ANATOMY OF A MAIN STREET BUILDING

Preserving Historic Places Conference 2023
AGENDA

- History of Main Street buildings
- What features make up a traditional main street building
- Mid-century changes
- How to conduct a building survey
As small towns began to develop across America, a central business district was established where merchants built stores for their retail businesses.

Traditional downtowns were formed as business owners built their shops one after another in a row along one main street. The “main street” was the primary road through town and as more businesses sprung up it became the main hub for the social activities of the community.
HISTORY OF STOREFRONTS IN INDIANA

- Mesker Storefronts: A building that displays pressed metal, steel, cast and wrought iron architectural features.

- From the 1880s through the 1910s the two manufacturing giants were Mesker Brothers Iron Works (St. Louis, MO) and George L. Mesker & Company (Evansville, IN).

- The Meskers marketed their products through catalogs displaying their designs. According to a 1915 catalog, there were Mesker storefronts in every state, including 4,130 in Indiana.

*Photo courtesy of Indiana State Library
HISTORY OF STOREFRONTS IN INDIANA
ANTAOMY OF A BUILDING

Grab your building form and follow along
The decorated projection at the top of a wall provided to protect the wall face or to ornament and finish the eaves.
CORNICE EXAMPLES
The typically non-retail space above the retail ground floor; multistory Main Street buildings are typically between two and four floors.
A projecting member above a window that is both structural and decorative; on Main Street typically of stone or cast iron.
WINDOW HOOD EXAMPLES
**WINDOW SASH**

The moveable part of a window made up of the vertical and horizontal frame that holds the glass.

**WINDOW PANE**

Also called a lite, a sheet of glass for glazing a window. After installation, the pane is referred to as a "lite" or "window lite."
WINDOW SASH & PANE EXAMPLES
Located at the very bottom of the window, the sill is usually sloped to allow water to run off the bottom of the window in rain or during cleaning.
WINDOW SASH & PANE EXAMPLES

[Images of window sash and pane examples]
Windows on upper stories are spaced in a symmetrical way.
REGULARLY SPACED WINDOWS EXAMPLES
LINTEL

Structural member above a storefront that supports the upper floor.
LINTEL EXAMPLES
STOREFRONT

The front exterior wall of commercial space, typically with large areas of glass.
TRANSOM

Upper windows in a storefront; can be operable or fixed, clear or patterned.
The main areas of clear glass on a storefront behind which goods are arranged.
DISPLAY WINDOW EXAMPLES
COLUMN
A vertical structural member.

PILASTER
An architectural element used to give the appearance of a supporting column and to articulate an extent of wall, with only an ornamental function.
BULKHEAD

The area between the sidewalk and the display windows; can be wood, tile, or metal; or can be glazed.
MID-CENTURY CHANGES

In the 1950s, downtowns declined and the suburbs explosion began. The marketing revolution after World War II dealt it a lethal blow.
Mid-century storefronts were changed to represent the thinking of the day.

These designs were completed by some of the most talented architects and designers practicing in the United States.
NEW TECHNOLOGY

Architects applied war-related technologies to constructing buildings, rather than destroying buildings.

Companies that produced glass and aluminum promoted renovation away from the traditional.

With new signs, shopfronts, display windows or slipcovers, Main Street became modern.
MID-CENTURY STOREFRONT CHANGES
Asymmetrical display windows and recessed entries provided room for additional displays and a small exterior lobby.

The angled front swiped buyers to the asymmetrical entrance door.
EXAGGERATED MASSING AND EXPERIMENTAL STRUCTURES

Signage was used in mass to further activate facades.

Some designers experimented with new technologies and mimicked space exploration.
CANOPIES

Canopies were added to front facades to project over the sidewalk to protect the exterior lobby and shop windows.

They replaced traditional fabric awnings. Some were supported by rods and columns. Others were steel and concrete and cantilevered with no visible supports.
AWNINGS

Fabric awnings were still used but fixed awnings became popular.

Some storefronts were shaded by fixed aluminum awnings.
DISPLAY CASES

Picture-framed display boxes showcased the latest goods. Sleek aluminum or steel surrounded the plate glass surface.

Other picture-framed display boxes were inset into the front or side walls of the storefront.
CANTILEVERED DISPLAY CASES

Cantilevered display windows projected beyond their base to further deconstruct the storefront plane.

This gave the display the allusion that they were floating.
SIGNAGE

Upper floors were closed off and whole facades became billboards for the store.

Giant signage stated the business name and was readable by fast moving automobiles.
Channel-set neon tubing was set within metal letters with the neon tubes left uncovered and visible.

Reversed channel-set letters had neon tubing housed, or set behind, metal letters.
PROJECTING SIGNS

Also called blade signs, these were mounted above the sidewalk and perpendicular to the building façade, typically suspended with brackets.
Front facades were covered in metal or porcelain enamel to give buildings the full modernism treatment.
NEW MATERIALS

- Plate glass in sizes 10' x 24'
- Opaque structural glass like vitrolite and carrara
- Aluminum
- Glass block
- Terrazzo
Many of the mid-century changes were profound. To ignore the built evidence of these changes seems inconsistent with preservation.

The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation states, “Number 3: Most properties change over time; those changes that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved.”
This allows the committee and the organization to better understand properties located in the district.

From there, they know which buildings/properties to target for projects and the availability for potential businesses.
Building Inventory Form

Property Name (if any) ____________________________________________________________

Address or Street Location __________________________________________________________________________

County _______________ Town/City________________________________________ State________

Owner________________________ Contact Information______________________________________________

Original Use________________________ Current use ________________________________________________

Architect/Builder, if known __________________________ Date of construction, if known____________
**STEP #2 DESCRIPTION**

**Description**

Materials – Please check these materials that are visible

- Exterior Walls:  
  - □ wood clapboard  
  - □ wood single  
  - □ vertical boards  
  - □ plywood  
  - □ Stone  
  - □ brick  
  - □ poured concrete  
  - □ concrete block  
  - □ Vinyl siding  
  - □ asbestos  
  - □ aluminum siding  
  - □ other_____  

- Roof:  
  - □ asphalt, single  
  - □ asphalt, roll  
  - □ wood shingle  
  - □ metal  
  - □ slate  

- Foundation:  
  - □ stone  
  - □ brick  
  - □ poured concrete  
  - □ concrete block  

Other materials and their locations: ____________________________________________

Alterations, if known: __________________________________________ Date: ____________

Condition:  
- □ excellent  
- □ good  
- □ fair  
- □ deteriorated
STEP #3 PHOTOS

Photos:
Provide several clear, original photographs of the property. Submitted views should represent the property from the public right-a-way (sidewalks and alleys). For buildings or structures, general setting, outbuildings, and landscape features. Color prints are acceptable for initial submissions.
STEP #3 NARRATIVE

**Narrative Description of Property:**
Briefly describe the property and its setting. Include a verbal description of the location (e.g., north side of Smith Street, west of Jones Road); a general description of the building, structure or feature including such items as architectural style (if known), number of stories, type, and shape of roof (flat, gabled, mansard, shed or other), materials and landscape features. Identify and describe any associated buildings, structures or features on the property, such as garages, silos, barns, pools, gravesites. Identify any known exterior and interior alterations such as additions, replacement windows, aluminum or vinyl siding or changes in plan. Include dates of construction and alteration, if known. Attach additional sheets as needed.

LETS PRACTICE
Thank you

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