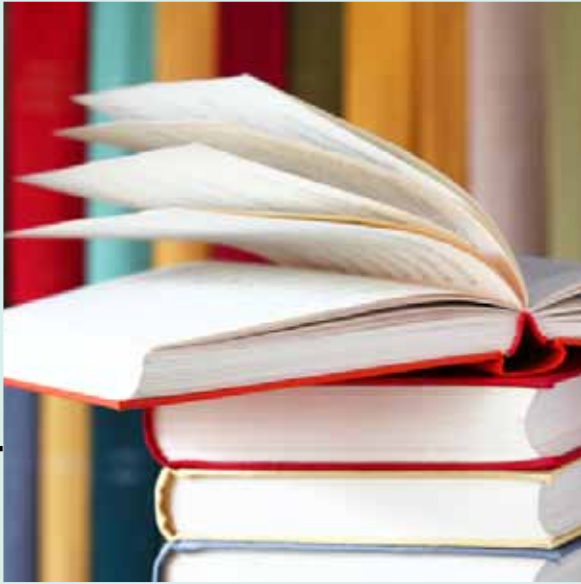
This permanent façade on a series of older buildings in Moline, Ill., is more than just a “slipcover.” It employs a highly stylized use of brick to compose panels and inset layers over an open, arcaded storefront. The blue framing on the window glass is a more recent renovation.

This 1960s “architectural slipcover” in Belleville, Ill., is very well designed. The upper façade has a great composition of panels and may once have had a large sign. The blue tile at the base, the canopies, the awnings, and the aluminum-framed display windows all complement each other in both design and function. This is one of the better designs for an architectural transformation that didn’t need natural light on the upper floors.

© Illinois Historic Preservation Agency



BOOKS ABOUT MAIN STREET



It's been quite a while since the architectural story of Main Street had a major re-write. Richard Longstreth's *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* (1987) still stands as the basic classification guide for anyone doing architectural surveys and National Register nominations. If the book has one major flaw, it is the failure to include much in the way of popular stylistic classifications.

In comparison, Virginia McAlester's *Field Guild to American Houses* doesn't shy away from such classifications and has recently been expanded and greatly revised to include the second half of the 20th century. There is no similar publication for the commercial

architecture of Main Street. In a recent story in the *New York Times*, Ms. McAlester hinted that she is thinking about expanding her view beyond that of residential buildings.

My own contribution to this effort was *Storefronts on Main Street: An Architectural History* (1995), which still serves as a brief guide to the late 19th and early 20th century period. Preservation Brief No. 11, "Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts," written in 1982 by Ward Jandl, has not been updated. Although it is more about treatment options than history, it does mention an Art Deco storefront as an example of "significance gained over time."

More recent publications on commercial (mostly retail) architecture generally fall into two categories—photography or design. A couple of recent publications on commercial architecture in New York and Brooklyn present photo documentaries of neighborhood storefronts. They capture building fronts of various design pedigrees that continue to serve their original functions despite years of deferred maintenance and a merchandising style that connects low prices with low design expectations. The book actually calls them "timeworn."

Storefronts of New York is well done with a good eye for mid-century

storefronts that are still serving their original function. It's a genre of photography that captures the "poetry of decay" and has led to a spate of documentaries on decayed buildings that can be described as "ruin porn." I know I shouldn't be looking at this stuff but I can't help myself. But while these photography books offer a realistic story of "who we are," they don't necessarily provide good models for urban and Main Street revitalization.

The design publications of note have a decidedly mid-century bent to them. The most colorful of these is *Shop America: Mid-Century Storefront Design, 1938-1950* by Steven Heller and Jim Heimann. Although this publication contains a short introductory essay on storefront design of the period, it is basically a series of colorful illustrations of storefront designs. There are few examples of real places of this era.

The most recent and complex publication on the subject is *Signs, Streets and Storefronts: A History of Architecture and Graphics along America's Commercial Corridors* by Martin Treu. This book is an academically text-rich publication that examines urban commercial streets and strip malls as well as Main Streets, with an emphasis on the graphic design of signs.

There are ample black and white photos, mostly from the east coast. *Signs, Streets and Storefronts* is a well-researched publication with a graphic design orientation that adds to the story of mid-century design. However, its tone and style best serve a design-oriented audience rather than the general occupant of a Main Street building.

Taking a broader look at this subject, *Scotland's Shops* by Lindsay Lennie is an excellent publication that covers 200 years of shop design on High Street, the Scottish equivalent of Main Street. Scotland was an early innovator in the production of cast iron, and Scottish shopfronts exhibit many characteristics similar to American storefronts, including the evolution of cast iron, sheet metal and wooden millwork in the 19th century. In the 20th century, Scottish shopfronts followed some of the same trends as American designs, but there are plenty of variations. This publication looks at shopfronts from both a chronological as well as a materials approach. American enthusiasts for Main Street design will enjoy this publication.



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