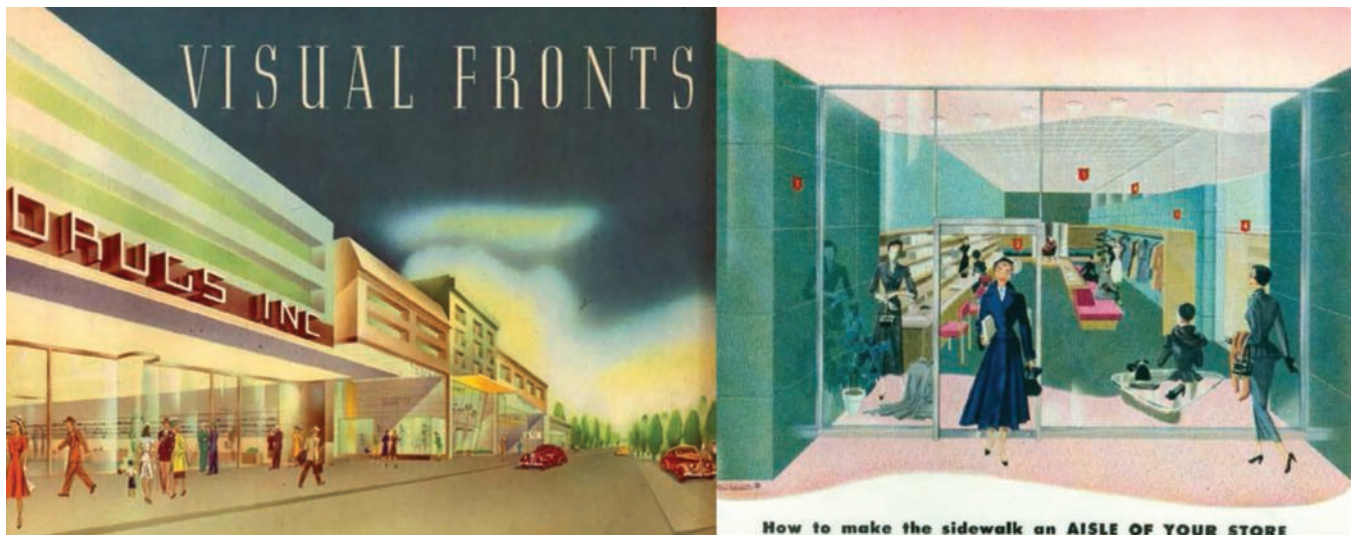


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# Midcentury Commercial Design Evaluation and Preservation: An Opportunity for Commissions

By Carol J. Dyson, AIA

Commercial building design of the mid-20th century expressed a period of American optimism and economic prosperity. Sleek new materials and structural systems represented post-war America's unwavering belief in new technology and materials; glassy open storefronts showcased the 20th century's more open relationship between consumers and products; modern designs promised customers up-to-date goods and service within.



**Figure 1:** In the mid-20th century, the commercial facade was no longer two-dimensional, rather it combined an open glazed front with dynamic three-dimensional features to create a 'deconstructed' front facade. Steel lintels now easily spanned across an entire facade, transparent "open fronts" replaced earlier opaquely-backed display windows, and the well-lit store, theater lobby or restaurant seating itself became the display. Left, a Libbey Owens Ford Glass Co. brochure: *Visual Fronts*, 1942. Right, a Libbey Owens Ford advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post*, October 15, 1949.

**Figure 2:** Other postwar design components that occurred parallel with, or as part of open-front designs were asymmetrical and angled fronts. On the left in Freeport, Illinois, angled rustic-stone pylons combine with a deep overhang to shield the open storefront windows from glare. On the right, in Moline, Illinois, is an example of a common postwar open storefront plan, shown here with structural glass surrounding large plate glass display windows that asymmetrically angle into the entrance.



Photos: IHPA archives

Yet these once-elegant buildings may now be showing their age. Although the aluminum, steel and glass components may still be sound, minor damage from signage alterations or impact damage to bulkheads may discourage building owners. Designs may be hard to appreciate because they were once heavily integrated with dramatic script, neon or individual cast letter signs long gone due to business changes. Finally, the aesthetic may still be too new for some owners, preservationists or commissioners to fully appreciate. Yet to consider a postwar bank as an intrusion into the historic fabric of an older downtown is no different than how an Italianate building was negatively viewed in the 1920s, or how Romanesque Revival Buildings were reviled in the 1940s, or an Art Deco post office was ignored in the 1960s. The full appreciation of more recent resources has always taken time and the time to recognize our midcentury has arrived.

Today, historic preservation commissions, state historic preservation review staff, and the National Park Service are all learning to evaluate resources from the mid-20th century. This is appropriate, for most of the commercial buildings of the 1950s and 1960s are now over fifty years old, and are really no longer our “recent” past. These commercial resources may include downtown buildings built in the midcentury, such as savings and loans or automobile dealerships, as well as earlier commercial buildings with postwar modernizations. The commercial building with a midcentury shop-

front on the first floor or the entire facade “slipcovered” can provide preservation challenges related to periods of significance and physical integrity.

These buildings tell an important story about architecture, commerce and 20th century mercantile history and as preservationists we should strive to make sure these resources do not disappear from our downtowns. Yet, too often owners may wish to scrape away an authentic midcentury modernization from their building to return to a “historicized” recreation of an older type of storefront.

When commissions evaluate these resources it is important to remember that downtowns were never static. Downtowns were dependent on style, and diversity prevailed, particularly at the ground level. If we strive to have downtowns uniformly fit a picturesque nineteenth century aesthetic, we can create a static appearance that never existed. At the end of World War II, as a post-war economy burst into action, modern commercial designs utilizing new materials vigorously filled architectural journals, design books, and storefront manufacturers’ advertising. Dramatic commercial building and storefront designs by well-known designers such as Raymond Loewy, Morris Lapidus, Victor Gruen, and Morris Ketchum Jr., were widely published and promoted to architects and building owners. These advances in materials and design, combined with intense material marketing all had a decisive impact on downtowns. Downtowns changed; new buildings were built; business



Illustration: Kawneer publication, 1946. Photo: Carol Dyson

**Figure 3:** Signage was often a critical component of midcentury commercial design. The Ramble's Hardware Store design by Ketchum, Gina and Sharp combines dramatic signage with linear display boxes that run from the exterior through the open front and on into the store. The Hub Clothiers, formerly in Springfield, Illinois, displayed equally dramatic porcelain enamel graphics and signage on a granite-textured porcelain enamel backdrop above a stone veneer and plate glass lower floor.

owners updated their buildings; retailers wanted the latest styles; downtown service businesses became more customer-focused. Midcentury changed Main Street and those changes deserve evaluation.

### WHAT DO YOUR DESIGN GUIDELINES SAY?

Most local preservation ordinances, particularly in Certified Local Government communities, are based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Standard 4 is the most relevant standard cited in evaluating later changes to historic buildings: "Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved." Basically, a feature does not have to be original to be significant, and in fact those changes may tell an important story

about the building's history and the timeline of your community. Standard 5 tells us that "Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved." Thus, we need to look at mid-20th century design, materials, and alterations that have acquired significance.

But every community and its resources are different. A not atypical situation is when a building owner comes to a commission with a request to demolish a midcentury storefront and create an earlier-appearing historically-inspired storefront. Has the midcentury storefront acquired significance? The next section discusses factors that commissioners may find useful to consider



Irene Burke photo: Design for Modern Merchandizing, April 1948. Other photos: IHPA archives

**Figure 4:** Cantilevered display cases in outdoor lobbies helped deconstruct the front plane of retail buildings. On the left is a 1948 design in Long Beach, California. In the center are similar displays in Bloomington, Illinois. On the right, the former Bakers Shoes in Chicago had a free-standing display "table," well-lit cantilevered display cases, and a curved open-front display window on the second floor.



when evaluating the significance of midcentury resources.

### WHAT IS THIS BUILDING'S HISTORY?

When was the building built? Was it constructed during the post-war period or was it an earlier building with post-war updates? Does the date of the midcentury resource or alteration fall within the period of significance of the historic district? If not, is it over 50 years old or of exceptional significance? Is it time to evaluate, and perhaps expand the period of significance for the historic district? Or might the building be individually eligible to become a local landmark as a good example of midcentury design?

Was this commercial structure built in the post-war period? If so, then it is real and authentic. Evaluate its significance and integrity, and promote retention of what makes it historic. It's true to its time, tells the story of the downtown's continuum of change and makes your Main Street much livelier. Commissions may wish to promote that these buildings be kept true to their midcentury nature.

If a building is a midcentury modernization of an

earlier building, was most of the earlier storefront or front facade removed or damaged during installation? If so, consider whether it follows Standards 4 and 5 to demolish an authentic 1950s design only to put back a reconstruction of an earlier period style storefront in new materials? Did the midcentury design carry through to the interior? If so, does any of that continuity of design remain? That can be an important factor for tax credit projects where designation and review includes interiors, but may be a less important one for local commissions whose consideration may be limited to the exterior.

### WHAT IS THE CONDITION OF MATERIALS?

Are the materials in good, or easily repairable, condition? In most cases, the structural glass, tile, spandrel, stone-panel systems, and plate-glass storefronts, are relatively durable. However, materials used at bulkheads and near door frames were often susceptible to impact damage. Those areas in the signage zone are also subject to damage from alterations. When these materials are impacted, business owners are often at a loss with how to deal with these materials. There is a growing amount of information out there regarding the repair of modern-era materials. Commissions



Photos: l. - IHPA archives; m. - Ann V. Swallow; r. - John Van Scheltema

**Figure 5:** Structural innovations and dramatic space-age-inspired design also appeared on Main Street in a style named Exaggerated Modern by Chester Leibs in his seminal book *Main Street to Miracle Mile*. On the left the Taylorville, Illinois cinema was completely refaced in the mid-century with polychrome porcelain enamel panels, swooping stainless steel and aluminum canopy and cornice, and dramatic pylon. In the middle, the elegant Oklahoma City Central Motor Bank drive-up, built in 1959, combines a thin-shell concrete roof with bright blue mosaic tile encased piers. On the right, precast concrete columns surround a darkly glazed curtain wall on this Moline, Illinois bank, designed by John Van Scheltema, of the Illinois Bank Building Corporation in the 1970s.



Photos: IHPA archives

**Figure 6:** On the left is “The Art of Refacing the New Art in Architecture” Julius Blum & Co.’s JB Curtainscreen, 1965. On the right, Burnside and Co., in Danville, Illinois, is an excellent example of an unusually intact design with gold anodized aluminum slipcover, cantilevered display case, decoratively tiled storefront, and period signage and deserves preservation.

can assist property owners with materials and methods for repair.

**WHAT IS THE DESIGN?**

What is the integrity of midcentury design? Can you still understand the design intent? Does the building still tell the story with most components, display windows, and materials still remaining? For many of these buildings loss of design impact may be due to the loss of the historic signage. Business or aesthetic changes may have caused removal of the original postwar signage and replaced it with either neutral or incompatibly designed signage. Many of these building designs were co-dependent on their midcentury modern signage. It is likely that the period signage does not remain and should not be given undue weight in evaluation. If it is missing, new signs can usually be designed that work with the midcentury storefront and help revive the design aesthetic (See Figures 8 and 9).

Is this an older building with a midcentury shopfront at the ground level? This is a relatively common feature in downtowns. It reflects the dynamic nature of downtown design history. Buildings, especially storefronts, were periodically refreshed. Or is this an older building with an entirely new facade. Some commercial building refacings completely removed or irretrievably altered the entire original front facade of the building (such as the Taylorville, Illinois cinema in Figure 5). The midcentury tile, glass, metal, or masonry facades may be the only significant features of the facade with nothing other than structure beneath. If the facade is a good example of the later period with most elements intact or repairable, then it has significance. Retention of this authentic historic midcentury facade would be more in keeping with Standards 4 and 5 than demolition and replacement with a completely new neo-historic facade. The midcentury facade is real, authentic and a part of the history of the building. It will always have more historic integrity

than a recreation of something that is long-gone.

Is the building merely “slipcovered?” Rather than completely refaced was the building covered with a lightweight aluminum, plastic or steel facade, often with a screen or panelized motif? Does this building represent a good example of a midcentury design (such as the Danville, Illinois example in Figure 6)? Many slipcovers or facade alterations were well thought out designs to showcase an up-to-date style. In contrast, some buildings were inexpensively covered in the last part of the 20th century with panels or corrugated siding devoid of design or signage simply to avoid repainting or repointing, and may retain little significance. If it appears that this situation exists, first try to determine what the original slipcover (complete with signage) looked like before making an evaluation. Historic photos, or ghosting of earlier signage on the facade can be very useful.

What is the condition of the slipcover itself? If damaged can it be repaired? Does the associated midcentury storefront remain as well? It is also important to once again study what is hidden beneath the slipcover. Is there any original historic fabric left? Even with slipcovers often much of the facade was severely damaged or removed to flatten the original facade during installation of the later design. The owner may not have the economic

resources necessary to repair demolished cornices, windows, and belt-courses, and any slipcover may be better than what is left behind after some removals. An additional factor should be the intended use of the building. If a building is being rehabilitated for upper floor housing then the removal or at least alteration of a midcentury slipcover that covers the windows may become necessary.

### WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?

Is this building a stand-alone design, or is it a post-war modernization of only one bay of a multi-bay building? If so, are the proposed changes part of an integrated effort to restore the entire building across multiple bays to its original design? How much of that original building fabric exists beneath the newer midcentury design?

### WHAT ARE SOME DESIGN SOLUTIONS?

These buildings often reflect high quality materials, design and cohesive display and lighting. If an owner or his architect works with signage and lighting that accentuates the modern aesthetic, the overall design can work better. Often with a return to historic colors, compatible signage, or original materials, these commercial buildings can be refreshed to their midcentury design intent with a minimum of cost. There is the added bonus that business owners can also be content they have “updated” their buildings.



Photos: IHPA archives

**Figure 7:** This black mid-twentieth century structural glass storefront was the third modernizing storefront for this mid-nineteenth century building in Rockford Illinois. The storefront was originally slated for demolition and replacement with an earlier neo-historic-style storefront. However, as part of the historic tax credit project the structural glass midcentury storefront was deemed a significant alteration and was retained, the sign damage was repaired and where necessary replaced by salvaged glass. The recessed terrazzo entrance lobby flooring was also retained. New signage was installed onto the storefront clear glass and did not damage the newly repaired structural glass transoms.





Photos: IHPA archives

**Figure 8:** These before and after images show a design solution for a mid-century storefront in Springfield, Illinois. IHPA Project Designer, Anna Margaret Barris' design transformed this storefront with compatible signage and a new paint scheme. The original design intent became clear and attractive once more, and the owners now agree that it is worthy of retention.

### EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Education is also key to building a recognition of mid-century resources. Often the more people learn about these mid-century facades, the easier it is for them to appreciate these resources. Commissions can be instrumental in encouraging the study of mid-century designs using examples from period advertising, contemporary design books, or current secondary sources. The elegance and beauty of these designs becomes more recognizable once one understands the aesthetic, historic and stylistic sources. Examples of rehabilitation designs that work with the resources can also be shared by the commission.

Furthermore, some commissions are looking for ways to connect with the next generation of preservationists. Many people in their teens, twenties and thirties demonstrate an appreciation for mid-century design. Mid-century furniture, facades and designs are all old enough to feel historic to them. Local educational efforts, building tours and public recognition of mid-century resources may serve as a bridge to a new generation of preservationists.

### CONCLUSION

In the mid-century there was a desire to create fresh new building styles that reflected the post war's growing economy and manufacturing



Photos: IHPA archives

**Figure 9:** This angled, white-metal mid-century storefront in Vandalia, Illinois was surrounded by simple (now painted) brick but embellished with a spectacular neon sign that advertised a mid-century jewelry store complete with a neon-illuminated diamond. Although the new tenant, Celebrations, initially wanted to remove the neon sign and storefront, they realized that the sign had community significance and that it could also reinforce the location identity for their new business. The new Celebrations signage was applied to the glass based on a drawing by IHPA Project Designers Darius Bryjka and Anthony Rubano and kept at the pedestrian level, so it that didn't have to compete with the historic neon "Jane Isbell" sign up in the transom area.

proress. The commercial buildings and storefront modifications of the midcentury exhibited an exuberance, drama, and elegance, as they showcased up-to-date businesses within. These modifications were just one more step in the continuum of change exhibited in our dynamic downtowns. They are an important part of our past, and are old enough to no longer be our "recent past." As such they deserve our study, survey, careful evaluation, and in many cases, preservation

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Photo: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency Archives

**Figure 3:** The early 20th century Booth Building in Springfield, Illinois received an elegant stone midcentury storefront ca. 1955.



Photo: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency Archives

**Figure 5:** As part of an historic preservation tax credit project, the non-historic-period slipcover was removed to expose the original upper floors, and the midcentury storefront was preserved and retained.



Photo: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency Archives

**Figure 4:** The Booth Building was clad in a panelized slipcover by the early 1970s concealing part of the storefront.





Photo: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency Archives

**Figure 6:** This ca. 1890 building in Rockford, Illinois received a number of alterations during the period of significance of the historic district, including the installation of an angled mid-century stone veneer storefront. Sometime after the period of significance the mid-century storefront window frames were painted dark and a later door installed.



Illustration: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency Archives

**Figure 7:** The rendering shows the design the owner first proposed, which included demolition of the historic mid-century storefront and installation of a completely new storefront.



Photo: Google Street View

**Figure 8:** For purposes of the federal historic tax credit project the SHPO explained that the mid-century storefront was historic and required its retention. The owner kept the mid-century storefront and installed a compatible clear-view door, restored the white metal window framing and added a canvas awning.



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# Evaluating Newer Facades and Storefronts

- 4** Midcentury Commercial Design Evaluation and Preservation: An Opportunity for Commissions
- 12** A Preservationist's Dilemma — Midcentury Commercial Building Remodels
- 19** State News
- 20** Signage and Advertising in the French Quarter: Reconciling Preservation and Commercial Needs
- 26** A Recipe for Restoration: Removing an Alpine Facade on a Historic Bakery
- 33** Spotlight on a Preservation Organization: National Main Street Center

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