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View of Tuscola's Main Street, ca. 1935. Tuscola's downtown was typical of many Illinois towns in the early-twentieth century, with its many commercial buildings constructed in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Most of the original storefronts are evident in this photo, but later innovations such as projecting signs and awnings have been added.

Storefronts on Main Street: An Architectural History

Mike Jackson, F.A.I.A.

Storefronts are the front porches of Main Street. Designed to be attractive, inviting, and functional, storefronts play such an important role in defining individual businesses and even entire commercial districts that they are the focus of attention for shopkeepers, building owners, architects, preservationists, and contractors. All that attention has had one very noticeable result: storefronts have been frequently altered to fit new business identities and changing architectural fashions. Architecture, technology, and merchandising have played important roles in the ever-changing face of Main Street. The nineteenth-century warehouse owner and the twentieth-century department-store owner each made decisions about the kind of storefront that served his business; it could be the simple vernacular design of the local builder or the elaborate design of a celebrated architect. More often than not, it was something between the two.

This publication is rooted in a fundamental preservation principle: understanding historic significance over time. The typical Illinois Main Street consists of commercial buildings that date from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Since most Main

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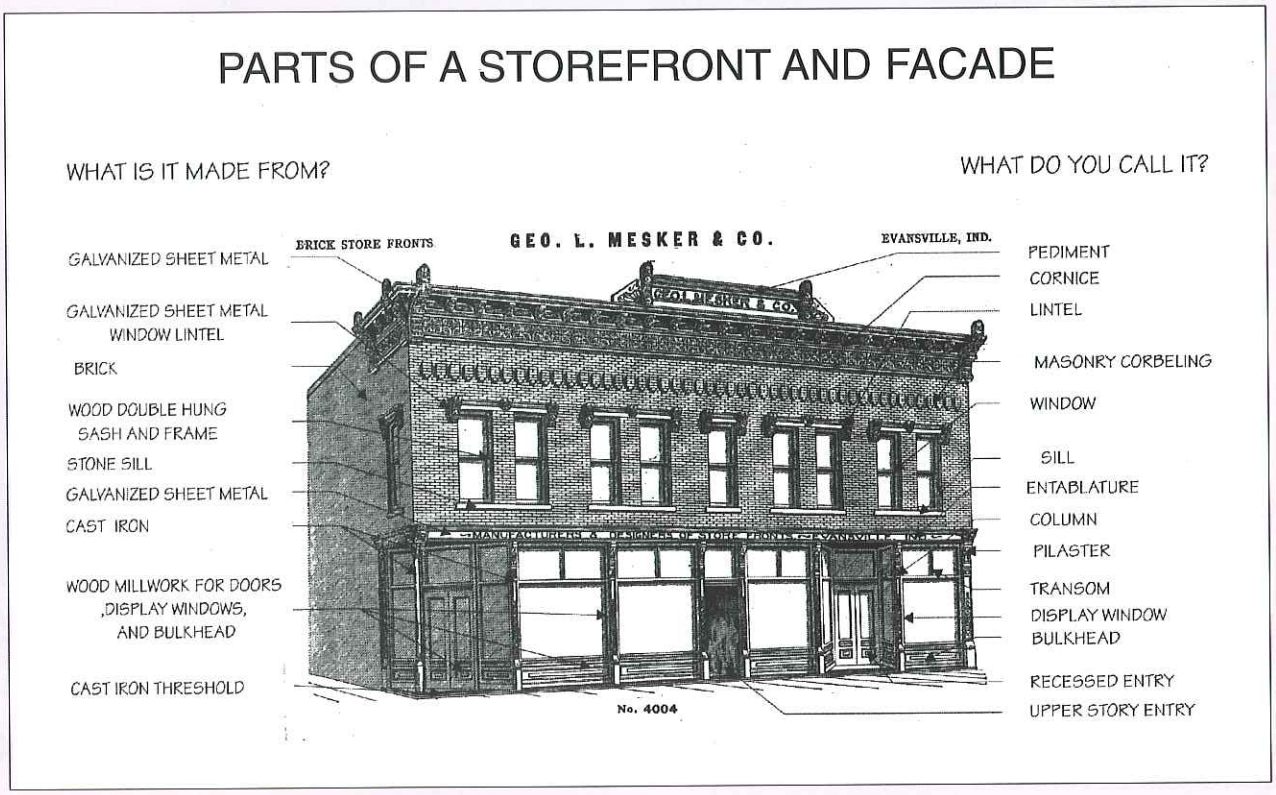
Streets are a 150-year collage of evolving storefront designs, it is not realistic to expect a downtown to represent a single era of commercial architecture. What era and which designs best represent the past with enough integrity of design and materials to qualify as historic? The first litmus test of historic significance is time. A place must be fifty years old to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. This is a fairly valid test for Main Street, since many storefronts are altered before fifty years have passed. Only a few Main Street buildings maintain their original shopfronts and front facades and they would, therefore, be among the most significant examples in any community. For most cases, the storefront should be evaluated separately from the building facade when determining if a building and the individual shopfront have historic significance. There is no single answer for every building. Each should be evaluated using this overview of architectural eras to see how the storefront stacks up against its peers.

Small-scale commercial structures make up the typical Main Street. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the storefront was very similar in scale regardless of the building's size and location. In the twentieth century, changes in retailing that led to larger stores and to shopping malls have produced a variety of sizes and forms that will not be considered here. This history is limited to Illinois, although the architectural trends that are discussed were national in scope. In the mid-nineteenth century, storefront material suppliers began shipping their products around the country. "Badger" fronts manufactured by Daniel Badger's Architectural Iron Works of New York were erected in such disparate locations as Chicago, New Orleans, and San Francisco. In the twentieth century, national marketing of architectural designs, products, and materials made it possible for the same storefront design to be found in many locations around the country.

Technological innovation and evolving architectural



Storefronts, Shopfronts, and Building Facades

The terms *storefront* and *shopfront* can be used almost interchangeably, but most Americans generally use *storefront,* while the English use *shopfront.* The classic dictionary definition of the storefront is the "front side of a store or store building facing the street." This definition is basically the same as that of a building facade, as long as the structure has a store on the ground floor. In most architectural uses, the term *storefront* (when it also means facade) is limited to structures from two to five stories high. For taller buildings with a business on the ground floor, *storefront* or *shopfront* is used to describe the ground-floor, commercial facade only. In this history, *storefront* refers only to the ground-floor commercial facade, and the term *upper-story facade* is used to describe a building's front side.

The two buildings in the center were architectural twins when constructed in the mid-nineteenth century, but the facade on the right has been altered several times over the years. The prism-glass transom and second-story windows on the right date from the early-twentieth century. The original storefront survives on the left, while the modernization on the right dates to the 1940s.

fashion fueled major changes in the appearance of storefronts and still met the critical merchandising demands of Main Street. Basic to most Main Streets is a rhythm of buildings platted on street lots twenty to twenty-five feet wide. That basic rhythm is more than a function of the surveyor's mapping skills. The spacing of downtown lots, visible in the proportions of the building facades, is directly related to early construction practices. In the nineteenth century the efficient single span of a wood joist was about twenty-two feet. The width of a typical storefront mirrored this span, separated by one-foot-thick masonry walls, which were designed to limit the spread of fire between buildings. It is an almost universal proportion, one that can be found in older commercial areas across America and throughout the world.

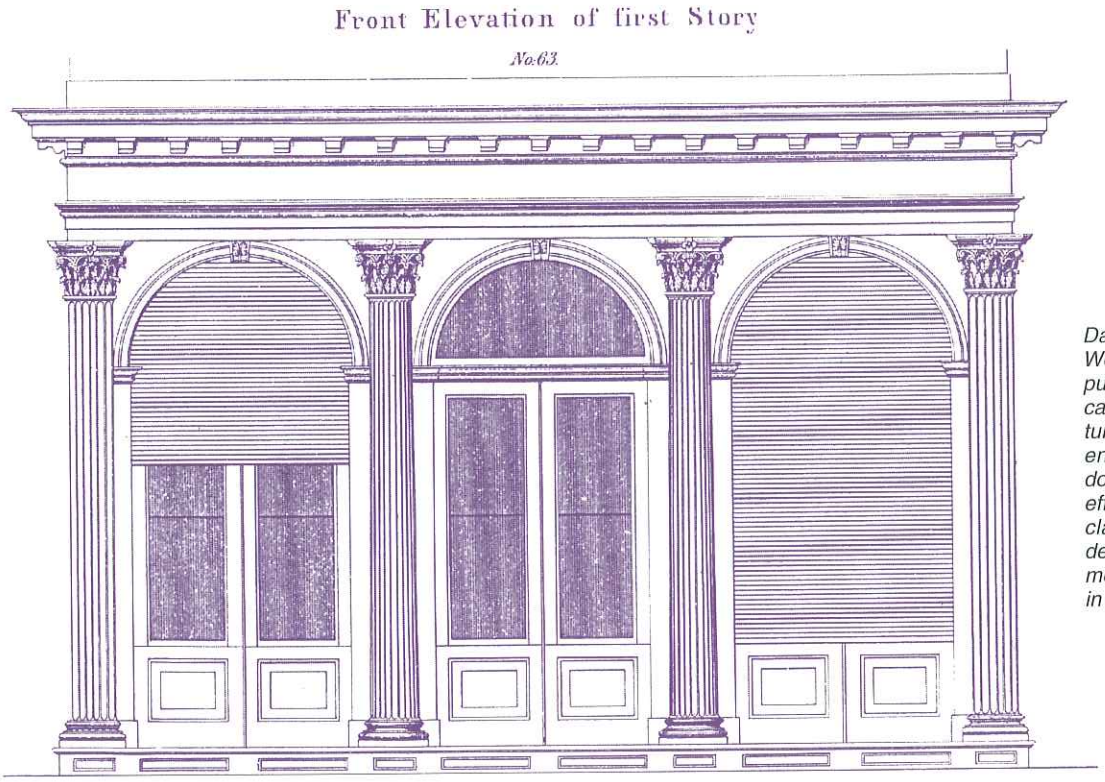
The structural system of the storefront was different than that of the sidewall. In the nineteenth century, the demands for larger display windows coincided with advances in iron and steel, which greatly reduced the visibility of the structural system in the overall proportion of the storefront. This was a healthy relationship of merchandising and architecture, and the resulting storefronts of the latter nineteenth century make a special architectural contribution to Main Street.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the structural system virtually disappeared as a part of the overall design. The beneficiary of the shrinking structural system was the display window, which grew larger because of merchandising demands and technological advances in glassmaking. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the size of glass available in America was quite small. French glassmakers were making large pieces of plate glass in the late-eighteenth century, but it was not yet available to American builders. By the mid-nineteenth century, advances in American glassmaking and shipping made it possible for large plate-glass panels to be used, and by the end of the century large plate glass was available virtually everywhere in America.

The Functions of the Storefront

Five basic functions must be incorporated into the design of a storefront—structure, enclosure, entry, identity, and display. While these elements can be described as separate directives to the designer, the final design integrates all five.

The overall enclosure of the storefront—the separation of the inside from the outside—is the most obvious function of the storefront. The ideal goal for most merchants, whether located inside a nineteenth-century market hall or a modern shopping mall, is to have no separation between their merchandise and the customer. The enclosure system provides security and protection from the elements. In the early nineteenth century, wooden



Daniel Badger's Architectural Iron Works, located in New York City, published this illustration in its 1865 catalog. This cast-iron storefront featured four columns topped by an entablature, with paired wooden doors behind the arches. The overall effect was a faithful translation of classical architectural forms and details in cast iron. The roll-down metal shutters were a popular option in New York City but not elsewhere.

shutters were used to protect storefront windows when the shop was closed. By the mid-nineteenth century, roll-down metal shutters were sometimes integrated into shopfront designs. Exterior mounted metal scissors screens are a major innovation of twentieth-century shopfronts. These security enclosure systems are more often found in urban commercial districts than on Illinois' Main Street.

Signs were the most frequently changed exterior element. Though signs could be integrated into the architecture of the storefront, they often were independently designed and placed. Architectural pattern-book designs often ignored the sign, leaving that to the individual store owner. Signs were often re-used when a store moved from one location to another, with the frequent result that the new sign did not fit the size and space allocated for it in the new architectural frame. Architectural and trade literature on store design, particularly in the mid-twentieth century, placed great importance on integrating sign design and architecture. Typefaces changed with architectural fashion; the 1930s marked an important benchmark in the history of graphic design, when popular lettering styles moved from serif to sans-serif designs.

Sign design has evolved in response to changing technologies. In the nineteenth century, sign making was a specialized art of the painter; the sign's structure was a minor detail compared to the craft of sign lettering. In the twentieth century, electricians and graphic artists were needed to make signs. From the invention of the electric light bulb to the neon light to the digital time-and-temperature display, signs and lighting have an integrated history.

Entrances to buildings have been similarly affected by changes in architectural styles and new technologies. The form, placement, and scale of the entry evolved separately from the material and design of the door. During most of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the entry was a wood-and-glass door, and changing architectural fashions were expressed in the millwork. In the twentieth century, as metal became the dominant material for doors, the wood door became less ornamental. One noteworthy variation in door design is that of the revolving door, a late-nineteenth-century invention most often found in larger department stores.

The store entry was not the only door integrated into a storefront design. For a building with more than one story, a separate entrance to the upper floor was often included. There is one principal difference between these two types of entrances—the store entry is often recessed to increase display window space and to make a more spacious entry, while the upper story door is generally flush with the building facade.

Awnings and canopies are frequent additions to the overall architectural form. The awning provides enclosure in the form of sun and rain protection, but it may also serve as background for signs. Like the sign, the awning was often installed independently of the overall architectural form. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century canvas awnings were the most popular form of storefront sun control in America. Canvas awnings had a limited life span and were frequently changed, though the basic hardware and operating mechanism could last for generations. The use of permanent canopies rather than operating awnings varied by region. Canopies supported by wood posts were popular in small towns and on hotels. The use of a suspended marquee-type awning gained popularity in the early twentieth century, and many variations of projecting canopies and screens are found in mid-twentieth-century designs.

Asher Benjamin's The Builder's Guide *(1839) was the most widely published pattern book in the early nineteenth century. The Greek Revival style storefront plan shown above featured square classical columns, an elegant entablature, multi-light display sash, and decorative grills for the bulkheads.*

The Greek Revival Era, 1820-1850

The first permanent commercial structures emerged with the growth of Illinois' first platted communities in the 1820s. These new towns followed a development pattern that was already established in eastern America—the city grid—with commercial buildings adjacent to the lot line. It is the development pattern common to virtually all of Illinois' Main Streets.

The oldest surviving commercial structures are found in riverfront cities from Galena to the north to Old Shawneetown in the south. Masonry bearing-wall structures with wood-floor systems were typical of this period and set the precedent for commercial construction that would dominate the nineteenth century. Architecturally, this first generation of stores was influenced by the Greek Revival style, as pre-Civil War American architects looked to the ancient architecture of Greece for inspiration. Asher Benjamin's *The Builder's Guide of 1839,* which featured several designs for storefronts, enjoyed widespread popularity. Greek Revival-era commercial storefronts were noted for their simple post-and-beam structural system for the store openings. Square masonry columns supported a stone entablature above. Where stone was readily available, it was used for columns and for beams with simple tooled edges. In rural areas and on vernacular structures, simple brick piers were often used. The space between the columns would include a series of paired doors or a combination of doors and display windows. The storefront windows were generally wood with multiple panes. Signs were either made of wood or painted directly on the stone columns or entablature.

This commercial building in Galena, with its square masonry piers and paired doors with transoms, reflects the influence of Greek Revival style.

The cast-iron columns supporting the front of this Galena building, constructed ca. 1856, are extremely slender and almost indistinguishable from the millwork. The most distinctive parts of this storefront are the arched-glass doors and the multi-light sash.

Cast Iron, 1850-1910

Cast-iron columns for storefront structures first appeared in the 1820s in the eastern United States. Foundries proliferated during the industrial expansion of the pre-Civil War era, and by the 1850s cast-iron columns were readily available to Illinois builders. During the 1850s cast-iron columns and lintels replaced stone and masonry as the preferred storefront structural system for masonry buildings. It was a trend that lasted into the early twentieth century. Older commercial buildings with masonry piers or walls could be renovated and the new metal columns added, or the columns could be used in new construction.

For merchant and architect alike, this amazing new material made construction more economical, and it permitted a substantial increase in the size of display windows. The large display window maximized the retailer's display space, and it permitted greater amounts of natural light into the store interior. The passing pedestrian could be continually tempted by the latest wares. In an era before mass advertising, store windows were one of the most important public mechanisms to promote new

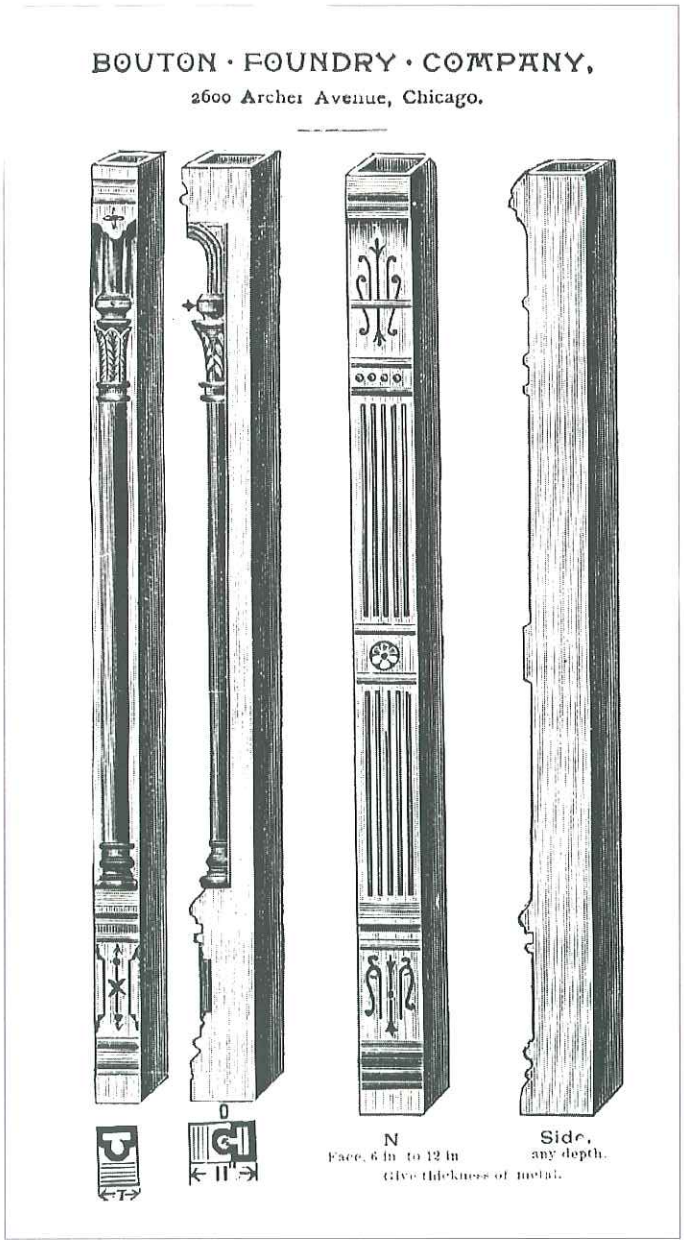
The decorative cast-iron columns on this building in Danville are one of its most distinctive features. The architectural ornament of the upper facade is stamped sheet metal. Note the large size of the plate glass.

materials and products. Any architectural device that allowed a merchant to increase display space was a product that would, and did, find a welcome audience.

Cast iron is extremely strong in compression, making it an excellent material for structural columns. It also provides design versatility; cast iron is heated to a liquid and poured into molds that feature various ornamental patterns. As fashions in architecture changed, the patterns on the cast-iron column also changed. In the 1850s, column designs were slender but literal translations of classical orders. By the end of the nineteenth century, columns were typically square with ornamental motifs showing the influence of Eastlake, Queen Anne, and Classical Revival styles. Though excellent in compression, cast iron is not as good in tension, so cast-iron beams were more limited in size. Initially, cast-iron lintels that spanned six to eight feet set the general pattern for the placement of storefront columns. By the middle of the nineteenth century, cast-iron and wrought-iron combination beams could span twenty feet between storefront walls, but the use of these composite beams was relatively uncommon. The six to eight feet between columns was a convenient dimension for the placement of display windows and entrances and for the foundation piers below. For most of the nineteenth century, when cast-iron columns were used for storefront construction, the spacing of columns would follow this six to eight foot span.

Cast-iron columns served as both a structural and a decorative element, but cast-iron beams were generally hidden. The bottom flange of the beam served as the support for the masonry walls above. Construction practices of the day necessitated a design solution for the top of the storefront since the appearance of a masonry wall resting on a thin flange of iron was not suitable to the architectural aesthetic of the day. It was necessary for an architectural element to unify the front design and provide a clear sense of stable proportion for the masonry above. The result was the storefront entablature. In the first generation of cast-iron storefronts, this covering was also constructed of cast-iron plates and included details that took their expression from classical architecture. A series of modillions supported the projecting mass of the entablature. The fascia was a convenient area for signs and awning hardware.

Bouton Foundry Company of Chicago provided cast-iron columns of various shape and ornament, as shown in the foundry's 1887 catalog.

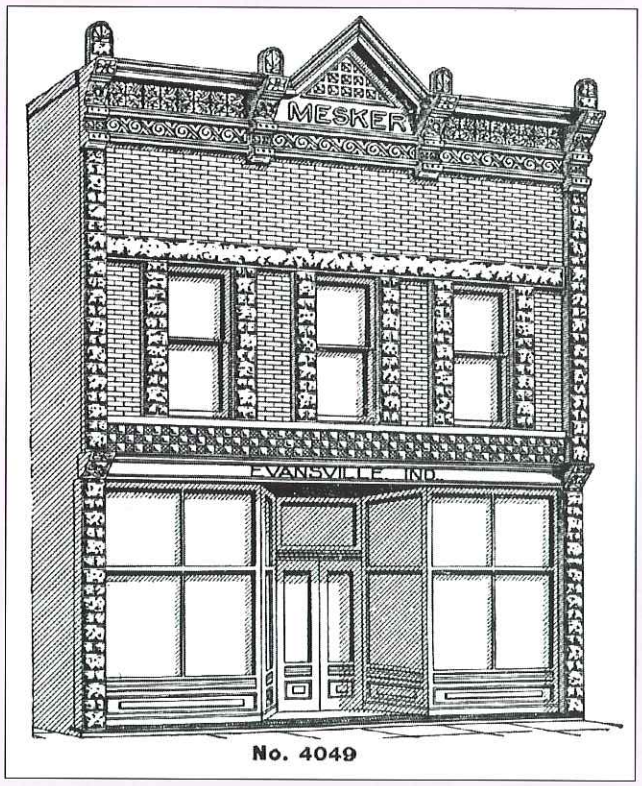


Mesker Storefronts, 1890-1910

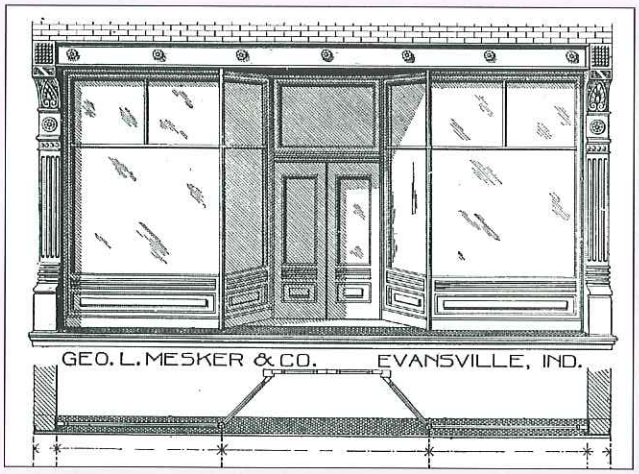
The Mesker Bros. companies of Evansville, Indiana, and St. Louis, Missouri, filled a niche in the architecture of America's Main Streets. Between 1890 and 1910 the company sold entire building fronts that included wood-and-glass storefronts and ornamental sheet-metal upper-story facades. Their products were marketed through illustrated catalogs that targeted small-town building owners. By one estimate, Mesker sold more than eight thousand storefronts and facades.

The primary architectural product of this company was an upper-story facade of sheet metal. The galvanized steel sheets were stamped with a variety of architectural motifs that were an amalgam of late-nineteenth-century popular architectural styles, with Classical Revival the dominant stylistic influence. A distinctive "engaged" column and base design was used between each of the upper floor windows in a facade design found in many Illinois towns. Because the exterior material was only a thin metal, it could be used as a covering for an existing building or as a facade for a new building. The backing could be masonry or wood, depending upon the local fire codes and building conventions.

The Mesker companies also sold storefronts that featured several designs of cast-iron columns and pilaster facings. Steel beams spanned the front facades, permitting the use of nonstructural materials between supports.

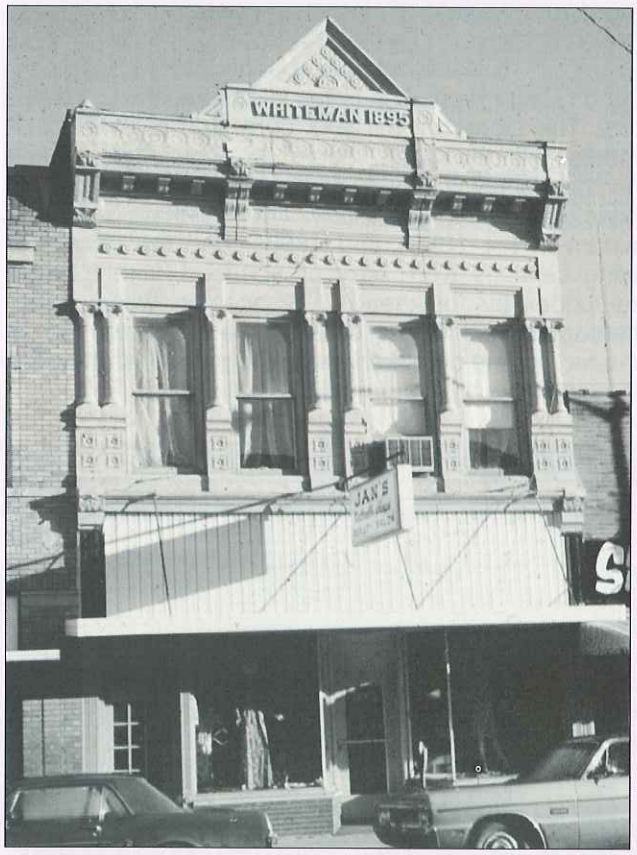


The Geo. L. Mesker & Co. 1905 catalog included design No. 4049: "This is a handsome low price galvanized front, having stamped steel pilasters in first story, with cast iron sill course. Price of cast iron sill galvanized iron pilasters and galvanized iron upper front 21 ft. wide, $168.55; 23 ft. wide, $178.60; 25 ft. wide, $188.65."



Shopfront design from Geo. L. Mesker & Co. 1905 catalog

The company also provided wooden millwork for the storefronts. Mesker fronts are found across America, and testimonials in company catalogs showcase their widespread sales. However, because these companies were based in the midwest, Mesker fronts are particularly plentiful in Illinois.



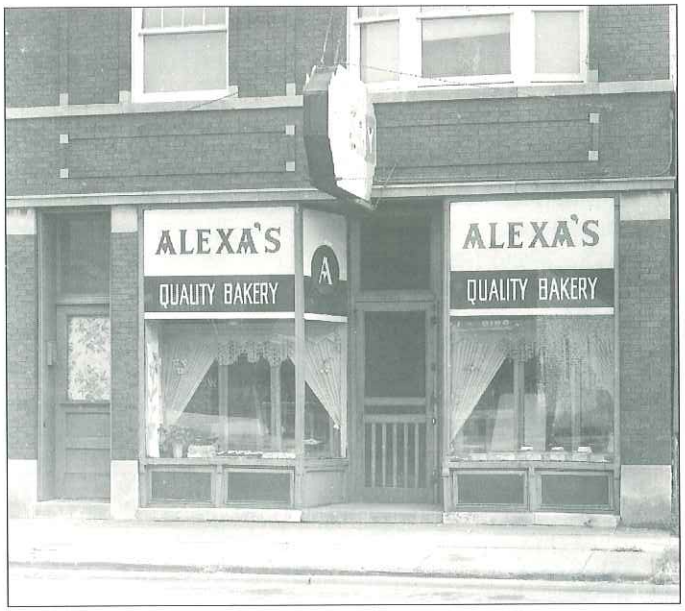
This Vandalia commercial building features an elaborate Mesker sheet-metal facade and cast-iron columns. The lower floor was renovated in the 1960s.

The entablature varied considerably in material and design throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the earliest examples, wood was used to produce designs that paralleled those of the cornice but in a smaller size. Beginning in the 1870s, architectural sheet metal became the preferred material for the entablature, and it remained the most common material for the storefront entablature until the early twentieth century. The design of the sheet-metal entablature was a variation of classical design modified for two other functional considerations—sign and awning placement. By limiting the entablature brackets to the sides of the storefront, a flat area was made available for signs or awning hardware. The projection of the entablature provided a protective ledge for the upper part of the awning, which better shed water. In the architectural examples, appropriately sized signs appeared within the entablature. But in actual practice, merchants re-used old signs or made larger signs that sometimes covered the entablature.

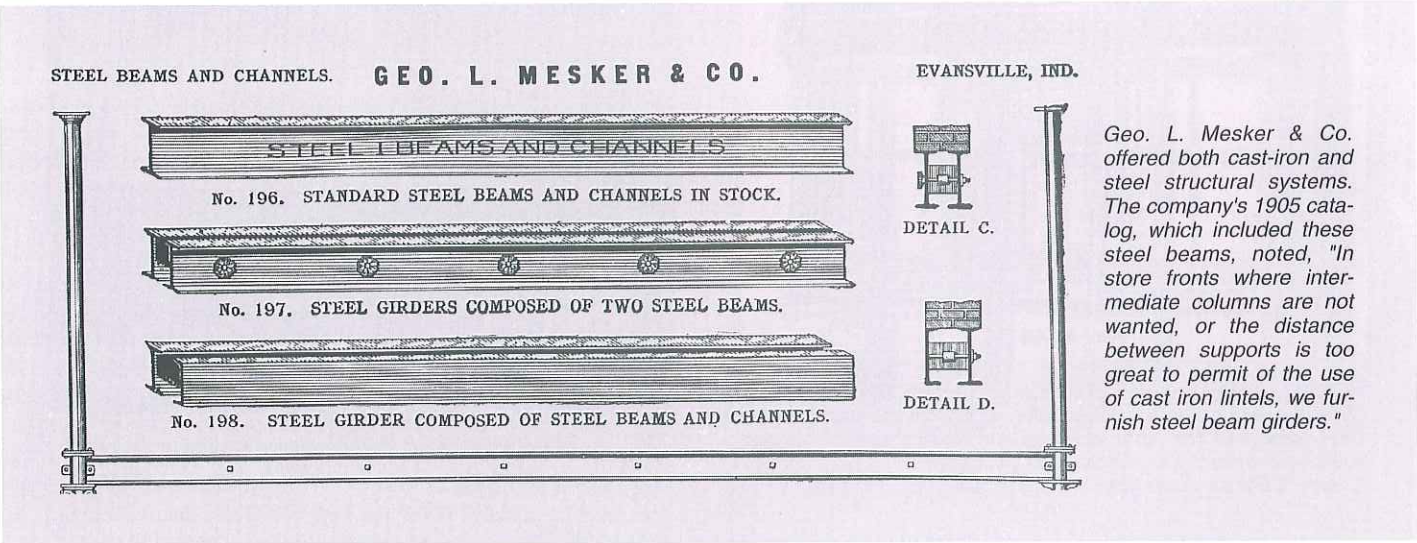
During the fifty-year popularity of cast-iron columns, a number of new architectural styles came into fashion, but the basic structural framing system remained the same. Only minor surface design changes were made to the cast-iron columns and pilasters in response to changing architectural fashions. Dating a building based upon the column design is difficult because once a new design was developed it did not mean that the earlier design went out of production. Catalogs of cast-iron ornament available in the 1890s illustrate an abundance of column designs dating from twenty years earlier.

The pattern of the millwork changed with the fashions of the day, and it offers a better measure of a building's history. The storefront millwork consisted of three basic elements—window sash, doors, and bulkhead panels below the display windows. All three followed the popular architectural motifs of the day. The Italianate style was dominant in the 1850s and 1860s, and the woodwork molding sections were very pronounced, with a single panel under the bulkhead. Advances in woodworking technology in the 1870s spurred the production of an expanded variety of molding shapes, panels, and incised designs. Those motifs were commonly found in residential architecture of the Eastlake, Queen Anne, and Stick styles. During the 1880s molding shapes were less pronounced than those found in the Italianate style, but they offered a greater variety of shape and detail. The millwork used for storefronts showed many similarities to millwork used in furniture of the period. During the last decades that cast iron was used, woodwork designs became less elaborate and followed patterns more typical of the Colonial Revival style.

The size and pattern of display-window glass also evolved, due as much to changing glassmaking technologies and commercial availability as to changing architectural fashions. French glassworks were producing



Alexa's Quality Bakery, location unknown, was located behind this simple wood storefront, which included a number of innovative features such as screens on the bulkhead windows (which allowed light into the basement) and stamped decorative metal at the corners of the sash. Contrast this ca. 1910 view of the building with the ca. 1935 view on page 12.



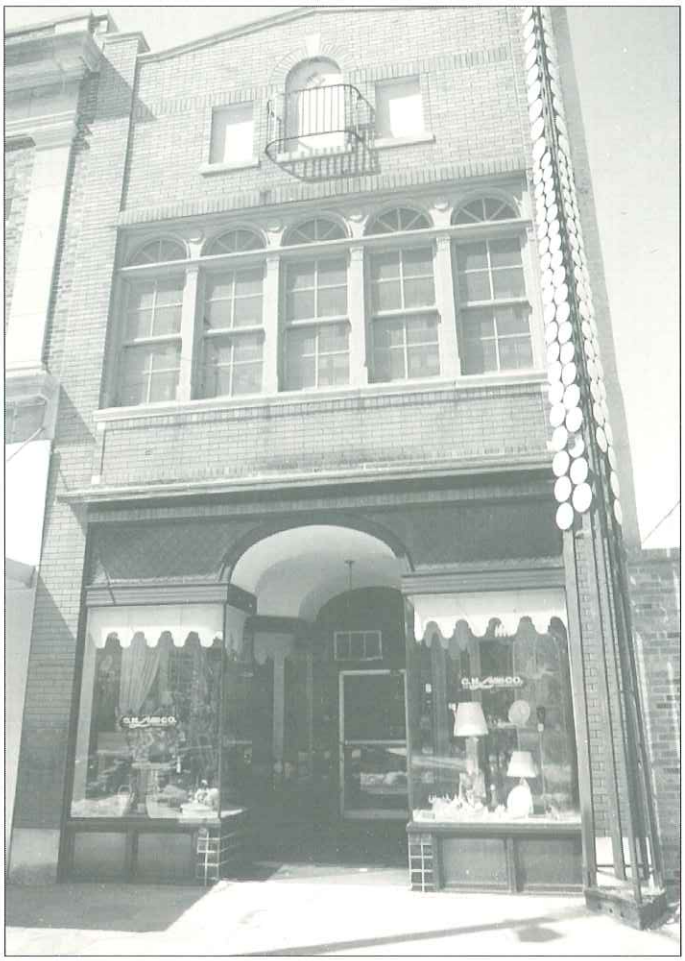
Geo. L. Mesker & Co. offered both cast-iron and steel structural systems. The company's 1905 catalog, which included these steel beams, noted, "In store fronts where intermediate columns are not wanted, or the distance between supports is too great to permit of the use of cast iron lintels, we furnish steel beam girders."

extremely large pieces of plate glass by the late-eighteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, large panes of French plate glass were being imported into eastern ports, just as the railroad was uniting American markets. Surprisingly large pieces of plate glass were used in mid-nineteenth-century storefronts. From the earliest days of cast-iron columns, merchants willingly spent extra effort and money to have the largest display window possible. Small-paned windows were not a desirable display window aesthetic to the mid-nineteenth century merchant; small-paned windows were viewed as old-fashioned or more suitable for residential use. Only in the design of the transom sash was it acceptable to use a multi-pane sash.

Towards the end of the era of cast-iron construction it was possible to find storefront designs that emulated the design and appearance of cast iron, but were made totally of wood. Throughout the nineteenth century, wooden storefronts had been used in rural or isolated frame structures, but they made a comeback on Main Street when steel-beam structural systems made it possible for the storefront to be a totally nonstructural element. The wooden shopfronts of the early twentieth century were generally quite simple in their detailing and virtually always had painted finishes.

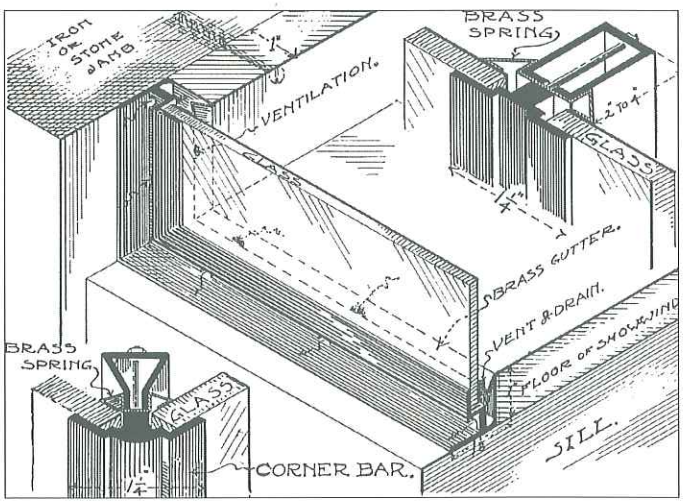
Prism Glass Era, Metal Sash, and Arcaded Fronts, 1900-1930

Changing technologies in metal and glass in the 1880s and 1890s led to a new type of storefront construction that dominated the early years of the twentieth century. Chicago entrepreneurs and a University of Illinois architect played key roles in those innovations. From a structural standpoint, the widespread availability of steel (instead of cast iron) meant that the storefront opening could be twenty to thirty feet wide with no intervening columns. Steel columns were relatively small (often as little as six inches in diameter) and could be completely enclosed behind the storefront enclosure.



Arcade storefronts, like this one in Freeport, were popular during the period 1910 to 1930. This building featured a vaulted ceiling in the recessed entryway, which incorporated a side-door entrance to the upper floor. Opaque glass below the large display windows allowed light into the basement.

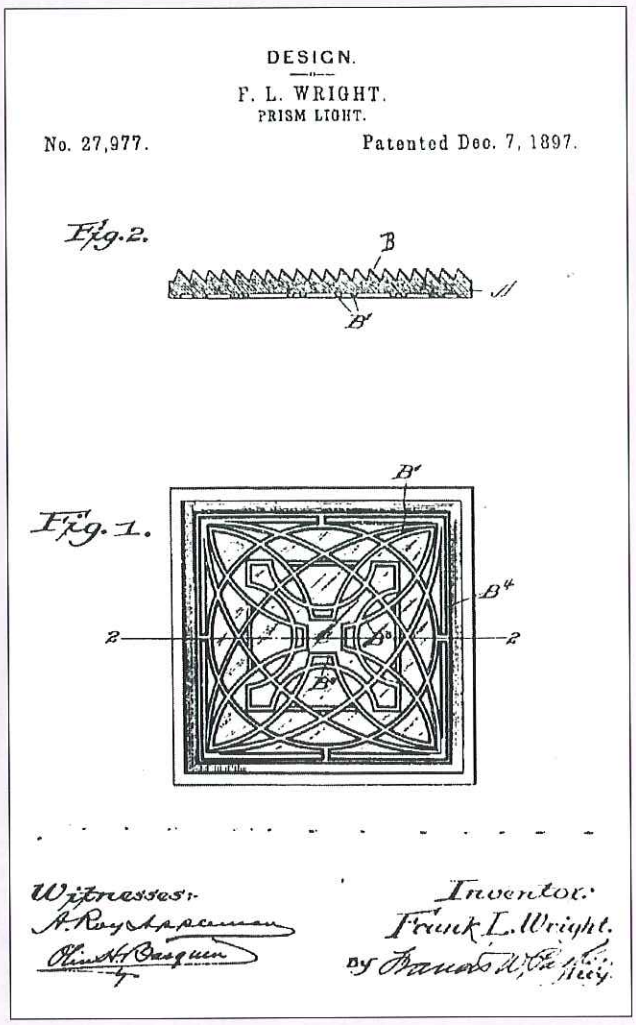
Francis Plym's drawing for the narrow metal sash system that permitted larger display windows was signed: "Original drawings of the first Kawneer Store Front Construction. Sketched by myself. Francis Plym. Kansas City, Mo. 1905."



With the structural system no longer a component of the storefront, the enclosure system could include large areas of display windows. The only limit to the design was a system to hold the glazing. During most of the nineteenth century, glass was mounted in a wood frame—the window sash. At the dawn of the new century, innovative metal-forming technology allowed the production of metal sash systems that were much narrower and stronger than their wooden predecessors. There were many different patented systems, but one of the most popular enduring systems was made by the Kawneer Company. The company was founded in 1906 by Francis Plym, an 1897 graduate in architecture at the University of Illinois. Plym's system used brass bars, copper-clad sash coverings, and rubber setting gaskets. The thin metal sash, typically no larger than two inches, could hold large sheets of plate glass. For the storefront designer, this allowed for the largest possible window area for every store.

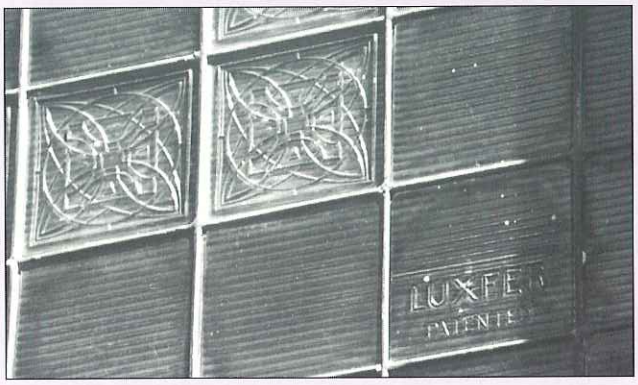
The Kawneer Company and its competitors were tremendously successful in the marketplace. The metal sash system was generally installed on a low bulkhead

Frank Lloyd Wright Design Discovered on Main Street



The headline above could be used in hundreds of towns across America, but one has to know what to look for and where. Frank Lloyd Wright designed many buildings—all well-known—but he also designed architectural products that were used in buildings other than his own. One of his products can be found on America's Main Streets.

In 1897 Wright designed a series of ornamental patterns for the outside surface of prism-glass tiles. The prism-glass tiles, usually four inches square, were set in frames of zinc or lead came that were made into panels for storefront transoms.



Most of the prism-glass tiles have a smooth exterior with the prism shape on the interior. Tiles with an exterior pattern were used to create an overall border effect on each panel. Frank Lloyd Wright designed the border tiles that were manufactured by the Luxfer Prism Glass Company between 1897 and 1930 and distributed nationwide through glass and storefront companies. The Wright-designed tile can still be found on thousands of buildings throughout the country.

panel that could be faced with a variety of materials; natural stone was a popular choice. To further increase the amount of display area, store designers and architects created deep display windows with metal sashes that stepped back from the street front. The arcaded storefront, found in a variety of plans, increased display window areas and provided additional strength to the storefront by exploiting geometry. Just as a folded piece of paper can be made to stand on end, a storefront with a series of "glass" folds had increased stability.

At the same time that the metal storefront system was gaining widespread acceptance, a major innovation in glazing was developed in Illinois. In 1897 a group of Chicago inventors and investors founded the American Luxfer Prism Glass Company, which developed a special glass tile that was used in transoms. Prism-glass tile diffused sunlight into the interior of store spaces to take maximum advantage of the storefront's sunlit area, an important consideration in an era before widespread use of electric lighting. Prism-glass transoms could be retrofitted into older sash styles, but they were generally incorporated into the metal sash of completely new storefronts. Just as the cast-iron structure system had replaced the Greek Revival, the new metal sash and prism-glass transom storefront replaced the cast-iron system.

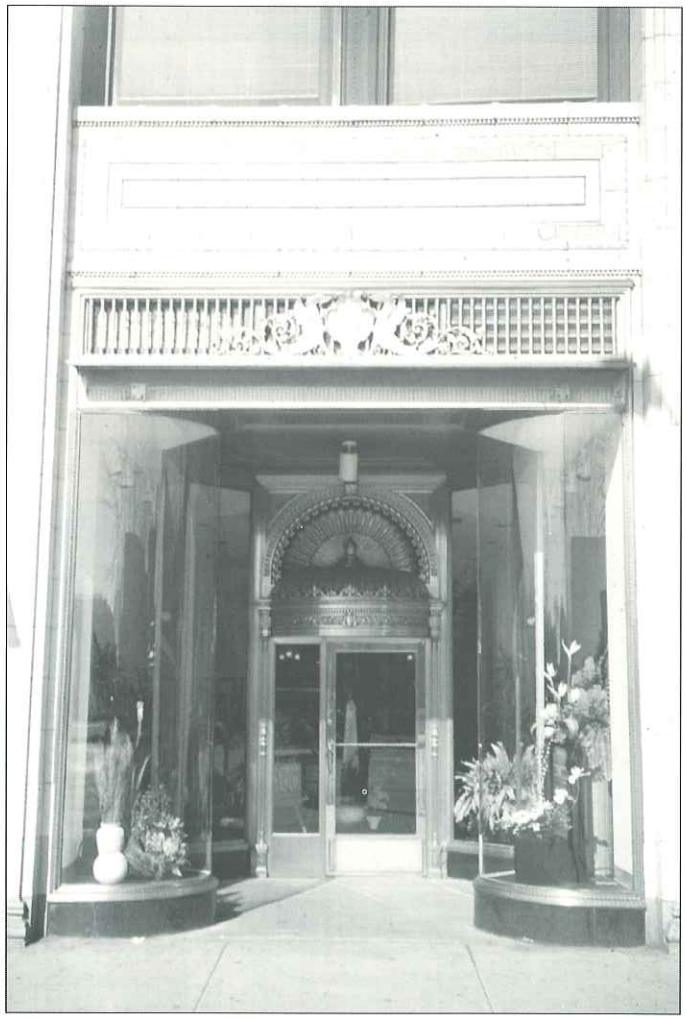
Eclectic Revivals, 1910-1930

In the early years of the twentieth century, there was great interest in architectural motifs based upon various European cultures and eras. Sometimes the motifs were used in a manner that architects thought was a faithful replication of the originals, but more often than not Americanized versions of these motifs were popularized. These architectural motifs were particularly common in residential architecture but were also used in commercial construction.

Howard Van Doren Shaw's design for the Lake Forest Market Square in 1916 is one of the finest surviving examples of revival style storefronts in Illinois. Incorporating

Market Square in Lake Forest was architect Howard Van Doren Shaw's make-over of the traditional downtown. Shaw's use of small-pane window sash and the bowfront was a conscious attempt to break from the convention of larger plate glass.

This storefront on the Santa Fe Building in Chicago features particularly elaborate metal ornament. The custom metal work was created by Winslow Bros. Metal Works of Chicago. The building was designed by D. H. Burnham and Co. in 1904.



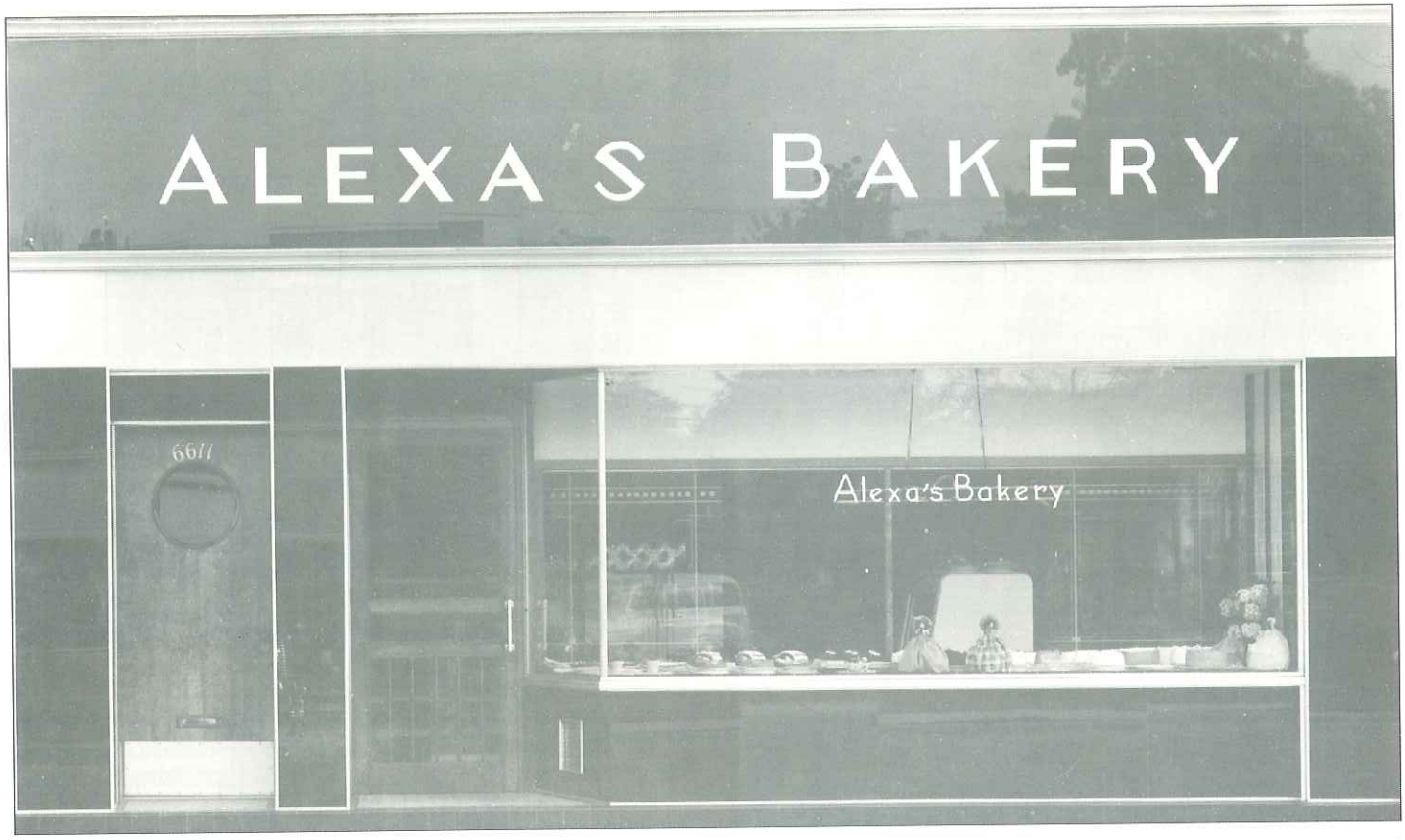
elements of Tudor, Gothic, Romanesque, and French Chateau styles into the upper building facades, the storefronts utilize metal sashes of varied proportions and glazing patterns to fit the overall architectural theme. Shaw's design, which included one bowfront display window and small-pane muntin sash in all of the windows, defied storefront conventions. Earlier storefront designers had sought to maximize the display window with unimpeded sight lines. Shaw's use of small-pane sash was purely for architectural effect, and it promoted small scale and intimacy over expansive vistas.

Eclectic revival-style commercial architecture is uncommon in Illinois, and Shaw's Market Square stands out among the best. Revival-style storefronts did not end with the 1920s, but surviving examples from the era certainly deserve historical consideration. The restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1930s sparked a national interest in residential architecture that is broadly defined as Colonial Revival. Occasionally, storefronts were designed using these motifs, with examples dating from the 1930s to the present day.

Another notable variation in eclectic revival storefronts was the use of ornamental metal sash and surrounds. These were particularly popular for urban storefronts whose smooth stone walls contrasted with the decorative metal. Cast iron, cast bronze, and even stamped sheet metal were fabricated as ornamental embellishment to metal sash systems. In the most elaborate of these, the cast facing panel would include the sash, awning hoods, entry doors, and cast-bronze sign letters.

Art Deco and Art Moderne

The Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratif of 1925 and the subsequent development of the International style of architecture profoundly influenced storefront design. At the end of the 1920s this new European aesthetic was adopted by American architects, particularly for storefront



The Alexa's Bakery shopfront was renovated in the popular Art Moderne style about 1935. The shopfront was covered in structural glass marketed under two different names—Carrara glass or Vitrolite. The polished glass panels were fitted together for a seamless effect. Two other innovations are evident—display windows enclosed in aluminum sash and a neon sign.

design. The Chicago Century of Progress Exhibition of 1933-34 greatly accelerated the popular interest in this new style of architecture, and merchants across the state and nation responded with new designs. One particular benchmark was a 1935 design contest—Modernize Main Street—sponsored by *Architectural Record* magazine. American architectural, construction, and retail industries all celebrated this new style of architecture as an essential marketing tool for the contemporary shopkeeper.

The Art Deco and Art Moderne storefronts were unlike

Left: Violet Zaczek's Tavern (location unknown), with its porcelain enamel facade, features another new material of the 1930s—glass block. Some businesses preferred glass block over plate glass because it permitted light but obscured the view. Right: The porcelain enamel storefront of the Kaveneys drug store in Wilmington is one of the best preserved of its kind in Illinois. Smooth surfaces, curved corners, and horizontal banding create the streamlined appearance of the Art Moderne style. The awning is carefully integrated into a small hood above the windows, and the sign letters are baked into the porcelain enamel panels.

Neon Signs

In 1915 French inventor Georges Claude patented a unique lighting system we now know as the neon tube. His company, Claude Neon, supplied the world with this new product. In 1923 America got its first neon sign when a Los Angeles Packard dealer purchased a Claude Neon sign during a trip to Paris. The neon sign business exploded onto the American commercial landscape during the 1930s as neon signs became a popular method for business owners to get a marketing boost without totally renovating their buildings. The aesthetics of the neon sign paralleled the popular interest in the Art Deco and Art Moderne design motifs. On many Main Streets, this new style of sign was displayed prominently on nineteenth-century masonry building fronts.

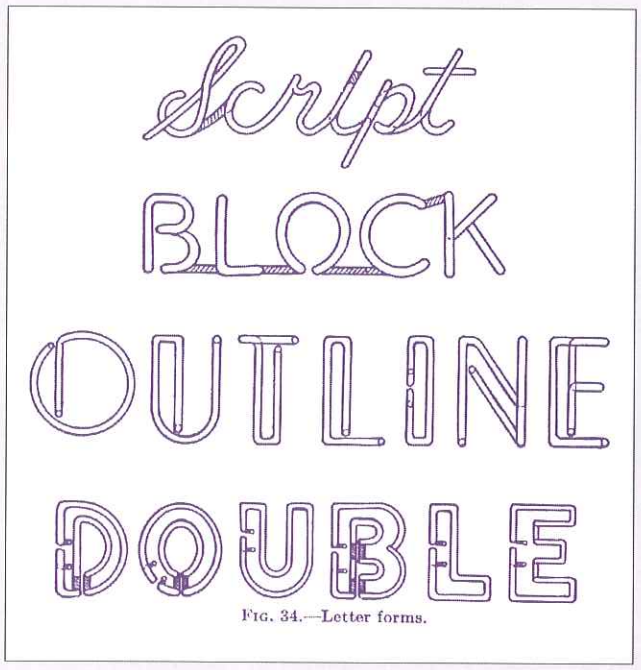


FIG. 34.—Letter forms.

From Neon Signs: Manufacture-Installation-Maintenance, *1935*

any previous designs. The new architectural styles emphasized large flat surfaces, with the display window and the surrounding surface an organized composition independent of any structural expression. The materials of this new aesthetic also differed substantially from previous eras. Two popular materials were structural glass and porcelain enamel panels. Both were fabricated in flat sheets, with a typical dimension of two feet by two feet. These smooth flat surfaces were accented by bold sign letters carefully placed over the store windows. The transom window was no longer necessary. Another new material of this era was aluminum window glazing. The popularity of "white metals"—aluminum, chrome, and "Monel" (an alloy of nickel and steel)—marked a change from the use of bronze and brass. Art Deco design motifs such as stairsteps and zigzags were often incorporated into metal hardware and glazing systems. Art Moderne designs achieved an aerodynamic effect with smooth rounded shapes known as streamlining.

This porcelain enamel storefront (location unknown) shows the possibilities of form that could be achieved with the thin applied panels. The oval is repeated in the entry door, and the elegant display window and carefully composed sign letters add to the streamlined appearance.

A number of new building technologies paralleled the emergence of this totally new aesthetic of building construction. The most notable were two innovations in electric lighting—the fluorescent light and the neon tube. Fluorescent lighting and general improvements in incandescent lighting made it possible to build larger store buildings that were not dependent upon natural light. The tall front windows, transom windows, and prism glass, all of which were meant to allow natural light into the interior of the store, were obsolete. The transom area in particular was transformed from a window to a sign background.

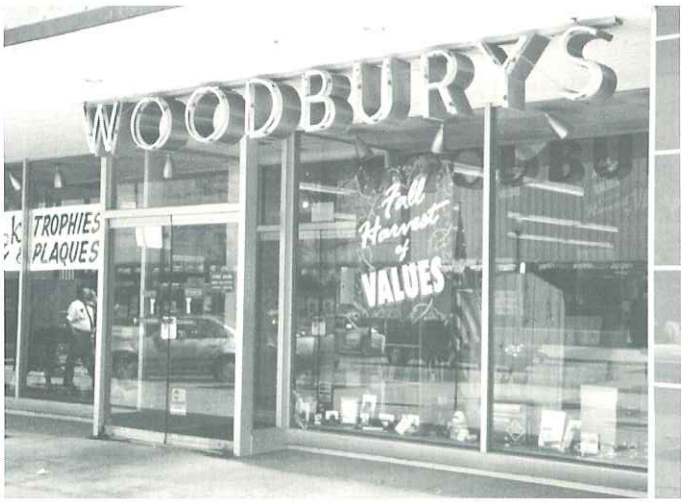
The materials and aesthetic of this new era were designed in a manner that could be easily adapted to existing buildings with minimal changes to the building's structural system. With their relatively thin profiles, structural glass or porcelain enamel panels could be attached over an existing brick wall, transforming an entire facade as well as the storefront area. The aesthetic achievement, the ease of construction, and the marketing push that resulted from this make-over made it one of the most successful architectural transformations in the history of American commercial architecture. Art Deco and Art Moderne storefronts from the 1930s to the 1950s can be found on virtually every Main Street in Illinois.

Kawneer Co. published this drawing in its folio Shopfronts of Tomorrow *(1946), which promoted the open-front storefront design that would dominate storefront architecture for two decades. The aluminum framing system allowed maximum window display area.*

The Open Front

Following World War II, the design of storefronts followed many of the construction trends begun during the 1930s, but with more emphasis on the display window and less on the surrounding frame. The maximum area of display window space is a characteristic of the "open front." Noteworthy variations in the display window design included recessed bulkheads under the display window to give them a "floating" appearance. It was also common for the display windows to be canted slightly from the sidewalk front, to lead the pedestrian towards the store entry. Virtually all such storefront glazing was constructed of aluminum with a mill finish, the basic gray color of aluminum. Stacked brick or small tile was often used for bulkhead panels and sidewalls, and terrazzo often covered entrance floors. Signs were sometimes designed to appear as "floating panels" in square or irregular shapes to contrast with the rectilinear geometry of the architectural elements.

The Woodbury's open storefront in Danville is constructed of mill-finished aluminum. The front door projects in front of the display windows, and neon sign letters are suspended from a smooth projecting canopy.



Limestone, structural glass, and glass block are combined in this modern open-front design. The sinuous S *of the neon lettering unites the facade.*

In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s storefront design emphasized renovation schemes that covered the entire building facade in a variety of materials promoted especially for that use. If the owner did not use the upper floors, the facade might be entirely covered. Flat metal facing systems were developed, with the most austere of these a series of simple metal panels or vertically seamed strips. More elaborate schemes used tile, porcelain enamel panels, and even natural stone. The large flat panel was an ideal location for large sign letters, which effectively converted the facade into a large signboard. Perforated grills that could cover entire buildings were marketed in the 1950s and 60s. The grills, which created a monolithic appearance, were popular for buildings with offices on upper floors because light and air could pass through the perforations.

Preservation and Restoration

Since the 1970s there has been a growing interest in historic preservation and the inherent qualities of design and materials found in older commercial districts. Merchants of every era have used their storefronts as a part of their commercial identity, and contemporary merchants are doing so while using historic preservation principles to

guide their selection of a design. Where the historically or architecturally significant storefront materials survive from an earlier generation, these should be preserved and supplemented by appropriate contemporary signs and lighting. When no historically significant materials survive, store owners and their architects have a variety of choices. They may choose to undertake accurate reconstruction of earlier storefront designs, which should be guided by archival knowledge of the earlier design for the particular building. Owners and architects might also choose contemporary designs based upon the proportions and materials of the past.

The design of storefronts offers a capsulized version of the changing architectural fashions of American commercial architecture. Shopkeepers and commercial building owners have a long history of interest in design innovations and changing architectural expressions. By understanding that history, those interested in the built environment can make informed decisions about incorporating contemporary uses into historic buildings. American commercial architecture has been very quick to adapt to new directions in merchandising. Historic preservation is a modern method of adaptation, and one that keeps a culture in touch with its heritage.

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The loss of character on Illinois' Main Streets is typified by this storefront, which presents a bland—if not hostile—face to the street.

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

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Illinois Main Street

Illinois communities are working to preserve their downtowns and recapture downtown's important "sense of place" through Illinois Main Street, a preservation-based economic development program of the Illinois lieutenant governor. Illinois Main Street is modeled after a program developed for the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Main Street Center. Illinois Main Street helps communities:

Build an effective volunteer-driven downtown management organization guided by professional staff and supported by the public and private sectors.

Enhance the design and appearance of downtown through historic preservation.

Create a unified, quality image and develop promotion strategies that bring people downtown.

Retain and strengthen existing downtown businesses, recruit appropriate new businesses, and develop appropriate economic restructuring strategies to sustain the economic vitality of downtown.

Illinois Main Street provides training and technical assistance to participating communities through on-site consulting visits and regional and statewide workshops. Design services are provided in cooperation with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. Assistance is offered to Main Street businesses in cooperation with the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, Small Business Development Center Network. Towns pay no participation fee for consulting services but are responsible for the financial support of their local programs.

For additional information, write Illinois Main Street, 612 Stratton Building, Springfield, IL 62706, or phone 217-524-6869.

This proposed design for a commercial building in Tuscola, created by Ilinois Main Street designer Bryan Lijewski, would restore character and symmetry to a nineteenth-century storefront in Tuscola.

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