

9: Sign, Awning & Canopy Guidelines



The businesses on this very narrow street in Asheville use hanging and blade signs below awnings and a sandwich board sign. The more traditional signboard between the first and second floors might not be visible to pedestrians in this condition. A banner sign is also shown attached to the lamp post.

9.1. Purpose

Signs fall into a variety of categories as they relate to a downtown. There are signs that announce a business, wayfinding signs, regulatory signs, painted mural signs, billboards, and gateway signs. This chapter will also deal with public and private banners.

The City has a sign ordinance in place (Section 6.4 of the UDO). These guidelines are meant to supplement and modify these guidelines as they relate specifically to the Historic District. Where questions arise, the Historic District Commission (HDC) is directed to decide based on the knowledge of the code modified by appropriateness to the context, especially the historic architectural context.

Because the Historic District encompasses several types of uses in addition to the commercial core, these guidelines will apply to these other uses, and the Historic District Commission will review signage within the entire district, including areas within the District that might otherwise be classified as Commercial, Office, Neighborhood Business, Shopping Center and Residential.

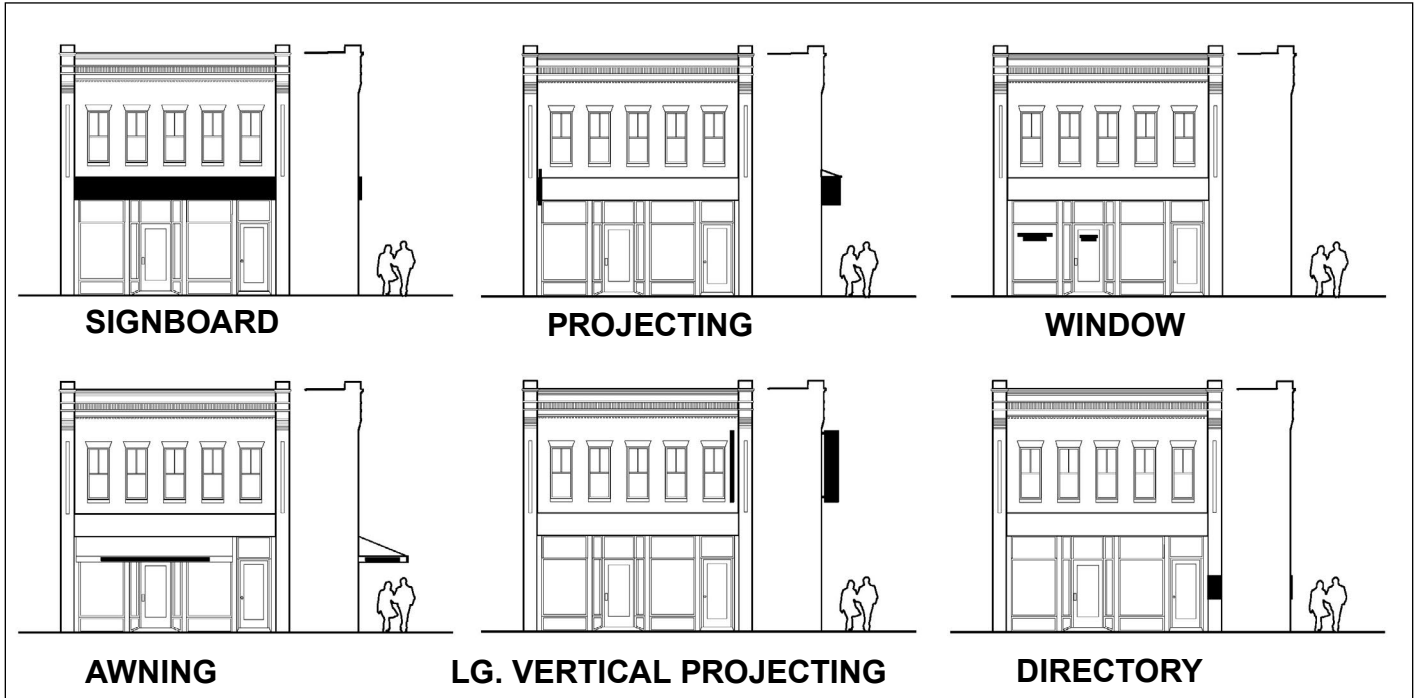
If attractively designed and well ordered, signs help us to find our way to the destinations we seek almost effortlessly. If signage, especially wayfinding signage, is inadequate or missing, it can lead to wrong turns, wasted time, and a bad impression of an area. If commercial signage is without standards, signs can become annoying and distracting. The purpose of these guidelines is to define each of these categories of signs and provide desirable and undesirable examples, and approved and prohibited materials. This document will not define regulatory signs because these are defined by Federal and State statutes, most particularly by the USDOT Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices.

9.2. Commercial Signs

1. Purpose

Commercial and business signs should call attention to the individual business without detracting from the overall character of the district. Further, they should fit the age and architectural style of the building on which they appear. Here are some of the types and locations for commercial/business signs:

- Business name sign on the signboard between the first and second floors,
- Business name on the glass of the windows and/or doors of the storefront,
- Hanging/projecting signs more readily visible to the pedestrian,



These drawings illustrate in elevation and section the possible placement of signs on commercial and industrial buildings. Shown elsewhere are examples of painted signs, banner signs, sandwich signs, marquee signs, and murals.

- Signs on building piers on the first floor (might include a directory if there are several uses within the building),
- Larger vertical projecting signs above the first floor. Historic examples of these types of signs can be seen at the Family Shoe Store (photo at left) and the former furniture store building at the corner of John and Walnut Streets,
- Smaller freestanding signs are usually used for buildings (often residential) where the building is set back from the street,
- Large freestanding signs provide business identity along a road,
- Awning and canopy signs,
- Signs were often painted directly on the brick of industrial buildings, and occasionally on the side or rear walls of commercial buildings,
- Existing historic signs,
- Temporary window signs, or small free-standing signs advertising sales or other temporary uses,
- “Sandwich” or A-frame type signs with changing messages (menus, sales, etc.).

2. Sign Type, Placement and Size

- Place signs so they do not interfere with or obscure the architecture of the building on which they are mounted or adjacent buildings and signs.



This is an appropriate building mounted sign from Asheville, NC. The incorporation of the lettering into the facing of the storefront unifies the image of the business.



The sign above is pin mounted and back-lit. The one at right is pin-mounted (New Bern, NC).

- b. All signs for an individual business may not exceed limits as defined in the Unified Development Ordinance Section 6.4.14.3: "The total allowable area for all signs, excluding incidental signage, in this [Central Business] district shall be one and a half square feet of sign area per one linear feet of building frontage on the street. Party walls or property lines shall define individual buildings."
- c. **Existing Historic Signs** of any type: Existing signs should be preserved and/or restored whenever possible. Even if these signs do not conform to the existing guidelines and/or ordinances, they should remain if possible.
- d. **Building Mounted Flat signs:** Building signs for commercial/retail buildings are to be mounted flat to the building or painted on the building and limited to 32 square feet per business (i.e. two businesses on a longer storefront would each have a sign). Greater square footage and/or signs on more than one face of the buildings may be allowed depending on the buildings size. Signs can be mounted to the sign frieze, to a flat surface of the building above the first floor and below any second floor windows or cornice, or to a covered transom (although covering transoms is discouraged). Signs should be illuminated by overhead and shielded LED or incandescent lights mounted above the sign, with neon, or with pin-mounted backlit letters as shown at left.
- e. **Pin Mounted Signs.** Pin-mounted letters and/or logos are allowed in the sign board area in place of and in the general area of the sign frieze. Pin-mounting allows the letter to stand out from the surface on which they are mounted. Letters are often gilded on historic buildings as shown below (from New Bern) or could be backlit as shown at left. Neon signs are also pin-mounted and are historically appropriate for the commercial area.



Below and Right: Three examples of projecting signs/blade signs. Note the spotlights mounted on top of the sign on the left and middle, and at the bottom on the right.



Below and Right: Two examples of hanging signs. The bottom of the sign must be at least 7' above the sidewalk.



- f. **Projecting signs between the first and second floors (Blade Signs):** These signs can add great visual interest to the streetscape. Their size is limited to 4 square feet per side, or 8 square feet total for a two-sided sign. This does not include the bracket. They should project no more than

4.5 feet from the building, and the bottom of the sign may be no lower than 10' above the sidewalk. Only one such sign is permitted per business.

- g. **Hanging Signs.** Hanging signs are different from projecting signs in that they are mounted under an awning or canopy where a projecting sign mounted higher would be obscured by the awning or canopy. These must be mounted high enough to ensure headroom beneath the sign. A minimum clearance of 7' is suggested, but this will be evaluated individually. Examples of hanging signs are shown below and at left.





The former Heilig-Myers Building (left) has a projecting upper story neon sign, as does the shoe store (right). These signs should be preserved if possible.



This building in Texas (above) has pin letter signs and the logo on the fall of the awning. This California awning sign (below) works well in a pedestrian area.



- h. **Projecting Vertical Signs on upper stories:** Because of the prominence of such signs, which traditionally used neon as an integral design element, their usage will be limited. Larger buildings are more appropriate for this treatment. Upper story projecting signs will be evaluated on a case by case basis, and there is no implicit right to an upper story sign of this type without review and approval.
- i. **Awning or Canopy Signs:** lettering on awnings should be printed on the fall of a canvas awning or canopy. Other locations for logos or lettering may be permitted by exception after review. Lettering height is limited to 4"; logos may be larger.
- j. **Permanent Window Signs and Lettering:** Lettering on the outside of store windows or doors of commercial buildings should be either at or slightly above eye level, or near the bottom of display windows (this may be more effective for stores with permanent awnings or canopies). Lettering can also be applied to the doors of shops, and to upper floor windows. Store window lettering should be an appropriate scale for the building and percentage of glass. All must be reviewed and approved. An example is shown below. Signs of any type mounted to the inside of the window may have lit messages to indicate the store is open, but may not include flashing, rolling, or moving elements or product advertisements.



An example of a window sign. Because this jewelry store invites proximity to the window, the small size of this sign works well.



This building in Brevard has a beautifully rendered period mural on the side of one of the repurposed Lumberyard buildings, now an arts center.



Artistic murals can be a great addition to downtown.

- k. **Changeable Message Signs.** Message signs that indicate hours or provide temporary messages (e.g. changing hours or “Be Right Back” or “call [phone number] for more information”). These must fit within the allowable square feet for signs. Materials could include chalk board or chalk paint. A sandwich board might be an alternative to this type of sign. Digital, flashing, rolling or product logo signs are not permitted.

- l. **Temporary Window Signs.** Temporary window signs include signs alerting the public to sales, clearances or special events, and are placed on the inside or outside of store windows or doors. These may remain in place for no more than two weeks, and may take up no more than 10% of the glass area of display windows only. Hand lettering for sales or special events is not allowed. Temporary window signs are not encouraged. Digital, flashing, rolling or product logo signs are not allowed. In lieu of such signs, sandwich boards are encouraged.

- m. **“Sandwich Board” Signs:** A-frame or sandwich board signs are allowed in front of stores, but materials and con-



Examples of acceptable sandwich board signs. Plastic signs or signs with track letters are not appropriate. See next page.





Plastic Sandwich board signs and signs with track letters are NOT acceptable.



A good example of a monument sign (middle) and a directory monument sign for multiple businesses.

struction for the sign itself must be approved in advance. Once approved, the message on the sign can change as needed. See photos on previous page and at left. Each face of the sign must be no more than 10 square feet, and the sign may be no more than 4 feet high. **This amount is not counted as part of the total square feet of signage allowed.**

- n. **Murals and Mural Signs:** Murals can be an attractive and artistic addition to the downtown if well planned and executed. Murals should be placed on blank (or mostly blank) side or back walls of commercial or industrial buildings, not on primary facades. Size will depend on placement. If artistic murals are to be created by private entities, the design must be approved in advance by the HDC. Murals that advertise the business of the building are considered to be signs. They must meet the overall limits on sign square footage and applicable codes. If the mural sign includes more than simply advertising copy, the HDC may allow additional total square feet of signage on the primary facade of the building.
- o. **Marquees:** At one time there were several buildings in Goldsboro such as the original Paramount that had elaborate marquees. Although many of these are no longer in existence, those that still exist (such as the Variety on Center Street) should be saved if possible. In the future if a theater or cinema-related-use is added to the downtown, a marquee might be appropriate with review and approval.



Building-Mounted Directory Sign example.

- p. **Directory Signs:** The rules for directory signs are 8 square feet for most commercial buildings. Larger buildings (particularly large industrial buildings) may be allowed up to 16 square feet by review and approval of the RDDC.
- q. **Monument or Freestanding Signs:** Small freestanding signs of 16 square feet or less and standing no more than 8 feet high are allowed for buildings set back from the right of



Neon is an historic material and is allowed in the commercial portion of the Historic District. Flashing or rolling signs are not allowed.



Store sign with cor-ten steel, backlit letters, and neon. This would be acceptable. (Denver, CO.)



This stainless steel sign with cut-out letters is unusual and attractive. It would be allowed. (Asheville, NC)

way. Additional square feet are allowed for sign supports. Examples might be for residential conversion to a Bed & Breakfast, permitted home-based professional services, and so on. Freestanding signs greater than 12 square feet (not including supports) are only allowed where buildings are set back from the right of way, and in general are not encouraged within the Historic District. In such cases, monument signs and pylon signs are preferred over signs on poles. Flashing, rotating, or internally illuminated signs (except illuminated letters only) are not allowed. All freestanding signs must be reviewed and approved by the HDC.

- r. **Banner Signs and Flags on Buildings:** In some cases banner signs may be an appropriate addition to or replacements for building signs. They may also be used for special events or to identify the building or separate tenants within a larger building. When using banner signs, such signs must be affixed at both top and bottom, and should be designed to deal with reasonable wind conditions, or be removed in such conditions. It should also be kept in mind that fabric banners will require more frequent replacement than traditional signs or other types of banners, such as vinyl. If the use of banner signs and/or special event signs is anticipated in advance (such as a semi-permanent business banner or an annual event), their use can be approved initially by the HDC and can be subsequently changed without the need for further approval. American flags may also be mounted on building facades for special occasions or permanently if they meet the requirements for displaying the flag. Decorative flags are also allowed but must be reviewed and approved. Any logos or writing of flags will be considered part of the allowable square footage of signs.
- s. "Feather" banners/signs are not allowed. These are defined as free-standing signs on flexible poles with curved tops, intended to flutter constantly.

3. Design and Allowed Materials

- Signs should be produced by a skilled **sign professional** to ensure legibility and attractive design.
- **Traditional materials** are appropriate for signs in the Historic District, including wood, glass, metal, gold leaf, raised dimensional letters, and painted designs. Window signs should be decal-type lettering or etching, or may be neon on the inside of shop windows.
- **New materials** such as MDF (with edge banding) and architectural foam may also be appropriate, but hardwood or metal is preferred over these.
- **Colors** for signs should generally be limited to three and should harmonize with or complement the colors of the building.
- **Illumination** for signs should be from shielded incandescent, or LED lights. Halo-lit pin letters are allowed.



These historic facades in Saunton, VA can be seen as a whole without the interruption of awnings.



This is the traditional style closed-end fabric awning used with commercial buildings.



These open-ended awnings are more contemporary but would still be appropriate with historic commercial buildings.

Ground-mounted spotlights are allowed for illuminating monument or freestanding signs. All lights must avoid producing glare.

- **Neon Signs** are allowed with approval but care should be taken that the neon does not overwhelm the sign or the building. Neon signs inside windows are allowed (see sections j, k and l above for more information).
- **Fabric awnings and sign banners** are allowed, as are canvas and other fabrics that have been treated for waterproofing and fireproofing. All materials must meet fire code.
- **Banners** for light poles are allowed, and must meet the same requirements for waterproofing and fireproofing as awnings.
- **Vinyl signs** are allowed only by exception.
- **Wood signs** may be constructed with attached raised lettering, painted or silk-screened lettering, or incised lettering through a process of sandblasting or routing the surface of the sign.
- Metal signs and plaques should be constructed of brushed bronze, antique bronze, aluminum, stainless steel, cor-ten steel or painted cast iron.
- Creativity is encouraged in signs, and other materials will be considered on a case by case basis with review and approval.

4. Not Recommended/Allowed

- **Plastic sign components** (e.g. backlit sign panels, plastic letters, or prefabricated sandwich boards) are not allowed.
- **Backlit awnings** are not allowed.
- **White dry-erase, all plastic, and track letter signs** are not allowed.
- **Plywood** is not recommended as a material for signs.
- **Backlit plastic panel signs** are not allowed.
- **Digital signs** are not allowed in the Historic District.
- No sign or parts of signs may flash or move with the exception of restored historic signs that had these characteristics or new marquees with review and approval.
- "Feather" banners/signs are not allowed.
- Highly reflective metallic signs or sign parts are not recommended.

9.3. Existing Signs

Existing signs are grandfathered, but any changes to existing signs and any replacement signs must meet the guidelines.



9.4. Awnings & Canopies

1. Purpose

Awnings and canopies are often seen on historic residential, commercial, and industrial buildings. They not only provide shade and cover from the weather, but they can also add character and color to an urban area.

While acknowledging that awnings and canopies can be an important part of a buildings, it is also worth considering that it should not be assumed they are essential. In some cases in our downtown, especially where sidewalks are narrower, large canopies and awnings hinder appreciation of the rich architecture on the street. By contrast, the photograph at top left shows the main street of Staunton, Virginia, where few canopies or awnings are used. This makes the architecture itself the center of attention, highlighting the interesting upper floor and cornice details of these buildings.

Awnings are also discussed in Section 4.4.



*If canopies are used, the materials should match the building as in this historic hotel in Austin, TX. Note the pressed tin ceiling (left) and use of the upper level for dining. This is more a balcony than a canopy, see Section ***.*

2. Space Requirements

Awnings will extend no more than 6' into the street from the facade, unless by exception with review.

Canopies will vary in width depending on use. Canopies may extend further than awnings, but in most cases would be required to be supported/suspended from the building to keep the sidewalk clear of impediments.

In some cases canopies for larger building may extend further into the sidewalk and even to the curb. If this is desired, such canopies must not interfere with street lights or the normal or anticipated spread of nearby street trees. An example of a larger canopy over the street can be seen at the Waynesborough House, which is supported by metal brackets on the facade. Another example is shown in the photo from Denver at bottom left, which spans the sidewalk and is supported with metal columns near the curb. On the next page is an example of an historic metal canopy on a building in Danville, VA, and a simpler metal canopy on a building in Baltimore.



This modern canopy on an historic building in Denver is appropriate for a large building entry.



Above: The new flat metal canopies over the entry to the Fresh Fields grocery in Baltimore announce the entry and provide space for outdoor display. This type of simple canopy might be appropriate for new buildings or existing masonry buildings with less articulated facades. The canopy below is much more ornate and clearly original to this building in Danville, VA.



3.Design and Allowed Materials

Awnings and Canopies for Historic Commercial Buildings:

- Fabric awnings are appropriate. These may be vinyl coated or otherwise treated to extend the life of the fabric as long as they meet district fire codes. Keep in mind that darker colors tend to fade more quickly than medium and light tones .
- Metal canopies may be appropriate, however, see comment above about obstruction of views to the upper portion of the facade. If existing canopies are to remain, the materials and craftsmanship of the visible ("ceiling") portions of the canopy should be evaluated, and if need be, improved.
- All awnings and canopies within the fire district must meet fire code.

New Buildings in the Historic District:

A variety of awnings and canopies may be appropriate for new buildings in the Historic District, including:

- Fabric and metal awnings and canopies as defined above.
- Modern shade structures affixed to the side of buildings.
- Clear canopies supported by metal structures (see photos at left).
- Other options as reviewed and approved.

4. Allowed Materials

- Canvas or "Sunbrella" fabric awnings. Sunbrella is preferred over canvas because of longer life, resistance to mold, and resistance to fading.
- Metal canopies are allowed with review and approval.
- New hybrid materials are being introduced to the market. These will be considered on a case by case basis and must first meet all district fire codes in order to be considered.

5. Materials Not Recommended

- Backlit awnings
- Any plastic supporting or canopy materials, except for new buildings with clear or white translucent acrylic "skylights" with review and approval.

9.5. Existing Canopies and Awnings

Existing canopies and awnings are grandfathered, but any changes to existing canopies and awnings, and any replacement canopies and awnings must meet the guidelines.

9.6. Routine Maintenance

(COA not required)

- Repainting or repair of previously approved signs, canopies, awnings or illumination.
- Replacement of awnings and awning signs with like colors and messages (if any), once approved.
- Changing of sandwich board messages once the board itself is approved.
- Repair or replacement of damaged banners, or re-use of banners previously approved.

9.7. Certificate of Appropriateness Required

- All signs of any type must be approved in advance of installation. A measured and rendered drawing is required, including materials and colors to be used, method of attachment, method of illumination, and location on the building.
- Canopy and awning materials and colors must be approved in advance of installation. Drawings and fabric samples showing proposed colors must be submitted for awnings.
- Measured drawings prepared and stamped by an architect and/or engineer must be submitted for all canopies.
- A COA must be issued before any historic sign, marquee or canopy can be removed.
- Failure to obtain appropriate permission will be considered a zoning violation.

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