



Signage Guidelines for the Downtown District

A common sense guide designed to assist new and existing business owners select the best signage option to promote their business in the Kings Mountain Main Street District.

DOWNTOWN SIGNAGE DESIGN GUIDELINES

Signage: What does it do?

For businesses and especially for retail stores, the most cost-effective, efficient, and readily-available form of advertising to potential customers is the on premise sign. In fact, the business sign is the basic link to customers in 98% of all United States retail transactions (totaling \$3trillion annually), and is essential both in impulse shopping and in the development of repeat customers for the good, product, or service. It is, in a sense, the broadest of all the communication forms. As with many forms of commercial speech, whether verbal or visual, sign use is site specific and an essential business strategy component.

No amount of money spent in other forms of communication media will equal the investment of the well-designed and optimally visible on premise sign. Surveys of new customers/clients disclose that the on premise business sign either (1) provided the new customer with their first knowledge of the company or (2) provided the new customer with their first impression of the company.

Why guidelines for downtown signage?

If everyone “shouts,” will anyone be heard? Such is the case when either several oversized signs or many smaller signs compete for the public’s attention. A better idea is for everyone to “speak” at the same moderate level while not trying to provide too much information at once. Too many signs are sized to be viewed from distant autos while others are cluttered with messages other than the name of the business. The combined effect is a mishmash of attempted communication.

Other common downtown sign problems include the use of cheap materials, sloppy workmanship, poor selection of typefaces, garish colors, interior illumination, and placement and sizing that bear no relation to the building’s architecture.

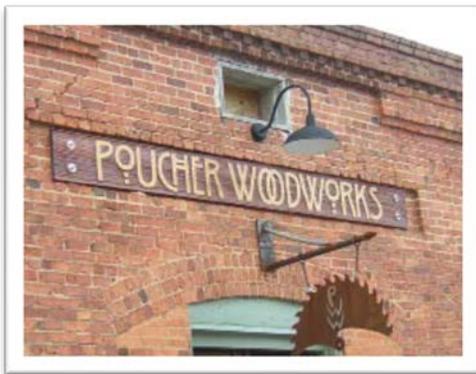


Signboards (Fascia Signs):

This is a common type of signage that has historical tradition in most downtowns and usually consists of a painted, wooden board that is mounted onto the façade. Fascia signs should be placed above transoms and display windows and in many instances can be designed to fit within the signboard area that exists on many older buildings. Such signs are usually proportioned to be longer than they are high. If business turnover is a problem fascia signs can be easily removed.

Criteria for Fascia Signs in Downtown Kings Mountain:

- No plastic signs are allowed such as plastic molded internally-lit signs.
- Generally lettering should be 8 to 18 inches high and occupy no more than 65% of the signboard.



A good example of a signboard placed in an area that was designed for it.



Here is another example of a signboard in colors that complement the storefront and typefaces that enliven the sign.

Painted Signs:

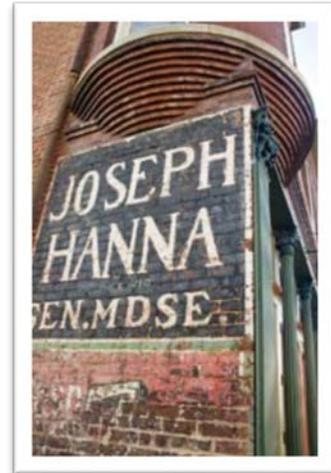
Painted signs, traditionally used on many downtown buildings, can be very effective as well as visually pleasing. The best such signs use contrasting lettering, appropriate business or graphical styles, and a placement that fits nicely on the building. Many older signs have become local icons. Even if the business that they served is long gone, such signs should be kept in place.

Criteria for Painted Signs in Downtown Kings Mountain:

- Signs should not be painted directly on unpainted brick. In such cases, fascia signs (signboards) are recommended.



In some cases, signs can be painted directly onto the facade. The photo on the left shows a contemporary sign and the one on the right is of an historic sign.



Window Signs:

Signs may also be placed on the display windows of a business. Here they are most visible to pedestrians and they may include secondary information that is not appropriate for the main business sign. Original window signs were of gold leaf applied to the interior of large window panes.

Criteria for Window Signs in Downtown Kings Mountain:

- Signs should not consume more than one-third of the glazed area of the window.



Business signs can also be painted directly onto the storefront windows. They can be easily removed if the business changes.

Hanging (Blade) Signs:

These project out over the sidewalk and are most effective for attracting pedestrian traffic. These signs were commonly used in the nineteenth century and were usually placed to complement window or painted signs.

Criteria for Hanging (Blade Signs) in Downtown Kings Mountain:

- Hanging signs must be no greater than twelve (12) square feet and have a maximum width of three (3) feet.
- Signs cannot extend beyond the first floor of the building.
- No less than ten (10) feet of clearance be provided between the sidewalk elevation and the lowest point of the hanging sign.
- Maximum distance between the sign and the building face is one (1) foot.

Below: Well-designed hanging signs add character to the street and are usually used with other signage. Right: Multiple signs can be organized and hung together to avoid visual clutter.



Neon Signs:

Neon signs were introduced in the U.S. in the 1920s and quickly became popular. These bold signs are making a comeback in many downtowns and are especially effective for businesses with extended evening hours.

Criteria for Neon Signs in Downtown Kings Mountain:

- Neon signs are permitted in display windows if not covering more than one-third of the window surface area.



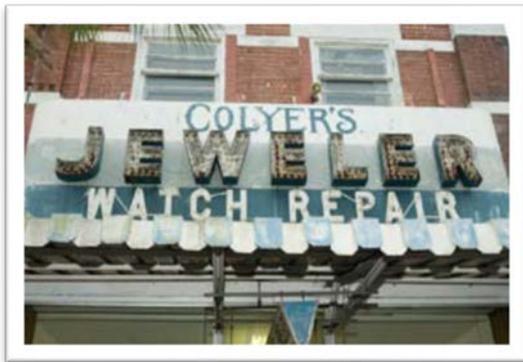
Left: New neon signs that suit the downtown character should be encouraged to promote evening activity. Right: An example of a new, custom-made neon sign placed inside a storefront window.

Historic Signs:

Neon signs of the early twentieth century are rare and often one-of-a-kind pieces. Those that are well designed and that have stood the test of time should be protected.

Faded wall signs, often called “ghost signs,” are found in many downtowns. Typically painted in styles and typefaces that are no longer common, these signs preserve advertising slogans, symbols, logos, and other visual reminders of the past. They should be preserved as they are.

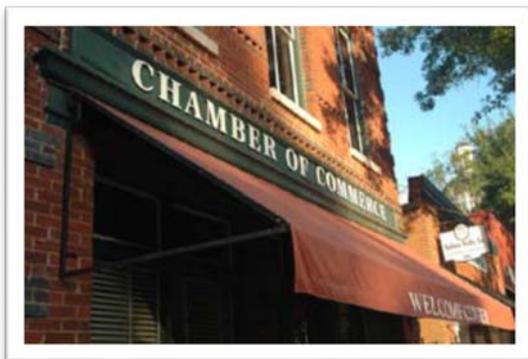
Below Left: Historic signs have a place in downtown even if they do not meet current design standards. Historic signs are relatively rare and should be refurbished and protected if possible



Above Right: Ghost Signs are reminders of past places, people and businesses in downtown. Resist the urge to freshen up or clean up such signs.

Other Types of Signs:

Awning signs typically have business names and addresses on the valance or skirt of the awning and sometimes on the awning side panels.



An example of an awning sign combined with a fascia sign on the lintel of a downtown building. This is a great example of well-placed signs reducing visual clutter while directing people to a specific business location.

Individually mounted letters saw a rise in popularity during the 1920s and 1930s. Shadows bring three-dimensionality to a façade during the daylight hours and can be illuminated from behind (but not within) after dark.



Individually mounted metal letters offer an alternative to painted signboards and hanging signs.

A-Frame signage is permitted on sidewalks in the downtown providing it is not permanently affixed to the sidewalk and made of metal, wood and writable-erasable surfaces.



An example of an A-frame sign used to promote a business.

IMPORTANT GUIDELINES:

- Signs should be viewed as part of an overall graphics system for the building. The building's form, name and outstanding features, both decorative and functional, also support the advertising function of the sign. **Signs should work with the building, rather than against it.**
- Sign placement is important. Signs should not obscure or damage historic architectural features. Signs above a storefront should fit within the historic signboard, for example
- New signs should respect the size, scale and design of the building. Often features or details of the building will suggest a motif for new signs. They should also respect neighboring buildings and not shadow or overpower adjacent structures.
- Projecting and hanging signs are encouraged but should be limited in size.
- Plastic signs illuminated from within are not allowed. They look out of place in downtown.
- Lighting for externally illuminated signs should be simple and unobtrusive.
- Use traditional materials commonly found on turn-of-the-century commercial buildings such as wood, metal, or stone. As an alternative, use modern materials that have a traditional appearance.

- Signs can be painted directly on the inside of display windows. Gold leaf is an effective material for such signs.
- Wall-mounted signs on above storefront windows should be of an appropriate size and fit cleanly within the surface area above the windows/door. The space between the lintel (a horizontal beam that supports the weight of the building above an opening such as windows or doors) and the bottom of second-floor windows is also a good location for these signs in most cases, but do not make the sign larger than necessary.
- Sign colors should complement the color of the building. Light color letters on a dark background are easiest to read.
- New signs should be attached to the building carefully, both to prevent damage to historic materials, and to ensure the safety of pedestrians. Fittings should penetrate mortar joints rather than brick and sign loads should be properly calculated and distributed.
- The combination of neon signage, permanently painted signage and temporary signage should not exceed a total of two-thirds of the window surface area.
- Utilize the services of a sign maker whose work you admire. A sign is a material investment that will become a primary indicator of your business to the community. Make certain the end result is a quality product installed in a professional and secure manner.
- It is often desirable to keep certain old signs in place because they have artistic appeal or are pieces of the community's history. Examples include business signs and advertisements painted onto building walls (typically on side walls), many old neon signs, masonry signs (often found on cornices), and business signs crafted in terrazzo at store entrances.

Sources:

"A How-to Guide for Downtown Building Rehab, Rescue and Repair," Lauren Malinoff, NC Main Street Center

"Designing Downtown," Georgia Dept. of Community Affairs, Office of DT Development

"Keeping Up Appearances," National Main Street Center
Zoning Ordinance; City of Kings Mountain, North Carolina