

# Design Guidelines

# for Commercial Façade Improvements

The City of Philadelphia



## Acknowledgements

Prepared in 2003 by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission for the Department of Commerce.

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# Introduction



A pleasant commercial corridor will encourage window shopping and help draw customers.

## What are design guidelines, whom are they for?

Design Guidelines address aesthetic issues that business and property owners face in planning commercial and retail improvements. In general, they are intended to provide ideas, stimulate thinking and promote good design among the many participants in neighborhood commercial corridor revitalization. They address the physical aspects of supporting a healthy commercial area through storefront design and building maintenance.

By establishing these guidelines, the City encourages several important public and private objectives. Design guidelines:

- Improve the quality of physical alterations to commercial corridors.
- Enhance the quality of the pedestrian experience along a commercial corridor by providing a pleasant shopping experience for business patrons.
- Enhance economic investment for business and property owners.
- Protect and conserve neighborhood architectural character.
- Promote community awareness of the physical environment.
- Encourage flexible and individual creativity rather than anonymous uniformity.

The vivid color, size and design of the Geno's Steaks facade has made it a landmark. Even though this facade does not follow the Design Guidelines presented here, its context and iconic value contribute significantly to the identity of this neighborhood.





Good design helps create a place where people want to be - to socialize, relax and shop.



A variety of building styles and periods makes for a very interesting commercial corridor.

## Why good design makes commercial corridors stronger

The physical design of a neighborhood commercial district contributes greatly to the overall image of the community; each has its own unique cultural qualities to attract residents, customers and visitors. The distinctive characteristics of buildings of varying ages make commercial corridors assets, and are often one of the most interesting and satisfying aspects of the street.

On a commercial corridor, façades built in the 19th century may exist alongside those built in the mid-20th century. Often, commercial structures started as residences and were later converted to shops. Thus, building features from one period were reconfigured to that of another, simply to keep up with architectural fashion. If the resulting appearance shows quality craftsmanship and is pleasing in proportions, composition and details, then the façade is a valuable visual resource for the corridor. Thoughtful design improvements reinforce the positive identity of a community's retail core and create a "sense of place" that is distinct to the neighborhood.

## Where do I start?



Notice how the facade's design compliments the entire building.



Before starting to redesign your facade, consider how your building fits into and contributes to the the entire commercial corridor. At left, we see that the most stores along this commercial corridor have respected a common position for their signs. This has helped to unify the stores on the corridor.

**Step One: Evaluate your building's appearance.** It is important to take a good look at a building before proposing alterations to its exterior. Consider the windows, doors, and detailing. Note the entire façade, including the upper stories as well as the storefront. A successful improvement strategy is one that treats the building as a whole and does not neglect the upper floors. Remember that storefronts should be viewed as just a part of an entire building. The goal is to achieve visually distinct façades that relate to their surroundings and provide a sense of cohesiveness in the commercial corridor without strict uniformity.

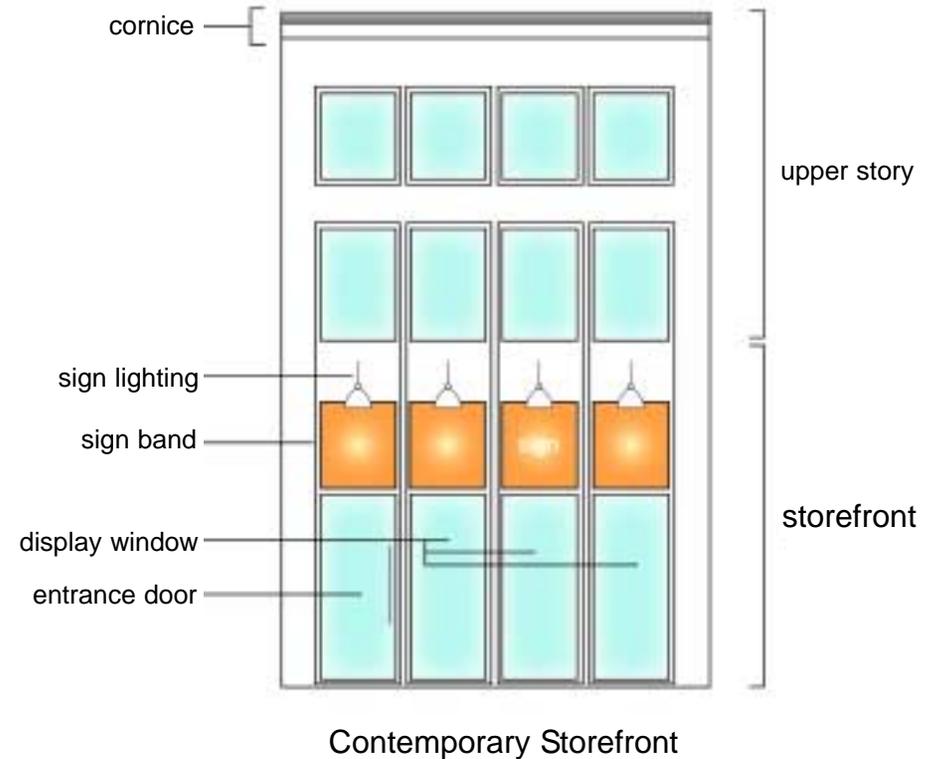
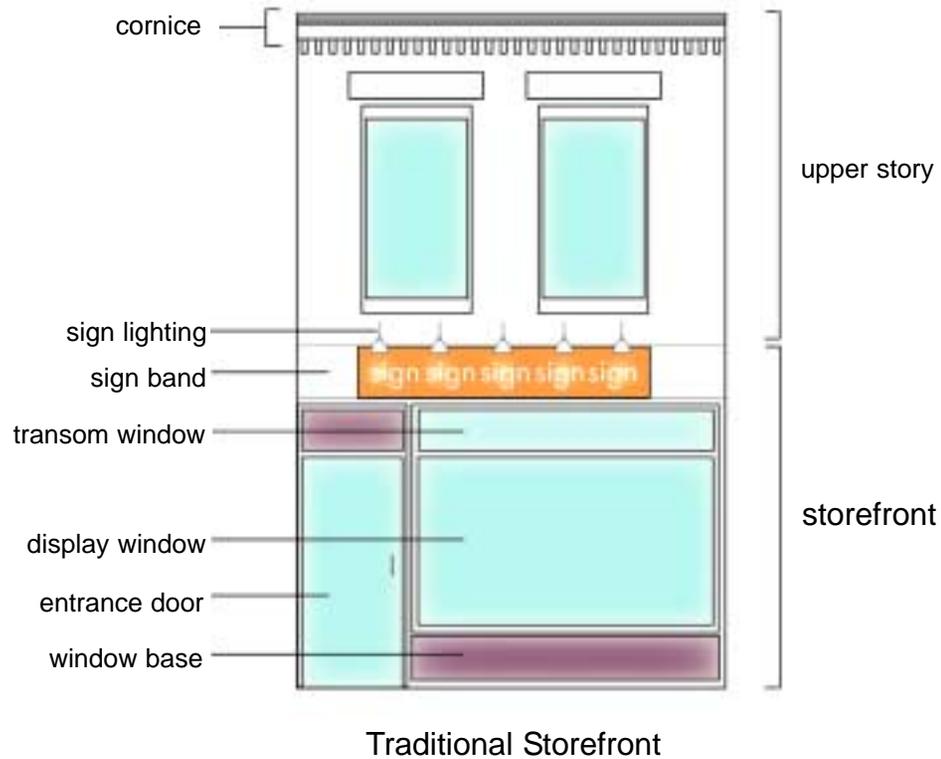
**Step 2: Evaluate your building's surroundings.** A high level of upkeep always strengthens the image of a commercial corridor. Sidewalk maintenance is the responsibility of the property owner whose property is immediately adjacent to it. The sidewalk should be kept free of debris and washed regularly. Trash generated by the store should be kept in enclosed areas at the rear of the building and must be easily serviced by trash collection trucks.

**Step 3: Make needed repairs; establish a maintenance schedule.** Preserve the value of façade improvements by repairing any damage before façade work begins. In order to prevent major building repair in the future, a regular maintenance schedule should be established for façade cleaning and repair. The following are recommended preventive maintenance steps:

- Checking roof to ensure that it is watertight
- Scraping chipped and peeling paint and repainting
- Repointing and patching deteriorated masonry or stonework joints
- Replacing deteriorated building surfaces
- Repairing and painting window frames and sills
- Repairing or replacing weatherproofing agents
- Repairing cracked sidewalks and broken curbs as damage occurs
- Establishing a sidewalk washing schedule

## Elements of a Façade

Below please find the name and location of several common building elements.



## Specific Building Façade Features

The next section provides guidelines for specific features of a building façade as well as specific features of a storefront. This section is intended to help create an identity for your storefront while respecting the needs of the commercial corridor. These recommendations are not meant to limit your creativity but to encourage and channel it so that you have the best possible result from your efforts.

# Upper Facade & Building Cornice



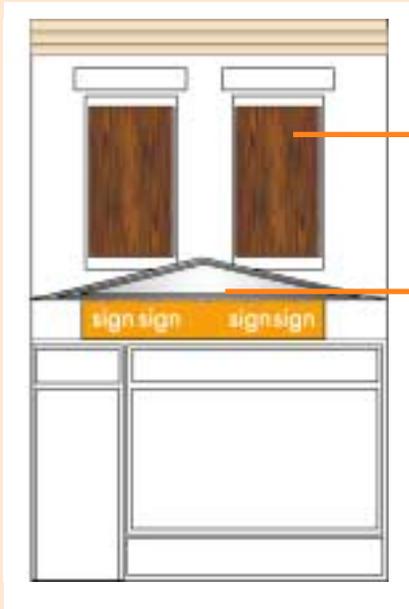
Maintain original details of the building facade. As in this example, these details add to the general character and identity of your building.

Existing windows should be kept open and when possible can be used to display merchandise.

**Objective:** Use the architectural features of the entire building to provide guidelines for the design of the storefront – incorporate upper floors in facade improvement plans.

- Maintain existing architectural elements around the shop windows.
- Preserve and restore historical features. Repair upper facade with material that is the same as, or that complements the existing construction.
- Use lighting to accentuate the architectural features of the building.
- Respect the entire commercial corridor by assessing the context of your building in the surrounding streetscape – ask, “how does my particular building work in the street?”
- In older buildings, consider installing a storm window on the inside of the original window so it will not be seen.
- Murals must not obliterate openings in a building’s facade – use the openings in the design of the mural.

Recommended



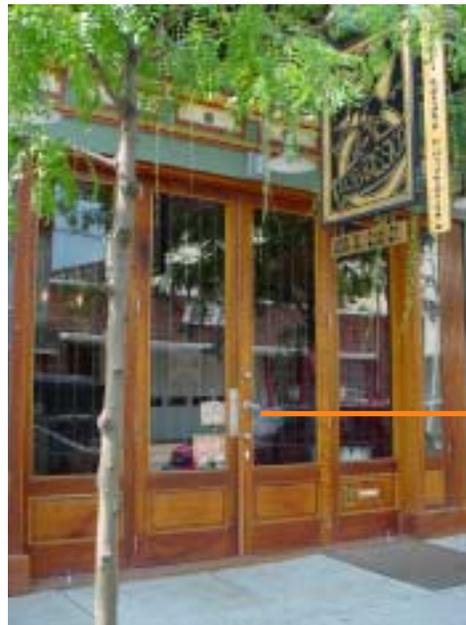
Upper story windows should not be boarded or covered up. This will make the facade look abandoned and make the commercial corridor unappealing.

False history, a detail that simulates a history that is not that of the original building, makes the building look awkward and detracts from the architectural character of the facade.

- Covering any part of the building facade with aluminum, stucco, false-brick veneer, or any other sheet material that will obscure openings or detailing.
- Filling in windows or doors with any material.
- Creating windowless blank walls or destroying original architectural detail.
- Removing existing quality materials and details from a building.
- Using materials or adding details that simulate a history other than that of the original building.

Not Recommended

## Entrances: Doors



These doors allow passersby to see inside. They are inviting and add to the quality of the commercial corridor.

**Objective: Make entrances obvious and welcoming.**

- Use doors that contain a lot of glass so the shopper can see the items inside.
- Choose a door that is compatible in scale, material and shape with the overall façade.

Recommended



An opaque door makes the space feel unsafe and unwelcoming.

A pulled back entrance creates an unusable space.

- Using doors that are opaque or that include no glass. Doors that are more suited to residential use should be avoided for commercial entrances.
- Pulling back the entrance from the building façade. This takes away precious retail space and creates unusable outdoor space that often collects trash and provides space for loitering.
- Storing merchandise behind one door of a double door entrance.
- Closing a part of an entrance or making the entrance door smaller than the original door.

Not Recommended

# Entrances: ADA Access Ramps



Plants are kept out of the way so that they don't impede access.

The stairs and ramp in this photo work together to create a pleasant entrance.

*Objective: Incorporate ADA access as an overall part of the entrance sequence.*

- Implement improvements according to the ADA standards for Handicapped Accessibility.
- Work with adjacent stores to coordinate shared ramps or stairs.

Recommended



Entrances should not be crowded with merchandise or plants.

- Use of slippery materials on walking surfaces.
- Making entrances complicated or difficult to get through by crowding them with merchandise.

Not Recommended

# Windows: Materials, Sizes, Maintenance

Recommended

Not Recommended

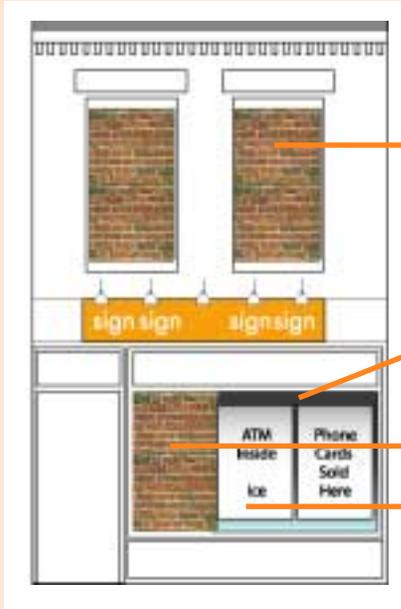
**Objective: Attract attention to the products or services within.**

- Use large windows – provide the maximum amount of visibility into the store.
- Use clear glass for easy viewing into the store.
- Clean glass regularly.



This simple window is clear and well maintained, adding to the attractiveness of the commercial corridor.

These windows allow for maximum view into the store.



Closing up these windows makes the building look abandoned.

Tinted, opaque, or smoked glass windows don't allow shoppers to see into the store.

Filling in part of the window opening detracts from the value of the facade.

Paper signs hung on the window clutter the facade and keep merchandise from being seen.

- Use of tinted, opaque or smoked glass.
- Covering windows with too much signage or attaching paper signs on windows.
- Reducing window size to an area smaller than its original.
- Boarding up or closing upper story windows in any fashion.
- Use of ground floor or upper floor window space for storage.

# Windows: Displays



As seen here, second story windows can be used to display merchandise.

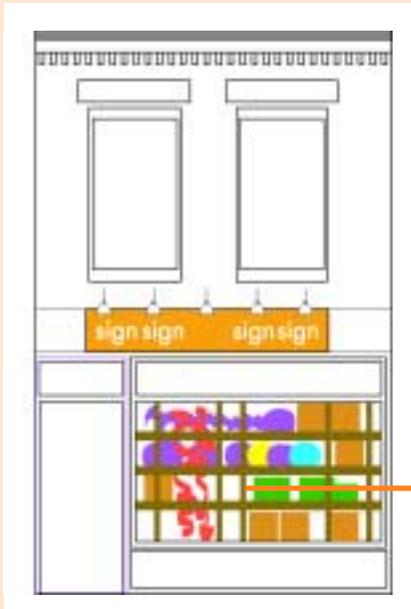


A bakery successfully displays its bread and creatively displays the prices on hanging round tags.

**Objective: Stimulate interest in new products or services.**

- Use windows to display merchandise by using the full extent of the glass.
- Make the display exciting, fun and original.
- Change the display often to keep the passerby interested and to continually draw in the potential customer.
- Display small merchandise at the front of the window or at eye level.
- Use the second and even third floor windows for displays.

Recommended



A cluttered window makes the entire store seem disorganized and unattractive to shoppers.

- Cluttering window displays with too much merchandise or disorganized displays that prevent customers and pedestrians from seeing inside the store.
- Use of window display space as storage.
- Keeping display windows empty.

Not Recommended

# Windows: Lighting

Lighting the upper story windows adds a sense of safety to the street and keeps the commercial corridor lively, even after dark.



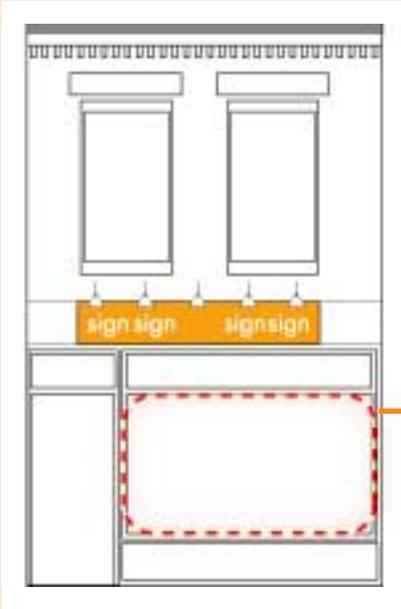
Subtle lighting illuminates the store sign and the window display.



**Objective: Make the street feel lively, inviting and secure.**

- Use lighting to draw attention to window displays, signs, store information and a building's architectural details.
- Use exterior fixtures that complement the entire façade.
- Keep window displays well lit, even after business hours.
- Direct lighting onto the display itself.
- When possible, light second and third floor windows, even after business hours.
- Use a timer to turn lighting fixtures on at dusk and off at dawn.

Recommended



Flashing, pulsating, or moving lights are not recommended because they are distracting and garish. They also compete with the building architecture.

- Use of flashing, pulsating, or moving lights.
- Use of lighting that is overly bright for the surroundings or that produces glare onto sidewalks or adjacent properties.
- Framing the display window with neon tubing.
- Use of lighting fixtures that clash with the architectural style and character of the façade.

Not Recommended

# Signage



Even though this sign projects out from the facade, it does not destroy the architectural character of the building but gives identity to the corner.

Simple signage can be very effective and also beautiful.



**Objective: Communicate the name of a store and add visual interest to the streetscape experience.**

- Signage that is consistent in scale with other signs on the corridor, and that complements a building's architecture.
- Pedestrian scaled signs.
- Type fonts and colors that are legible.
- Distinctive lettering styles that represent the store.
- Artwork, icons, logos and simple messages.
- Lettering on window glass itself- either by adhesive or etching.
- Professionally fabricated signage in metal, plastic, glass or some combination of these materials, as well as in stone or wood.
- Incorporating illumination of a sign at night as an integral part of the sign's design.
- Signs should be mounted no more than one story above the sidewalk level.

Recommended



Too many signs with too much information result in visual clutter.

- Using many signs that are confusing to read - use one or two signs.
- Covering building elements such as windows and cornices with signs.
- Using long, complicated messages.
- Attaching paper signs to the windows.
- Using large projecting signs that are secured onto a building by metal armatures.

Not Recommended

# Awnings

This simple awning complements the rest of the storefront and helps create a welcoming commercial corridor.



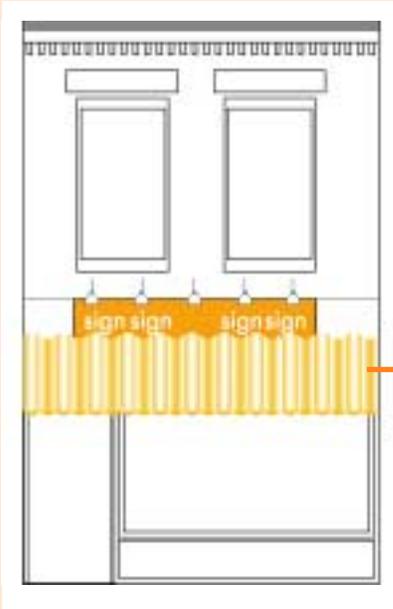
An example of an awning used as a sign.



**Objective: Add an exterior building element that serves a practical purpose and enhances a store's appearance, if appropriate for your building.**

- Assess your storefront for the appropriateness of an awning.
- The size of the awning must be scaled to the size of the building and its context in the commercial corridor.
- Use awnings that have a simple shape.
- Use fabric (real or synthetic) made of weather resistant material.
- Consider using retractable awnings because they are more flexible in changing weather.
- Use awnings to create pleasant shaded spaces in front of a building.
- Use awnings to cool interiors and save energy.
- Use awnings to mask security grilles.
- Use awnings as signs.
- Use larger awnings for shading a store's interior or to provide a covered place for outdoor merchandise display and sales on the sidewalk.

Recommended



Aluminum awnings are harsh and unwelcoming. They are also less flexible than fabric awnings and more subject to wind damage.

- Use of back-lit or internally lit awnings.
- Use of aluminum, vinyl, or other plastic materials.
- Covering architectural details with continuous awnings or oversized awnings.

Not Recommended

# Security Grilles

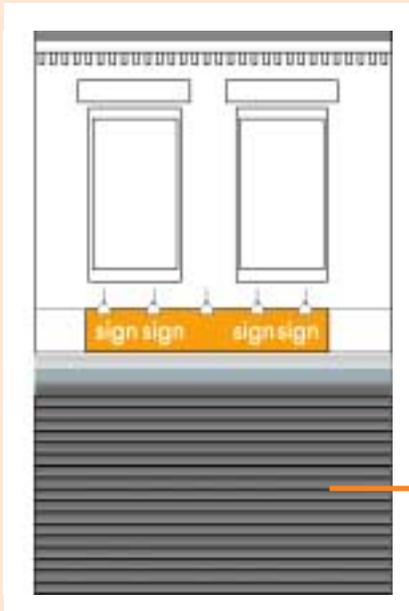


The open security grille is installed behind the window in order to be less visible.

**Objective: Provide overnight building security in a visually pleasing way.**

- Use open grilles that allow lighted window displays to be seen at night.
- Keep security grilles clean and well maintained.
- Conceal grille box or housing unit under awnings and signs.
- Install security grilles inside of the display glass and make sure they can be completely concealed during regular business hours.
- Explore various types of transparent security grilles and find the one that best fits the look of your store.

Recommended



These opaque, solid security grates make the commercial corridors feel unsafe and do not allow window shoppers to see the merchandise.

- Use of opaque, solid security grates.

Not Recommended

# Building Color

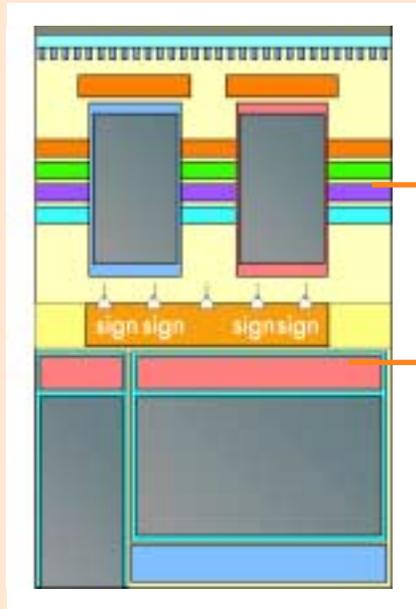


The use of bright colors give identity to this restaurant.

**Objective: Convey the identity and attitude of a store.**

- Color should be considered in the context of the entire commercial corridor.
- When choosing color for your building façade, consider how sunlight strikes your building. This will determine how the color really appears to the eye.
- Color should be used to bring together the elements of the entire façade, from the cornice to the entrance door.
- Color should complement, respond to and enhance the architectural character and detailing of a building.

Recommended



Arbitrary decorative lines detract from the architectural integrity of this building.

Too many colors make this facade look haphazard and unappealing.

- Using more than 3 colors, because it will make your façade seem less coherent and less composed.
- Painting arbitrary decorative lines, bands or graphics directly on the facade if not related to building's character or detailing.

Not Recommended

# Landscaping/Planting



These plant containers are well maintained and kept out of the high traffic pedestrian area. They provide a distinct zone in front of the store that is eye catching and inviting.

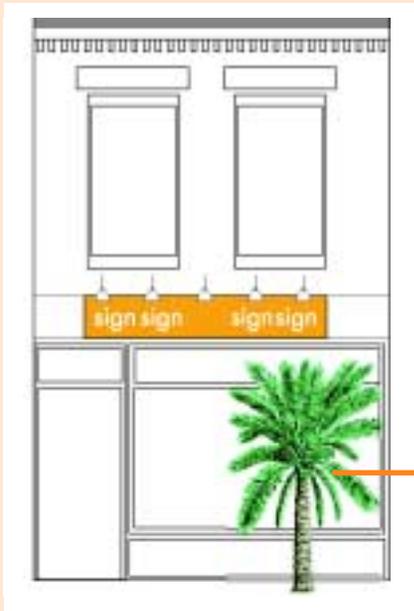


Flower boxes at second and third story windows are attractive and enhance the quality of the commercial corridor as well as the facade.

**Objective: Strengthen the appeal of your business and the character of the commercial corridor.**

- Use landscaping to create shaded areas and reduce wind speed on commercial corridors.
- Plant trees to reduce pollution and noise.
- Plant trees that have high, sparse canopies that will not cover storefront signage.
- Use plants and trees that are native to the area and easily maintained.
- Use flower boxes at windows and plant containers at entrances.
- Use plant containers that are sturdy and stable so they cannot be easily tipped or blown over.
- Keep plant containers free of litter and other debris.
- Keep plants suitably watered and pruned.

Recommended



A tropical tree will not survive in Philadelphia's climate conditions. It will also look out of place and unnatural.

- Use of exotic landscaping that will not survive the climate conditions.
- Breaking the continuity of the sidewalk by placing plant containers in high pedestrian traffic areas of a sidewalk.

Not Recommended

# City Approval and Useful Resources

Reviewing this guide is only the first step in making storefront façade improvements in Philadelphia. Depending on the work you want to do, other City approvals may be needed. Contact the Mayor’s Business Action Team at 215/683-2100 or your local Community Development Corporation for guidance through the process, or explore on your own at [www.phila.gov](http://www.phila.gov). The following Departments may have information useful to you:

- The Art Commission
- The Department of Commerce
- The Historical Commission
- Licenses and Inspections
- Philadelphia City Planning Commission
- Philadelphia City Code and Home Rule Charter Grille Ordinance
- The Streets Department (Sanitation)

#### Other Resources:

- ADA Requirements, website:  
<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm>
- Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, website:  
[www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org](http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org)