

DESIGN GUIDANCE: SHOPFRONTS & ADVERTISEMENTS



St Albans
City & District Council

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Design Principles	2
Shopfronts	4
Historic Shopfronts.....	4
Detailed Design of Shopfronts.....	6
Advertisements	12
General Principles.....	12
Specific Sign Types.....	14
Permissions and Consents	16
Checklist and Questions	17
Glossary	18

INTRODUCTION

1. This booklet provides guidance on shopfront and advertisement design within St Albans District to help ensure high quality design. It provides applicants with pointers to the approach the District Council will adopt when considering and deciding applications for shopfronts and advertisements. The aim of this document is to assist the design of these to make a positive contribution to the appearance of the building and the character of the area.
2. Many of the commercial centres within the District are located within a historic settlement. Many of these are designated as Conservation Areas and have a number of Listed Buildings. This is the case with St Albans and Harpenden, Sandridge, Redbourn and Wheathampstead. Although this guidance document covers the entire District it also contains important considerations for design within Conservation Areas and on Listed Buildings.
3. There can be a perceived conflict of interest between signage being commercially conspicuous against the need for preservation or enhancement of the character of the area. However, carefully considered design can ensure that both needs are met.
4. Successful and popular shopping areas offer an attractive, pleasant shopping environment in addition to the range of shops and services usually expected of them. An emphasis on good quality design enhances the character of a shopping centre, encourages investment and spending and brings benefits to all commercial interests.
5. Within Conservation Areas, and particularly when dealing with Listed Buildings, specialist design advice should be sought.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

6. Altering shopfronts or advertisements is often seen as a way to modernize a building, especially when ownership changes or when the use of the shop alters. Over the years, shopfronts may change several times whilst the buildings in which they are located remain relatively unaltered. This means that alterations to shopfronts and advertisements need to be designed to relate to the rest of the building and its context as a cohesive whole.
7. The architectural merit of buildings and the collective townscape qualities of the street can be eroded by poor quality alterations or the unsympathetic replacement of shopfronts. Similarly, poorly located, sized or otherwise poorly designed advertisements can degrade the architectural qualities of a street and add to visual clutter. The sketches on page 3 show how signage and shopfronts can alter how a building is appreciated and affect the architectural quality of the street.
8. A successfully designed shopfront will be designed to respond to the existing building's characteristics. Consideration of the street scene as a whole as well as the individual building at street level and above should take into account building proportions, construction, character and style. It is important to carefully choose the scale, materials, colours and design details to respect these factors, rather than to detract from them.
9. There are 4 main principles to good shopfront and advertisement design, the design of these should:
 - Form part of the overall composition of the building and relate well to the surrounding context taking into account its character and style
 - Be appropriately sited, scaled, and proportioned
 - Retain historic shopfronts or other historic features
 - Avoid visual clutter or harsh visual contrast and excessive illumination.
10. Most of the District's shopping streets are still dominated by older buildings which share some common characteristics. These often have placed a greater emphasis on vertical proportions. Plot widths were often traditionally narrower so window and door openings were necessarily restricted in width. Storey heights are traditionally expressed by the use of plinths, string courses, friezes and different proportioned openings and windows. Fascias and cornices were often richly detailed and modelled. The shopfront should always be considered as an intrinsic part of the overall appearance of the building and should appear to be naturally related to the upper floors.
11. These elements must be taken into account, particularly when designing shopfronts and advertisements within a Conservation Area, or on a Listed Building.

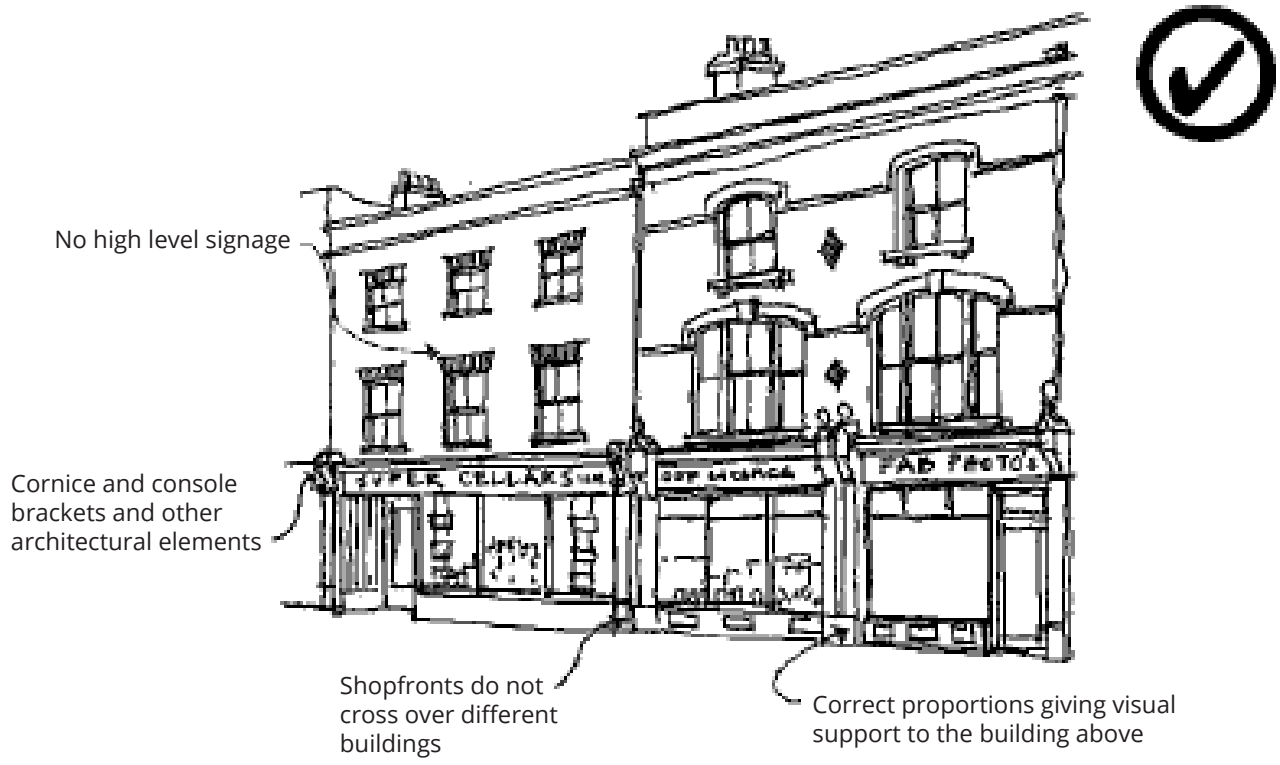
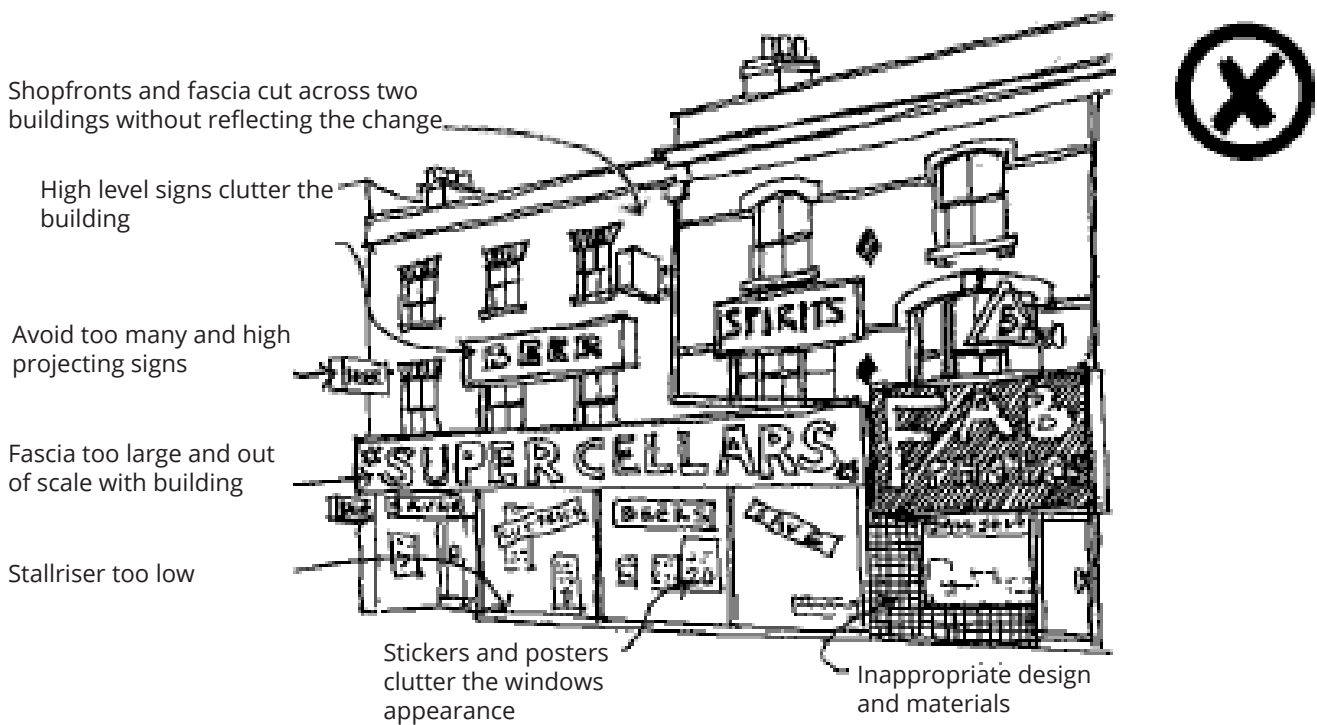


Figure 1: How signage and shopfront design can affect the quality and design of an entire building

SHOPFRONTS

Historic Shopfronts

12. Very few early shopfronts (pre-1920s) survive, but where they do, special care is needed to ensure they are protected and restored sensitively with careful attention to detail. Where the existing shopfront contributes to the character of the building or area, or is listed, it should be retained and restored rather than replaced. When a building undergoes a change of use it will normally be desirable to retain a historic shopfront, particularly in Conservation Areas and on Listed Buildings.
13. Much of the detailed modelling and decoration of older shopfronts is particularly valuable in the street scene and rare C18 and 19th Century shopfronts should be retained, and repaired where possible. More recent shopfronts can also be of interest. Designs incorporating Art Nouveau or Art Deco detailing are often of high quality, constructed from materials such as mahogany, bronze, chrome, stained glass and marble, sometimes forming part of the design of an entire façade and should therefore be retained wherever possible.
14. Traditional shopfronts have a classical design approach. Many of these features are based on constituent parts of a classical building: namely the plinth, column and entablature. This particular style was successful in achieving a balanced relationship between the shopfront and the building as a whole and remains important in shopfront design.

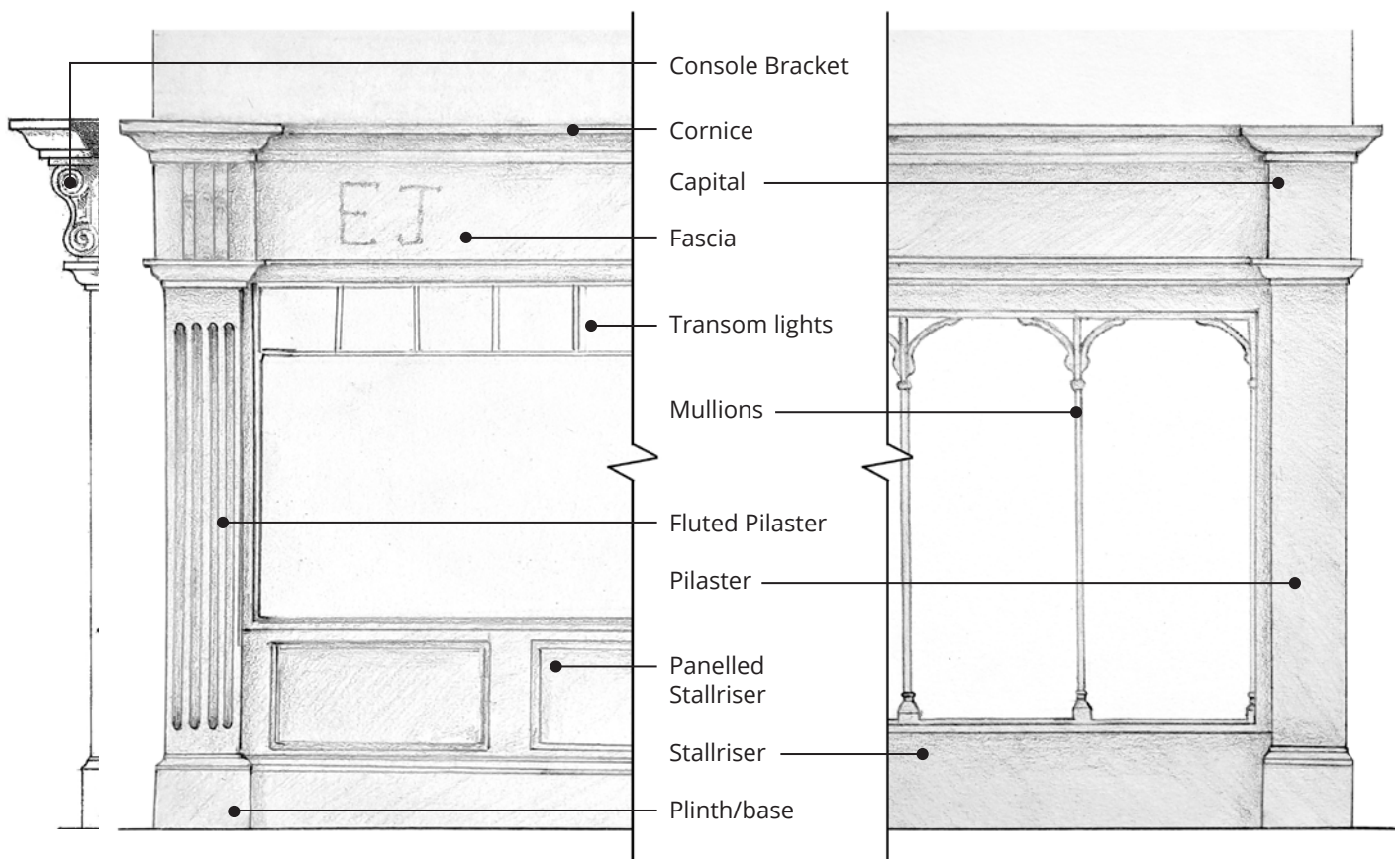


Figure 2: Diagram of different traditional shopfront elements and features

Reinstatement & Restoration

15. In some cases, missing parts of old shopfronts can be reinstated but care must be taken that the detailing is correct. Original features can be concealed behind recent additions, and they can often be revealed and redecorated to great effect.
16. Where a traditional shopfront has been removed, or a modern shopfront detracts from the character of an historic building, a replacement traditional shopfront, which is historically correct for the elevation and to a high standard of design and craftsmanship, will be favourably received.

Replacement

17. In some cases it may be desirable to replace certain shopfronts, particularly if they are poor modern shopfronts which lack detailing and correct proportioning and detract from the character of the building and the area.
18. Where a shopfront is to be expanded to occupy more than one building, every effort should be made to retain the original proportions of each building, in order that from the outside the individual shopfront units are retained and have a positive relationship to the buildings above.

Removal

19. It may be appropriate to return to the original elevational treatment of a building and dispense with a standard 'shopfront'. For example, domestic windows could be re-inserted into an 18th Century building. With this approach, the siting of advertisements needs to be modest and thoughtful. Applied letters, windows signs and projecting signs will be more appropriate than fascias.



The Cornmarket before and after the shopfronts were restored in the late 20th Century, demonstrating the impact inappropriate signage and shopfronts can have on the character of the building and streetscene.

Detailed Design of Shopfronts

20. As shopfronts can be subject to close scrutiny, design and detailing are extremely important. Whilst this section concentrates on traditional elements of shopfronts, this does not mean that a design which incorporates traditional elements will automatically be sympathetic to its setting. The composition and treatment of a shopfront in relation to its context are vital to the success of a design.

Fascia

21. In the 19th century, timber fascias assumed the proportions and place of the frieze and cornice in classical architecture entablature. These classical proportions create a harmonious relationship with the rest of the frontage. A diagram of classical entablature elements is contained within the glossary.
22. The fascia must never be out of scale with the building as a whole. An over deep fascia will appear too heavy for the facade beneath. Fascias which fill the whole space between the shop window and first floor windows usually appear too big for the building. Every opportunity should be taken to reduce the depth of over deep fascias.
23. Fascias should not run through several distinct elevations, even where they are occupied by the same business. Where two users occupy the ground floor of a single building the shopfronts and fascias should relate. This does not necessarily mean a loss of identity for either shop.

Cornice

24. Traditionally the fascia is crowned by a cornice providing a valuable and attractive break between the shopfront and the building above. Omitting a cornice leaves the shopfront incomplete and it tails off into the building above in an unsatisfactory way and can result in a dull or uninteresting appearance.



No. 11 George Street retains its highly attractive Victorian shopfront with decorative ogee arches. The fascia is in proportion with the rest of the shopfront and building.



The cornice on the corner shopfront creates a better relationship with the upper floors of this building than its neighbour.

Pilasters

25. The pilasters are the shallow piers or columns which project slightly from the wall to each side of a shopfront, and may also occur at intervals along it, where the façade is long. The pilasters provide visual and physical support to the fascia and together they form a type of picture frame containing the shopfront. These usually have a wider base on a plinth at the bottom and a decorated capital to the top, similar to classical columns.
26. In Victorian shopfronts, the capital at the head of the pilasters was often elaborated to form a 'console bracket' extending outside the fascia to support a distinctive cornice.

Stallriser

27. Together with the pilasters, the stallriser is important in providing visual support for the upper part of the building. Most traditional shops had stallrisers, usually of wooden panelling, stone, brick or render. Some Victorian shopfronts used decorative tiles (most notably butchers and public houses). Mosaics, laminates and marble are rarely appropriate materials for stallrisers on traditional buildings.
28. Sometimes a design will unify the façade of the building by using the facing material of the upper floor for the stallriser e.g. painted smooth render or brick.
29. Where a stallriser has been removed for a plate glass window to pavement level, reinsertion is encouraged.



This shopfront helps visually support the building above, balancing out the elongated proportions of its early shopfront. The panelling details on the pilasters correspond to the glazing details and fascia creating a coherent design.



The stallriser on this shop is formed of brick and thin terracotta tiles which match the detailing on the rest of the building.

Fenestration and Doors

30. One of the most important visual elements of the shopfront is the large window. It is important to consider how the shop window's style, size, and shape will relate to those on the upper floors.
31. Often breaking up the area of glass with mullions, transoms or slim glazing bars will help subdivide a large expanse of glass and help the shopfront to relate better to the upper floors.
32. The style, scale and shape of door openings needs similar careful consideration. The use of recessed doorways is encouraged as this provides a point of interest in the shopfront and clearly defines the access.
33. In some cases, the recessed doorway is decorated with mosaics or tiles, or patterns to the soffit above, or feature glazing. Good quality examples of these should be retained.

Accessibility

34. Access is an issue which can affect everybody. While it may not be possible to make every shopfront accessible and usable by every person, every effort should be made to improve accessibility whilst remaining sympathetic. Alterations to shopfronts should aim to comply with Building Regulations Approved Document M – Access to and use of buildings.
35. Where possible, access should be level, or ramped, with flush thresholds. Manifestation on fully glazed doors should be provided, and contrast on steps and for handrails and door handles is recommended.



This shopfront window is broken up with glazing panes in the same proportions as the upper floor sash windows.



This shopfront window has a traditional decorative grille associated with C19 greengrocer and produce shops and a mullion to break up the large extent of glazing.



This decorative recessed doorway has a panelled soffit and decorative tile floor.

Contemporary Design

36. Contemporary designs and the use of some modern materials of a high standard will be encouraged where appropriate, usually on contemporary buildings.
37. The use of a contemporary approach can sometimes relate well to an historic building, e.g. glazed windows and door openings which are impeccably designed, and relate well in scale, proportion and detailing to the elevation as a whole. Care should be taken to avoid creating a visual effect of a void at the base of a building.

Shutters and Alarms

38. Care should be taken when choosing security shutters or grilles. Shutters which require permanent bulky housing attached to the fascia, or elsewhere externally on the shopfront are generally unsightly and unacceptable. Where possible, housing for shutters should be incorporated into the shopfront design to avoid any externally visible bulkheads or housing.
39. Solid shutters which totally obscure shopfronts during closing hours are usually unacceptable. Removable open-mesh grilles designed to be as unobtrusive as possible are preferable, particularly in Conservation Areas.
40. Alarm boxes, where necessary, should be sited as unobtrusively as possible. Arbitrary positioning of alarms should be avoided. Alarms are best incorporated on centrelines between windows, centred below the windows of the first floor or on the soffits of recessed doorways. They should never be located on architectural features such as consoles or pilasters.



This modern shopfront does not have a stallriser, but the columns and fascia details help give visual support to the upper floors.



The alarm box on this building has been placed at high level on the window away from the hanging sign and small scale fascia.

Awnings and Canopies

41. Shop blinds are traditionally straight awnings, and were historically used to protect perishable goods from strong sunlight. When not in use traditional straight awnings are virtually invisible, concealed in a blind box designed carefully as part of the cornice or fascia. Proposals for awnings will be required to have appropriately designed and incorporated blind boxes when in Conservation Areas.
42. Since the late 20th century, the continental Dutch canopy has increased in number. These are curved and appear like a pram hood. These cannot be concealed in a blind box and when folded, the frame and fabric remain visible often obscuring part if not all of the fascia. For these reasons Dutch canopies are considered inappropriate for use on traditional buildings and shopfronts and in Conservation Areas.



The awnings on this shopfront are detailed to fold neatly into the fascia, so whether closed or open the shopfront is not obscured.

Materials

43. Materials for a shopfront should be chosen to reflect its context. The range of materials in an area should not be indiscriminately increased. Materials which are unusual either for the building or its context i.e. rustic stonework or marble should be avoided.
44. Painted timber is the most common shopfront material of historic streets and should form the basis of most designs. In Conservation Areas, materials form an important part of their character and this is often derived from the mellowed appearance of traditional materials such as brick, stone, tile, slate and timber. This should be reflected in the design of shopfronts with materials chosen to conform with the historic character of the area, and with the building above or, where suitable, to each side.
45. Aluminium, acrylic, perspex or other plastic finishes for fascias are generally unsympathetic when viewed in combination with historic natural materials and should be avoided. These are considered inappropriate in Conservation Areas and on Listed Buildings.
46. When designing a scheme, it may be better to pursue a modest scheme which fits in well with its setting, rather than an elaborate design which may easily have its quality diminished as a result of excessive costs or poor quality materials.

Colour

47. Colour schemes should harmonise with the majority of the building and the street scene. Harsh or garish colour combinations should be avoided.
48. Colour can be used to emphasise important elements of the design. It can also be used to pick out details e.g. gilding of mouldings, capitals and fluting. An inventive colour scheme may be all that is needed to update the appearance of a shopfront rather than going to the expense of a replacement.

Corporate Branding

49. Many companies will use standardised corporate design on shopfronts and for advertisements, which have the potential to be visually intrusive, overbearing, or out of proportion. New shopfronts incorporating corporate design should respect the character of the host building and the wider streetscape, and avoid masking special features.
50. In most cases it is possible to reconcile corporate design with the local context and satisfy the principles of good shopfront design. The Council will expect the use of appropriate colours, materials and style including, where required, the tailoring of corporate design to suit the context of the proposed advertisements and shopfront. This is particularly important in more sensitive areas including those on Listed Buildings and within Conservation Areas.



The restrained colour palette and painted timber shopfront make a simple yet attractive shopfront.

ADVERTISEMENTS

General Principles

51. The design, scale, siting and quantity of advertisements need to be carefully considered to ensure that the character and quality of places are not diminished, taking into account cumulative impacts. A careful balance needs to be made between attracting attention while ensuring good design.

Quantity, Scale and Siting

52. An excessive amount of advertisements can be counterproductive, creating an unsightly and cluttered appearance. Hanging signs, posters, window stickers, and free standing advertisements are commonly used and can detract from the appearance of the premises if they are used excessively. Unnecessary duplication of the message should be avoided.
53. Where upper floors have separate business uses, appropriate signs in windows, or by their entrance should be considered so as to avoid clutter and high level signage.
54. Signage should not obscure or damage important architectural features. Where there is a shopfront, signage should normally be restricted to the shopfront elevation.
55. Signs should not be so large that they visually overpower the appearance of the shopfront and adversely affect its proportions. Signs should be in proportion to the building and shopfront they are attached to. Advertisements applied above fascia level can be over-dominant and are generally unacceptable.

Illumination

56. Whilst appropriate use of lighting may contribute to the interest and attractiveness of some signs and shopfronts, excessive illumination is unnecessary and can detract from the building and its locality. This is particularly important within a Conservation Area. The intensity and quantity of illumination must not be excessive and the method and warmth of the proposed illumination should be carefully designed into the signage.
57. Internally illuminated letters, projecting signs and box fascias generally provide a harsher and less sensitive form of illumination and are not considered to be appropriate within a Conservation Area, nor on a listed building and will be resisted. Halo lighting may be acceptable on less sensitive buildings as long as it does not have a detrimental effect on the character of the building and appearance of the shopfront.
58. External illumination creates a much more even and pleasant effect. However careful design is needed to avoid lighting units which appear unsightly in the daylight, or cut across important shopfront features.

Lettering

59. Lettering should be part of the architectural detail of a building and should respect the character of the building and the street as a whole.
60. Lettering which is oversized or disproportionate would not relate acceptably with the fascia, shopfront or streetscene. The size of the lettering should be determined by considering the need to be:
- Legible to pedestrians;
 - Not obtrusive to the building facade; and
 - Integrated with all the other elements making up the street scene.
61. Individual letters should be neither too widely spaced, nor cramped together. Compact styles of lettering often look best on a short fascia, whilst extended letters can achieve a balanced appearance on longer fascias.
62. The style of lettering can help to convey the image of the shop. However, it is important that it does not conflict with the other elements of the building. Some styles of lettering can be difficult to read and are therefore best avoided.

Materials

63. In general, materials for lettering and signs should follow the guidelines on shopfront materials. Traditionally shopfronts had hand painted timber fascias which harmonised with the traditional construction and materials of the buildings.

64. Hand-painted timber signs are generally preferable and will be encouraged, although free-standing metal, or cut-out wooden letters applied to the fascia or directly to the building may be an acceptable alternative.
65. Acrylic and vinyl lettering are usually inappropriate for older shopfronts, within Conservation Areas, or on Listed Buildings. Acrylic, aluminium or other materials may be more suitable for newer developments where they are compatible with the main building.



The corporate branding on this shop has been tailored to better suit the existing building.

Specific Sign Types

66. There are specific considerations for certain types of signage. The fascia is the usual place for displaying advertising material, particularly the name and profession of the person carrying on the business at the premises. Fascias are covered in the sections above on shopfront design and general principles for signage.



Hanging signs should be appropriately sized to suit the building and streetscene and sited to respond to other existing features, such as these wall lights.

Projecting and Hanging Signs

67. Hanging signs can add interest to the streetscene and shopping environment, however they can also cause clutter in historic streets if they are too numerous or inappropriately sized or placed. The retention of historic projecting signs is encouraged.
68. The use of hanging signs should be limited to one per shopfront and only where there is adequate space and where their cumulative effect will not detract from the character of an area.
69. The design of a hanging sign should complement the design of the fascia and shopfront. Small and neat traditional style hanging signs will be encouraged in place of existing bulky projecting signs or in places where hanging signs are an evident characteristic.
70. In Conservation Areas, small and neat traditional-style hanging signs will be encouraged. These are usually painted wooden signs, which use metal brackets, either in a simple or decorative style, depending on the building.

Window Signs

71. Lettering and decorative signs can be applied onto the inside of window glass and can be very attractive. This can also help break up large areas of glass for a building where the window is not used to display goods. Window signs can also be used well where the upper floors are occupied by a separate business.
72. Any window sign needs to take into account the design of the host building and will be acceptable where it does not adversely affect the appearance of a building considering the positioning, style and size of letters.
73. However whole window stickers or advertisements which deactivate street frontages will be resisted.

Painted Wall Signs

74. These signs typically either comprise timber boards or signs painted directly onto the walls (often prominent flank walls) of commercial or industrial buildings. This is a traditional form of advertising popular with the Victorians. Only certain locations may be suitable for such signs e.g. these are often suited to public houses. They should be regularly maintained, and removed when redundant through appropriate methods. Painted signs should not be too many in number, otherwise their value is lost.

Banner Signs

75. Banner signs can be very dominant, overbearing and can create visual clutter. These should be avoided, particularly when it is intended as a permanent sign. The Council is likely to require the removal of banners where the appropriate consent has not been secured.



This public house uses window signs to break-up the large windows without deactivating the streetscene.

PERMISSIONS AND CONSENTS

Advertisement Consent

76. There are three categories of advertisement consent: those permitted without requiring either deemed or express consent from the Local Planning Authority (LPA); those which have deemed consent; and those which require the express consent of the LPA. Flags, banners, lasers, search lights and projected illuminations are also treated as advertisements for the purposes of the planning regime.
77. The display of advertisements and signage is controlled by the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (England) Regulations 2007. Highway safety and visual (and where relevant aural) amenity are important considerations.

Planning Permission

78. The alteration and replacement of shopfronts will normally require planning permission. This can include the installation of additional features such as blinds, canopies, shutters or grilles and many other changes to the external appearance of the building such as alterations to the glazing or the size of the fascia.

Listed Building Consent

79. Any works which affect the character or appearance of a listed building will require Listed Building Consent, including the alteration or replacement of a shopfront and the display of signage. Consent may also be required for minor works such as changing a painting scheme, installing an alarm box, or altering a shop interior.

CHECKLIST AND QUESTIONS

Below is a useful checklist and set of questions to consider when proposing to alter a shopfront or install advertisements

The Building

- Is it part of a larger group of buildings?
- Is it really part of a larger building?
- Is the building in a Conservation Area?
- Is it a statutorily Listed Building?
- Is it an important local building of some architectural or historic importance?

The Existing Shopfront

- Is the shopfront contemporary with the building?
- Has it got any special historic features?
- Is it well-related by construction or detail with the rest of the building?
- Does the shopfront have valuable features in common with other shops in the group?
- Is it one of those rare shopfronts which perfectly complements the rest of the building?
- If so do you really need to change it or would renovation, repainting and new signage suffice?
- Are there existing features which could be improved?

The Proposed Shopfront

- Is the new design compatible with the building of which it is part?
- Is it desirable to copy features and materials of nearby buildings, shopfronts or signs?
- Are the chosen materials in keeping with the design, the rest of the building, and the location?
- Are the proposed advertisements in keeping with the design of the shopfront, the building and the location?
- Does the amount and scale of advertising detract from the appearance of the building or street scene?
- Is the fascia over-large - could it effectively be reduced in depth or width?
- Are the signs too large for the fascia?
- Is the level and type of illumination excessive? Will it detract from the appearance of the area and/or the building?

GLOSSARY

Advertisement - Any word, letter, model, sign, placard, board, notice, awning, blind, device or representation, whether illuminated or not, in the nature of, and employed wholly or partly for the purposes of, advertisement, announcement or direction.

Architrave – A formalised lintel. The lowest member of an entablature in classical architecture. Also the moulded frame of a door or window.

Awning - A sheet material stretched on a frame and used to keep the sun or rain off a window or doorway.

Capital – A head or crowning feature of a column or pilaster.

Column – A classical, upright structural member of round section with a shaft, a capital, and usually a base.

Console - Sometimes referred to as a console bracket, a bracket supporting the upper members of a cornice, traditionally curved.

Cornice – Flat topped edge with a moulded underside, projecting along the top of a building or feature. The upper projecting portion of an entablature in classical architecture. Also the decorative moulding to the angle between a wall and ceiling.

Entablature - The upper part of a Classical architectural order, which rests upon the columns. Consists of three horizontal elements the architrave, frieze (or fascia) and cornice.

Façade - The exterior face of a building.

Fascia – A plain horizontal band. On a shopfront the surface above the shopfront window and door, which often displays the principal signage.

Fenestration – The arrangement of windows in a façade.

Frieze - The band or flat strip of an entablature, often moulded between the cornice and architrave.

Glazing Bar - The metal or wooden bars which separate and support glass panes.

Halo lighting - Typically back-lit solid letters to create a glow of light by illuminating the wall surface. Does not include internally illuminated signage.

Mullion - A vertical window frame element that divides a window into two or more panes.

Pilaster - Shallow piers or columns which project slightly from the wall.

Plinth – Projecting courses at the base of a wall, pilaster or column, generally moulded or chamfered at the top.

Shopfront - A street-level frontage with a display window, usually serving a retail outlet but also other commercial businesses including restaurants, banks etc.

Soffit – An external ceiling, the underside of an architectural structure or arch.

Stallriser - The panel below the window on a shopfront which raises the window up from ground level.

Stringcourse – Horizontal course or moulding projecting from the surface of a wall.

Transom - A horizontal window frame element that divides a window into two or more panes.

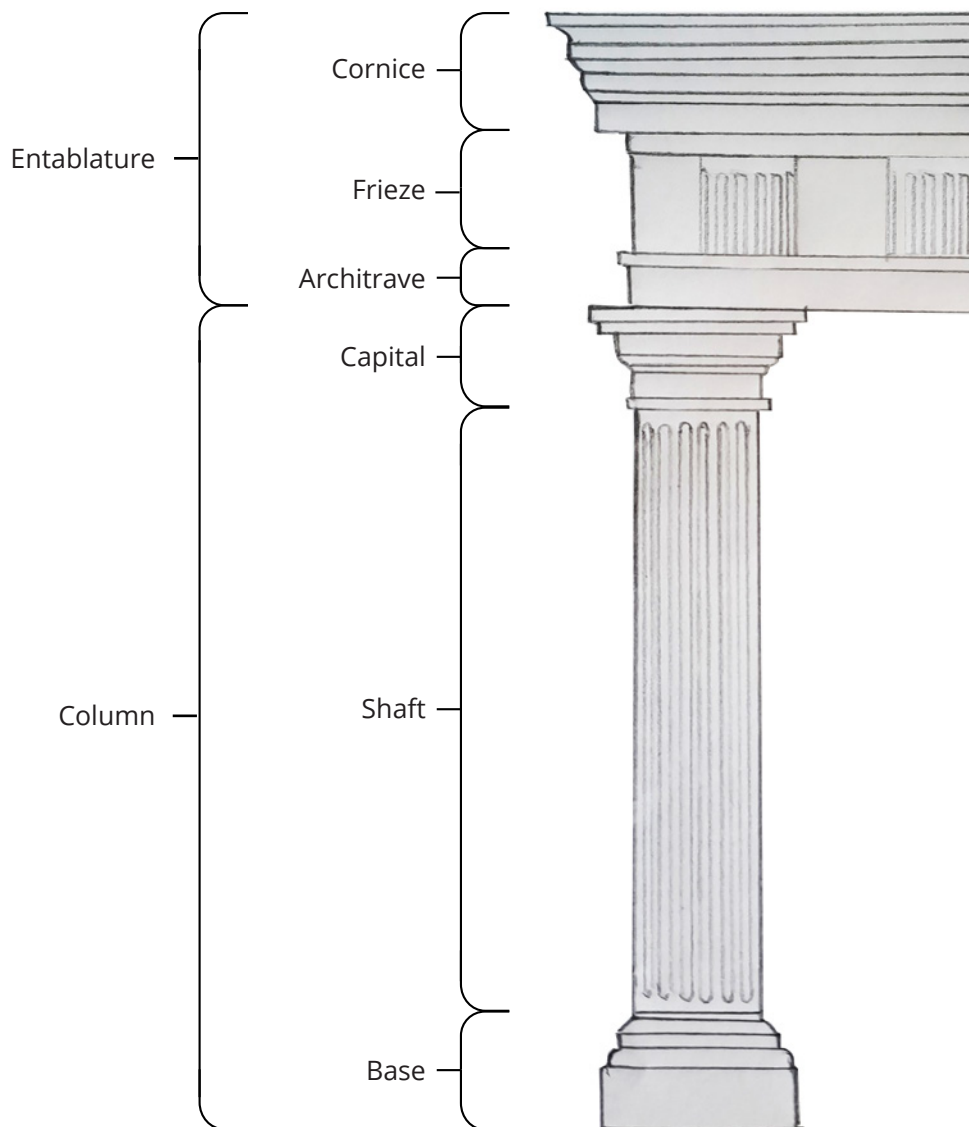


Figure 3: Diagram of Classical order elements

For more information please contact the Council at:

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If you require this information in another format e.g. in large print, Braille, audio or in another language other than English, please contact the Equalities Officer on 01727 814602 or email equalities@stalbans.gov.uk

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