

THE CITY OF SAULT STE. MARIE

# DOWNTOWN COMMERCIAL FACADES

URBAN DESIGN GUIDE



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# INTRODUCTION

## **What is a Facade?**

A facade is a building's primary exterior face, typically serving as the public interface of a business.

Every building and facade is different, yet a closer inspection reveals a common design language that is composed of just a few elements organized in similar patterns. This is evident on most traditional facades within the Downtown exhibiting similar entrances, windows sizes and cornice lines.

## **A Unified Front**

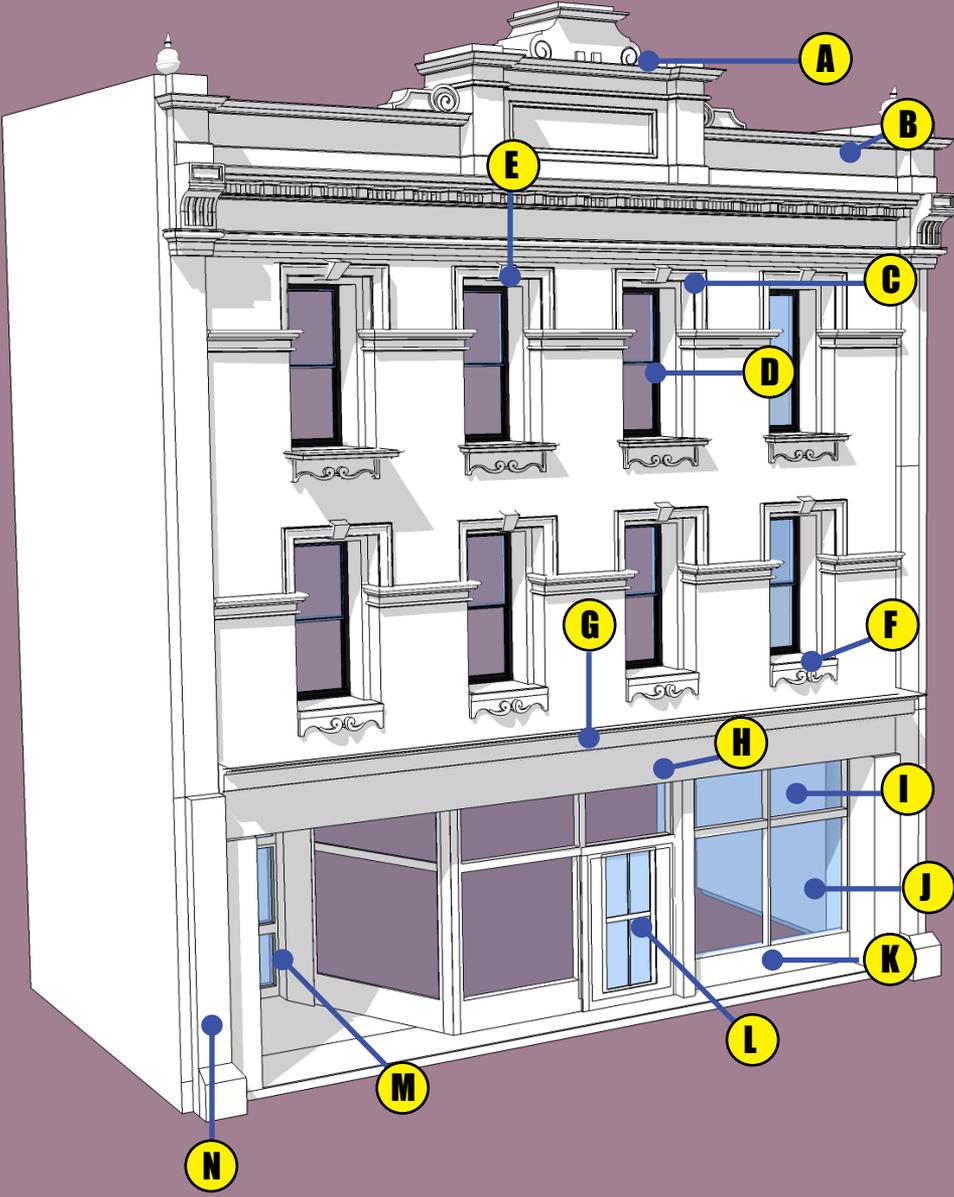
A facade typically consists of a pedestrian-oriented ground floor, and decorative upper storeys. While these two components serve different purposes, the facade as a whole should look like a single, unified unit. A careful selection of materials, colours, architectural detail, and overall design should be utilized to achieve a cohesive appearance.

## **Purpose and Application:**

A welcoming, eye-catching storefront sends a positive message to the community and can help draw in potential customers. To this end, the City is encouraging good design through a series of facade and building improvement grants as part of the ongoing Downtown Development initiative. The design guidelines contained in this document are a tool to support the implementation of building improvement grants.

This Urban Design Guide has been developed to be a helpful basic source of information on facade design practices, focusing on elements that visually impact views from the street, as well as the interaction of interior store-front spaces with the public realm. It is not, however, a substitute for professional advice or consultation.

# FACADE ELEMENTS



- A** Pinnacle
- B** Cornice
- C** Window lintel
- D** Window muntin and mullion
- E** Keystone
- F** Window sill
- G** Lower/storefront cornice
- H** Signboard
- I** Transom window
- J** Storefront window
- K** Base panel
- L** Storefront door
- M** Secondary door
- N** Pier or pilaster

# ACCESSIBILITY

The City of Sault Ste. Marie is committed to creating a barrier free community that is accessible for all users, and in compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Not only do inclusive environments enhance the quality of life for all, as well as promote acceptance, but also the benefits to business should not be underestimated. Facade related accessibility improvements primarily involve the main entrance, however, improvements throughout the building are encouraged.

To learn more about accessibility practices and requirements for buildings, please contact the City's Accessibility Coordinator:

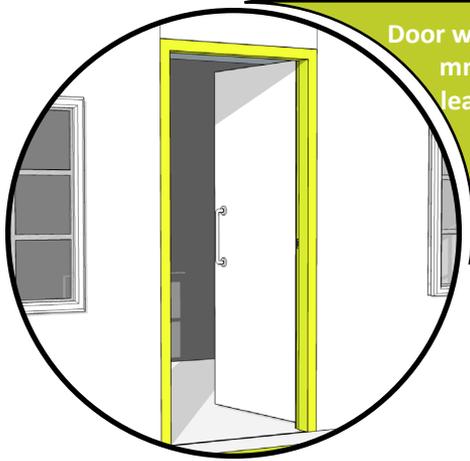
Nancie Scott at **705-541-7310** – [n.scott@cityssm.on.ca](mailto:n.scott@cityssm.on.ca)

## Encouraged:

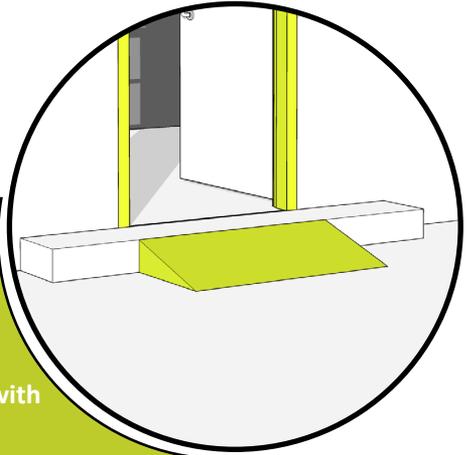
- Entrances should be leveled with the sidewalk. A required single step to reach an entrance could prevent a person using a wheelchair, walker or cane from accessing the building. Adding a short ramp, or modifying the entrance to eliminate the step/s should be considered if the main entrance has one or two steps.
- When door width is less than 850 mm, consider enlarging door opening. Alternatively, “swing-clear” door hinges can add up to 38 mm in clearance without replacing the door or frame.
- Entrance doors that do not require much grasping, twisting, or force to open. Lever handles, and push plate/door pulls are preferred, knob handles and thumb-latch handles are not.
- Entrances should be defined and be easily identifiable. The proper use of awnings, lighting, and signs can assist with this.
- Materials and colours of ramps, rails, or other features, should be compatible with the character of the building or area.

## Discouraged:

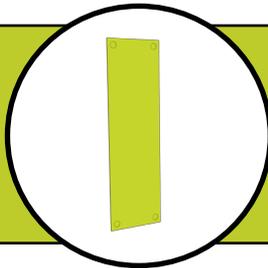
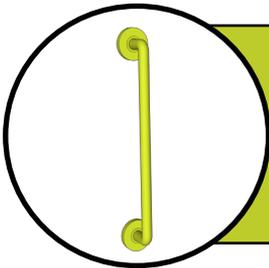
- Placing display racks or merchandise where it would encroach on the building entrance and make it difficult to enter and exit the building.



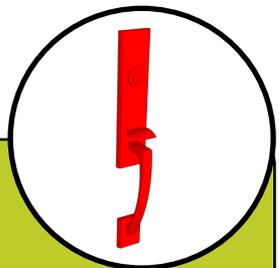
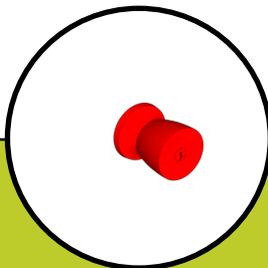
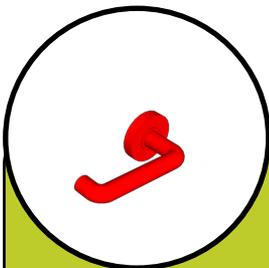
Door width clearances should be at least 850 mm and lead to interior pathways of at least 1100 mm. This is to provide enough space for individuals in wheelchairs or with other physical impairments to comfortably enter a business and maneuver inside.



A small entrance step is an obstacle for those in wheelchairs or with other physical limitations. Ramps, whether permanent or temporary, can help mitigate this limitation. Ramps should also be level and flush against the step with no gaps present.



Door handles, such as pull bars and push plates, are easy to operate and do not require much force or hand maneuvers.



Handle levers, knobs, and thumb-latch handles are more difficult to operate and are therefore discouraged.

# DOORS AND GROUND FLOOR WINDOWS

Storefront entrances and windows should be visually appealing to promote local businesses to passing pedestrians, and to contribute to making the sidewalk a more welcoming public space.

## Encouraged:

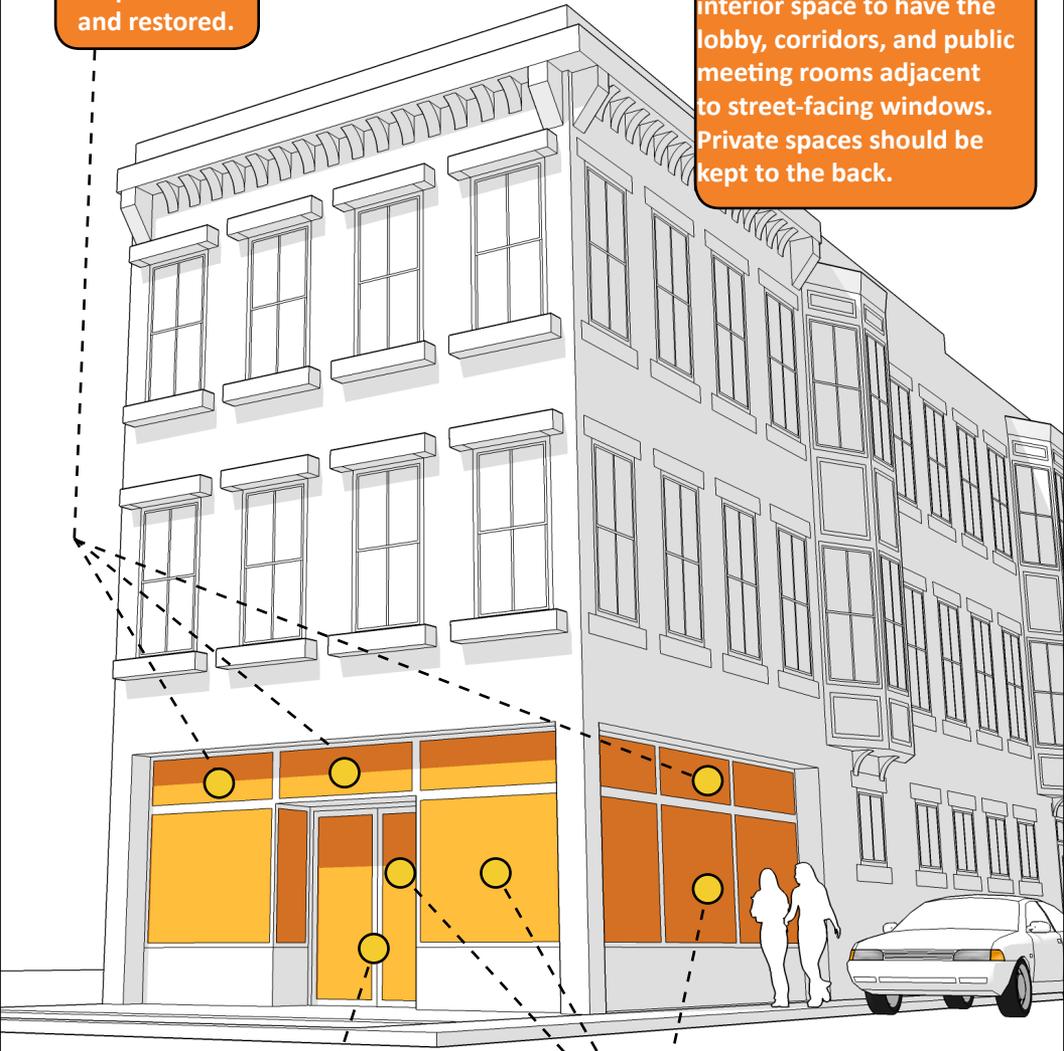
- Windows and doors that are made of transparent glass and kept unobstructed to provide visibility into the store.
- Folding and sliding doors that can open business activity onto the street and activate the public realm.
- Window frames that are painted with complimentary colours to the rest of the facade to add interest and variety.
- Preservation and restoration of original patterns and openings of doors and windows. New installations of windows, including transom windows, should be compatible with the building's overall appearance.
- Perforated and retractable shades for street-facing windows, rather than styles that would substantially inhibit visibility to and from the street.

## Discouraged:

- Obstructing window views with signs, product shelving, and other obstacles.
- Non-transparent decals covering the full extent of windows.
- Replacing or altering original windows or its openings with different styles or materials.
- Window replacements that do not fit the entire window opening or the use of filler material to compensate for size differences.
- Plexiglass as a glass substitute.

Transom windows should be preserved and restored.

Businesses requiring privacy, such as law offices, should configure the front interior space to have the lobby, corridors, and public meeting rooms adjacent to street-facing windows. Private spaces should be kept to the back.



The most prominent doorway should be the one that leads to the ground floor space. Doors leading to upper-storey residential spaces can be simpler in design and have less windows and transparency.

A high degree of visibility and transparency creates an interesting experience for pedestrians and can help draw them into retail spaces.

# AWNINGS AND CANOPIES

Awnings and canopies are ground floor based elements that shelter building entrances from rain and reduce heat and glare from the sun. They provide space for signage and decoration that can welcome customers and enhance the pedestrian realm, as well as bolster business identity. Awnings and canopies must conform to the Ontario Building Code and City by-laws.

## Encouraged:

- Awning/canopy width dimensions that match window and door openings, and are in proportion to the building facade.
- Matte finish canvas and cloth material that is waterproof, fade and tear resistant, and that can withstand rain and snow.
- Where appropriate, retractable awnings can be used to accommodate different weather conditions.
- Colours that are compatible to the rest of the building's facade.
- Illumination to add comfort for pedestrians and enhance the public realm.
- Graphics and text kept to a minimum.

## Discouraged:

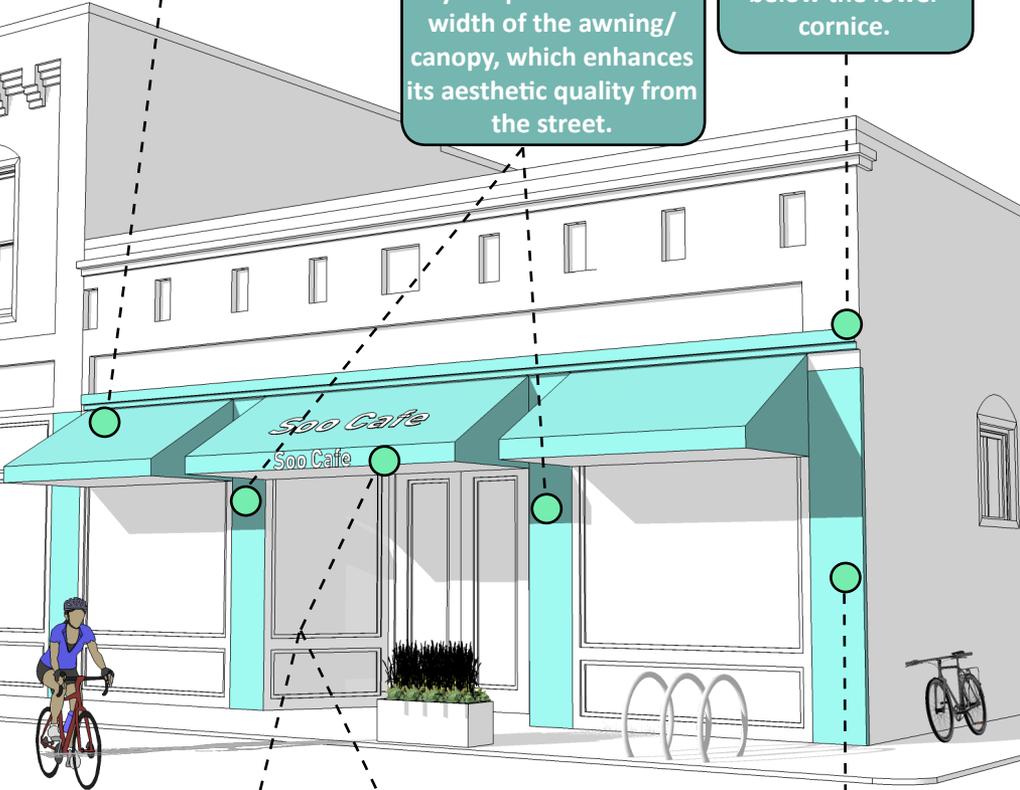
- Materials that are transparent, reflective, sensitive to wind and snow (i.e., vinyl and plastics) should be avoided.
- Styles or placements that obstruct important building elements, or are located above the ground floor.
- Outdated designs such as fluted, curved, bullnosed, or rounded canopies.
- Backlit canopies. They should be lit from above.

Awning is projected over an individual window bay or door opening. Single and long continuous awnings or canopies are not encouraged.

An awning typically consists of a lightweight frame structure over which a cover is attached, and entirely supported by a building's exterior wall. A canopy is a more permanent and rigid structure supported by the exterior wall, poles, or both.

The facade's architectural rhythm is reinforced by the placement and width of the awning/canopy, which enhances its aesthetic quality from the street.

Awning/canopy should be mounted below the lower cornice.



Awning/canopy is kept at a uniform height level.

Awnings/canopies that do not require to be supported underneath by poles or columns are encouraged.

Storefront piers and pilasters should be left uncovered.

# LIGHTING

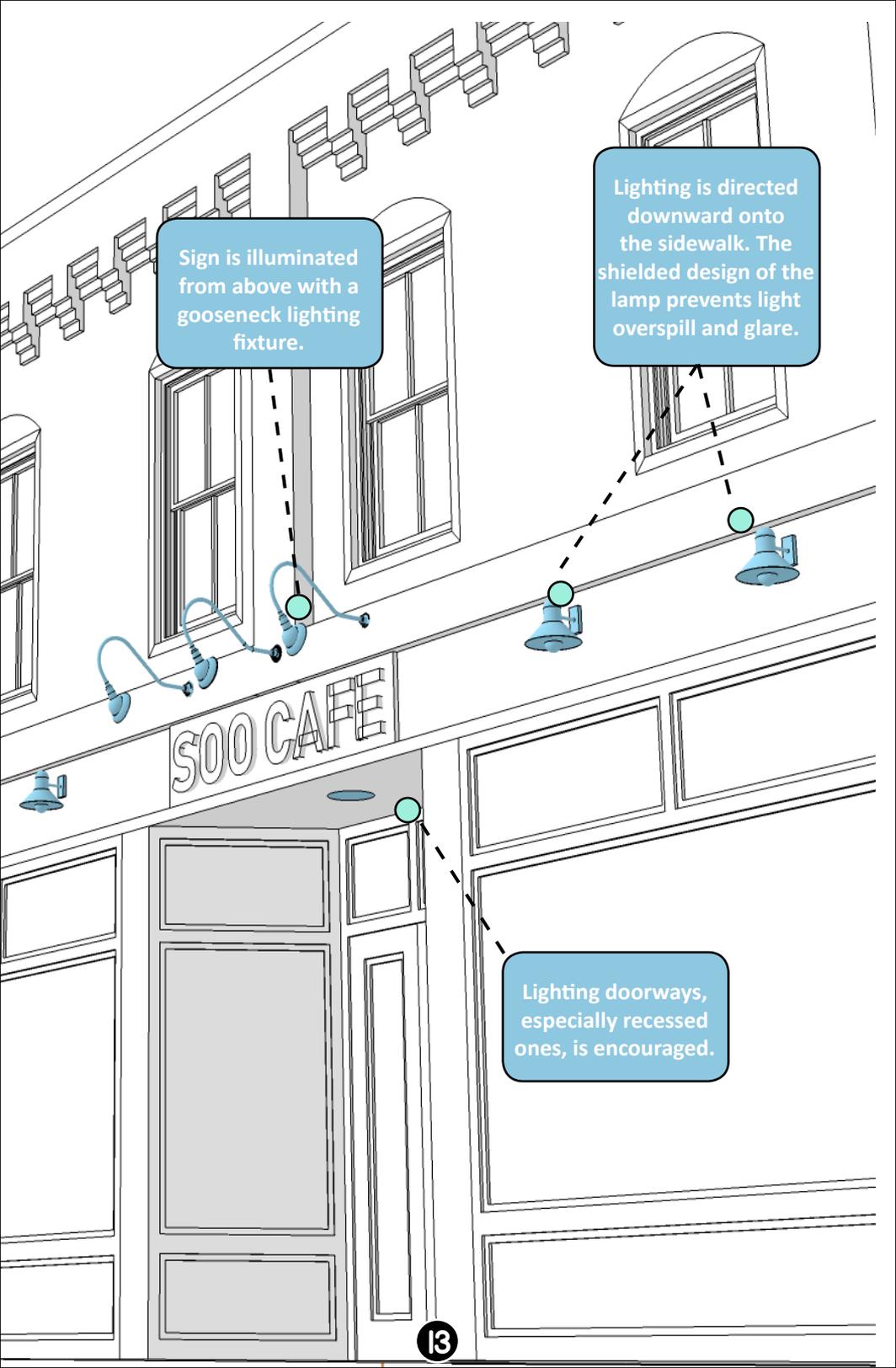
Effective lighting creates visibility, increases safety for pedestrians, and highlights strategic storefront areas and architectural elements. Lighting must be used in moderation and designed in a way to prevent negative impacts on the character of the building or on passing pedestrians and motorists.

## Encouraged:

- Energy efficient light bulbs with a warm and inviting spectrum.
- Lighting that is directed downward at all entrances and along sidewalks to maintain security. Recessed pot lights or gooseneck fixtures are preferred.
- Signs that are illuminated from above rather than from behind, and with an appropriate light fixture design.
- Light source should be shielded to prevent glare for pedestrians, and directed downwards to reduce light spill, glare, and light pollution.
- Light fixtures of an appropriate style, size, and colour to complement the overall building's design to accentuate significant architectural elements.
- Lighting should be used to highlight details of the facade (i.e., columns), sign, and entranceway, rather than the entire building itself.

## Discouraged:

- Lighting that is too bright, over illuminates the facade, causes glare for pedestrians, or spreads in all directions rather than downward.
- Distracts from the historic fabric of the building or obscures architectural elements.
- Backlit awnings/canopies and internally lit signs.
- Fluorescent or sodium vapour lighting.



Sign is illuminated from above with a gooseneck lighting fixture.

The diagram shows a building facade with a sign that reads "SOO CAFE". Several lighting fixtures are installed: gooseneck fixtures above the sign, shielded fixtures above windows, and a recessed fixture above the entrance. Dashed lines indicate the light paths from each fixture to its target area.

Lighting is directed downward onto the sidewalk. The shielded design of the lamp prevents light overspill and glare.

Lighting doorways, especially recessed ones, is encouraged.

# SIGNAGE

An attractive facade is an effective form of store identity and advertising. Signage is an important element in this, as it makes a strong first impression and can be a creative demonstration of a business' character. Signage that is excessive in scale, inappropriately placed or not maintained, are common issues that should be avoided, as its improper use can negatively impact commercial areas.

## Encouraged:

- Stand alone lettering, affixed directly onto signboard.
- Simple and short wording, with up to seven words.
- Blade or projecting signs that are pedestrian scaled are preferred.
- No more than one main sign with a maximum of two other smaller signs. The smaller signs should be pedestrian scaled and at eye level.
- Main signs should be flat and located on the signboard.
- Store name and logo should be restricted to two or three areas: the signboard, display window, entrance door, awning, hanging or projected sign.
- Lettering style that is legible from a distance, reflects the business's image and historic period of the storefront.
- Signs and signboards should be aligned with the same features on neighbouring buildings to maintain the existing pattern of horizontal and vertical facade features.

## Discouraged:

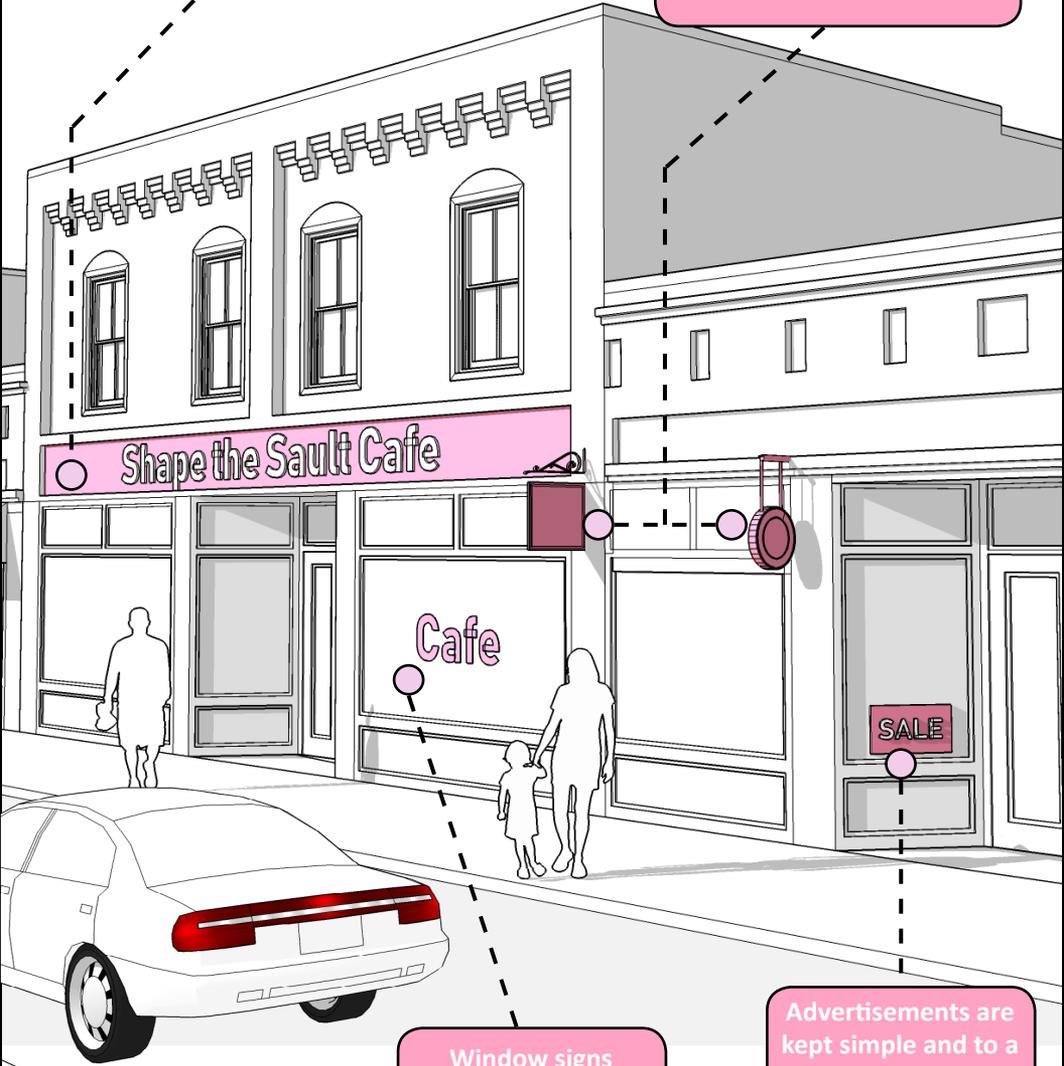
- Signage that is overly large, inappropriately located, or that overpowers and obstructs a significant portion of the facade or obscures important architectural detail.
- Backlit illumination. Signage should be illuminated from above.
- Not investing in durable, quality, or compatible material to the building facade, and neglecting the maintenance of signs, especially historic ones.
- Tarp signs.

Signboard is kept unobstructed from air conditioning units, ventilation, etc.

Simple and clear text is used.

Hanging or projecting signs should be orientated towards pedestrians and provide smaller scaled information.

Signs reinforce each other by being placed at similar heights.



Window signs are screened or transparent to maximize visibility into the store.

Advertisements are kept simple and to a minimum to prevent a cluttered and unattractive window display.

# UPPER STOREY WINDOWS

Windows do more than just let light and air inside. They play a significant role in the overall design and appearance of the buildings they serve, especially when they are the most dominant visual element of an otherwise plain building. Historic windows often exhibit a high degree of craftsmanship and design that reflect the era in which they were built. Poorly designed windows can dramatically alter the appearance of a building and compromise historic character. Windows above the first storey of a building are considered upper-storey windows.

## Encouraged:

- Retention, preservation, and maintenance of the location, form, and materials of historic windows.
- When repair is not possible or practical, replacement may be an option given that it is as close as possible or compatible with the colour, material, texture, dimensions, and design of the original window.
- Inappropriate additions or alterations to the original historic windows should be reversed to reflect the original appearance.
- New windows should be aligned with those of neighbouring buildings for consistency amongst horizontal features.

## Discouraged:

- Covering, enclosing, reducing, expanding, or concealing an original window opening.
- White vinyl window casings, mullions, and muntins.

A window opening should be properly fitted with one that closely replicates the original design. Filling a window opening with other materials is not encouraged.

Window openings should not be altered, as changes to them impact the overall look of a heritage building.

Mullions, muntins and the patterns they form should be maintained.



Window heights should be similar to those on neighbouring buildings.

New window with different color, material, size, and grid style from the original is not compatible as it impacts the look of the facade.

# PAINT AND COLOURS

The maintenance and enhancement of original stone and masonry elements is paramount when upgrading a facade. However, the use of appropriate colours can also be an effective way to highlight other architectural features. Repainting is one of the easiest and most affordable elements to change, but the immediate and dramatic effect of repainting warrants careful consideration and planning. The use of improper paint can create an incongruent facade, distorting the historical significance or visual input of a facade.

## Encouraged:

- Reviving the original colour scheme is preferred.
- The palate of colours should be drawn from the original colours of the building or other historical buildings in the area, with no more than two or three different colours.
- Colours should be grouped into two categories and applied accordingly: primary “base” and secondary “accent” colours.
- Vibrant colours should be muted and soft and used as an accent colour.
- Colours should be in harmony with the building’s predominant material and generally subdued to allow the original architectural details to remain as focal points.
- Brick staining applications are the preferred methods to changing masonry or stone facade colours. This should only be used to address former repair work where different colored bricks were used. Staining allows the brick to breathe, thereby avoiding some of the long-term problems that come with typical brick paint.

## Discouraged:

- Cluttered and unorganized designs, colours that are excessive as well as too bold and bright.
- Painting brick or stone facade elements.

Windows are painted in same colour to show that they belong to the same facade.

Elements that are not made from the same material as the facade may be painted.



Brick is left unpainted.

Window and door frames, sign band, base panel trims, and parts of the cornice have been painted with accent colours.

# DECORATIVE DETAILS

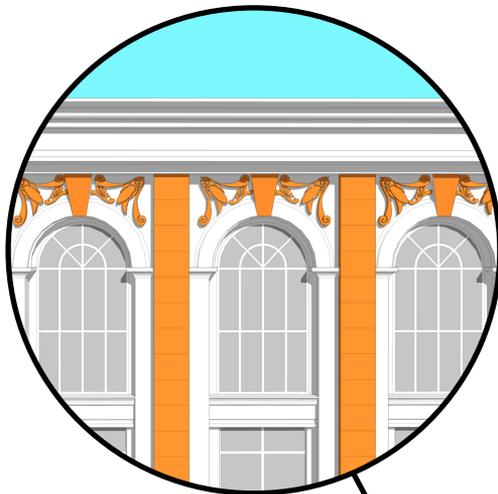
Architectural and historical details not only add visual interest to a facade, but also communicates that value is placed on the place of business as well as the customer's experience. Cornices, keystones, window sills, quoins, skilled craftwork, columns, medallions, bay windows, masonry detailing, ornaments, trims, moldings, and more are all examples of the types of details that should be preserved.

## **Encouraged:**

- Where feasible, the repair, restoration, and preservation of original facade details. Where this is not possible, they should be replaced with something that closely resembles it.
- Replications should be installed in place of missing details of importance (i.e., a missing cornice that serves to both cap the facade and reinforce the horizontal continuity of the streetscape).

## **Discouraged:**

- Removing or obstructing the visibility of architectural and historical details.



Architectural and decorative details are some of the many components that make a building visually appealing and connected to its historical origin.

Many of these features are also labelled under the [Facade Elements](#) section of this guide.



# MATERIALS

## Encouraged:

- The restoration of existing materials is preferred, but in the event of repair or replacement, new materials should match the original in terms of colour, texture, form, and shape.
- New materials should respect the era and style of the building and prevailing character of the area.
- Brick, sandstone, and wood siding are the preferred exterior finish materials. Stone cladding and stucco are less desirable alternates.
- Traditional brick styles, colours and sizes should be sourced for facade improvements.
- To achieve better transitions between various materials, they should change at a point of recession or projection on the inside of a corner or pronounced expansion point along flat building walls.
- Regular and safe maintenance of facade materials, including nonabrasive cleaning, and tuck pointing brick and stone facades.
- Removing cladding to reveal the original materials and architectural details that have been obstructed.

## Discouraged:

- Vinyl, aluminum, or metal siding or cladding.
- Power washing or sandblasting as this process can weaken materials, especially brick.
- Non-local stones, corrugated metal panels, concrete blocks, or “faux materials” that mimic other materials.

# INTERIOR LAYOUT

The storefront should be designed to create a visual connection between the interior and exterior spaces. Unobstructed visibility into an interesting and attractive building interior communicates its positive look and feel, which creates curb appeal and subsequently increases the chances of converting foot traffic into store traffic.

While there are many components that work together to achieve an attractive interior layout, the following recommendations are focused on those that have the most visual impact on pedestrians.

## **Encouraged:**

- Many people discover stores after-hours. Window display lights should be left on until 11:00 p.m. Timers can be used to automate this cycle.
- Non-retail businesses located on the ground floor should place the more active spaces, such as lobbies, corridors, and other common spaces adjacent to the street-facing windows. Private spaces should be arranged at the rear.

## **Discouraged:**

- Placing product shelving, signs, or other obstacles in a manner that inhibits visibility between the outside and interior of the building.

**For additional information, please contact:**

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**SAULT STE. MARIE**