

Seaton Town Centre Conservation Area – Shopfronts Practice Notes

1. Introduction

These notes on shopfronts are published to encourage applicants to produce more attractive designs and do not remove the need for skilled architectural advice. The preservation and enhancement of elements of Seaton's Victorian era is of vital importance to the character of the town and its continued prosperity. Shops and shopfronts are significant features in the town centre. Individually many are small units but together they create a character which has a major impact on the centre. A number of shopfronts survive from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Every building, whether listed or not, has a contribution to make to the character of the street and of the town centre. Proposals affecting buildings in the town centre will be judged on the positive contribution they make to the protection and enhancement of the area. Where the opportunity arises improvements to any previous unsympathetic alterations will be sought. The notes were adopted as supplementary planning guidance by East Devon District Council, following public consultation, on 1st February 2001. The policies have been updated in this version of the Practice Notes to reflect the policies of the 2003 Revised Deposit Local Plan.

2. Historic Shopfronts

Some shopfronts in listed buildings are of architectural and historic interest in their own right and every effort must be made to preserve them intact.



A traditional shopfront

3. Proposals for New Shopfronts

Before the renewal of a shopfront is proposed consideration should be given to the quality of the old front and the possibility of restoring it. Many of Seaton's traditional shopfronts date from the

later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century and were inserted into much older buildings. They are nevertheless of considerable interest and relate well to the older structure. When replacing or restoring a traditional shopfront the details should be determined as far as possible by the evidence of the building itself and of any original joinery and features. In many cases where shopfronts have been altered or destroyed some original features remain and these should be maintained and restored and missing parts reconstructed and incorporated into the new design.

4. The building in the Street Scene



Where a new shopfront is required the process of design should begin with a visual assessment of the street scene and the hierarchy” of buildings- a ranking of greater or lesser importance in the scene. A building may be grand and important” by virtue of its size, use and design, or humble”- smaller, less formal or imposing. It is generally a mistake to upset this hierarchy and the design of a new shopfront should reflect a building’s position. The second stage is to consider the individual building, its general shape and proportions. Materials, window shape, colour, entrance points and overall character should all be noted. Finally, looking closely at building, finer details and decorative features worthy of retention will be appreciated.

The building should provide interest and harmony at each stage. The process of attracting the customer should flow smoothly through without either dullness or jarring. A good shopfront will not only satisfy the shopkeepers aims but will also enhance the street scene. Texture and colour of materials are important in this respect and the general tendency to try to shout more loudly than the neighbours only results in everyone shouting and no one person being heard at all.

5. The Need to Modify Standard Designs

Some national firms wishing to present a corporate image propose a standardised design for shopfronts, regardless of their location. Such designs will rarely be able to harmonise properly with individual buildings and Seaton's character without appropriate modification.

6. Consider the Building as a whole



The fascia runs across the facades of two buildings ignoring the division between them and their different character and place in the character of the street scene

The whole front elevation of the building should be included in the design. In particular a new shopfront must be related to the upper floors of the building and the uncomfortable impression of a heavy upper structure resting on a flimsy sheet of glass avoided. A display window framed by a visually robust surround will give the appearance of firm support to the upper floors and appears structurally logical. The use of a cornice or stringcourse above a shopfront can provide a valuable break between the shopfront and the building façade above. However, unnecessarily deep fascias covering architectural details or the sills/part of the first floor windows can visually slice a building in two and mar the street scene. A new shopfront should respect the scale, design, materials and colours of the building above although not necessarily the style. Most buildings into which a new shopfront is to be inserted are built of matt and non-reflective materials.

7. Maintain a Vertical Emphasis



The pilaster and scroll bracket gives framing and strong support to the upper floors

The town centre is characterised by two and three storey buildings with narrow frontages, usually with tall, narrow sliding sash windows, and this gives a strong vertical emphasis in design. Shopfronts of traditional design harmonise with this verticality with columns or pilasters at the sides, sub-divided windows and often a recessed doorway. Modern shopfronts, often with a single large sheet of plate glass in a slender, visually weak surround and an excessively deep fascia, have a horizontal emphasis which can destroy the character of a street.

If a shop occupies the ground floor of two or more buildings a continuous fascia running across the facades of all the buildings, regardless of architectural detail and decoration, will not be acceptable. It is more important for a fascia to be related to the building in which it is set than to line up with those on neighbouring shops. The cheerful irregularity of an old established shopping street is preferable to an over zealously planned uniformity.

8. Maintain Interesting Detail



A modern shopfront, respecting tradition and proportions, the tiled roof above the projecting fascia creates a different character

As shopfronts are available for close scrutiny, design and detailing are of great importance. Modern shopfronts can be simple and unfussy but should not be dull. Good design can be smart, elegant or even witty and should enhance its surroundings. Any existing details should be incorporated into the design and careful use of new ornamentation and detailing can add interest.

9. The Traditional Shopfront



A traditional shopfront, the later replacement door has not respected the symmetry of the overall composition.

The first shops were open stalls built into the ground floors of buildings. By the end of the seventeenth century shops in towns were enclosing the open area above the stall with a glazed screen, windows and door. This pattern of stall riser, windows, door and fascia above formed the basis of shopfront design in the 18th and 19th century with designs being gradually refined and elaborated. Later in the 19th century the elements of the shopfront become heavier and more ornate. Pattern books for shopfronts were available from the end of the 18th century and the task of the local joiner was to modify these, often grander designs, to suit the local site. With new developments in the manufacture of glass, larger and larger panes were used until the plate glass windows of this century were received.

A traditional shopfront gives strong visual framing to the window and visual support to the upper floors. Ornamental detailing of the pilasters, corbelling, stall riser and glazing bars provide visual interest and depth to attract the eye and discourage attention from wandering. The angled fascia directs its message downwards towards the onlooker with the lettering seen free from perspective distortion. The stall riser raises the display to a convenient level for inspection and protects the base of the window from damage. The whole design holds the eye within a strong frame leading to the recessed door with its invitation to enter.

In a modern shopfront the materials colouring and character are often at odds with the traditional building above. The slender, visually weak, surround has little effectiveness in framing” the opening. The flat fascia misdirects its message to a point above the observer’s head can be dull and bland. The hard, mechanical, glossy materials are out of place against the mellow, hand-wrought traditional materials of the older building. Whilst the traditional shopfront is interesting in its own right, the poor modern” example is often of no particular interest in itself.

10. Sun blinds and Canopies



A traditional retractable blind on a butchers in Queen Street

Retractable canvas canopies such as those that are traditionally placed over butcher’s or newsagent’s display windows serve a purpose, and are perfectly acceptable, often complementing a building and adding to the attractiveness of a shopping street.

On the other hand, a clutter of unnecessary sun blinds or canopies, whose sole purpose is to advertise the premises or promote particular branded goods, can detract enormously from both the character of individual buildings and the locality. Plastic or non-retractable examples look particularly out of place.

11. Mosaic Thresholds

A special, locally distinct feature, found at the entrance to a number of the shops in the town centre are the mosaic thresholds. Their origins are not entirely clear, one suggestion is that the work was undertaken by Polish prisoners of war whilst interned at Blue Waters camp during the Second World War. Another suggestion is that the fine quality work was carried out by Italian specialist workmen employed in the area. There are four examples in the town centre which are illustrated below. Although the traders and original users may have changed they provide a link with earlier uses and are examples of craftsmanship worthy of preserving.



The shopfront (left) was installed in 192? by Pinney and Sons (Sidmouth)

The entrance has a barrel vaulted mirrored roof

12. Illustrations of Good and Bad Practice



13. East Devon Local Plan Policies

Key policies include

D7- Shopfronts

D8- Applications for Display of Advertisements

D9- Advertisements within Areas of Special Control of Advertisements and Advance Advertisement Signs

EN16- Preservation and Enhancement of Conservation Areas

14. Statutory Approvals and Consents

Planning Permission

New shopfronts, or alterations to existing ones, and changes to the external appearance of a building require planning permission.

Listed Building Consent

Listed Building Consent is required for alterations (however minor) which affect the character of a listed building.

Advertisement Control

Certain types of non-illuminated advertisements are regarded as having deemed consent depending on the type of premises and subject to restrictions of size, position and height above ground level. These may be displayed without reference to the Local Planning Authority although they can be challenged on grounds of amenity or highway safety. Information on the classes of deemed consent can be obtained from the District Council Environment Directorate.

Food Hygiene Regulations

Where proposals affect any food premises, applicants may wish to consult with the Local Environmental Health Inspector in the District Council Communities Directorate who will advise on the appropriate food hygiene regulations.

Offices and Shops Act

Standards are laid down under this Act for natural lighting and ventilation. The Local Environmental Health Officer will advise on these requirements.

15. Glossary

Cornice - a projecting ornamental moulding along the top of a building, wall, etc. finishing or crowning it

String course - a continuous projecting horizontal band set in the surface of a wall and usually moulded

Fascia - the wide board over a shopfront, carrying the name

Sash window - a window formed with sashes i.e. sliding glazed frames running in vertical grooves

Column - an upright shaft, generally rectangular or round in plan and usually tapering

Pilaster - a shallow pier or rectangular column projecting only slightly from a wall and in classical architecture, conforming with one of the orders

Scroll Bracket - an ornament in the form of a scroll of paper partly rolled

Stall riser - the vertical surface of polished granite, armour plate glass, tile or wood, marble etc. from the pavement to the sill of the glazed portion of the window.

Corbelling - projecting blocks, usually of stone, supporting a beam or other horizontal member.