



# Design Guide 17

## Shop Front Design

## 17.1 SHOP FRONT DESIGN

Shops are a key part of the fabric of our lives and settlements, and represent a defining building type in towns and villages. Whether standing alone or lining high streets, the contribution they make to the appearance, character and dynamics of places is profound. The public face of a shop – the shop front – is by its nature calculated to be a conspicuous presence in the street scene. Consequently, the visual impact of shop fronts, whether through good or bad design, can also be profound.

A well-designed shop front has the potential not only to enhance the appearance and character of a building, street or settlement, but also to make a huge difference in terms of the success of that business. With increasing competition from out-of-town retail parks and supermarkets the onus on those involved in the design of shop fronts and the appearance of high streets has never been greater.

A town centre or high street characterised by high quality shop fronts has the potential not only to enhance the appearance of that area, but to stimulate prosperity, civic pride and tourism. High

quality design should therefore be the aspiration of all involved in the creation of shop fronts.

When considering the design of a new shop front, the first judgment to be made (assuming there is a pre-existing shop front) is whether the current shop front merits retention and refurbishment.

## 17.2 EXISTING OR HISTORIC SHOP FRONTS

Before an existing shop front is replaced, consideration should be given to its condition, quality and relevance, and why it may need replacing. Even if it has been altered, it may still be worthy of repair and refurbishment; or original details may exist behind later cladding. Restoration may result in a shop front that is more appropriate to the building and its location. The craftsmanship found in older shop fronts is not always easily replicated today, and it is rare that a shop front needs to be entirely replaced for practical reasons.

Where an historic shop front survives, this should be preserved or restored – particularly if it forms a part of a Listed Building. Where an historic



Fig. 1 Leigh & Sons in Witney c.1900



Fig. 2 Leigh & Sons c.2000

shop front has been mutilated, or features have been lost, sufficient evidence (either physical or documentary) may exist to enable an accurate reconstruction. In replicating any lost features, it is important that details are correctly reproduced in appropriate materials.

The application of 'stick-on' mouldings or fascias, the use of plywood, MDF or plastic, and the distortion of original proportions are all likely to result in harm to the original shop front.

### 17.3 NEW SHOP FRONTS

Where a new shop front is required, in order to achieve a successful design the shop front should:

- A) Respond meaningfully to the elevation of the building as a whole; and
- B) Respond meaningfully its street (adjoining buildings) and settlement contexts; and
- C) Demonstrate a clear understanding of the composition of a traditional shop front; and
- D) Make sympathetic and appropriate use of materials and colours; and
- E) Make measured and appropriate use of signage; and
- F) Successfully integrate lighting (internal and external), access and security measures; and
- G) Clearly display goods for sale within; and
- H) Be well maintained.

### 17.4 A) CONTEXT: THE BUILDING ELEVATION

Crucial to the success of a shop front is the degree to which it responds to its context; and most importantly to the building elevation of which it is a part. Traditional, period buildings (often Listed and within Conservation Areas)

make up a large proportion of the stock of premises whose ground-floor use at least is retail. If the character and appearance of such buildings is to be preserved or enhanced, it is critically important that the design of their shop fronts is carefully considered in light of the elevation and building as a whole – as opposed to being designed without due regard to context, and simply 'bolted on'.

### Proportions

In designing a shop front, particular attention should be paid to the proportions of the shop front. The shop front should not be overly expansive relative to the overall elevation, but should follow the proportions established by the elevation.

In terms of its lateral proportions, the shop front should not extend the full width of the building, but should be contained within piers of the same material as the main elevation (for example, stone or brick) extending down to ground level at either side. These not only provide visual enclosure and separation to the shop front, but also serve compositionally to integrate it with the elevation above. Where this is not possible, substantial pilasters should be used to provide strong framing elements to either side of the shop front.

In terms of height, and to avoid the shop front 'chopping' the building in two horizontally, the top of the shop front (the cornice plus fascia) should remain clear of the sills of the first-floor windows, and should not meet with or cut into them.

The vertical divisions of the shop front provide a key way in which the shop front can be made to relate well to the elevation as a whole. The main vertical divisions established in the elevation above – such as those provided by bays, piers or windows – may be carried down through the shop front, in order to respect and respond meaningfully

to the elevation as a whole, and to ensure the architectural harmony of the overall composition. The continuation of these strong verticals also provides visual support for the building, rather than leaving it 'floating' above a weak shop front.

### Character/ design approach

Another fundamental aspect of context to consider is the character of the building. Is the building traditional or modern, vernacular or high status, humble or imposing? What date or period does it belong to? (for example, Georgian, Victorian or twentieth-century?)



Fig. 3 The shop front should respect the overall elevation

If traditional, what characteristics does the building have that might meaningfully be reflected in the design of its shop front? (for example in terms of the design or scale of existing mouldings and motifs, patterns of glazing, colours or typography appropriate to the building?) If the building is traditional, this need not preclude a modern design approach; however, the implications for the elevation as a whole will need to be carefully considered, in order to ensure that the pre-existing character of the building is not harmed.

### 17.5 B) CONTEXT: THE STREET

While the building elevation provides the most important context for the shop front, other wider contexts should also be considered, including that provided by the adjoining buildings and street scene. Careful consideration will need to be given as to how a proposed new shop front – in all of its particulars, including scale, proportions, traditional or modern design, colour and signage – will relate to adjoining and nearby shop fronts. In responding meaningfully to its individual building context, it may also be appropriate, for example, to respect the stallriser or fascia height of the flanking shop fronts.

Where the buildings vary in date and design along a street or in an area (and are not uniform) the shop fronts, too, should vary in their composition and design. It is more important that a shop front relates well to the specific building elevation of which it is a part, than conforms artificially to the design of nearby shop fronts belonging to fundamentally different buildings. Vibrant, traditional high streets are generally characterised by the richness and variety, and not the uniformity, of their shop fronts.



Fig. 4 Variety characterises traditional high streets



Fig. 5 The components of a traditional shop front

## 17.6 C) COMPOSITION OF A TRADITIONAL SHOP FRONT

A traditional shop front is composed of a number of distinctive, well established elements – most notably a stallriser (base), a fascia (top) and sometimes pilasters (to either side) – which together provide the basic frame for the shop front.

These elements are equally relevant to traditional and modern shop front design; with the adaptability of these and other elements (including doorways, mullions and glazing bars), allowing for almost limitless compositional variety.

Only through the careful resolution of all these elements, however, will a successful design result – one that responds sympathetically to the immediate context of the elevation of the building as a whole, and to the wider contexts of street and settlement.

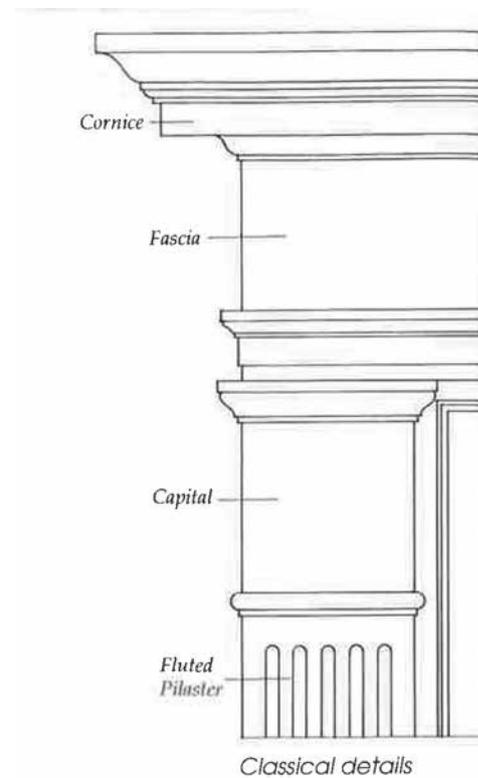


Fig. 6 Classical shop front details

### Fascia

This is perhaps the most important element in the composition of a shop front. The fascia is the uppermost, and most visually prominent, element of the shop front's frame, and provides the hoarding upon which the name of the shop is generally displayed. In traditional shop fronts, the fascia itself should be made of timber, with hand-painted lettering (see *SIGNAGE* below).

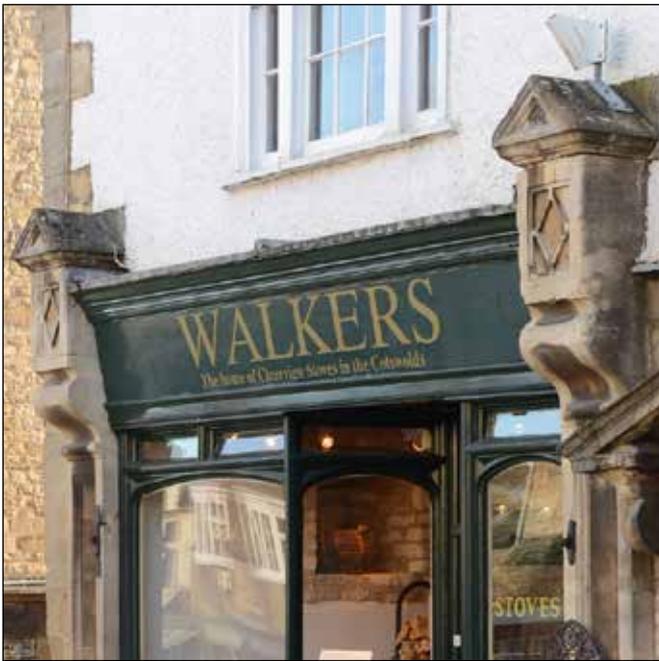


Fig. 7 A traditional (canted) fascia

The depth of the fascia is crucial, and should be in proportion both to the other elements of the frame (including the stallriser and pilasters) and to the elevation as a whole. It should not be excessively deep (generally less than c.400mm), as not only are deep fascias not locally traditional, but they can be unduly visually dominant, leading to the shop front having a top heavy appearance.

The fascia should be kept well below first-floor window sill level. It may be aligned with the wall plane, or may occasionally be canted forwards, in order to make it more legible to shoppers.

Traditional fascias generally have a projection above in the form of a moulded cornice (often with lead flashing), which is both decorative and functional, giving a clear edge to the top of the shop front, and affording weather protection by throwing rainwater clear of the fascia itself. The fascia may also have a raised moulding or architrave below.

In some instances, a suitable retractable awning or canopy may be incorporated into the cornice of a traditional shop front. This might be plain, or display the name of the shop.

### Stallriser

The stallriser provides the shop front with a conspicuous physical base. If the stallriser is excessively low (less than c.300mm) or non-existent, the frame of the shop front is likely to appear weak and less well anchored, and the elevation as a whole visually undermined by the apparent lack of a solid base. Additionally, the stallriser protects the frontage from knocks and splashes, and can also be used to increase security provision.

Traditional stallrisers may be left as exposed stone, or clad in timber (either left plain, or with a moulded or recessed panel finish). Locally, exposed stone stallrisers are a common feature of period shop fronts.

The stallriser should be topped by a sill substantial enough to provide a robust, visible base for the windows, and to throw water clear of the stallriser below. The sill should not generally project forward of any pilasters or the opening in which the shop front is installed.

### Pilasters

Pilasters generally form the flanking uprights in traditional shop fronts, dividing shops from their neighbours or dividing longer shop fronts into a number of bays. They generally project proud of the shop front, and are terminated by a base or plinth at ground level, and topped with a capital, console, or a combination of the two at fascia height (the elements approximating with those of a classical column).

Where capitals are present, these typically 'support' the fascia; where consoles are present, these generally bookend the fascia (and may themselves carry a moulded projection or corbel; see fig. 5). If the fascia does not have enclosing console brackets, it should have returns back to the wall. The pilasters, bases, capitals and corbels may be variously moulded, with pilasters sometimes having fluted faces.

Like the other framing elements of a traditional shop front, pilasters should relate well in their proportions to the other principal elements of the frame, most notably the fascia and stallriser (with typical pilaster width in the range 150–250mm).

### Windows and doors

Fenestration and doorway/s should relate meaningfully to the elevational context, particularly in terms of the character and composition of the elevation. The height of the window is generally governed by the size of the structural opening. The visual proportions of the glazing are generally greatly improved if it has a vertical emphasis (the individual panes taller than they are wide) – this can be achieved through the use of mullions to subdivide the glazing.



Fig. 8 Windows and doors should relate to the elevation

Large undivided sheets of glazing are not generally characteristic of traditional shop fronts. Smaller paned designs may be appropriate (for example, for early Victorian buildings); while larger paned designs may be appropriate for late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century buildings. The fenestration may vary across the window – with, for example, an area of smaller paned glazing in the top of the window above doorway height, separated from the more expansive display glazing below by a transom.

Doorways may be recessed in order to break up and relieve a shop front, and to afford shelter to those entering or leaving the shop. Doors, meanwhile, should also be considered as integral to the composition as a whole, typically with the height of the solid lower portion matching that of the adjoining stallriser.

### 17.7 D) MATERIALS AND COLOURS

Painted timber is the traditional material for shop fronts. It is versatile, durable, relatively cost effective and simple to maintain and refurbish. Materials such as aluminium and plastic (acrylic or

Perspex) are not generally appropriate for shop fronts in historical contexts, being conspicuously modern materials that tend to look out of place on historic buildings.



Fig. 9 The consistent use of colour

There is no standard formula for shop front paint schemes. However, restrained, dark colours often work well, as they can act as a good foil and strong frame for window displays. Lighter colours tend to appear more intrusive, look dirty or faded more quickly and need more frequent maintenance.

Corporate colour and branding, which makes little or no reference to local distinctiveness (indeed, is intended to impose a universal and unvarying brand message), may be inappropriate in historical contexts. However, even minor variations to corporate colour and branding can result in a greatly improved design, and a more meaningful response to a local context.

*For further information on paint colours, including shop fronts, see: Design Guide 19: Traditional Paint Colours.*

### Signage

The purpose of shop front signage is primarily to inform shoppers of the name and nature of the business. It is important that this information and its display is carefully considered, proportionate and appropriate to its context.



Fig. 10 Signage should be proportionate and in keeping

On principal signage (the fascia and sometimes a hanging sign) the name and nature of the business is generally sufficient. Other information, including opening times and contact details can be displayed on much smaller secondary signs, on entrance doors or within windows. Excessive signage (including excessive text upon signage), can lead not only to a visually cluttered shop front, but also to a dilution of the message and branding being projected by that shop front.

Shop signs should be well designed in their own right, and relate meaningfully to the design of the shop front as a whole, and to the elevation/ building more widely. Lettering and text in particular should be carefully considered – in terms of their design, colour and size of typography – in order to meaningfully reflect the nature of the business, and

the character of the elevation/ building. Lettering on principal signs (both fascia and hanging signs) should be sign-painted on timber.

Projecting signs are not always appropriate in historic areas or as additions to historic buildings. Where they are acceptable, however, they should generally take the form of a traditional hanging sign, with no more than one for any given shop front. Traditional hanging signs should be sign-painted with a free-swinging board suspended below a wrought iron bracket. The size and proportions of the sign board should relate well to other aspects of the shop front, and be neither overly large, nor so small as to render the sign unintelligible.

Where an original bracket remains in place, this should be reused if possible. Otherwise, while a more elaborate wrought iron bracket may be appropriate in some traditional contexts, in most cases a simple bracket will be appropriate. In terms of position, this will vary from building to building, and will depend on such factors as the composition of the elevation, and the position of hanging signs on adjoining buildings. However, at or around first floor window height is typical.

Occasionally, where a fascia sign may not be appropriate (for example, in the case of a traditional residential property converted for retail use at a later date, but not having a proper shop front) the application of individual cut-out letters directly to the stonework may be appropriate.

### **17.8 F) LIGHTING, ACCESS & SECURITY**

The illumination of town centres, pedestrian spaces and linking routes requires a co-ordinated approach to lighting, in order to ensure a safe and vibrant night-time environment and economy. Particular care will be needed in historic settlements, where inappropriate lighting, or levels of lighting, may be

visually harmful. In Conservation Areas, and where the levels of street lighting and the light from shop windows is adequate for trade, illuminated shop signage may be inappropriate.

Where illuminated signage is deemed acceptable, the lighting should be carefully integrated as part of the overall design, being discreetly concealed rather than conspicuously added as an afterthought. Internally illuminated box fascias, individually illuminated or 'halo-lit' lettering, swan neck and projecting spotlights and fluorescent lighting generally appear out of place in historical areas. It is not usually appropriate to illuminate projecting or hanging signs unless they belong to a public house, restaurant or similar late-opening premises.

#### **Access**

New shop fronts should be designed in such a way as to accommodate the needs of elderly and disabled people. As a general principle, steps should be avoided and doors should be openable by people in wheelchairs. Frameless glass doors, as well as being generally inappropriate for period buildings, should be avoided, as they can present a hazard to the young and partially sighted.

In the case of Listed Buildings and sensitive historical areas, the needs of elderly and disabled people should be accommodated as far as possible, commensurate with the need to preserve the character of the building or area.

#### **Security**

When installing a new shop front, questions of security should always be taken into account. However, a measured approach needs to be taken, preferably as part of comprehensive approach to crime reduction in an area, rather than a piecemeal approach being taken by diverse business owners.

While the need for adequate security – and the attendant pressures of insurance – are recognised, it is important that the attractiveness and vibrancy of shops and shopping areas is not eroded by overbearing security measures. In general, security should entail discreet or invisible alterations only.

The use of external steel roller shutters should be avoided – particularly in Conservation Areas. Research suggests that solid shutters create a hostile environment, deterring public from an area and removing the natural deterrent of activity, thereby encouraging the problems they seek to prevent. Laminated glass or solid shutters behind the glazing are aesthetically preferable.

CCTV schemes can provide benefits over a wide area with minimal harm to appearance. Individual CCTV installations either within premises or on the exterior of premises may assist security.

### 17.9 G) WINDOW DISPLAY

As the majority of a shop-front will comprise the window display, the treatment of this aspect of its design is also important – both for the appearance and success of the shop itself, and for that of the street and wider area. Clarity and an absence of visual clutter are generally key ingredients in a successful window display: a few carefully chosen and well displayed items are likely to result in a more eye-catching and enticing display than one crammed haphazardly with goods.

Shop windows should not be obscured by a proliferation of stickers or posters. The internal illumination of the window display should also be carefully considered: subtle, focussed lighting of the goods being displayed can greatly enhance a window display; while harsh, overly bright or unvarying illumination can undermine it.



Fig. 11 Particular care should be taken with window displays

### 17.10 H) MAINTENANCE

Regular maintenance of shop fronts is vital if shops and retail areas are to remain attractive and vibrant. This is especially important in the case of traditional joinery and metal surfaces. Neglect will lead to deterioration and unnecessary expenditure on repairs or replacement. Most retail areas have empty shops. In order to avoid these properties detracting from the character of the street, owners should ensure that maintenance and repair is continued pending a change of tenant.

### 17.11 MODERN SHOP FRONTS

The same basic principles set out above in relation to traditional shop fronts also apply to modern shop fronts. In terms of context, it is vital that the composition of a modern shop front responds meaningfully to the elevation of which it is a part. The basic horizontal components of the traditional shop front – the fascia-plus-cornice and stallriser – should be respected in order to create a strong and meaningful top and base for the shop front and the display glazing.

The components themselves, however, might be handled quite differently. A common strategy is for the composition and the individual features to be simplified, in order to give a 'cleaner', pared-down aesthetic. This might involve the use of larger areas of glazing; less conspicuous framing of glazed areas; the omission or simplification of pilasters, consoles, capitals and mouldings; the use of untraditional colours, modern typography or internal lighting. Where pilasters are not used, the sides of the display glazing, and the lateral extent of the shop front, should be clearly defined by the outermost vertical framing elements of the shop front, in order that the edges of the shop front, and the frame as a whole, remain clearly discernible.

Whether a traditional or modern approach is taken, if the context is a traditional building the shop front should generally still be of timber.

Common failings in modern shop fronts include missing, badly proportioned or badly designed components, such as too-deep fascias (top heavy), too-low stallrisers (weak or undermined base), too-thin or missing uprights (weak framing), 'stuck-on' features, including fascias and mouldings; garish or cluttered signage, and inappropriate materials and lighting.

### **17.12 PLANNING CONTROL**

Shop fronts come under planning control, and may need any or all of the following consents: Planning Permission, Advertisement Consent and Listed Building Consent (if the building is Listed).

As with all other forms of proposed development, it is strongly recommended that contact is made with the Planning Department before an application is made, in order to determine both what consents may be required, and whether or not the proposals are likely to be supported in their current form.