

Sterling Main Street Design Standards



The physical appearance of a downtown is the direct reflection of the attitudes and values of the citizens. Well-maintained business districts suggest a higher degree of community pride than do downtowns which are unkempt and shoddy. Also, a community's appreciation of itself is often reflected in its attitude toward the preservation of its historic buildings, many of which are usually connected to the founders of the central business district. If the character of downtown Sterling is to be maintained and improved, it is important for property owners and community leaders to be aware that methods for dealing with older buildings often differ from treatments for newer buildings, and that choosing the wrong treatment can cause serious, irreversible damage to historic buildings. These guidelines contain general recommendations to enable property owners and tenants to make the proper decisions regarding their buildings within the downtown area. The Guidelines are applicable to institutional as well as commercial architecture (such as churches).

Sterling Main Street has at its disposal the design and contractor expertise necessary to guide property owners through the proper process. Since drawings and specifications are required to illustrate the design and construction intent, we recommend those resources be used to facilitate façade improvement projects.

1.0 Masonry Wall Surfaces

- 1.1 The exposed surfaces of historic masonry should remain exposed. Historic masonry surfaces should not be covered with artificial materials (dryvit, siding, T-111, etc).
- 1.2 Previously unpainted masonry surfaces should not be painted, since paint will obscure defining features such as joint profiles and bonding patterns and will also create an instant maintenance expense for the future.
- 1.3 Some previously-painted masonry surfaces should be re-painted. If owners wish to clean the paint from historic masonry surfaces it should be undertaken using only the gentlest effective means possible. In no case should abrasive cleaning (i.e., sandblasting, water-blasting, blasting with nut shells, etc.) be used. Further guidance from masonry cleaning is found in the U.S. Department of the Interior's Preservation Briefs No. 1, *The Cleaning and Waterproof Coating of Masonry Buildings* and No. 37, *Removing Graffiti from Historic Buildings*.
- 1.4 A test patch should be taken prior to beginning a major cleaning project. The masonry may not be suitable for cleaning. Always inspect the building fully before beginning a cleaning project; window and door openings may have been

altered and in-filled with brick that does not match the original, and the building may look better re-painted than cleaned. A one square-foot test patch is usually sufficient; areas that are of differing materials or that appear to have been altered should always be tested.

- 1.5 Masonry cleaning, particularly paint-stripping, must be undertaken in an environmentally-responsible fashion. The paint on older buildings in downtown Sterling is likely lead-based and must be disposed of properly.
- 1.6 If re-pointing of historic masonry is required, the mortar should duplicate the original in color and composition and the re-pointed joint profiles should match the original. The use of mortar with high-Portland cement content should be avoided. Further guidance for re-pointing is found in the U.S. Department of Interior's Preservation Brief No. 2, *Re-pointing Mortar Joints in Historic Brick Buildings*.
- 1.7 If patching or replacement of brick is necessary, used brick should be used, with the surface of the brick intended for the exterior being so placed. Do not install replacement bricks that fail to match the original in size, shape, and color.

2.0 Wood Wall Surfaces

- 2.1 Wooden wall surfaces should be sealed to avoid moisture penetration.
- 2.2 Damaged wood siding should be repaired rather than replaced.
- 2.3 When replacement of deteriorated wood is necessary, it should be carried out with new wood of matching size, texture, thickness and profile.
- 2.4 Deteriorated wood surfaces should never be painted or otherwise covered without identifying and treating the initial causes of the deterioration.
- 2.5 New wood should be back-primed prior to installation and all wood surfaces should be scraped, sanded, and cleared of debris prior to paint.

3.0 Windows and Doors

- 3.1 Windows and doors are often some of the most defining features on older buildings, and can comprise as much as one-third of a building's surface area. As such, their care is extremely important and alterations should be carefully planned.
- 3.2 Original window and door opening sizes should not be modified, and openings that have been changed should be returned to their original configuration and

- dimensions. New glazing for existing storefront systems and doors that look period specific, and also meet the needs of current energy and egress codes, are available and should be utilized.
- 3.3 Windows and doors should be repaired, rather than replaced. If replacement is necessary, it should be undertaken using units that match the original in material, configuration of panes, and dimension. Vinyl replacement windows are not allowed.
 - 3.4 Resist the temptation to “early up” a building by installing windows with small-paned sash unless the historic appearance of such sash can be documented. The buildings within the downtown Sterling were constructed after larger sheets of plate glass became available.
 - 3.5 Storm doors do not work with current building codes due to emergency egress accessibility requirements. They are also not appropriate to the era of the buildings. A double door vestibule would be appropriate, and energy efficient doors in compliance with energy and egress codes are available that give a more historically accurate appearance.
 - 3.6 If exterior storm windows are used, they should fit the opening of the windows without having to infill any portion of the opening or flattening any portion of an arch. Storm windows should be installed within the window opening, rather than on the outside surface of the building or the window frame and dividers should match those on the primary window unit.
 - 3.7 Interior storm windows offer a good alternative and do not compromise the exterior appearance of the window; often, a window with a curved sash has a flat-topped inside frame which can easily accommodate an interior storm window.
 - 3.8 Shutters should be used only when their original appearance can be documented by physical evidence (shutter hinges, silhouettes, or holes in the window frames) or through a photograph. If shutters are to be used, they should be hung onto the face of the window frame – not the wall- using hinges and should be sized to fit one-half of the window opening. Due to the age of the buildings in downtown Sterling, it is unlikely that shutters were ever used and their installations should be avoided unless the above documentation is present.
 - 3.9 The use of window air conditioners that are easily visible from the street is not allowed; every attempt should be made to insert units on secondary elevations.
 - 3.10 Consult additional guidance found in US department of the Interior’s Preservation Brief No. 3, *Conserving Energy in Historic Buildings* and in Preservation Brief No. 9, *The Repair of Historic Wooden Windows*.

4.0 Painting

- 4.1 If paint failure is occurring, always identify the source of the problem before beginning a painting project.
- 4.2 All surfaces should be dry and properly prepared prior to painting. Careful scraping and hand-sanding will assure that the surfaces are free of debris.
- 4.3 Caulk all joints carefully; caulking not only provides for a more uniform painted surface but can also assist in creating a more energy-efficient building.
- 4.4 Prime all surfaces prior to painting; surfaces of new wood that will not be exposed should be “back-primed” prior to installation in order to assure the longest durability.
- 4.5 Never remove paint from wood wall surfaces by abrasive methods. Sandblasting will damage the wood irreparably and water-blasting subjects the surface to an unusually high volume of moisture and can cause long-term moisture infiltration problems.
- 4.6 Choose paint colors which are appropriate to the era in which the building was built, and place the colors on the building (lights and darks) as they would have been placed historically.
- 4.7 Ideally, oil-based paint should be applied over oil-based paint and latex over latex.
- 4.8 Clear finishes and stains are generally not appropriate for historic buildings within downtown Sterling. If pressure-treated wood has been used for a project, it should be painted.
- 4.9 Consult US Department of the Interior’s Preservation Brief No. 10, *Exterior Paint Problems on Historic Woodwork*.

5.0 Commercial Architecture, General

- 5.1 The facades of historic commercial buildings generally consist of three major components: the storefront-the first story; the upper façade-the second, third or fourth story; and the cornice-the decorative feature at the top. Each of these elements is important unto it and should be maintained accordingly.
- 5.2 Consult the detailed guidance contained in the following specialized publications which deal specifically with historic commercial facades.

- U.S. Department of the Interior’s Preservation Brief No. 11, *Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts*.
- Preservation League of New York State Technical Publication No. 2, *A Practical Guide to Storefront Rehabilitation*.
- National Main Street Center publication, *Keeping up Appearances: Storefront Guidelines*.

6.0 Storefront

- 6.1 Always avoid the use of historically inappropriate materials. Storefronts are highly visible and materials should be of the highest possible quality and should reflect the character of the individual building.
- 6.2 The storefront area should remain as transparent as possible. Display windows should not be reduced in size; if the retail space is converted to a different use, privacy can be assured through the use of full-size blinds or curtains.
- 6.3 If display windows are replaced, replacement should use thermo pane glass and should retain the dimension of traditional display windows.
- 6.4 If transom windows are found above the display windows they should be retained, particularly if they are of art glass. In new storefront construction, transoms may or may not be included within the design.
- 6.5 Bulkheads below the display windows should be retained. If new bulkheads are to be installed, they should be of wood and may have recessed panels (applied molding strips should be avoided), and should not be any more than about twenty inches in height.
- 6.6 Significant surviving historic elements, such as storefront cornices and the cast iron supports found on several Sterling buildings should be retained and re-used in any rehab project.
- 6.7 Entry doors set flush with the building should be avoided. Instead, doors should be recessed within an entryway set at either a thirty-degree angle to the plane of the building, or perpendicular to the front wall of the building. The recessed entry provides a more inviting entrance and creates additional sight line opportunities for visual merchandising. There are a significant number of historic resources available in the City of Sterling for accurate original storefront reference.
- 6.8 The storefront should be visually “contained” within the upright structural piers of the building. Storefront materials and color should not spill onto the uprights which frame the storefront.

- 6.9 Substitute materials conveying the same sense of design as the original may be considered for rehab projects.

7.0 Upper Façade

- 7.1 Improvements to the upper façade should follow the rhythm and lines of the building's original design and maintain a consistent relationship to adjacent buildings. Upper windows are a predominant character-defining feature on multistory buildings.
- 7.2 Windows should be retained within the upper façade without alteration to their openings; refer to guidelines for windows, above.
- 7.3 Windows that have been downsized or covered should be reopened to maintain the size and proportion of the historically correct window openings.
- 7.4 The original masonry window openings should always be maintained. Under no circumstances should any window opening be blocked in or covered with a solid material. (No new masonry, plywood, etc.) Such coverings present a fire hazard because solid coverings can obscure flames and serve as an impediment for firefighting.
- 7.5 Window coverings such as shades or curtains can mask unused upper floor space and are an acceptable alternative to blocking in windows that are no longer needed for day lighting or ventilation. Window coverings also assist with the overall appearance of buildings from the street level.
- 7.6 When upper level windows are missing or are in need of replacement, the openings should not be resized or downsized in any way to accept stock windows; replacement window must fit the entire opening and resemble the style and profile of the original window.
- 7.7 Windows should always use clear glass. Reflective, frosted, or tinted glass is strongly discouraged and not historically accurate. There are a variety of glass products that minimize heat gain and loss without substantially affecting appearance. Examples of such products include thermal glazing with clear or Low "E" glass.
- 7.8 Original exterior surfaces should be retained or restored if covered or altered; refer to comments about masonry cleaning, wood wall surfaces, pointing, and painting, above.

8.0 Cornice

- 8.1 Cornices, whether of metal, wood or masonry, are some of the most highly-ornamented features on commercial buildings. Original or existing cornices and/or building caps should be retained and repaired.
- 8.2 When applied cornices have been removed, replacement of the correct historic cornice is strongly encouraged. If replacement is not feasible, a simplified design should be created, in keeping with the original cornice and those of neighboring buildings, and installed to define the top of the building and to maintain the visual unity of the building topics in that block.
- 8.3 Brick cornices should be pointed as needed; refer to repointing guidelines, above.
- 8.4 Wood cornices should be repaired, primed, and painted; refer to painting guidelines, above.
- 8.5 Metal cornices may be repaired as one would repair metal on automobile-using body putty or a similar material.
- 8.6 Replacement cornices may be fabricated of wood or of a synthetic such as ‘Fypon’, MDO, ‘AZEK’ trim boards or equal.

9.0 Signage

The quality of the graphic message conveyed by a business district is nearly as important as is the district’s architectural message. In older downtowns such as Sterling, signage should be designed in such a way that it does not impact adversely on the district’s historic commercial buildings, but acts as a positive visual force in the downtown atmosphere.

- 9.1 Signage should be installed in a manner that does not obscure or destroy significant features on a building and will conform to current local sign ordinances.
- 9.2 Signage should be mounted so that holes can be patched easily. Whenever possible, mount signs in mortar joints, not directly into the masonry units. If holes or hangers from earlier signs remain, try to make use of them, if appropriate to current ordinance.
- 9.3 Signs should be externally illuminated, not internally illuminated. “Gooseneck” lights should be used for signage, hung from buildings and “up-lighting” should be used for free-standing ground signs.

- 9.4 Some storefronts retain their natural signbands, which were constructed when the building was new. Signs should be placed within these signbands whether using painted signboards or individual three-dimensional letters.
- 9.5 The widespread use of neon, which involves delicate glass tubes filled with electrified gas, occurred in the 1920s and is only appropriate for a limited number of buildings.
- 9.6 The use of foam, vinyl or plastic signage is generally not appropriate for buildings in the historic central business district.

10.0 Awnings

Awnings can be a highly effective means of providing visual excitement to an individual building or entire commercial area.

- 10.1 Like signage, awnings should be attached to buildings with minimal impact upon the architectural fabric.
- 10.2 While awnings are easily removed and cause no irreversible damage to the building, it is generally recommended that the traditional sloped awning form be used rather than awnings with more contemporary profiles or flat “marquee” canopies.
- 10.3 Awnings may be installed on a fixed, rigid frame of piping or any retractable on rollers or scissor arms.
- 10.4 Since natural materials such as cotton and canvas are very susceptible to decay, it is recommended that awning fabric be of a synthetic material, e.g. “Sunbrella” or an equivalent.
- 10.5 Fabric color should be coordinated with the color of the storefront, signage, or other building component.
- 10.6 Graphics may be painted or sewn onto the valance, the sideflap, or the banner of the awning.
- 10.7 Consult detailed guidance found in National Main Street Center publication, *Awnings for Main Street*.