

Working with Heritage

Downtown Commercial Properties Signage, Awnings and Storefronts



St. John's, Newfoundland

Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador



Working with Heritage:
Downtown St. John's Commercial Properties,
Signage, Awnings and Storefronts

prepared by the

Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador
and
Heritage Advisory Committee, City of St. John's



Edited by Dale Gilbert Jarvis. Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador: St. John's, Newfoundland, February 2003. Images courtesy City of St. John's Archives, Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, and City of St. John, NB.

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Executive Summary

Signage

- Traditional signs were generally flat signs with lettering mounted flush against the building, often ending with a decorative bracket. Other types included three-dimensional signs and painted/gold leaf window signs.
- New signs should work with historic buildings, rather than against them. They should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building, should not obscure historic features, and should also respect neighbouring buildings.

Awnings

- Aesthetically appropriate awnings for the Heritage Preservation Area break down into two types, fabric awnings and architectural awnings.
- Fabric awnings are by far the most historically appropriate type of awnings for downtown St. John's, and can be made of modern flame retardant materials ranging from canvas to 100% acrylic or u.v. resistant vinyl.
- Architectural awnings mimic the shape and design of fabric awnings, but are made of a fixed material which may include, but are not limited to, copper, tin, slate, etc.
- Modern curved canopy or "waterfall" style signage is out of character with the look of the downtown area.

Building Facades

- Building facades, including the storefront, are the most important visual elements of commercial structures in the downtown core.
- Recessed entries should be retained and should be strongly encouraged in new storefront construction or renovation.
- The storefront is part of a larger structure and its design should relate to the building's upper storeys and to its overall character. Restoration should be encouraged where possible.

The downtown St. John's business district is a special place and should be recognized as such. Clever, custom-designed signage, traditional storefront windows and entrances, and colourful awnings are integral to the promotion of our past achievements, and can help to create a unique and inviting downtown commercial district.

Building Facades and Commercial Signage in Downtown St. John's

Introduction

Building facades and signage help to define the overall character and distinctiveness of a downtown. When properly maintained and attractive, they provide a strong impression of the overall commercial health and vitality of a business district and impart positive, long-lasting impressions to customers and visitors alike.

The storefront, or street level of a building, plays a particularly critical role in an advertising and merchandising strategy to draw customers and increase business.

A typical 19th century storefront in St. John's consisted of a centrally located, recessed door flanked on either side by display windows. The windows themselves were raised off the ground by wood bulkheads, and often, a series of glass transoms were placed above each door and window. Canvas awnings were often installed to shade the storefront, and the sign board placed above the storefront was a prominent part of the facade.



Between the 1930s and the 1950s, a variety of new materials were introduced to St. John's, including aluminum and stainless steel, tinted and mirrored glass, neon lights. Larger commercial buildings during this period often incorporated fixed metal canopies, lighting and signage as integral components of the facade, often hiding or destroying the heritage features of buildings.

From the 1960s onward the development of alternate shopping venues outside of the city core brought about great changes to the face of downtown. Today, the historic core of St. John's is experiencing a rebirth, with many recent additions and developments to the area.

Development invariably means change, and one of the goals of the Heritage Advisory Committee of the City of St. John's to assist in making sure that changes to the portions of downtown which fall inside the Heritage Conservation Area occur in a manner which is sensitive to the City's strong

historical roots. One way the Committee does this is to advise on matters relating to signage and storefronts.

This document is intended to serve as an overview of historic signage and to suggest historically sensitive ways of dealing with signage, awnings, and facades. **Specific questions regarding what is permitted under the City's Development Regulations, Heritage Bylaws and Heritage Area Sign Guidelines should be directed to the City Building Department before work is started.**

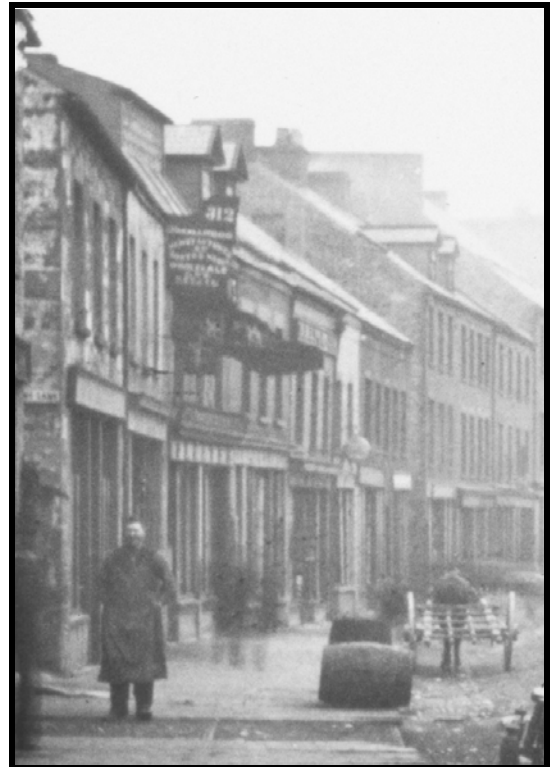
Three Dimensional Signs

Newfoundland sign practices originated largely in Europe. The earliest commercial signs included symbols of the merchant's goods or craft. Emblems were mounted on poles, hung from building, or painted on hanging wooded boards. Such symbolic signs were often important in a society where not all could read. For example, a sheep signified a tailor. Merchants in St. John's before the Great Fire of 1892 advertised with large, three dimensional hanging signs such as watches, anchors and codfish.

One of the more famous examples of the three dimensional sign in downtown St. John's was the Smallwood boot hung suspended from a pole above the sidewalk. Another hanging boot could be found further down Water Street, at J. Thistle's Boots and Shoes, although the Thistle boot was not nearly as flamboyant as the Smallwood version.

Laws passed in England in 1762 banned large projecting signs, and in 1797 all projecting signs were forbidden. In Newfoundland however, this practice persisted right into the twentieth century. The Great Fire changed the face of downtown St. John's, and use of hanging signs diminished, but did not disappear. One of the best remembered signs in downtown St. John's was the Dicks and Co. book. Today, there are very few examples of this type of sign remaining.

One modern example is the sign over The Tickle Trunk, which draws on this tradition. Another example might be the sign for the Liquor Store by the Murray Premises, which uses a barrel head to form the sign.



Fascia or Sign Board Signs

Flat signs with lettering mounted flush against the building gradually replaced hanging, symbolic signs, and surviving historic photographs depict a great variety of signs. Signs placed on the fascia, the horizontal band between the storefront and the second floor, were among the most common. Also popular were gold leaf signs, and signs painted or etched on glass in windows, doors and transom windows. In St. John's, the traditional way of ending a sign board was to use a large decorative bracket often a part of the building facade, and many of these still exist.

Awnings

Another important aspect of St. John's storefronts is the use of awnings. Appropriate awnings for the Heritage Preservation Area break down into two types, fabric awnings and architectural awnings. Fabric awnings are by far the most historically appropriate type of awnings for downtown St. John's, and early photographs of the downtown core show that the use of this type of retractable awning was widespread.



While historic examples of retractable awnings were made of cloth, today's fabric awnings can be constructed of modern flame retardant materials, ranging from canvas to 100% acrylic or u.v. resistant vinyl. Opaque canvas or other soft fabric is the preferred material while frames should be metal.

At ground level, awnings should match the width of the storefront or window opening, and should avoid placement that obscures details of the facade. Awnings valences, the overhanging front face of the awning, may be used to display signage or street numbers. Colour choice remains with the property owner, but awning colours should reinforce the facade and sign colour schemes, and may be single colour or feature a two-colour stripe. In general, colours should create continuity with the facade upon which they are mounted and with adjacent buildings.

The second type of awning in use in the downtown area is an architectural awning, and in many instances, this type of awning can be quite tasteful. Architectural awnings mimic the shape and design of fabric awnings, but are made of a fixed material. Such materials may include, but are not limited to, copper, tin, slate, etc. Several good examples of this type of awning exist in the downtown area. Like fabric awnings, architectural awnings should be constructed of materials consistent in style and colour with the building facade.



The use of architectural awnings is a good example of how a building owner can incorporate historic elements into a very new design. Architectural awnings draw upon the same architectural tradition as fabric awnings, and therefore fit more sympathetically into the heritage look of St. John's.

Certain other types of awnings do not fit as well into the heritage look of St. John's, and are less sympathetic to its architectural traditions. Modern signage that does not take into consideration the historic nature of the downtown serves to diminish an overall sense of the downtown as a historic area. Curved canopy or "waterfall" style signage for example, do not fit as well with the look of restored buildings, or with more historically sensitive modern awnings.

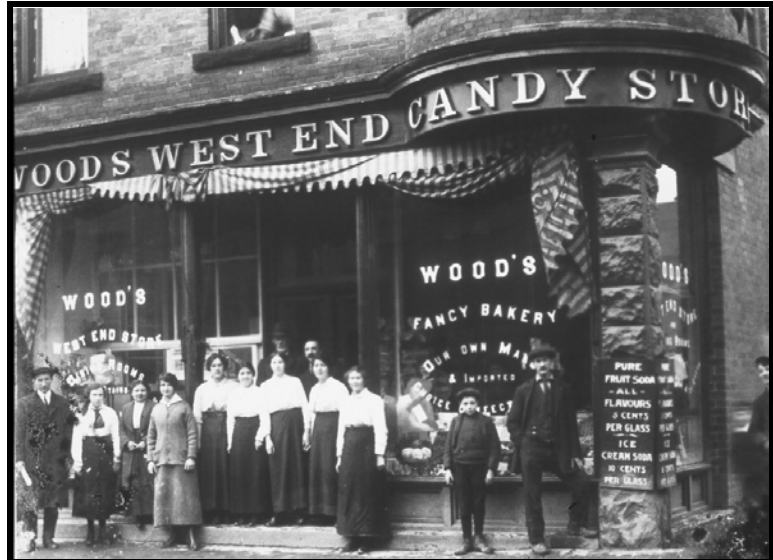
A disregard for existing patterns disrupts the character and image of Downtown. Generally, to create harmony between the existing urban fabric and new elements introduced into the Downtown, all new structures, additions, renovations and signage should be compatible with the prevailing historic architectural character of the surrounding area.

New Signs

It is not the intent of this publication or of the City's Heritage Signage Bylaw to eliminate design freedom or discourage innovative design. Innovation and modern signage are an important part of downtown development, and modern signage can be designed in creative ways that enhance the character of the streetscape. New signs should work with historic buildings, rather than against them. They should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building, should not obscure historic features, and should also respect neighbouring buildings. Good design, quality building materials, a relationship to the city's thematic architecture, and craftsmanship in construction should be part of the ultimate goals of downtown development and signage.

Facades

As equally important as signage is the storefront facade. The building facade is the primary public or street side of the building in its entirety, from the sidewalk to the uppermost portion of the roof line. Building facades, including the storefront, are the most important visual elements of commercial structures in the downtown core. Facades also experience significant change during a building's life and hold the most potential for alterations affecting both the building and the streetscape.



In downtown St. John's, commercial storefront entries are typically recessed and/or sheltered by a covered arcade structure, canopy or awning. This design provides more area for display space, a sheltered transition area to the interior of the store and emphasizes the entrance. Recessed entries should be retained and should be strongly encouraged in new storefront construction or renovation.

First floor windows for commercial space should be as large as possible, with the elevation of the window base and top of window consistent with windows of surrounding buildings. Upper floor windows should be in harmony with the character, design and proportion of the building facade. The storefront is part of a larger structure and its design should relate to the building's overall character.

There is a great range of possibilities open to property owners, but in general, development should be harmonious with the building character, adjacent buildings and surrounding community. In many ways the owner should be guided by common sense, and not create harsh contrasts, or detract from the exterior design of the building or its neighbours.



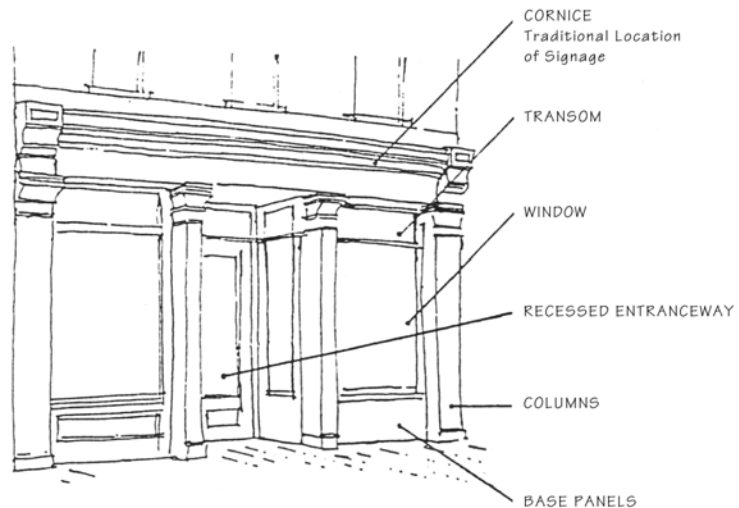
In general, storefronts can be viewed as having a number of important key elements:

Basepanel

The basepanel provides a visual and functional base for the storefront, separating the shop windows from the sidewalk. Maintain the originals when they exist. Use materials of the same colour and texture as the display window frame, or the pilaster materials.

Display Windows

As the largest element of the shopfront, the display windows establish the character of the storefront. Avoid breaking the continuity of the streetscape of large display windows. If smaller windows are desired, paint out or otherwise obscure the transparency with display cases behind the glass, curtains or blinds, while maintaining the image of large display fronts. Avoid breaking the continuity of the sidewalk by recessing display windows, except at entranceways. Traditionally, windows are usually framed in wood.



Transoms

The display front is often divided near the top into transom windows. This served to focus attention on the displays while letting more light into the shop, and occasionally was used as an operating ventilator. The transom was often glazed with patterned or coloured glass. Maintain the transoms as an important element of the display window.

Entranceways

As mentioned above, the store entrance was usually recessed from the streetline, affording an opportunity for more display window, focussing attention on the doorway, and providing shelter at the entry. The sides of the entry recess were often angled or splayed to avoid crowding the doorway. Maintain or restore these recesses as an important part of the streetscape rhythm.

Columns, Piers and Pilasters

Made of wood, masonry or in some cases of cast iron, these elements support the upper storey and are the primary vertical elements on the shopfront. Their locations frame display windows or establish the rhythm of the lower facade. Maintain the originals where they exist, and if missing, install new columns aligned to suit the upper storeys.

Cornice

The cornice plays an important role of visually capping the storefront. If the cornice has been lost or simplified, the facade will appear incomplete. If the cornice is beyond repair, measure the existing carefully for duplication, replicated the shape, dimensions, materials and style. If missing,

look at neighbouring buildings of similar design and style, and replicate existing cornices to fit with the dimensions of the building.

Restoration

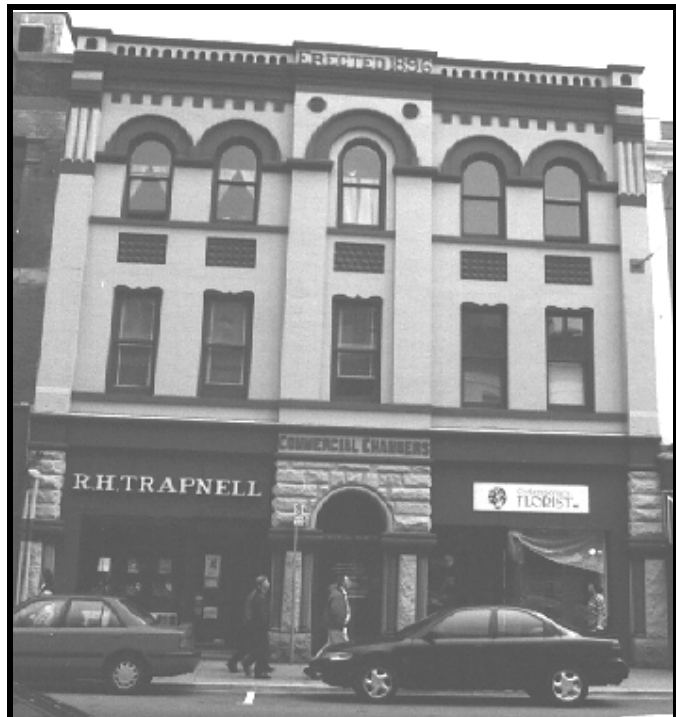
Over time, many older commercial buildings along downtown main streets have received one or more facelifts to modernize traditional facades; many of these physical alterations often cover up or eliminate the very features which gave the building its original character and integrity. Other commercial buildings in downtown might have avoided major physical alterations, but instead, suffer from years of neglect and deferred maintenance, resulting in poor appearance or actual structural damage requiring repair and replacement.

Rehabilitation or renovation are not the same as restoration. Restoration seeks to accurately depict the form, features, and character of a property at a particular period of time. Where possible, the owners of buildings of architectural and/or historic significance should be encouraged to restore their properties to their original condition. At the same time, property owners should not attempt to create something that was never there in the first place.

Heritage Conservation in Action

A good example of heritage conservation in action is the Commercial Chambers Building, located at 199 Water Street. Constructed in 1896 by the contractor William Ellis, the Commercial Chambers Building is a fine example of post-fire architecture. The Commercial Chambers Building was primarily occupied by various merchants and insurance companies. Most notable were the firms of R.H. Trapnell, the Ewings, and Robert A. Brehm, who began to manufacture margarine in Newfoundland in 1883. Trapnell's has occupied the building continuously since its construction.

The building was the first commercial property honoured with the St. John's Heritage Foundation Award. In 1996, it was designated a Registered Heritage Structure by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, and the following year was awarded the Southcott Award for



Restoration by the Newfoundland Historic Trust.

Beautifully restored, the Commercial Chambers Building today forms an important part of St. John's architectural heritage, and lends a sense of permanence and authority to the commercial premises on the streetscape. It survives as one of the great downtown commercial premises, and is a perfect example of the sort of restoration work that should be encouraged in the downtown.

A more recent example of excellent heritage conservation is the Neyle-Soper Building. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Neyle-Soper Building on Water Street was, with S.O. Steele and Co, virtually the only remnant of the old Water Street shops. Many people who were involved in heritage - and many who were not - entered the shop to purchase hardware and became quite captivated by its character, by the shop fittings, the counters, the cabinets, if not by the characters of the shopkeepers themselves. And there was always a concern that the building might be lost.

Fortunately for all of us - and for the sake of the historic character of the city - Shane Kelly had the imagination to see how it might be reused and persuaded his mother, Janet, of his idea. Now this meant for her a major move - from a remarkably well-established trade in Churchill Square in a situation for which her enterprise had made her the anchor tenant. But Auntie Crae's was to move and did move and has done so with great success - a success which contributes to the remarkable rebirth of Newfoundland-owned retailing on Water Street.

Much of the main floor's heritage has been preserved and - more than that - been successfully re-used, not for hardware but for food stuffs. The counters and elaborate display cases which survived the sale of the property now see trade again. They have even managed to preserve the old hand-operated freight elevator. The Neyle-Soper Building was given a Southcott Award for Restoration by the Newfoundland Historic Trust in 2001.

In order to promote this sort of heritage conservation work, the City of St. John's is working on a tax incentives scheme for commercial properties, and is attempting to study ways in which building codes and the special needs of heritage buildings can be made more compatible.

Conclusions

The character and appearance of a community is established through the architecture of its buildings and their relationship to each other. The downtown St. John's business district is a special place and should be recognized as such. The appearance of public space and the commercial buildings is a reflection upon the city, the business owners and the residents of the community.

Heritage guidelines do not seek to impose an overriding style, a limited colour palette, or an artificial theme. The goal is not to make the Heritage Conservation Area another Lunenburg, but to assist in promoting positive traditional design characteristics and to preserve the prevailing architectural character existing throughout the downtown today.

Arthur Frommer, one of the United State's most prominent tourism promoters and creator of the "Europe on \$5 a Day" book empire wrote: "Historic preservation attracts visitors to a community, and brings income with it. Every study of travel motivations has shown that an interest in the achievements of the past is among the three major reasons people travel".

Clever, custom-designed signage, traditional storefront windows and entrances, and colourful awnings are integral to the promotion of our past achievements, and can help to create a unique and inviting downtown commercial district. In turn, the creation of a unique and inviting downtown commercial district will serve to stabilize and improve property values; to foster civic pride in the beauty and accomplishments of our past; to protect and enhance the city's attractiveness to tourists and visitors; and in general to strengthen the economy of our city.

Simply put, heritage is good business!



The Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador was established in 1984 to stimulate an understanding of and an appreciation for the architectural heritage of the province, and to support and contribute to the preservation and restoration of buildings of architectural or historical significance in the province. The Foundation has the power to designate buildings and other structures as Registered Heritage Structures and may also recognize districts of historical and architectural interest as Registered Heritage Districts. The Foundation is also a source of information for respectful restoration of historic properties and the sensitive treatment of heritage features, and is interested in working with property owners, planners, and municipalities to enhance the general heritage character of our cities, towns, and cultural landscapes.

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