

# **Sign and Façade Design Review Guide**

Adopted by Planning Board on February 3, 2022

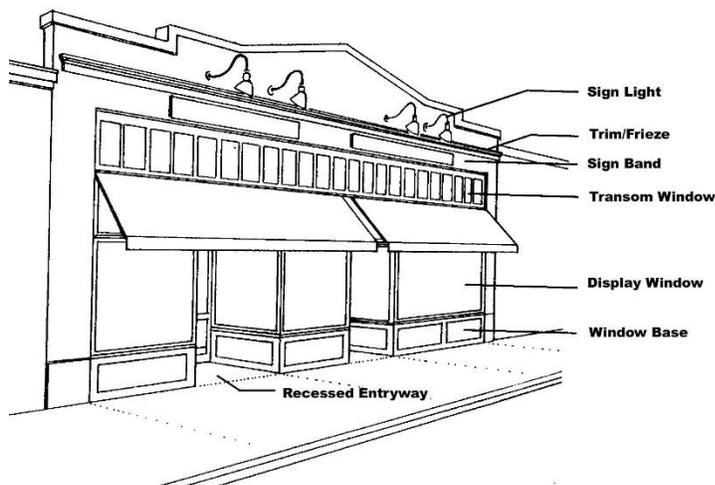
## **Introduction**

This guide seeks to promote signage and façade design review in Brookline’s commercial areas by providing guidance on the Design Review process and design criteria for signage, awnings, and structural façade alterations. The intended audience is commercial property owners, business owners, sign designers, architects, and members of the public interested in learning how Brookline reviews and regulates changes to signage and building façades.

Storefronts play an integral role in neighborhoods and commercial areas by providing a unifying element along the streetscape and continuity within a commercial district. The type and characteristics of individual buildings define commercial areas as recognizable and vibrant places. Well-integrated storefronts and signage augment building architecture and improve a business’s viability by increasing visibility and access to information about the goods or services.

The storefront includes several components that collectively create the first impression – “the face of the business” – that merchants present to customers. The design of a storefront and any exterior changes affect the individual building, neighboring businesses, and the overall streetscape. Renovations that enhance a building’s architecture and streetscape can stabilize and strengthen property values, making integrated design and detail a sound investment for the property owner and the community identity.

The diagram below illustrates the components of a commercial storefront. Defining these components will help business and property owners to understand and communicate with project teams regarding new signs and storefront renovations. This information is will also help applicants better understand the Town’s approach to regulating changes to storefronts.



*Storefront Components*

## Design Review Process

The purpose of Design Review is to preserve and enhance the appearance of the many historic buildings that comprise Brookline's commercial areas and to promote well-integrated signage for new developments. Although many components of taste and preference are subjective, there are some universal planning and design principles that Brookline encourages, as outlined in this guide.

The Design Review process is as follows:

1. Applicants are encouraged to contact staff in the Planning and Community Development Department for a preliminary design consultation (see the end of this guide for contact information).
2. Applicants must submit an [online application for Design Review](#). Detailed instructions for completing the application can be [found here](#).
  - A Design Review submission should include, at a minimum:
    - Visual of existing conditions
    - Visual simulation of the proposed sign and façade changes, including all dimensions
    - A cross-section diagram of the sign, including dimensions
    - Details on materials, illumination, and mounting method
    - Other documents as requested by staff or the Planning Board.
  - *Note that applications will not be accepted for formal review or scheduled on the Planning Board's calendar until all application materials are submitted. Changes to the façade of a building that is listed on or eligible for listing on the State and/or National Register of Historic Places are subject to review by Preservation staff and/or the Town's Preservation Commission.*
3. Once a complete application is submitted, Planning staff will review the application and contact the applicant for any missing information or with any questions.
4. If staff determines the proposed changes to the storefront signage are substantially similar to the existing conditions and that they meet zoning requirements and all criteria outlined in this guide, the Design Review application may be approved administratively by staff. In these cases, staff will approve the plans and an applicant may then apply for a building permit.
5. If staff determines that the proposed changes cannot be approved administratively, the application will be referred to the Planning Board for review at its regularly scheduled Design Review public meetings.
6. Staff will then notify the applicant via email of the Design Review meeting date and time. The applicant, sign maker, or representative authorized to make decisions regarding potential changes to the design is strongly recommended to attend the Design Review meeting with the Planning Board.
7. Staff will send the Planning Board the plans and staff report approximately one week prior to the meeting date.

8. At the Design Review meeting, the Planning Board will discuss the proposed changes with the applicant and the staff and will make a decision. The Planning Board will make one of the following decisions:

**Approved as Submitted: The applicant’s proposal is acceptable as submitted and no changes to the design or additional information is required.**

Planners will update the Planning Board report consistent with Planning Board comments and provide copies to the Building Department and the applicant. As soon as the decision is approved, the applicant can obtain a building permit from the Building Department and begin the proposed project.

**Approved with Conditions: The Planning Board has approved the plans in concept, but the applicant must make changes to the design and/or provide additional information as recommended during the Design Review meeting.**

If the Planning Board does not request that the applicant return for further review of their application, the final plans are reviewed by staff for compliance with the Planning Board’s recommended changes.

**Do Not Recommend Approval: The design is not approved because the application does not comply with zoning requirements, is not in keeping with the Planning Board’s Design Criteria, and/or the applicant is not able to comply with the Planning Board’s recommendations.**

In this scenario, the applicant can choose to resubmit a design for review by the Planning Board at a later date or the applicant may appeal the Planning Board’s decision to the Town’s Zoning Board of Appeals.

### Design Guidelines

In reviewing applications for new signage or changes to a building’s façade, the Planning Board uses the following criteria to inform their recommendations. These criteria supplement the regulatory requirements of the Zoning By-Law (Article VII Signs, Illumination, & Regulated Façade Alterations). Each building, block, and neighborhood is different and the Planning Board applies these criteria to each proposal within the context of the building and surrounding neighborhood.

#### **Design Criteria for Signs**

- *The sign should serve to define or enhance architectural elements of the building, not obscure or obliterate them.*

Take note of the defining architectural elements of the building – including masonry details, transom windows, parapets, pilasters, and other elements – and design signage to enhance and complement these character-defining features, while working within the limitations of the building’s architecture. Materials used for signage should be sustainable.

- *The sign should identify the name of the business, not advertise brand names or services.*

Signage should be proportioned and located to help customers identify your business name and the point of access. Excessive branding or overly large signage should be avoided.

- *Signs should be consolidated.*

The components and content of facade signs should be consolidated to minimize the overall façade area taken up by signage. Where an identifiable sign band exists on the building façade, proposed signage should be located within it and avoid obscuring any architectural details outside of the band. Avoid distributing signage across the building's façade (or other exterior walls, in cases where directional signs are necessary).

- *The sign should be designed without superfluous back-facing.*

Sign backing should be minimized to the extent needed for installation of the sign and designed to be consistent with the character and appearance of the building.

- *Sign graphics should reflect simplicity, neatness, and minimum wording – not only to improve appearance but to improve legibility.*

Signs with fewer words and simple, clean fonts are more easily identified and remembered by customers. Clear signage can help establish a business's brand identity and promote return visits.

- *All nonconforming signs, facade elements, awnings, and other extraneous materials which conceal architectural details should be removed.*

Proposals for new signs or façade improvements should be viewed as opportunities to improve the overall appearance of the façade by removing any components that detract from the appearance of the storefront or that do not comply with the Zoning By-law.

- *Sign colors should be selected to enhance legibility and should be compatible with the facade.*

The colors used in a sign should complement the façade, including the color of the building and any architectural or character-defining features. The variety of colors should be limited and be selected to ensure the sign is clean and legible.

- *Sign illumination shall be of low-to-moderate intensity.*

Sign illumination is an important means for customers to find your business at night and can help improve safety on the street, but illumination can also have negative impacts on surrounding residents and passersby. Illumination should be bright enough to notify visitors of your location and attract customers to your business, but the brightness should be in keeping with the surrounding neighborhood context and avoid any "spillover" into residences. See the Zoning By-law for specific requirements related to internally illuminated signs. All illuminated signs shall be installed with a rheostat switch so that they may be dimmed during non-business hours.

## Design Criteria for Awnings

- *The awning should define or enhance architectural elements of the building, not obscure or hide detailing.*

Awnings should be configured so as to highlight a building's architecture and character-defining features. Using separate awnings over each storefront opening (windows and doors) can support a building's character while providing the desired benefits of awnings. Materials used for awnings should be sustainable; use of vinyl awnings is not allowed.

- *The awning should not be attached to building trim and should not be placed under overhanging building elements, but should be recessed within door and window frames.*

Attaching awnings to door and window frames helps preserve the building façade and maintains the visibility of architectural details.

- *The awning should be an appropriate shape to complement the style and age of the building and should relate geometrically to the space within which it will be placed. Fixed awnings should be used on at least two-thirds of the building.*

Awning shapes should be simple, equally sized, and consistent with the overall appearance and style of the building façade.

- *The awning frame should be at least 8 feet above grade level, and the fringe or valance at least 6 feet 9 inches above grade level.*

Place awnings with enough clearance for pedestrians to easily walk beneath. An awning frame less than 8 feet above the sidewalk creates a safety hazard and does not comply with building code.

- *The principal purpose of an awning is to reduce light, not increase sign area; therefore, awning graphics should reflect simplicity, neatness, and minimum copy.*

As with the guidelines for facade signs, any signage located on the awning should use as few words as possible. Any logos should be designed using simple, clean fonts that are more easily identified and remembered by customers.

- *Awning colors should be limited and should be compatible with the façade and other awnings on the block.*

Awnings of different colors on a single building façade should be avoided. Where a business's brand or other factors demonstrate a need for a change in awning color, efforts should be made to ensure such changes are compatible with the color of surrounding awnings and building facades.

- *Retractable awnings and those not back-lit should have a minimum of fixtures and moderate illumination.*

Where retractable awnings or under-awning lighting is used, mechanical fixtures and overall illumination should be minimized and should not detract from the overall appearance of the building façade or defining architectural features.

### **Design Criteria for Structural Façade Changes**

- *Respect a building's scale, size, architectural period, and original materials, as well as the surrounding neighborhood context.*

Where practical, retain, restore, and uncover any original materials or architectural details that have been obscured or damaged over time. Ensure that the height and/or size of the knee wall, window base, and window frames is consistent with adjacent storefronts, especially if part of the same building.

- *Install doors and windows that are compatible with a building's overall appearance and character, while helping customers locate entry points and view the business from the sidewalk.*

Windows and doors help to define a building's character and special attention should be given to any façade changes that will affect these façade components. Customers should be able to clearly identify the entry to the business. Where appropriate, large and unobscured windows can help provide maximum visibility into the store.

- *Create a cohesive storefront appearance by aligning window heights and unifying window sizes.*

Aligning the heights and sizes of architectural features such as windows creates a visually appealing and cohesive appearance for the storefront. It can help attract customers by reducing the amount of visual clutter that distract from the businesses signage and entranceway.

- *Retain and, where possible, restore transom windows.*

Transom windows are a special architectural feature present on many of Brookline's older storefronts. Where intact, these windows should never be covered or blocked with any materials. In instances where the historic transom windows have been covered or damaged over time and where there is nothing to hide behind the windows, businesses and property owners should uncover and restore the transom window as part of their façade upgrade.

**For more information on Signage and Façade Design Review, please contact the Town of Brookline Department of Planning and Community Development:**

Department of Planning and Community Development  
Regulatory Division  
333 Washington Street  
Brookline, MA 02445  
Phone: 617-730-2130