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April Eberly

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Some Guidelines for STOREFRONT REHABILITATION



by April Eberly

*A proposed rehabilitation plan
for one block of Washington street,
by April Eberly*

When asked to sum up my experience as a summer intern for the National Trust, all I can say is "Great!"

That may be a little too simplistic a response, so I will elaborate. The project itself was extremely interesting and fulfilling to me, so much so

that I have decided to continue my career in downtown revitalization.

The people who were involved in my project could not have been more helpful, hospitable, nor more interesting. I feel I have made many good friends in Huntsville.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation was also very good to its summer interns, not only was the program run quite efficiently, but we were also treated to an interesting one week conference in Washington on preservation topics.

The city of Huntsville was a pleasant surprise. I must admit I came with a typical "Yankee" stereotyped view of what Alabama was like. I found Huntsville to be an active, sophisticated city with great scenic beauty.

I would like to especially thank the following people for their help in my internship: Harvie and Lynn Jones, whose active work in preservation should be highly commended, and special thanks to Linda Bayer who was instrumental in this project and a wonderful supervisor, whose contributions to the cause for historic preservation in Huntsville have been immeasurable.

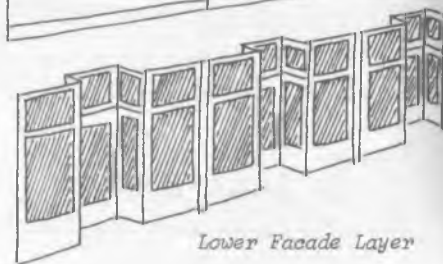
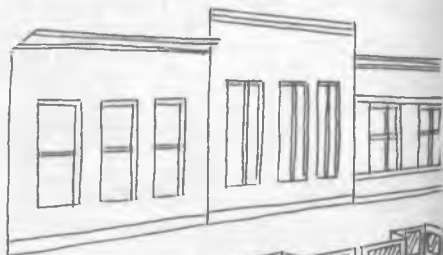
The first few weeks of my internship were involved in researching the design techniques and philosophies of older commercial storefronts. The information was quite illuminating and helpful. I will try, then, to summarize just what I think are the more important aspects of storefront design.

When designing a new storefront or rehabilitating an old one, it is important to consider not only how the storefront relates to the upper street facade, but also how it relates to the rest of the buildings along that street.

The designer must think of this storefront and upper facade as a repetitive unit forming collectively a double-layered

wall that defines an outdoor space, either the street or a square. This wall is traditionally composed of two distinct strata. The ground level originally was a continuous, undulating glass wall. This level helped to demarcate the vertical building plane but was broken every so often by an inviting, recessed area for each doorway. This wall was a delicate, invisible barrier between the pedestrian and the displayed merchandise. The continuity of the wall with its relatively unbroken sequence of display windows gave the strolling pedestrian a pleasant experience and held his interest. By gentle persuasion, the customers' eyes were captivated up and down main street, even to stores at the extreme ends.

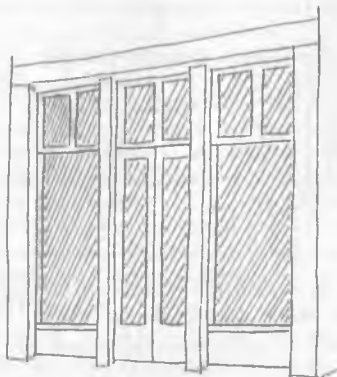
Upper Facade Layer



Lower Facade Layer

The upper layer or upper street facade was most often a brick wall with a series of window openings. From a distance, this pattern provided a rhythmic, textural interest. A closer view often revealed the use of high quality ornamentation.

When looking at the typical commercial building as a singular unit, it is evident that until the automobile age, most storefronts portrayed basic characteristics and refinements.



Most older commercial buildings contained a specific framed opening that would enclose the storefront. It is easy to recognize this frame if left uncovered, but in some cases, it is hard to tell its location if the building has been extremely altered or covered up with applied storefronts. The storefront, which was usually much lighter in appearance, was then sunk into the frame about four to six inches. Not only was this smart detailing in order to prevent the entry of water into the building, but this refinement added greatly to the sense of the storefront being contained in the building facade. More importantly, it gave one the sense that the storefront was actually subordinate to the rest of the structure.

These refinements allowed the whole building to form a business "image" contrary to the later "applied" modern storefronts which totally disregarded the upper facade.

The storefront itself was

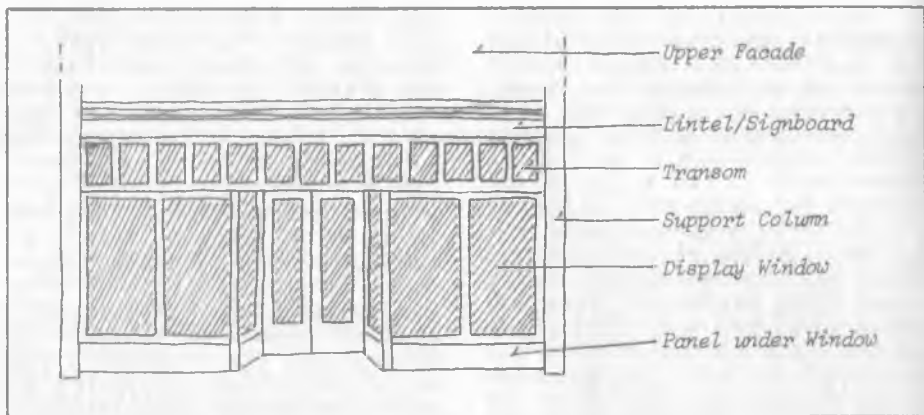
most often subdivided into several zones. The lower zone was a series of panels about one and a half feet high; the shelf for display started at the top of this panel. Next was a large expanse of glass for display windows which was divided by thin wooden mullions. The top level of the display area frequently contained transom windows; this is especially true for Huntsville. Transom windows may have been operable or decorative. They helped visually by giving the storefront a more substantial look, while breaking up the large expanse of glass and admitting daylight to illuminate the interior.

The transoms were then topped by a lintel, sometimes of iron, and a signboard. Many storefronts had elaborate pressed metal cornices above the signboard.

Most of the commercial buildings in downtown Huntsville are masonry structures, usually of brick with metal and wood trim. Many of these buildings, if rehabilitated, will need re-pointing, cleaning and/or painting of the masonry and trim.

These operations are most crucial to the success of the rehabilitation. If the masonry of the building is quite dirty or has been painted, a cleaning will make a dramatic difference. Here it is important to get an expert's opinion. Unfortunately it has been popular to clean brick buildings by sandblasting. Every recent article on masonry repair and cleaning states that sandblasting is NOT recommended. Nevertheless, this procedure remains in widespread use.

Granted, a sandblasted brick wall looks new; however, sandblasting is detrimental to the individual bricks. It re-



moves the hard-baked outer crust of the brick leaving the softer inner core exposed to slowly deteriorate by weathering. After a period of years, the bricks become pitted and almost hollowed out. A brick wall that is intact and withstood a hundred years of weathering may have little chance of survival after it has been sandblasted.

Harsh chemical cleaning may also remove the outer coating. Often just the application of water at low pressure will do an adequate job of cleaning brick.

In many instances, the brick masonry has been painted several times. If this is the case, there is little choice (besides sandblasting) other than to paint it over again.

Before painting the building, proper preparation is essential. The building should be repointed and scraped of loose paint. Muted earth-tones seem to be the more successful colors for the brick combined with contrasting trim. Color is important, but visually it is good to stick with three or fewer colors on the facade. White paint was not used as much as it is today; Victorian

tastes found it too glaring, and when used in excess, this point is well taken. Not only is it glaring, but it is monotonous.

Many new storefront designs are left unpainted and only varnished. These natural wood fronts are quite aesthetically pleasing; however, they do need to be varnished every year or so.

Another important factor in facade rehabilitation is graphic design. Any garish, modern, overly-large plastic signs should be removed (unless they are deemed somehow significant) and replaced by a smaller, pedestrian-oriented design. The lettering style should be on the plain side and straightforward. On many commercial buildings, facades had a specific area for signs, called a signboard, located just under the horizontal portion of the frame for the storefront. It is important to keep the signage at this level so that signs remain in a continuous area along the street.

Another nice effect is painting the sign directly on the display window glass at eye level, usually done in gold

leaf. Small hanging signs were also prevalent and are a good way to show a logo or symbol.

Awnings are another element that can be added to the storefront with many positive results. Besides adding color and a three-dimensional quality to the facade, awnings provide shelter and shade for the customers. They also regulate the amount of light entering the store, and if located with the right orientation, can provide effective solar control in summer and can be rolled up in winter to let in the sun's warmth.

These awnings should be made out of canvas or vinyl but never rigid aluminum. Norman Mintz, director of the Market Street restoration in Corning, New York, has observed of rigid aluminum awnings: "Primarily residential in character, these awnings are usually unattractive and inappropriate in a downtown area. A flat aluminum canopy particularly detracts from historical character."

Canvas awnings, like flags, add the small touch of color that is needed along the street while providing a sort of intermediate zone between sidewalk traffic and storefront.

After researching just how to go about the process of storefront rehabilitation, on which there is scant information, I set out to redesign my own storefronts in downtown Huntsville. Prior to my arrival the Historic Huntsville Foundation had sent out letters to the owners of suitable buildings asking if they would want this free design service. Extremely few of the owners replied. Consequently, I chose some buildings that I thought were architecturally signifi-

cant and that would benefit greatly from a storefront rehabilitation.

Interestingly enough, this approach may have been the more successful as far as getting any kind of response from the owners. After doing the actual design and showing the owner a drawing of what his building COULD look like, there was a surprisingly favorable response.



Marja's Dress Shop on North Side Square (c. 1883) immediately struck me as being a prime candidate for a new storefront design. The upper facade was virtually unaltered; the original storefront had been entirely replaced.

Views from old photographs revealed that it once had a quite standard storefront for Huntsville with large display windows, central, recessed door opening, lower window panels, and a series of segmented transoms across the top. The cornice and flanking pilasters would have been a combination of wood and pressed metal. My proposal for Marja's, as shown in the drawing, is basically a recreation of this traditional 19th century storefront design. A retractable canvas awning would complete the front. The large sign would be replaced by a smaller, more pedestrian oriented sign. The upper facade

needs new replacement window sashes, but little else, unless a new painting is desired.

Marja's was my first attempt at a storefront design, and looking back, this solution may be too literal an adaptation of a Victorian storefront. Not truly a restoration, it can almost be termed a reconstruction which is more often than not an extremely expensive and less honest way to design. Perhaps



a sensitive, contemporary design which kept the standard storefront refinements would be more appropriate.

It is a rare situation when a designer has the opportunity to design several adjacent storefronts, but this was the case with the block on the west side of Washington Street between Clinton and Holmes which is primarily owned by the Huntsville Housing Authority. In

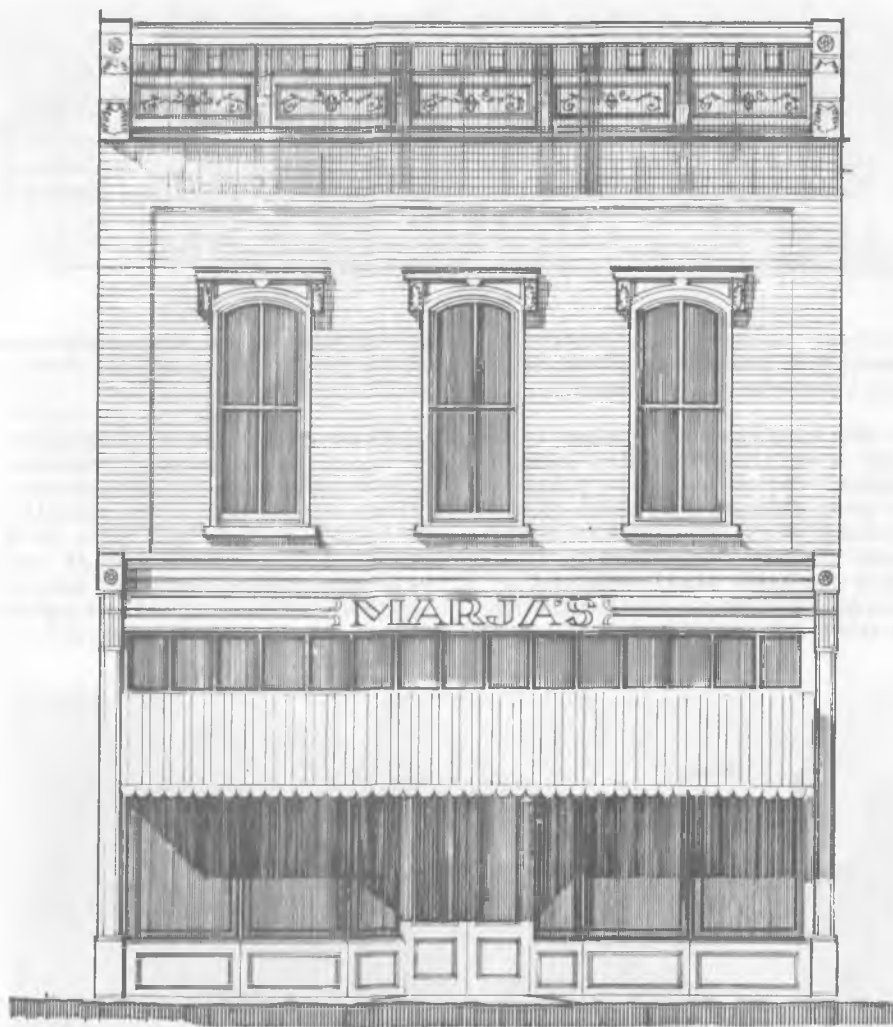
order to interest a developer in purchasing this block and rehabilitating it, I was asked to give some exterior views of a rehabilitation scheme.

There are inherent problems with this design situation, the main one being the high chance of too much similarity in the stores which would give the street a suburban shopping plaza monotony. One could get easily a series of fronts that were too uniform. I attempted to give an idea of how this block could look if it were given a set of design standards, and the stores then evolved over a period of years. The same features such as lower wooden panels, large windows, glazed doors, and transoms are repeated but rearranged and varied so that each shop has a distinct identity. The design goal was to hit the happy medium between bland uniformity and the total lack of any continuity.

The block consists of essentially two buildings with about seven storefronts in each. In many instances, it is appropriate to design the same storefront in each bay of a multi-bayed commercial building, depending on the proportions of the building. In this case, the buildings were so long and low that it would be difficult to perceive each as an individual structure.

The addition of new storefronts could be further dramatized by repainting the two buildings with colors that have more chroma and then highlighting each with a contrasting trim. I am suggesting a deep gold color with green trim for the building on the right and deep red with ochre trim for the building on the left.

The Struve-Hay building on



Jefferson Street (1900) posed another interesting design problem. The building front on Jefferson originally had three, two-story bays; however, the two second floor bays on the south burned and were removed. After a period of storefront modernization, the three bays now appear unrelated and awkward.

The exterior needs a unifying element to make the three bays again read as one building. Also this element must be visually active to achieve a visual balance with the remaining second story bay and its corner tower. A series of arched window openings is one solution to this problem. The arches tie the ground story together



in a very dramatic way which causes the tower to act as an accent to the facade design.

The two smaller stores would share a recessed opening with interior doors to again place the main entrance between the existing cast iron columns. It would also be desirable to paint all bays one system of colors. The perspective sketch visualizes this design with

canvas awnings at both entrances and in the upper floor of the last bay.

This design is a contemporary solution to rehabilitation of the structure and makes no attempt to recreate the original facade. More and more this method of rehabilitation is being thought more appropriate than reconstructing the original front. It is more honest to





our time and continues the tradition of historical variety that contributes so much to the vitality of downtown. It is also easier to avoid the appearance of being cute or quaint which sometimes results from recreations.

A modern design that repeats the materials, textures, scale and proportions of the original structure allows the

building to function on both a contemporary and a historical level at the same time.

However, whether a rehabilitation design is modern or historical, it must be compatible with and sensitive to the original facade to be successful. This means that Colonial or Williamsburg details are not appropriate. They are suitable in Williamsburg and in the





long-settled regions of the Northeast but not in Huntsville which was still a dense forest at the time Colonial architecture was fashionable. The indiscriminate application of Colonial details to later buildings creates an amusement park appearance that has no relation to the life and history of Huntsville.

To conclude, I would think that successful downtowns are those that provide a number of services besides governmental and legal; they are the ones that offer a variety of things to do and see. If there is a need for new construction, treat the new structure in an honest manner. Surely there are a number of ways new construction can visually relate to its neighbors and become another building block of main street without being a reproduction of an 18th century domestic style building. It is up to those interested in promoting good architecture (architects, designers, historians and preservationists) to educate the property owners and the builders to this fact. *

