



# Borough of Phoenixville Historical Architectural Review Board

## GUIDELINES FOR STOREFRONTS

### COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF PHOENIXVILLE

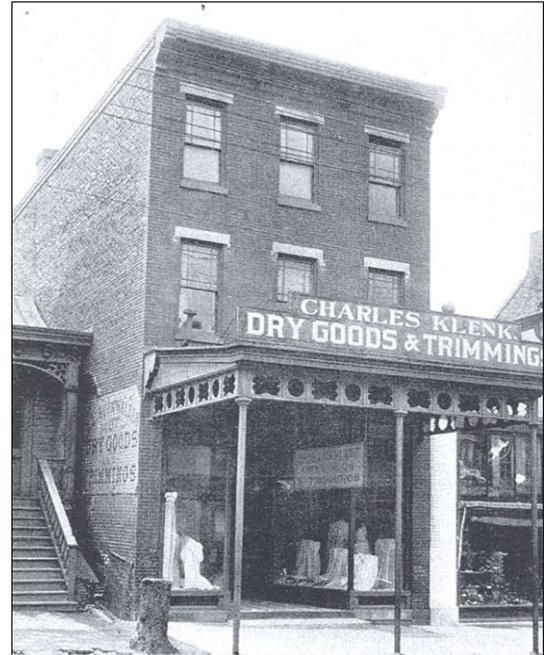
The late nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial and residential development of Phoenixville was directly tied to the prosperity of The Phoenix Iron and Steel Company. As more families emigrated to work at the mill, additional residential and commercial buildings were constructed. The building styles reflect the needs and period of construction from late Victorian to early twentieth century styles.

The Historical Architectural Review Board (HARB) encourages economic development and revitalization of the Phoenixville Downtown Historic District and the commercial properties within it. The HARB recognizes the Historic District's vibrancy is linked to the viability of its businesses. It makes every effort to assist commercial building owners and tenants to revitalize older retail areas helping to attract new customers while promoting an appreciation of local history.

It is not intended that these guidelines should replace consultation with qualified architects, contractors, the HARB, and/or the applicable ordinances.

These guidelines were developed in conjunction with the Phoenixville Historical Architectural Review Board (HARB). The HARB reviews Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) applications for proposed exterior alterations to properties within the Historic District that are visible from a public way. The applicant is responsible for complying with the provisions of the Zoning and Building Codes at the time of application. The applicant must obtain a COA as well as all necessary permits prior to proceeding with any work. For more information, or to obtain permit applications, please call the **Zoning Officer at Borough Hall at (610) 933-8801**.

Please review this information during the early stages of planning your project. Familiarity with this material can assist in moving a project quickly through the approval process, saving applicants both time and money. Additional information and *Guidelines* addressing other historic building topics are available at Borough Hall and on its web site at [www.phoenixville.org](http://www.phoenixville.org).



*This glazed storefront contrasts with the upper floor windows. Although the canopy has been removed, the building remains.*

### STOREFRONT DEVELOPMENT

A storefront is typically defined as a ground-level façade constructed with large sheets of glass to display merchandise. The development of storefronts was linked to the desire to increase commercial visibility and merchandise display possibilities. As technology progressed through the middle of the nineteenth century, the configuration of storefronts was also modified. Smaller windows in commercial buildings were replaced with larger sheets of glass and new materials such as cast iron were introduced into architecture. Advances in technology also allowed new configurations of buildings including corner entrances with wrap-around storefronts to maximize commercial visibility. Commercial storefronts can:

- Attract potential customers with eye-catching merchandise displays
- Serve a key role in a commercial building's identity
- Define a pedestrian's visual experience and create a sense of transparency at the ground floor



Commercial buildings are composed of three vertically stacked zones: 1. Ornamental Cornices; 2. Upper Floors; 3. Storefronts.

## COMPOSITION OF COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

Those buildings originally constructed for commercial purposes in Phoenixville, as opposed to buildings converted from other uses, are predominantly three stories in height. These commercial buildings have several similar features including three vertically stacked zones as depicted in the above photograph. Although the three zones of a commercial building are distinct, they are integrated into a unified design. Retaining the characteristic sections of commercial buildings with their distinctive elements is important for maintaining the character of individual buildings and the streetscape as a whole.

**1. Ornamental Building Cornices** tend to be composed of projecting moldings at the top of building wall, providing a visual cap or termination to the building. The complexity of the cornice will often reflect the style of the building with many including panels, brackets, or parapets with incorporated signage. The cornice materials can also vary widely and be constructed of wood, cast iron, pressed metal, limestone, terra cotta or decorative brick patterns.



**2. Upper Floor** walls at commercial buildings in Phoenixville tend to be brick and relatively solid with the windows appearing to be “punched” through the wall surface. Upper floor windows are usually operable and arranged on a flat wall surface in a regular pattern that does not necessarily coincide with the storefront openings below. Upper floor windows can be arched and have decorative trim components or detailing.



**3. Storefronts** can be defined as a ground-level façade constructed with large sheets of glass to display merchandise. Storefront entrances are usually recessed within an alcove with a secondary door to provide access to upper levels.

*The HARB encourages:*

- Retaining the characteristic elements of the three distinct zones of commercial buildings
- Retaining and maintaining all building cornices, features and details
- Maintaining the rhythm, size and shape of upper floor windows and associated trim and moldings
- Reopening previously infilled windows

*The HARB discourages:*

- Enclosing or removing elements, such as building cornices and storefronts
- Locating air conditioners in street elevation windows or creating new openings for thru-wall air conditioners that are visible from the street
- Infilling or altering window openings
- Removing a building cornice without providing a compatible new cornice of similar scale and detailing



*These residences have been modified for commercial purposes with the addition of storefronts at the ground level but retain their residential character above. Separate entrances for the residential and commercial uses are clearly distinguished and identifiable at the building to the right. Residential buildings converted for commercial uses are composed of three vertically stacked zones: 1. Roof and Building Cornice; 2. Upper Floors; 3. Storefronts.*

## RESIDENCES CONVERTED INTO COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

Several buildings in Phoenixville were originally constructed as residences and have since been adapted for commercial purposes. Residential buildings adapted for commercial uses tend to have one to two-and-a-half stories above the storefront that retain their residential character as depicted in the above photograph. Because of their dual use, these buildings tend to have very different characters on their lower and upper floors. Additionally, residences vary stylistically, and the vertical divisions between parts of a residential building adapted for commercial use are not as consistent as those constructed as commercial buildings.

**1. Roofs and Building Cornices** tend to be residential in design with sloped or gabled roof surfaces unlike the typically concealed or flat roof surfaces of commercial buildings. Many of the roofs have been replaced with asphalt shingles, although earlier roof materials would likely have been either slate, wood shingles or standing seam metal. Cornices at converted residences are usually wood and of a smaller scale and less elaborate in design than commercial building cornices, acting as a transition between the wall surface and the roof edge.



*The residential character is retained at the roof and upper floor of this building.*

**2. Upper Floors** at converted residences in Phoenixville have a residential appearance and scale. The wall materials vary greatly from wood frame to masonry and can include projections such as bay windows. Upper floor windows are usually operable and are typically arranged to compliment the original style of the former house.



*The bay window at this former residence is now used for a display.*

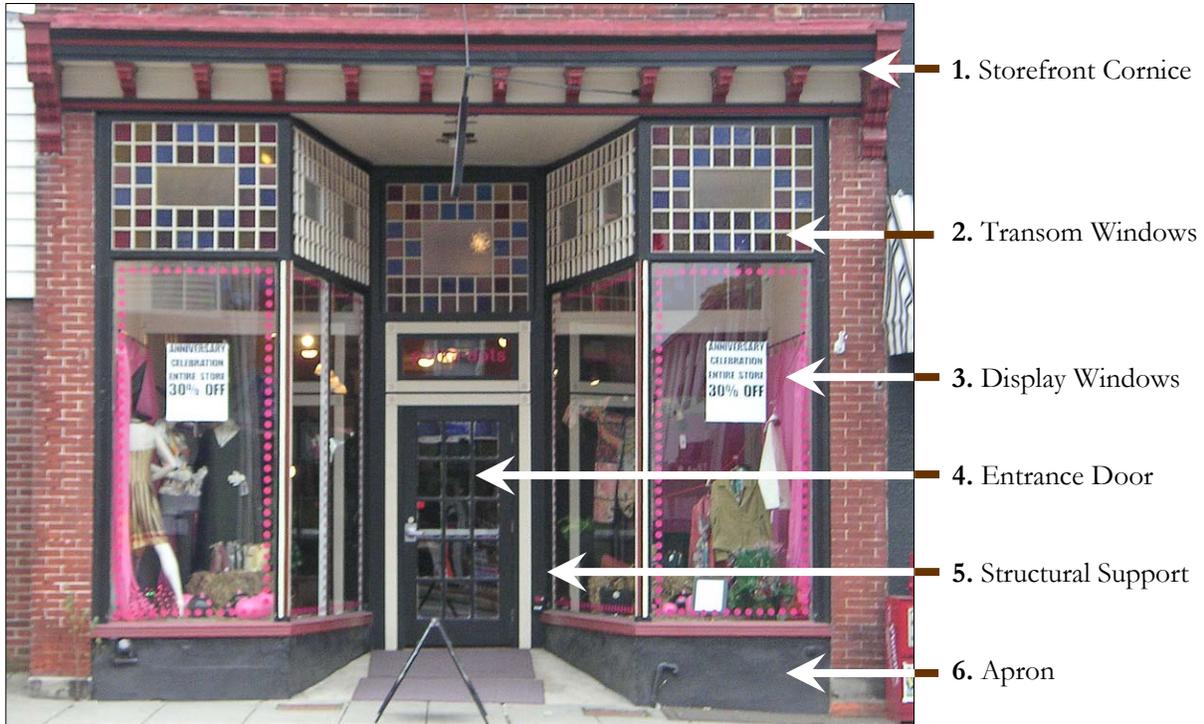
**3. Storefronts** at converted residences were typically created by enlarging former window openings, modifying the first floor by adding a new storefront, or constructing a storefront addition at the front of a former residence. Given the variety of types, these storefronts can have greatly different appearances.

*The HARB encourages:*

- Retaining residential characteristics of upper floors of residences converted into commercial buildings

*The HARB discourages:*

- Enclosing or removing elements, such as building cornices and storefronts



## STOREFRONTS

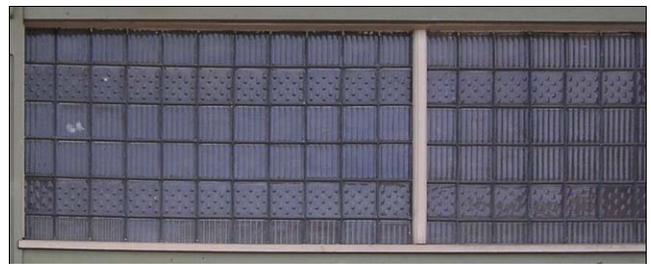
The storefront is one of the most significant features of a commercial building whether it was originally constructed for commercial purposes or converted from another use. Most people experience buildings at the ground floor level and the attractiveness and overall maintenance of a storefront can greatly influence a casual observer's perception of a building and the business within. Because a positive impression can help draw potential customers, regular maintenance and careful design can be positive on the bottom line.

Although the specific configurations of storefronts can vary greatly at different building locations, the typical construction includes large expanses of glass to display merchandise and one or more entrances. Historic storefronts were typically constructed of wood, metal (cast iron, bronze, copper, tin, galvanized sheet metal, cast zinc, or stainless steel), masonry (brick or stone) and clear, translucent or pigmented glass at transoms.



*The bracketed cornice separates the storefront from the upper building levels.*

**1. Storefront Cornices** are projecting moldings at the top of storefront, providing a visual cap or termination to the storefront and a separation with the upper floors. Cornice materials can vary widely and include wood, pressed metal, limestone, terra cotta or decorative brick patterns. Cornice details can include brackets, dentils and panels.



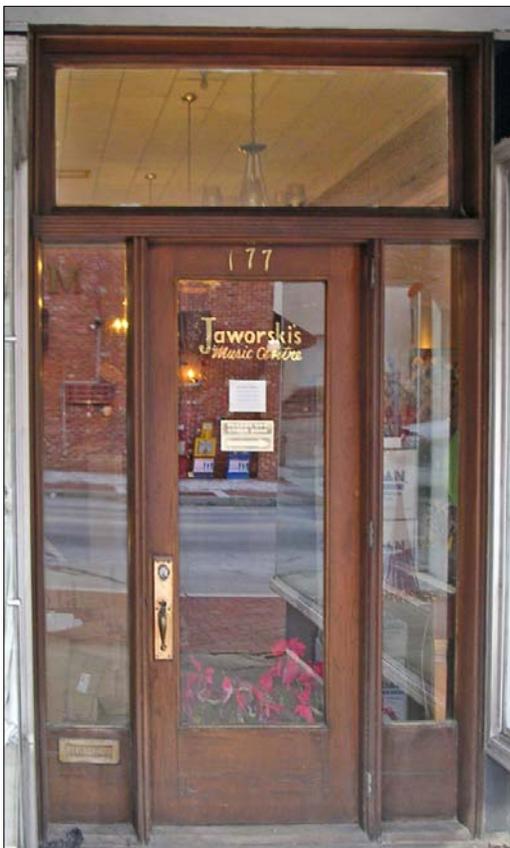
*These fixed leaded transom windows have translucent glazing with two patterns that provide additional light to the interior and additional texture at the exterior storefront.*

**2. Transom Windows** are located above display windows and doorways to provide additional daylight, and can be either fixed or operable for ventilation. They can be either single or multi-paned and are often leaded, stained, pigmented or textured glass. Historically transom windows could also include signage, lettering or other ornamental details.



*This storefront with a central recessed entry alcove has a large expanse of glazing allowing maximization of display area to attract potential customers. The storefront window apron is marble with patterned tile flooring.*

**3. Display Windows** are typically large expanses of glazing to present the available merchandise within a shop. Display windows typically flank the entrance alcove to a store and can include additional advertising to further entice potential customers.



*This wood entrance door system includes a central entry flanked by tall sidelights, all topped by a large transom window.*

**4. Entrances** at storefronts can be located flush with the outside of the building or recessed within an alcove providing additional display areas and shelter from the elements. In addition to commercial entrances, there are often secondary entrance doors that provide access to upper building levels.



*The vertical supports flanking the storefront glazing has quarter-round fan shaped trim that complements the architectural style of the storefront and building.*

**5. Structural Supports** at storefronts are necessary to carry the weight of the building and roof above and are often decorative, reinforcing the storefront's style. Typically, structural supports flank entrance doors and display windows and can be constructed of wood, cast iron or masonry.



*The granite apron provides a base for the storefront window glazing system. The former vent grille is an architectural feature that should be retained.*

**6. Aprons** act as the base for the display windows and at the interior can provide a raised platform for merchandise display. Aprons can be constructed of a variety of materials with different finishes including wood, masonry and tile.



*This arched entrance alcove ceiling has a simple geometric design at the ceiling that visually directs customers to the focal point of the central entrance door.*

### STOREFRONT ENTRANCE ALCOVES

A storefront's entrance alcove acts as a transitional space from the sidewalk to the commercial entrance. It provides shelter from the weather, and is often designed to increase the display area of the storefront to entice potential customers. Entrance alcoves tend to include a decorative ceiling and floor, and be flanked by large storefront display windows leading to a central entrance door.

*The HARB encourages:*

- Retaining the characteristic elements of the entrance alcoves including the floor, ceiling, flanking display windows, and entrances
- Retaining the entrance alcoves as exterior space rather than enclosing the alcoves as part of the interior of a store

*The HARB discourages:*

- Enclosing or removing elements, or materials such as ceilings, floors or display windows



*This tiled entrance alcove floor has a solid color center surrounded by a geometric pattern border.*



*This storefront entrance alcove has an unusual shape that narrows back towards the central entry. The ceiling pattern highlights the geometry of the space.*

**Decorative Ceilings** within entrance alcoves were often articulated with patterns, textures or materials that often included lighting and reinforced the architectural style of the building and geometry of the space. The materials used within the entrance alcove ceiling were frequently repeated on the ceilings of the flanking display windows. Historically these materials included paneled wood, beaded board, and pressed tin, with flatter surfaces such as stucco gaining in popularity in the early twentieth century.

**Decorative Flooring** within storefront entrance alcoves were often composed of small ceramic tiles, a stone stoop, or in the early twentieth century terrazzo became a popular option. Historically, the configuration of tile or terrazzo was only limited by the creativity of the installer, and often included decorative borders and patterns of various colors. It was not uncommon for the tiles to include the name of the business occupying the store within the alcove flooring.



*The colors of the paneled wood storefront apron complement the tile colors in the flooring.*

## STOREFRONT TREATMENT OPTIONS

Making changes to storefronts can be a costly endeavor that if not properly planned might negatively impact a business. Prior to considering alterations, it is recommended that property owners take the time to identify the key storefront elements and consider alternatives prior to proceeding with the work. By carefully studying alternatives, property owners tend to be much happier with the finished results. When contemplating storefront work, the following approach is recommended.

- a. **Identify Key Historic Elements:** Develop an understanding of the architectural character of the storefront including the overall size, major divisions or bays, placement of components such as doors, windows and distinctive elements. This can be based on selective removals or documentation such as old photographs or drawings.
- b. **Retain, Preserve and Repair:** Once important historic elements have been identified, they should be incorporated into the storefront design. Deterioration of some historic elements might require stabilization, replacement in-kind, or replacement with a similar substitute material utilizing the historic material as the guide.
- c. **Replacement:** Replacement of a historic storefront is only encouraged when the existing storefront materials are too deteriorated to be repairable, or a historic storefront has been encased in a newer storefront and the historic form and detailing are still present allowing for an accurate representation. Replacement of historic storefronts with modern storefront systems is strongly discouraged.
- d. **Reconstructing a New Storefront With Historic Documentation:** If there is no physical evidence of a historic storefront, there might be sufficient historical or pictorial evidence to allow for appropriate reconstruction. Appropriate research is recommended to ensure the greatest degree of accuracy feasible in the reconstruction.
- e. **Installing a New Storefront Without Historic Information:** If there is not sufficient information and documentation to accurately reconstruct a storefront, the new design should be compatible in size, pattern, scale, material and color as the overall building and similar storefronts from the period, but have distinctly contemporary characters that reflect rather than copy historic storefronts.



*Historic photographs, postcards or advertisements can be a good source of documentation to determine earlier appearances of buildings.*

## DETERMINING THE HISTORIC APPEARANCE OF STOREFRONTS

For property owners hoping to restore the appearance their storefront to an earlier period, there are a number of places where you can find information that can guide the effort. Often remnants of earlier storefronts or “ghosts” of earlier materials are concealed under newer storefront materials and careful selective removals can reveal elements or clues. In cases where historic materials are revealed, property owners are encouraged to incorporate the materials into the new storefront. In addition to potentially uncovering storefronts, it can also be beneficial to look for old building materials stored in attics or basements.

Another potential source for information is old records, photographs or drawings. These can be advertisements or articles, newspapers, promotional materials from earlier businesses, postcards or paintings. Please keep in mind that some drawings and paintings include a certain amount of artistic license and might not be entirely accurate depictions. Local sources for historic documentation, photographs and drawings are:

- **Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area;** 204 Church Street; Phoenixville, PA 19460; (610) 935-7646; [www.phxsg.org/hspa](http://www.phxsg.org/hspa)
- **Phoenixville Public Library;** 183 Second Avenue; Phoenixville, PA 19460; (610) 933-3013; [www.phoenixvillelibrary.org](http://www.phoenixvillelibrary.org)
- **Chester County Historical Society;** 225 North High Street; West Chester, PA; (610) 692-4800; [www.cchs-pa.org/index.php](http://www.cchs-pa.org/index.php)

Some local residents and business owners also have private collections of historic photographs of the area.



*This storefront window has been infilled with wood reducing the window opening size and changing the character of the building.*

## STOREFRONT DO'S AND DON'TS

Although each storefront is unique, the following lists provide general recommendations when addressing storefronts. Property owners are invited to consult with the HARB early in the process when contemplating storefront modifications. In some instances the HARB can suggest less costly new or alternate materials that can simulate the details and appearance of historic storefronts.

### *The HARB encourages:*

- Understanding the historic character of the storefront through investigation and documentation prior to making changes and reconstructing storefronts based upon evidence of original materials or pictorial documentation
- Retaining historic character and elements of storefronts including building material and forms
- Retaining original entrances, windows, display alcoves and their locations
- Retaining storefront windows after a change in use and installing blinds or thermal curtains behind storefront windows if privacy is desired
- Opening previously closed windows
- Retaining historic building materials where feasible – appropriate suitable alternate materials that convey the same visual appearance can be used where the use of historic materials is not technically or economically feasible
- Respecting the scale and proportion of the existing building when contemplating a new storefront and not extending beyond the original in height or width
- Considering merchandizing needs when modifying a storefront design

- Maintaining the planes of the historic storefront relative to the building façade including flush, projecting or recessed areas
- Although the HARB does not review paint, it recommends that a paint scheme be selected that complements the style and features of a storefront and building

### *The HARB discourages:*

- Enclosing or removing elements, such as building cornices and storefronts
- Altering size or shape of major building forms such as window, door and transom openings
- Installing stylistic elements from periods that are different from the storefront or building and do not complement the overall stylistic expression
- Altering a façade from commercial to residential character unless the building was previously residential and there is sufficient evidence or documentation to provide an accurate representation
- Installing inappropriate materials at storefronts including vinyl siding, some types of wood siding, artificial brick, masonry and mirrored glass
- Installing any material other than clear glass within a display window
- Installing built-in furniture visually blocking the inside of display windows
- Altering an existing residential building into a commercial building
- Installing window air conditioners in transom windows or thru-wall air conditioners that are visible from a public way
- Introducing a new storefront or element that alters or destroys historic building materials
- Creating an incompatible design or false historic appearance based upon insufficient documentation
- Adding a false front or false story to a building

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The contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the County of Chester, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the County of Chester.

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