



# City of Newton Historic Preservation

## GUIDELINES FOR COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS



*While Newton's Historic Districts are mainly comprised of residential properties, commercial structures such as this converted mill building in Newton Upper Falls are also an important part of the City's historic fabric.*

### PURPOSE

These *Guidelines* were prepared to assist commercial and institutional 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. They are not intended to replace consultation with qualified architects, contractors, the Newton Historical Commission (NHC), Local Historic District Commissions (HDC) and their Staff. The City's Preservation Planner and the NHC/HDC will be happy to provide a preliminary consultation to potential applicants free of charge.

These *Guidelines* were developed in conjunction with the City of Newton's Historical Commission (NHC), Local Historic District Commissions (HDC), and the Planning and Development Department (PDD). Familiarity with this material can assist owners of designated historic properties to move a project quickly through the City of Newton review and approval process. Information pertaining to all properties with a City of Newton historic preservation review designation is marked with the abbreviation **(ALL)**. Information pertaining specifically to properties in Local Historic Districts **(LHD)**, to Local Landmarks **(LL)**, or to properties with Preservation Restrictions **(PR)** is marked accordingly. Information in the Guidelines that is advisory only is marked with the abbreviation **(AO)**. Please refer to the Introduction section for background information on historic preservation designations and the project review process in the City of Newton.

Additional Guidelines addressing other historic preservation topics are available at City Hall and on the City's website at [www.newtonma.gov](http://www.newtonma.gov). The NHC, HDC, and PDD are available to provide informational meetings or preliminary consultation with applicants prior to filing. For more information, questions regarding the application process, or to clarify whether a project requires review please contact the PDD at (617) 796-1120.

### COMMERCIAL & INSTITUTIONAL PROPERTIES

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

The main goals for commercial and institutional buildings are to:

- Encourage compatibility and provide a visual connection with the historic building and context
- Provide variety and vitality along commercial corridors
- Encourage design flexibility while considering historical appropriateness
- Identify those elements that are integral to the historic streetscape
- Encourage the consideration of how proposed storefronts, signs and awnings relate to each property, the streetscape and the historic context
- Provide respectful, equal access to all commercial and institutional buildings for all citizens and visitors

### INFORMATION FOR NEW BUSINESSES

If you are considering opening a new business in Newton, City representatives are available to discuss zoning and other requirements applicable to a specific project. Please contact the Department of Planning and Development at (617) 796-1120 for more information.

All signage and awnings are subject to the provisions of the Sign Ordinance and review by the Urban Design Commission.



*This historic storefront in Newton Upper Falls is an important element of the streetscape. Note the location of the commercial signage, applied to both the storefront glass and the storefront cornice above the entry door.*

## 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 the business it represents, the building it characterizes, and the streetscape it helps define. 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 possibly a separate entrance that includes a stair for access to the upper levels.



*In mixed-use structures, such as this store and residence in Newton Upper Falls, often combined a commercial storefront with a separate residential entrance.*

## STOREFRONT TREATMENT APPROACH (ALL)

Changes to storefronts can be a costly endeavor that if not properly planned might negatively affect 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 when 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 characteristics 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. Potential sources of information are old records, photographs or drawings. These can be advertisements or articles, newspapers, previous business promotional materials or postcards.



*Simple signs, such as these individual letters on a historic building in Auburndale, can accomplish the goal of signage without compromising the historic building.*

## TYPES OF SIGNS (ALL)

There are generally two types of signs, those that are attached to the building and those that are freestanding and placed near buildings. New signs can use features similar to traditional signs to both enhance the character of the building and convey the necessary information to the public. The choice between attached or freestanding signs may be based upon the property's specific location, needs of the occupant, and limitations in the City of Newton Ordinances. In particular, free-standing signs require a special permit.

*Projecting signs can include information on two faces, attracting potential patrons from both directions.*



## SIGN MATERIAL (ALL)

Early signs were typically made of wood, either attached directly to the building or suspended from metal brackets. As technology advanced and building styles changed, a wider varieties of materials were used. These included bronze, cast iron, stainless steel, etched or painted glass, leaded glass, gold leaf, tile, terrazzo, concrete, stone, and enameled 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 NHC/HDC welcome innovative designs and alternate signage materials that are appropriate to the building style and location.

## SIGN ILLUMINATION (ALL)

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 approval. Gooseneck lighting or other unobtrusive light fixtures are often the most appropriate choice to illuminate wall signage. Backlit signs are typically inappropriate.



*Institutional buildings often include signage. This irregularly shaped sign is located on a historic church in Chestnut Hill.*

## SIGN SIZE & SHAPE (ALL)

The City of Newton Ordinances regulate the maximum number, size and type of signage. However, the NHC/HDC determines the appropriateness of the placement relative to the building's design.

*The NHC/HDC encourage:*

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

## AWNINGS (ALL)

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.

## STOREFRONT GUIDE (ALL)

*The NHC/HDC encourage:*

- Following the *Storefront Treatment Approach* on Page 2
- Maintaining historic storefront components
- Opening previously closed windows
- Maintaining transparency of street-level windows, rather than covering them with displays/advertisements
- Maintaining the planes of the historic storefront relative to the building façade including flush, projecting or recessed areas such as alcoves

*The NHC/HDC discourage:*

- Enclosing or removal of elements, such as building cornices, storefronts and angled 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 the appearance of a residential building as part of a conversion to commercial use

## SIGN & AWNING GUIDE (ALL)

*The NHC/HDC encourage:*

- Signage that does not obscure or damage architectural features, 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
- Etched-glass or vinyl-appliqué signage or 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
- Signage lighting styles that are consistent with the character of the historic building including location, orientation and brightness
- Canvas awnings in shapes that correspond with the openings they protect with lettering and logos limited to awning valances

*The NHC/HDC discourage:*

- Signage that obstructs architectural features or views into the store through storefront windows and glazing
- Exposed conduit, boxes or raceways for signage or lighting
- Neon signs

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- New billboards, internally illuminated box signs, LED reader boards, flashing or changeable message signs
- Contemporary or glossy awning materials such as vinyl, plastics or leatherette; internally illuminated awnings; and waterfall awnings

## ACCESSIBILITY (ALL)

In addition to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), in Massachusetts there are accessibility requirements governed by the Architectural Access Board (AAB) under the code of Massachusetts Regulations, referenced as 521 CMR 1.00. These requirements seek to improve quality of life for people with disabilities. These accessibility requirements exist so that people with disabilities can participate in everyday activities in their communities, such as working, dining out or shopping. Many businesses and institutional facilities in Newton were constructed prior to the enactment of accessibility regulations and lack features to accommodate people with disabilities, including those who use wheelchairs. Property owners contemplating an accessibility project should consult the ABA and its requirements early in the planning process.

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/AAB is the installation of a wheelchair ramp or lift to provide building access. In many cases, these ramps or lifts have been successfully incorporated at the interior of the building envelope with modification of existing door sills. When installing ramps, it is important to remember that if the ramp is too steep or railings are not secure, it can be hazardous.

*The NHC/HDC encourage:*

- 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, preferably at a secondary elevation, 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 or walkway 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
- Installing 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