

Conservation Guidelines Shopfronts

Foreword

This series of booklets has been produced by the Department of the Environment to increase awareness of the value of our architectural heritage and to provide information on the basic principles and methods of conservation and restoration. The titles in the series are listed on the back of each booklet.

These texts are not intended to be comprehensive technical or legal guides. The main aim is to assist architects, builders, owners and others, in understanding the guiding principles of conservation and restoration. They will facilitate the identification of the most common problems encountered in heritage buildings, and indicate the best solutions. It should be appreciated that specialised aspects of conservation and restoration will require professional expertise and more detailed information.

The Department acknowledges, with appreciation, the efforts of the authors of the individual booklets, the Irish Georgian Society who coordinated their production, the Conservation Advisory Panel established under the Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development and all others involved.

Summary of Conservation Principles

- Research prior to planning work
- Minimum intervention - repair rather than replace
- Respect the setting.

Summary of Conservation Procedure

- Research and analyse history of building
- Survey building and identify original material
- Plan work according to conservation principles
- Use experts where necessary
- Record all work
- Install maintenance procedures.

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Shopfronts

Introduction

The traditional Irish shopfront is a significant piece of Irish architectural heritage and contributes enormously to the fabric and texture of town and village. The architecture of Irish shops developed over the centuries and was shaped by the same forces, social and economic, which formed the architecture

of ordinary people elsewhere in Europe. The shopfronts are often an integral and harmonious part of the simple and unpretentious architecture of the towns, and their colours and small scale details are invaluable ingredients for the preservation of the essential liveliness of the street.



Traditional shopfront.

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Shopfronts

Brief History

Shops were originally the workplaces of tradesmen and craftsmen, the goods being made in the workshop and sold directly to the customers who called. In time, a larger window was installed to display some finished goods and the traditional shop was born.

The earliest shops were open fronted, having a counter between the the shop and the street: shops like these were common in Roman cities. The present day market stall is probably the only survivor of this type.

Glazing of shopfronts was established by the end of the 17th century and Malton's prints of Dublin in the 18th century show elegant shops with round headed windows. The surviving traditional shopfronts of Ireland almost all date from the 19th and early 20th centuries when this splendid art and craft flourished.

While the shopfronts of the 18th century were carefully designed to blend in with the street architecture, resulting in a serene uniformity, the arrival of advertising and competition in the 19th century led to an explosion of different designs. The earliest country town and village shop had little more than a simple window with the name of the owner, either painted or built up in plaster, overhead. Intriguingly, many of these still exist in little Irish towns. Even though the shop has long ceased business the name of the owner is proudly preserved for posterity.

The most remarkable and attractive feature of the traditional Irish town street today is the variety of the different shopfront designs and their colours. The preservation of the remaining examples of this very Irish art and craft is vital for the retention of the identity and character of village and town.

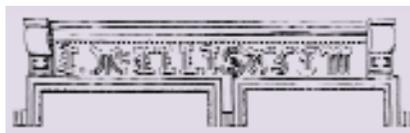
Typical Elements

The typical elements which make up the unique character of the traditional Irish shopfront may be listed as follows:

1. **Nameboard or fascia**
2. **Window shape, proportions and glazing bars**
3. **Pilasters or vertical surrounds**
4. **Decorative details**
5. **Colour.**

1. Nameboard or fascia

The nameboard of the typical shop can vary from the simplest fascia with painted or raised lettering to a highly decorative, carved classical entablature with elaborate consoles at the side and a cornice to throw off rainwater at the top. The lettering can vary from a plain bold style to an elaborate exercise in a deep shadowed manner.



Example of traditional nameboard.

2. Window shape, proportions and glazing bars

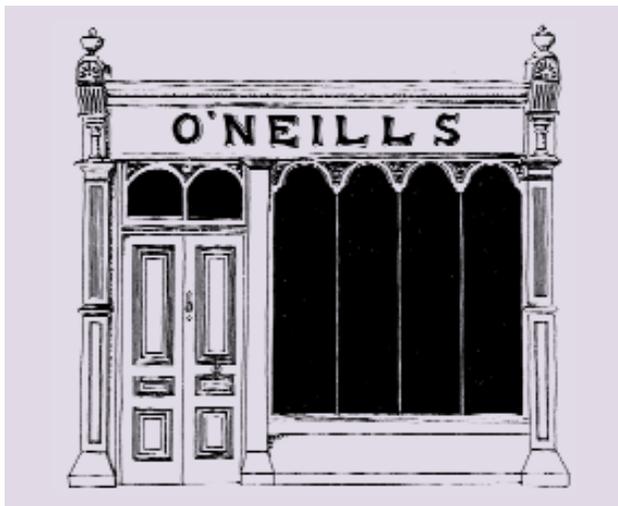
The overall shapes of the shop windows are very important in fitting in with the scale of the street architecture. Large plate glass windows did not become acceptable features until the 20th century but many older shops have unfortunately had their original windows replaced with larger panes of plate glass. Many of the older shop windows had round headed glazed units and, where they survive, these are most attractive features. Highly decorative vertical mullions, dividing the windows, are a common feature of the traditional Irish shopfront. Typically, these often have a slim profile and can be plain or intricately carved.

3. Pilasters or vertical surrounds

Most shopfronts, except for the plainest examples, have vertical surrounds, or pilasters, framing the edges of the front and sometimes, in addition, on either side of the door. These can be simple square section frames but more often have decorative carving on caps and bases. A particularly beautiful feature of the traditional front is the use of a little classical column, complete with carved cap and base. These are highly appropriate architectural elements in a street of simple classical houses.

4. Decorative details

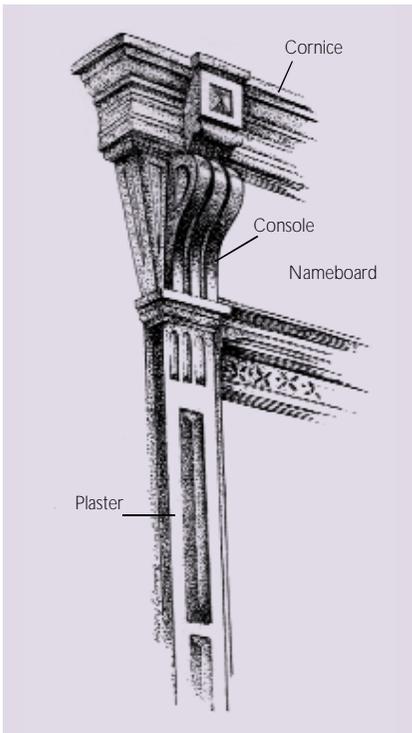
The principal areas for decorative features are the cornice and the consoles or brackets



Vertical mullions were a typical feature.

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on either side of the nameboard. The decorative treatment of the consoles is sometimes taken down to the top of the vertical pilasters or columns thus constituting a highly elaborate frame for the whole shopfront. The carved consoles on many Irish shops are often their most important and attractive features and the sheer variety of the designs makes a major contribution to the architecture of the street.



Details of traditional shopfront

Some shops were adorned with a little wrought iron railing or frill at the top of the cornice or nameboard, and a few had a little metal gate in front of the doorway when it was recessed. The floor of this recess or porch may have originally been provided with a mosaic or tiled design and in a few rare instances these survive and deserve preservation.



Top of cornice adorned with decorative railing or frill.

While shutters for the outside of shop windows were mainly for practical use and were therefore quite plain, a few were carefully crafted to give the shop an attractive appearance when closed. These are always worth preserving as they are unusual and pleasant features on the street.

Minor features of traditional shops include the little spiked railings on window cills which were intended to deter idlers! These are part of local history and deserve retention.

5. Colour

The principal glory of the traditional Irish small town street is often the variety of colours of the painted house fronts. The shopfronts were usually painted in deeper and bolder colours than the upper storeys and in most cases each shop was given a different colour.

Materials

The principal materials used for the traditional Irish shopfront were wood and plaster and the vast majority of surviving examples are formed of either of these two. A smaller number of traditional fronts are made of metal, tiles or stone.

Wood

The majority of shopfronts are in wood as this was the easiest material to prefabricate the various parts of the front and the assembly on site was relatively simple and quick.

Common Problems and Solutions

1. Removal of mullions
2. Damaged or missing details
3. Woodrot
4. Overpainting
5. Signs.

1. Removal of Mullions

Many traditional fronts were spoiled by the

removal of the original vertical mullions to introduce a larger window. Where this has happened, consideration should be given to dividing up the window with new mullions and thus produce a window with vertical strips. Old photographs of the town or village (see Sources of Information below) can often show the original shop or at least the typical window arrangement in the area. This can be particularly appropriate when the old shop has a new use, such as a cafe or restaurant. Window displays in these smaller scale windows can be more imaginative than in the larger, bland, single-pane units.

2. Damaged or missing detail

A common problem is the loss or damage to some of the carved decorative details on the cornices, consoles or the caps, to columns and pilasters. It is worthwhile having replicas made of these, using the surviving details as models, and replacing them in position. Many local craftspeople or joinery firms are well capable of carrying out this type of work efficiently. Broken or missing metal rails or frills to the cornice can be easily replaced by local metalworkers, if repair is not possible.

A common type of nameboard, often used on the general store which advertised, for instance, such things as 'Drapery, Hardware and Provisions' or 'Medical Hall' etc., had the lettering deeply cut into the wood nameboard and painted in gold; this was

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then covered in plate glass. These examples of craft are particularly valuable and deserve preservation even when the shop changes hands and function. The signs and memory of original use can have great local interest.

In many cases the entire original nameboard has been replaced by an inappropriate modern plastic signboard. To carry out a proper restoration job, this should be removed and a new replacement nameboard, in the style of the traditional type, should be installed. It is common to find that the original wood nameboard has been left with the new board fixed over it. In these cases it is comparatively easy to restore the front by removing the modern face and repairing any nail holes etc..

It is not uncommon for the whole of a traditional shopfront to be covered in a modern plastic facade with the original completely hidden from view. This may not be realised if the shop has changed hands, and many treasures of Irish craft may still exist waiting to be revealed.

3. Woodrot

Woodrot is often seen as a serious problem but fairly simple action can cure and prevent this happening.

(a) Prevent water penetration

The first source of water penetration is usually from a damaged flashing at the

top of the nameboard or cornice.

These flashings should be regularly checked and old lead flashings may need to be replaced with copper. This is a relatively simple operation. Regular painting of the wood front is essential for effective maintenance.

(b) Replace damaged wood

Small sections of damaged wood can be cut out and replaced with plastic wood filler. Larger areas of rot may need to be cut out and replaced with new wood.

4. Overpainting

Continuous overpainting of traditional Irish wood shopfronts tends, unfortunately, to obscure much of the fine carved detail. When a regular repainting job is to be carried out it would be worthwhile to thoroughly strip the old layers of paint back to the bare wood before repainting. This would have the added advantage of exposing any areas of woodrot for repair. The newly painted wood would then restore the shopfront to its former glory.

5. Signs

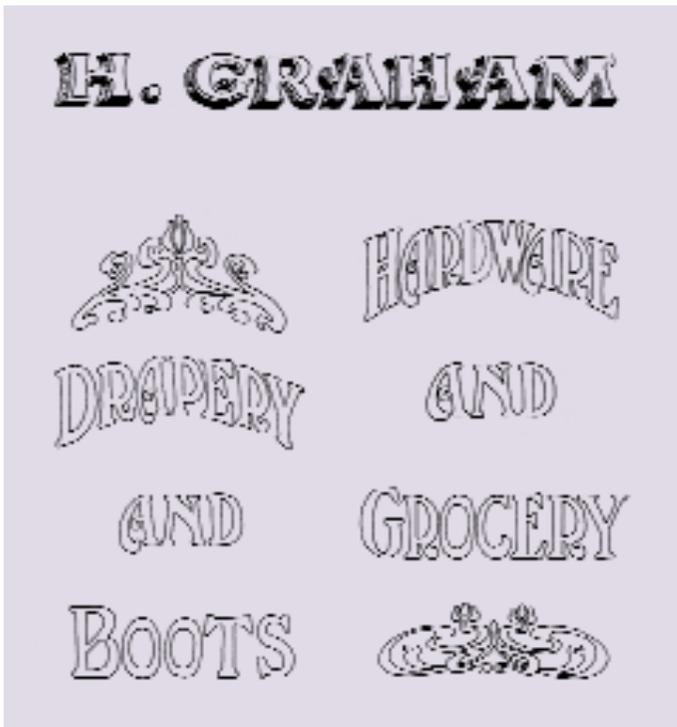
One of the most important components of the Irish shopfront is the hand painted lettering of the nameboard. Examples of these were disappearing at an alarming rate until a few years ago when there was a strong revival of this special Irish craft. The

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art of signwriting is alive and well throughout the country and there is little difficulty in obtaining the services of a signwriter to replicate traditional lettering or, as can be equally appropriate, a vigorous modern style. When a shop changes owners consideration could be given to retaining the original name, particularly if this would have local historical significance.

Plaster

Plaster or stucco was an economical substitute for cut stone to imitate all sorts of classical details, and its use was widespread in Ireland. Whole shopfronts were constructed with nameboards, cornices, pilasters and decorative details, all executed in the manner of stone carvings. The most superb examples of these plaster fronts are in the south west



Traditional signwriting.

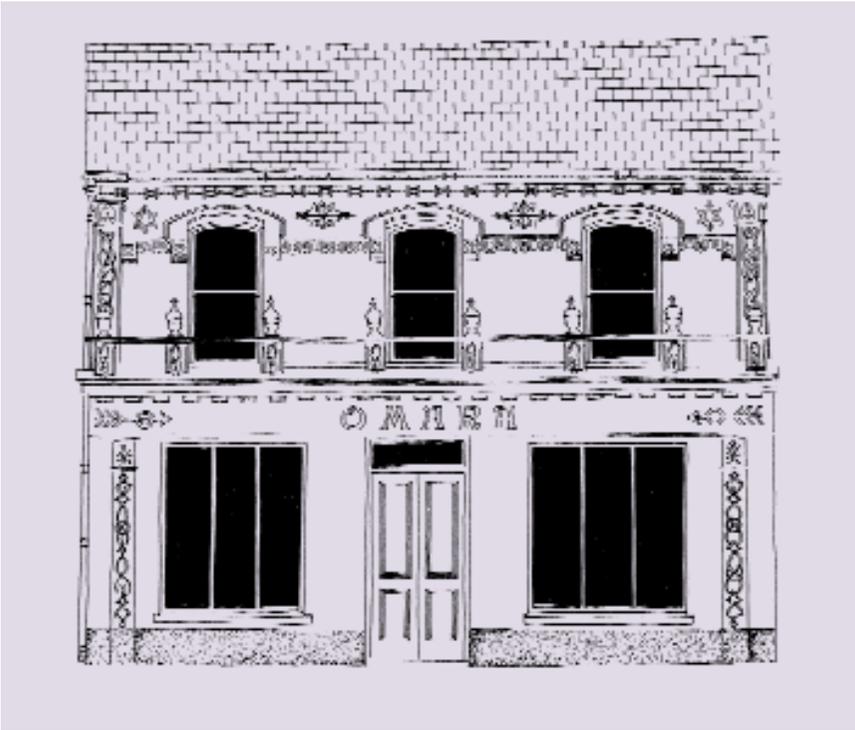
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of the country where the work of the celebrated folk artist Pat McAuliffe (1846 - 1921) can be seen, particularly in Listowel and Abbeyfeale.

These fronts are usually quite robust and long lasting and need little maintenance except for repair of broken details and repainting.

Tiles

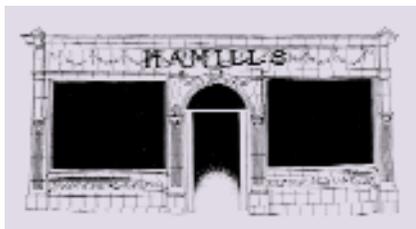
A much rarer type in Ireland is the shopfront in tiled or faience majolica. Most of these have disappeared but, as with wood fronts, many remnants of tiling survive, some being covered with modern plastic. The tiling can be on the whole front, including lettering, and the few remaining examples of these are masterpieces which deserve careful preservation.



Superb plaster shopfront.

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Tiled fronts are quite long lasting and no maintenance, except cleaning, is necessary, but missing tiles should be replaced. It may be difficult to find exact matches but tile manufacturers or suppliers may help with acceptable replacements.



Rare tiled traditional shopfront

Stone

Cut stone shopfronts are not uncommon in the cities and larger towns, and these were traditionally used for the business of pub/grocer. These often rivalled the banks with their splendid palazzo facades with the living quarters over the shops. These facades require little or no maintenance and must rank with the best examples of architecture in a town.

Metal

A very small number of Irish shopfronts were constructed entirely of metal, usually in cast iron. These were standard and from builders' catalogues and each arrived as a kit-of-parts complete with nameboard, cornice and pilasters. The firm of Walter MacFarlane &

Co. of Glasgow was one of the most celebrated manufacturers of complete shopfronts. Cleaning, removal of rust and regular painting is the only maintenance required.

Do's and Don'ts

- Do*
- preserve all existing original details
 - restore missing details
 - seek out historical photos, if possible, to ascertain details
 - check for woodrot and cut out damaged sections
 - prevent water penetration
 - replace mullions and vertical strips of window panes if original shop window was substituted with one large pane
 - preserve or restore old nameboard
 - paint wood fronts in traditional colours after proper stripping of old paint layers.
 - use traditional lettering and local signwriters.
- Don't*
- cover up old nameboard
 - replace original vertical strip windows with one plate glass pane
 - destroy or remove original decorative details in wood, wrought iron, stone, plaster etc.
 - overpaint.

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Sources of Information

The Irish Architectural Archive (IAA)
73, Merrion Square Dublin 2
Tel.01 676 3430

The IAA houses a large collection of photographs and drawings of Irish buildings, and there is a library of architectural books and journals.

The National Library (NL),
Kildare St., Dublin 2
Tel.01 661 8811

The NL houses the Lawrence collection of old photographs which contains views of most Irish towns in the 19th century. Original Irish shopfronts feature in many of the photographs.

The Father Brown Collection
Information on this huge collection of photographs of Irish life and scenes can be obtained from Davison and Associates, 69b Heather Road, Dublin 1
Tel.01 295 0799

Select Bibliography

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