



# City of Easton Historic District Commission

## GUIDELINES FOR COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES



Many of Easton's commercial buildings include ground floor storefronts with office above. In this example, the suspended signage at the building entrance, following the contour of the central arched opening.

### PURPOSE

These *Guidelines* were prepared to assist commercial property owners and tenants with information when considering the repair, alteration or installation of storefronts, installation of signs and awnings, and the design of accessible entrances. It is not intended that these *Guidelines* should replace consultation with qualified architects, contractors, the Historic District Commission (HDC), City Staff and applicable ordinances.

These *Guidelines* were developed in conjunction with the City of Easton's Historic District Commission (HDC), and the Bureau of Planning. Please review this information during the early stages of planning your project. Familiarity with this material can assist in moving a project quickly through the approval process, saving applicants both time and money. The HDC and the Bureau of Planning are available to provide informal informational meetings with potential applicants who are considering a project that might include exterior changes to their properties.

Additional *Guidelines* addressing other historic building topics are available at City Hall and on the City's website at [www.easton-pa.com](http://www.easton-pa.com). For more information, to clarify whether a proposed project requires HDC review, or to obtain applications, please call the Bureau of Planning at (610) 250-6500.

### COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

The economic development of Easton's retail areas and the commercial properties within it is encouraged. It is recognized that Easton's vibrance is linked to the viability of its businesses. Every effort will be made to assist commercial building owners and tenants with revitalizing older retail areas and buildings, helping to attract new customers while promoting an appreciation of historic architecture.

The goals for commercial buildings are to:

- Encourage compatibility and provide a visual connection with the historic building and context
- Provide variety and vitality along commercial corridors
- Encourage the greatest amount of design flexibility
- Identify those elements that are indisputably detrimental to the historic streetscape
- Encourage the consideration of how a proposed storefront and sign or awning relates to each property, the streetscape and the historic context

### INFORMATION FOR NEW BUSINESSES

If considering opening a new business in Easton, City representatives are available to discuss zoning, construction and other requirements applicable to a specific project. Please contact the Bureau of Planning at (610) 250-6500 for more information.

## STOREFRONTS

The attractiveness and overall maintenance of a storefront can greatly influence a casual observer's perception of a building and the business within. Because a positive impression can help draw potential customers, regular maintenance and careful design can be positive on the bottom line. The storefront is one of the most significant features of a commercial building, the business within it and the overall streetscape. Storefronts often included large sheets of glass at display windows with minimally sized mullions and often recessed entries. This configuration allowed merchants to maximize the visibility of their wares to attract potential customers.

Historic storefronts were typically constructed of wood, metal (cast iron, bronze, copper, tin, galvanized sheet metal, cast zinc, or stainless steel), masonry (brick or stone) and clear, translucent or pigmented glass at transoms. Although the specific configurations of storefronts can vary greatly based upon architectural styles, at different buildings and locations, a common feature is large expanses of glass to display merchandise. In addition, it is typical to have a principal entrance to the commercial space and a separate entrance that includes a stair for access to the upper levels.

*The cornice separates the storefront from the brick wall surface above and features decorative end brackets.*



**Storefront Cornices** are projecting moldings at the top of storefronts, providing a visual cap or termination to the storefronts and a separation with the upper floors. Cornice materials can vary widely and include wood, pressed metal, limestone, terra cotta or decorative brick patterns. Cornice details can include brackets, dentils and panels.



*Historic transom windows were often made of leaded glass and can include signage.*

**Transom Windows** may be located above display windows and doorways to provide additional daylight, and can be either fixed or operable for ventilation. They can be either single or multi-paned and historically were often leaded, stained or textured glass. Transom windows can also include signage, lettering or other ornamental details.

**Display Windows** are typically large expanses of glazing to present the available merchandise within a shop. Display windows typically flank the entrance doorway or alcove to a store and can include additional advertising to further entice potential customers.

*The display windows flank the entrance alcove providing additional display areas to entice customers. The entrance door includes a large glazed panel. The floor of the alcove is sloped, providing access to customers with strollers or in wheel chairs.*



**Entrances** at storefronts can be located flush with the outside of the building or recessed within an alcove providing additional display areas and shelter from the elements. In addition to commercial entrances, there can be secondary entrance doors that provide access to upper building floors.

*This fluted structural support is located adjacent to an alcove entrance. The style and detailing complements the storefront design.*



**Structural Supports** at storefronts are necessary to carry the weight of the building and roof above and can be decorative, reinforcing its architectural style. Typically, structural supports flank entrance doors and display windows and can be constructed of wood, cast iron or masonry.



*This polished granite apron provides the base for the storefront window and includes a metal vent.*

**Aprons** act as the base for the display windows and at the interior can provide a raised platform for merchandise display. Aprons can be constructed of a variety of materials with different finishes including wood, masonry and tile.

## STOREFRONT TREATMENT APPROACH

Changes to storefronts can be a costly endeavor that if not properly planned might negatively impact a building's architecture or the business located in it. Prior to considering alterations, property owners should identify the key storefront elements and consider options. By carefully studying alternatives, property owners tend to be much happier with the finished results. When contemplating storefront work, the following approach is recommended:

- a. **Identify Key Historic Elements:** Develop an understanding of the architectural character of the storefront including the overall size, major divisions or bays, placement of components such as doors, windows and distinctive elements. This can be based on selective removals or documentation such as old photographs or drawings.
- b. **Retain, Preserve and Repair:** Once important historic elements have been identified, they should be incorporated into the storefront design. Deterioration of some historic elements might require stabilization, replacement in-kind, or replacement with a similar substitute material utilizing the historic material as the guide.
- c. **Replacement:** Replacement of a historic storefront is only encouraged when the existing storefront materials are too deteriorated to be repairable, or a historic storefront has been encased in a newer storefront and the historic form and detailing are still present allowing for an accurate representation. Replacement of historic storefronts

with modern storefront systems is strongly discouraged; however, appropriate suitable alternate materials that convey the same historic visual appearance can be used where the use of original materials is not technically or economically feasible.

- d. **Reconstructing a New Storefront With Historic Documentation:** If there is no physical evidence of a historic storefront, there might be sufficient historical or pictorial evidence to allow for appropriate reconstruction. Appropriate research is recommended to ensure the greatest degree of accuracy feasible in the reconstruction.
- e. **Installing a New Storefront Without Historic Information:** If there is not sufficient information and documentation to accurately reconstruct a storefront, the new design should be compatible in size, pattern, scale, material and color as the overall building and similar storefronts from the period, but have distinctly contemporary characters that reflect rather than copy historic storefronts.

## HISTORIC STOREFRONT APPEARANCE

Often, remnants of earlier storefronts or "ghosts" of earlier materials are concealed under newer storefront materials and careful selective removals can reveal elements or clues. Another potential source of information is old records, photographs or drawings. These can be advertisements or articles, newspapers, previous business promotional materials or postcards.

## STOREFRONT GUIDE

Although each storefront is unique, the following lists provide general recommendations when addressing storefronts.

*The HDC Typically Approves:*

- Following the Storefront Treatment Approach (Above)
- Maintaining historic storefront components including storefront glass
- Opening previously closed windows
- Maintaining the planes of the historic storefront relative to the building façade including flush, projecting or recessed areas such as alcoves
- Selecting paint colors that complement the style and features of a storefront and building

*The HDC Typically Does Not Approve:*

- Enclosing or removing elements, such as building cornices, storefronts and storefront glazing
- Altering the size or shape of major building forms such as window, door and transom openings
- Installing stylistic elements from periods that are different from the storefront or building and do not complement the overall stylistic expression

- Altering a façade from commercial to residential character unless the building was previously residential and there is sufficient evidence or documentation to provide an accurate representation
- Installing inappropriate materials at storefronts including vinyl siding, some types of wood siding, artificial brick, masonry and mirrored glass
- Installing any material other than clear glass within a display window
- Substantial modification of residential building into a commercial building - such as new storefronts
- Installing window air conditioners or thru-wall air conditioners that are visible from a public way
- Introducing a new storefront or element that alters or destroys historic building materials
- Incompatible designs or false historic appearance based upon insufficient documentation
- Adding a false front or false story to a building

Property owners are encouraged to consult with the HDC early in the process when contemplating storefront modifications. In some instances the HDC can provide information regarding appropriate storefront types and materials for a particular building's style.

## TYPES OF SIGNS IN EASTON

Historically, there are two types of signs; those that are attached to the building and those that are freestanding and placed near buildings. Because buildings in downtown Easton are built at or near the property lines, the majority of signage is attached to buildings. New signs can use similar features of traditional signs to both enhance the character of the building and convey the necessary information to the public.

The following illustrations are intended to provide general examples of sign types that can be found at historic properties and within a historic context.



**Wall Signs** are the most common type of signage in Easton. They are single sided signs mounted parallel to and generally flat against a wall of the building.



**Pin Mounted Signs** are composed of individual letters or logos mounted flat against or slightly proud of the wall of a building. Care should be taken to minimize damage to the wall surface during installation.



*This halo lit wall sign is illuminated behind the individually raised letters.*



**Window Signs** are applied to the interior of the window or door glazing. Signs that are attached to the glazing are generally painted, vinyl appliqué or etched glass. A related option is stained glass. All window signs that are attached to the exterior of the glazing are subject to HDC review. Window signs mounted at the interior of the glazing are not subject to HDC review but must comply with the Codified Ordinances.

**Routed Signs** include an opaque face and internal light that shines through the routed areas, which often includes an accent color.



**Blade Signs** are generally two sided signs that project from the face of a building and span multiple floors.

**Neon Signs**, originally developed in the 1920s, are made of narrow, gas filled electrified tubes. Given Easton's stylistic variety, the use of neon is carefully reviewed by the HDC to determine compatibility with the building and surrounding area. In general, neon is most appropriate on 20th century buildings in highly commercial locations.

**Directory Signs** can be either freestanding or attached to a building and are often used for professional offices. They include information about several businesses on a single larger sign, with an identifying building address and/or building name. For a unified appearance, the individual nameplates on the sign should match each other in size, materials, colors, letter size, case and styles.



**Perpendicular Projecting Signs** are generally two sided signs, suspended from an iron or metal bracket, or projecting building feature, mounted perpendicular to the face of the building or element such as a wall.



**Suspended Signs** are one or two sided signs, generally suspended from an architectural element of a building such as a balcony or porch, mounted parallel or perpendicular to the face of the building.



## SIGN MATERIAL

Early signs were typically made of wood, either attached directly to the building or suspended from metal brackets or overhangs. As technology advanced and building styles changed, a wider range of materials were used. These included bronze, cast iron, stainless steel, etched or painted glass, leaded glass, gold leaf, tile, terrazzo, concrete, stone and enamel and metal panels. Each material was popular during particular time periods, and might not be appropriate at all building locations.

Some materials might no longer be practical for signage installations due to limited availability or expense. When using modern materials care should be taken to select those that offer improved performance, while replicating the appearance of traditional materials. Some modern materials such as plywood may replicate the appearance of a traditional wood sign but will warp or split over time. In addition to materials that appear historic, the HDC welcomes innovative designs and alternate signage materials that are appropriate to the building style and location.

## SIGN SIZE & SHAPE

Easton's Codified Ordinances establishes the maximum size and type of signage; however, the HDC determines the appropriateness of the placement relative to the building's design. In general, the HDC utilizes the following guidelines when reviewing the appropriateness of proposed sign's size:



- Signage should be compatible to scale of the building, adjacent buildings, the streetscape and adjacent signage
- Small scale signs are appropriate to smaller scale buildings and pedestrian traffic, while larger scaled signs are appropriate to vehicular traffic
- Small scale signs are appropriate to primarily residential areas and uses such as professional offices
- Small scale signs are appropriate for buildings that require several signs, which can be grouped in a single directory sign for a unified appearance
- A well-designed smaller sign can have more of an impact than a larger sign, particularly in historic commercial corridors, where the means of travel is by foot or slow moving vehicles
- A sign's shape can reflect the type of business or institution at the location, increasing its impact

## SIGN ILLUMINATION

In many instances, available ambient street or storefront lighting can illuminate signs, which is preferred to the installation of additional lighting. The use and placement of sign illumination is subject to the approval of the HDC. Gooseneck lighting or other unobtrusive light fixture is often the most appropriate choice to illuminate wall signage. Backlit signs are typically inappropriate.



*A single gooseneck light illuminates this wall sign. The conduit for the light and mounting connections for the signage have been concealed.*

## SIGN LOCATION

Although it is helpful to understand a building's type, style and design when locating a sign, in general:

- Signs should not be installed in locations that damage or obstruct important architectural features
- Signage for 1st floor businesses should be located below 2nd floor window sills
- No sign or sign support should be located on the roof or extend above a roof cornice

## ALLOWABLE SIGNAGE

The Codified Ordinances governs allowable signage at each property in Easton. It is recommended that potential applicants for signage and awnings contact the HDC early in the design process to understand the allowable signage at their property.

## HISTORIC SIGNAGE

Historic signage is often an architectural feature that reflects the original owner and use of the building. Although abandoned signs from recent tenants should be removed, it is encouraged that historic signage, that is architecturally integral to the building, be retained.



*Awning valances, or skirts, can act as signage, that includes the business name. In this example, the awning provides needed shade from the afternoon sun for the patrons.*

## AWNINGS

Awnings are a historically popular means of sheltering pedestrians, advertising a business, and protecting window merchandise from sun damage, particularly for storefronts oriented to the south or west. Historically, awnings project at a continuous angle away from the face of the building on a metal frame, terminating at a skirt or valance. Awnings can be fixed or retractable in configuration. Retractable awnings tend to be open sided, while fixed awnings can be either open or close sided.



*Many of Easton's commercial buildings have awning pockets that provide a space for retracted awnings. Retractable awnings allow property owners or tenants the flexibility to manage the amount of sun or shade, while maintaining the visibility of their business name on the valance.*



*Awnings can provide continuity to storefronts as they wrap corners.*

## MOUNTING SIGNS & AWNINGS

Care should be taken in mounting walls signs and awnings to minimize the damage to historic materials. This includes reusing hardware or brackets from previous signs or awnings. If reusing existing hardware or attachment locations is not an option, remove abandoned hardware and patch holes. When installing new signage or awnings, select mounting locations that can be easily patched if the sign or awning is relocated or removed. An example would be to locate anchors in mortar joints rather than mounting directly into brick or stone faces.

When installing signage, such as wall mounted signs, business owners are encouraged to recess fasteners and patch the fastener opening to match the sign background for a more finished appearance, unless the fasteners are part of the overall design. When installing awnings, the HDC encourages the reuse of historic awning pockets and frames with retractable awnings whenever possible.

## SIGN & AWNING COLOR & LEGIBILITY

The contrast between the logo or lettering and background color can greatly increase the overall legibility of the sign. In many instances, limiting the number of colors to those necessary to convey the information also increases the legibility. Similar to selecting a color, when considering letter style for signs and awnings, business owners must balance the need to make them legible, convey the business identity or logo, and complement the historic character of the building and environment. Excessive amounts of text or highly stylized type styles can overwhelm a viewer and render the message ineffective or illegible.

In general, there are three styles of lettering available; serif, non-serif and script. Within each general style are numerous typefaces available, many of which can be varied by making them bold or italicized. Similar to materials, different styles of lettering were typically utilized for specific architectural periods. Applicants are encouraged to utilize lettering and materials that complement their particular building.

### SIGN & AWNING GUIDE

*The HDC Typically Approves:*

- Maintaining and repairing integral historic signage with materials to match the original whenever possible
- Innovative signage that identifies the business, complements the style of the building and is appropriately scaled for its location
- Sign design that reflects the architectural characteristics with materials that are consistent with the historic character of the building
- Using modern, durable sign materials such as Urethane board or MDO board that are similar in appearance to historic materials but offer increased performance
- Existing ambient street light or storefront lighting in lieu of new lighting whenever possible
- Light styles that are consistent with the character of the historic building including location, orientation and brightness
- Customized neon signs to enhance the style or character of a building, if permitted by the Codified Ordinances and stylistically appropriate
- Awning shapes that correspond with the openings they protect
- Canvas fixed or retractable awnings, whose color, style and location are compatible with the building's character
- Awnings whose slope projects down approximately 3'-0" from the face of the building in a continuous angle of approximately 45 degrees, possibly with an 8" to 12" straight or scalloped valance
- Locating awnings between storefront bays
- Limiting lettering and logos to awning valances

*The HDC Typically Does Not Approve:*

- Using fasteners and hangers that destroys important building fabric for the installation of signs or awnings
- Paper signs or graphic films adhered to the exterior of glazing
- Signage that obstructs views into the store through storefront windows and glazing
- Contemporary awning shapes, such as balloon or barrel awnings
- Using awning materials that act as wall signs or are pole supported
- Signs or awnings that obscure architectural features

*The HDC Strongly Discourages:*

- Removing, damaging, altering or encasing historic architectural features with signage or awnings
- Exposed conduit, junction boxes and raceways for signage or lighting
- New billboards, internally illuminated box signs, LED reader boards, flashing or changable message signage, and channel letter signage
- Installing pre-manufactured neon signs at the interior or exterior of a building, advertising a specific product or service, such as alcohol and tobacco products, that is highly visible from the street
- Installing awnings in locations where they are non-functional, such as under a balcony or overhang
- Contemporary or glossy awning materials such as vinyl, plastics or leatherette
- Internally illuminated awnings
- Awnings with a solid or closed underside

## ACCESSIBILITY

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) strives to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities. The ADA recognizes that, for people with disabilities to participate in the everyday activities in their communities such as going to work, eating in a restaurant or shopping in a store, they need to have access to the goods and services provided by businesses. Many business and institutional facilities in Easton were constructed prior to the enactment of the ADA in 1992 and lack features to accommodate people with disabilities, including those who use wheelchairs.

As existing buildings are renovated, they are often required to make accommodations for people with disabilities. One of the most visible exterior alterations required by ADA is the installation of a wheelchair ramp or lift to provide building access. In many locations, these ramps or lifts have been successfully incorporated at the interior of the building envelope with modification of existing door sills. In Easton, some of the commercial building alcoves include sloped floors that allow the passage of patrons in wheel chairs and strollers. (Refer to photograph, *Page 2*) When installing ramps, it is important to remember that if the ramp is too steep or railings are not secure, it can potentially be hazardous.

Other historic features that might require modification to accommodate individuals with special needs are doors, particularly the paired doors often found at Victorian period buildings. The individual leaves of doors tend to be too narrow to allow the passage of a wheel chair. In some cases, the hardware at paired doors can be modified for automatic operation. Another possibility is the reconstruction of the paired doors as a single leaf in a manner that matches the overall design and arrangement of the historic doors.

### *The HDC Typically Approves:*

- Retaining the historic entrance stairs and doors
- If access to the front door is not possible, providing a respectful accessible entrance that is located close to the principal entrance and designed in a manner that is visually unobtrusive and complements the building's style
- Complying with all aspects of the accessibility requirements, while minimizing alterations of the primary building façade and architectural features
- Modifying sidewalk, walkway or entry alcove elevation a few inches, where possible to provide an accessible entry and meet all code requirements
- Installing ramps and/or lifts within the building envelope where it is possible to modify an existing door sill to allow entry at grade – The design of interior features are not subject to HDC review
- Installing a lift in lieu of a ramp if it would be less obtrusive
- Ramp or lift styles that are compatible with the building
- Railings that are as simple and visually unobtrusive



*The historic door has been modified to allow for a wider opening in a respectful manner that maintains the appearance of a paired door opening.*

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This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability or age in federally assisted programs. If you believe that you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility as described above, or if you desire further information, please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity; National Park Service; 1849 C Street, N.W.; (NC200) Washington, DC 20240.

## PREPARATION

All components of the *City of Easton - Guidelines for Commercial Properties* including all text, graphic design, photography and illustrations unless noted otherwise were prepared by:

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