

# Signs & Awning Guidelines

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*“Signs often become so important to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. They become landmarks, loved because they have been visible at certain street corners--or from many vantage points across the city--for a long time. Such signs are valued for their familiarity, their beauty, their humor, their size, or even their grotesqueness. In these cases, signs transcend their conventional role as vehicles of information, as identifiers of something else. When signs reach this stage, they accumulate rich layers of meaning. They no longer merely advertise, but are valued in and of themselves. They become icons.”*

Signs as Icons, “The Preservation of Historic Signs,” by Michael J. Auer. Preservation Brief, #25 (Technical Preservation Services), National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

The cultural significance of signs combined with their often transitory nature makes the preservation of historic signs fraught with questions, problems, and paradoxes. If the common practice in every period has been to change signs with regularity, when and how should historic signs be kept? If the business is changing hands, how can historic signs be reused? The subject is an important one, and offers opportunities to save elements that convey the texture of daily life from the past.

“The Preservation of Historic Signs,” by Michael J. Auer. Preservation Brief, #25 (Technical Preservation Services), National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

## SIGNS

### Objective

- To enhance the integrity of the buildings and community by preserving and appropriately restoring historic signs

### Purpose of signage:

- To indicate the original occupants and the area’s past. Even with a change in business, retaining historic signage as part of the community memory is desirable
- To identify current businesses and stores

### Guidelines

1. Preserve historic signage when possible
2. Restore signs only when the original has lost its visibility through age, damage, or excessive/inappropriate cleaning
3. Create attractive commercial signs that promote business, both pedestrian and vehicular, but are free of visual clutter



4. Require that new signage compliment the historic integrity of the building and community. Signs must relate to the building(s) they serve
5. Signs shall be restricted to those which identify the name of the establishment and/or the primary business or service provided within.
6. Advertising related to businesses or services not provided on the premises shall be prohibited unless, with the approval of the Commission, such advertising is deemed historically appropriate.
7. Signage should make an attempt to recognize the stylistic features and characteristics of the historical districts in their materials and graphics
8. Signage should recognize the scale, massing, style, materials and colors of the building and the district

Common elements of historic signage include:

- Painted facades and fascia signs
- Material inlaid into the buildings façade
- Hanging signs and older neon signs
- Gold leaf or gilded lettering in storefront windows



### **Signs Mounted on Buildings**

#### Size

Signage must fit within the building design and its storefront and be historically compatible with the site and context; must be compatible with building; and must not obscure architectural elements.

#### Shape

Shape of sign must be consistent with the character of the historic district in which the signage is located.

#### Materials

- Material inlaid or carved into the buildings façade should be retained
- Sign materials should be compatible with the design theme and use of materials on the building where the sign is to be placed.
- Painted wood and metal are preferred materials for the signs.
- Metal signs, wood signs, glass signs, and signs painted on masonry are permitted.

#### Position

- Locate signage above the storefront opening so that it does not conceal architectural details and features
- Signs should be located where architectural features or details suggest a location, size, or shape for the sign
- Signs should be placed on buildings consistent with sign location on adjacent buildings
- Limit the number of projecting signs
- In pedestrian areas, orient signs to sidewalk instead of motorists.

- The bottom of hanging signs should maintain at least a 10 foot pedestrian clearance from the sidewalk.
- Signs on canopies should be twelve (12) inches away from the end edges of such canopies.
- Maintain a physical separation between individual store signs so that it is clear that the sign relates to a particular store below

### Illumination

- Consider if the sign needs to be lighted
- Use external or halo lighting to illuminate building and/or storefront signage
- Lighting should fit within the building design and its storefront and be architecturally compatible with the site and context
- With internally illuminated channel letters, limit raceways depth behind letter to five (5) inches (2 inches when using LED light source)

### Typeface/Legibility

- Use cast or fabricated metal dimensional graphics – letters and logos – in lieu of plastic or vinyl dimensional graphics
- Use a minimum of ½ deep metal dimensional graphics – letters and logos.
- Selected materials should contribute to the legibility of the sign
- Avoid faddish or bizarre typefaces
- Avoid hard to read typefaces and symbols
- Limit the number of lettering styles



### Color

- Sign colors should complement the colors used on the structures and the project as a whole
- Sign colors should reflect the color system appropriate to the period of the building
- Limit the total number of colors used in any one sign

### **Signs not mounted on buildings (commercial development or multi-tenants identification) should reference the following guidelines:**

1. Use a *ground or monumental* sign not to exceed six-feet in height including the base
2. Provide a sign base of masonry, granite, or concrete with an architectural finish. A metal base on grade is prohibited unless it is 12 inches above grade
3. Include landscaping around the base of ground and monument signs
4. Limit commercial development identification signage to a maximum of two signs (double face) when development is on two major streets, not to exceed 150 square foot of signage
5. For *pylon* signs, limit height to a maximum of (12) twelve foot in height above grade including its base and post. Limit post width to 12 inch face.

6. Provide professionally made signage, including design, material, painting and construction.
7. Use signage materials that are architecturally appropriate to the historic character of the neighborhood

## AWNINGS\CANOPIES

### Objective

- To enhance the integrity of the buildings and community by preserving and appropriately restoring historic awnings and canopies

### Purpose of awning

- Awnings and canopies provide protection from the elements, expand floor space, provide unity of appearance, and create a decorative backdrop for identification.

### Guidelines

1. Design awnings and canopies so as not to conceal building features such as pilasters or windows.
2. Use color schemes to coordinate with building façade colors
3. Use simple and triangular shape awnings with valance face not to exceed ten (10) inches
4. Install into mortar joints – no fastening into brick, stone or arch details.

### Standards

1. Locate awnings, canopies and marquees and their supporting structure at a minimum of eight (8) feet, six (6) inches above public sidewalk
2. Project awnings and canopies not more than one half the width of the sidewalk and not more than 10 feet, six inches.
3. Project awnings and canopy material such as metal, glass, or woven fabric.
4. Limit signage on awning to the valance area (e.g., front fascia of the awning, not the sloped area.) Include business name, address, logo, or business “slogan,” but not to exceed 40% of the awning valance surface area. Product advertising is unacceptable.
5. Limit the signage area of awnings and canopies to that allowed per Section 61-140292(5) of the City of Detroit Zoning Ordinance.
6. Use external lighting to illuminate awnings. Internally illuminated awnings are unacceptable.



7. Use awnings to define individual storefront openings. Continuous awnings along blank walls or awnings located at upper floor windows are unacceptable.
8. Use exposed awning design with open ends and no ceiling.

#### Other

The awning may be attached either just below the storefront cornice or between the transom and display windows (allowing light into the store while shading merchandise and pedestrians from the sun.)

The awning should fit within the storefront opening; i.e., should not cover the piers or space above the cornice. Aluminum awnings or canopies generally detract from the historic character and should not be erected.

New coverings for existing – previously approved – awnings may be administratively approved by the coordinator if the colors, content, placement of printing and materials are appropriate.

*"... signs (and awnings) convey the texture of daily life from the past."*

Variance to the above guidelines may be granted by the Historic District Commission.

The Historic District Commission reserves all rights to amend and/or update this policy statement. Any questions pertaining to this policy shall be directed to the Historic District Commission, 65 Cadillac Square, Suite 1300, Detroit, Michigan 48226, telephone (313) 224-06536

Use these guidelines in conjunction with the City of Detroit Zoning Ordinance: Signs – Article VI and Awnings-Article XIV General Development Standards

Adopted: August 13, 2008  
Effective: August 13, 2008  
Revised: May 12, 2010 and November 13, 2013