



City of Chicago
Mayor Brandon Johnson

DESIGN GUIDELINES: **Ground Floor Commercial**

Department of Planning and Development
Ciere Boatright, Commissioner
City Hall Room 1000
121 N. La Salle St.
Chicago, IL 60602

Chicago Plan Commission
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01

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

The purpose of these design guidelines is to provide best practices and design inspiration for ground floor storefronts along Chicago's commercial corridors. The guidelines offer suggestions on how to renovate existing storefronts or design new construction which complements existing commercial corridors, and promotes renewed vibrancy in Chicago's neighborhoods.

APPLICATION

This document does not modify any land uses, policies, project review processes, or ordinances. Projects must comply with current regulations, which include the [Chicago Zoning Ordinance](#), [Construction Codes](#), and applicable review processes.

These guidelines are a resource for commercial ground floor storefronts, including the renovation of existing buildings and new construction on commercial corridors. They build upon Chicago's adopted [Neighborhood Design Guidelines](#), which provide high level urban design guidance that is flexible enough to apply in any Chicago neighborhood or context. This document, while not exhaustive, contains best practices and design inspiration specific to ground floor storefronts which have unique challenges in an urban context.

GUIDELINES STRUCTURE

This document includes two sections of guidelines and a series of case studies. Most guidelines apply to new construction and renovations, exceptions are noted where applicable.

1. SITE DESIGN

Addresses setback zones, landscape design, and building entry orientation.

2. FAÇADE DESIGN

Includes recommended approaches for selecting materials, windows, doors, and lighting that is visible from the street.

3. CASE STUDIES

Built projects that illustrate best practices described in the guidelines.





02

GUIDELINES

SITE DESIGN

1.0 URBAN LANDSCAPE

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Thoughtful landscape design can support business owners, customers, and others on the street by creating attractive and functional spaces. When designing a space, consider the natural systems and features of the site and its surroundings.

1.1 Enhance the site within the property boundary with amenities such as planters, seating, bike racks, special paving, shade structures, and art.

1.2 Consider flexible landscape options such as durable planters or planter boxes to add greenery when space is limited.

1.3 Landscape elements should not block access or visibility to building entrances or public sidewalks. Placing elements in the public parkway will require a permit and additional City review. Additional information here: [Landscape Ordinance](#)

PROPERTY LINE
PUBLIC SIDEWALK
(6' MIN. WIDTH)
PRIVATE PROPERTY

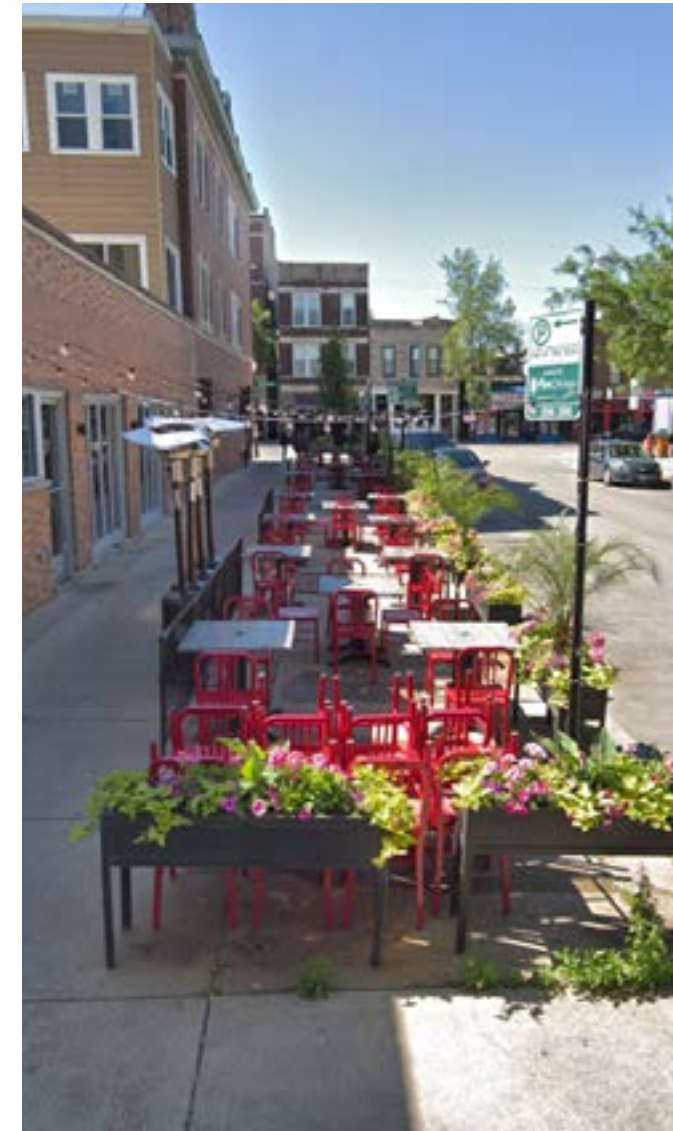
1.4 Consider adding a rooftop amenity space which could be utilized as open space for building users, a green roof which supports sustainability goals and increases the life of a roofing system when designed well.

1.5 Outdoor seating or dining should be located on private property if space allows. Seating or dining areas in the public parkway require a permit and additional City review. Additional information here: [Public Way Permit](#) | [Outdoor Dining Program](#)

1.6 Consider plant types, planting location, and maintenance requirements when selecting plants. Choosing low maintenance grasses, shrubs, and perennials can reduce future maintenance costs while being more sustainable. Consider designs that will allow for public access in all seasons, including winter.

1.7 Explore permeable pavement or artistic surface elements for a functional and visually appealing solution.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES:
[Chicago Zoning Ordinance \(Section 17-11\)](#) | [Landscape Ordinance](#) | [Public Way Permit](#) | [Outdoor Dining Program](#) | [Street & Site Plan Design Standards](#)



Outdoor seating and planters on the sidewalk still allow a clear path for pedestrians.



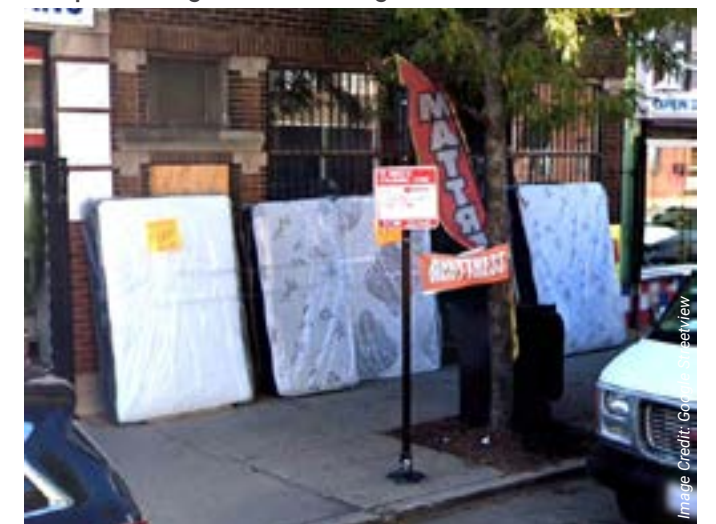
Shaded seating and dining space with planters on private property.



Aesthetically pleasing outdoor dining space on private property.



Dining space with planters on the public way complementing storefront design.



X Not Recommended: Cluttering the sidewalk with merchandise or other objects.

SITE DESIGN

2.0 ACCESS & ENTRIES

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Building entries should be accessible, visible, and functional to welcome customers and be a good neighbor.

2.1 Main building entries should be clearly visible from the street and accessible to pedestrians. Door swings into the public sidewalk are not permitted.

2.2 Recessed entries should be well-lit, welcoming, clean, free of debris and visible from the sidewalk.

2.3 If possible, main entries and routes from the public sidewalk should be accessed without stairs. When ramps are required, they should be made of durable, quality, and attractive materials and integrated into the overall design to provide intuitive and dignified entrances for people of all abilities. Accessible ramps and stairs should be interior to the building. Additional information here: [Chicago Accessibility Compliance](#)

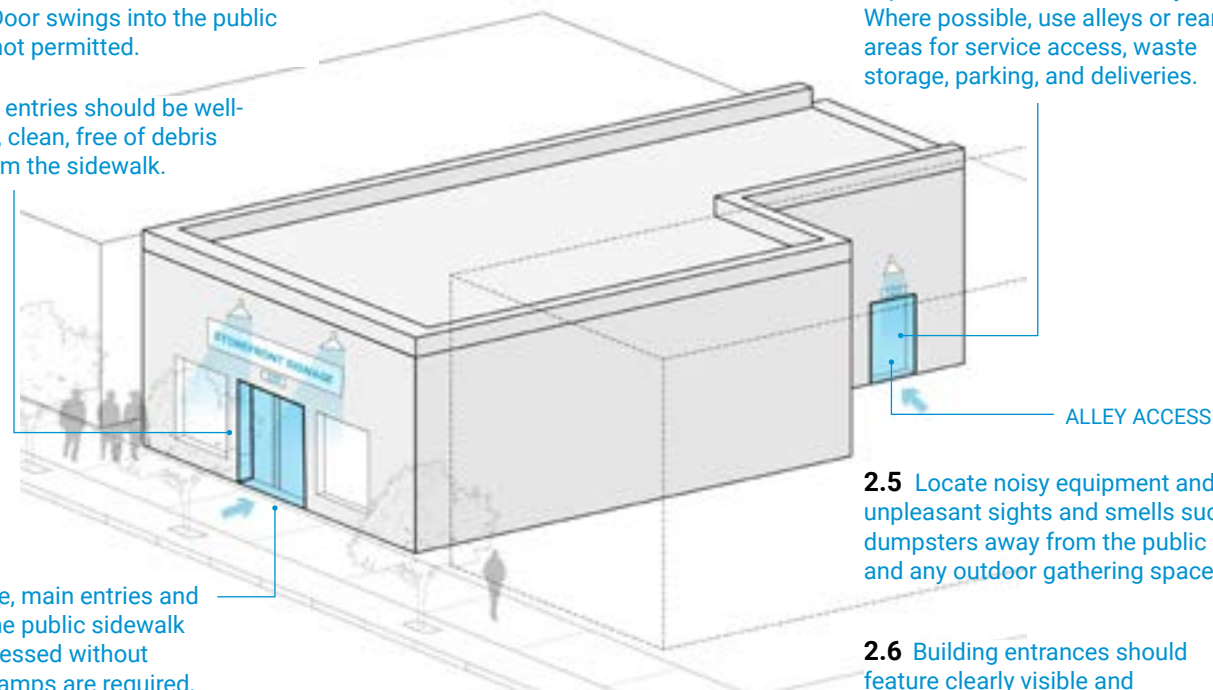
ADDITIONAL REFERENCE:
[Chicago Accessibility Compliance](#)

2.4 Service entries should be separated from the main entry. Where possible, use alleys or rear areas for service access, waste storage, parking, and deliveries.

2.5 Locate noisy equipment and unpleasant sights and smells such as dumpsters away from the public sidewalk and any outdoor gathering spaces.

2.6 Building entrances should feature clearly visible and well-maintained address signage.

2.7 Welcoming building entries enhance pedestrian comfort and safety. These can be achieved through various design elements, such as decorative lighting, contrasting paving materials or entry canopies to protect during inclement weather.



Clear and visible main storefront entrance.



Easily identifiable recessed entry.



Storefront entry within a mixed use development.



Accessible store entry ramp with planters located within the building setback.



Angled entry for a corner store allows convenient access from both directions.



X Not Recommended: Deeply recessed and dark entries that create an unwelcoming space.

FAÇADE DESIGN

3.0 FAÇADE PROPORTIONS & CONTEXT

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Façades that preserve and enhance the existing architectural and design legacy of the building contribute to the unique charm and character of the corridor, fostering a vibrant atmosphere that attracts small businesses and foot traffic.

3.1 Maximize views from the sidewalk into neat and attractive interior space. Storefront windows and doors should use transparent glass wherever possible from knee level to ceiling height. Visibility invites customers, creates a sense of safety, and allows natural light into the space. Properties on City of Chicago designated Pedestrian Streets have specific requirements about window transparency.



3.2 Maintain or restore existing or original façade proportions, including masonry rough openings, window and door sizes and locations, when possible.

SIGN BAND

LARGE CLEAR DISPLAY WINDOWS

3.3 The ground floor façade should have visual interest along its length. Windows and doors should be sized in proportion to the façade, and blank walls should be avoided. Murals, architectural details, and tall planters are common ways to make a blank wall more attractive.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE:
[City of Chicago Pedestrian Streets](#)



Windows complementing recessed entry design reflect building architecture.



Corner storefront with recessed entry.



Recessed entry with large display windows.



Mural activating a blank wall.



X Not Recommended: Permanently covering windows or reducing window size.

FAÇADE DESIGN

4.0 FAÇADE DETAILS & STYLES

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Maintaining, restoring, and selecting façade details in line with existing community design is an investment in the neighborhood, its history, and culture.



4.1 Consider the overall architectural style of the building. Materials and details should complement the original style of the building and highlight, rather than hide, its unique features. Additional information for Small Business Improvement Fund (SBIF) applicants can be found below.

4.2 Details to consider retaining or restoring may include original sign bands, storefront systems, sculptural elements, brick patterns, finishes like terra-cotta tile, window and door trim, window sills, existing masonry openings, and unique geometric features such as arches or columns. However, new doors, windows, and storefront systems within existing masonry openings is allowed. To retain building finishes, regularly clean, inspect, apply breathable sealers, and protect from outside elements with methods such as weather proofing.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE:

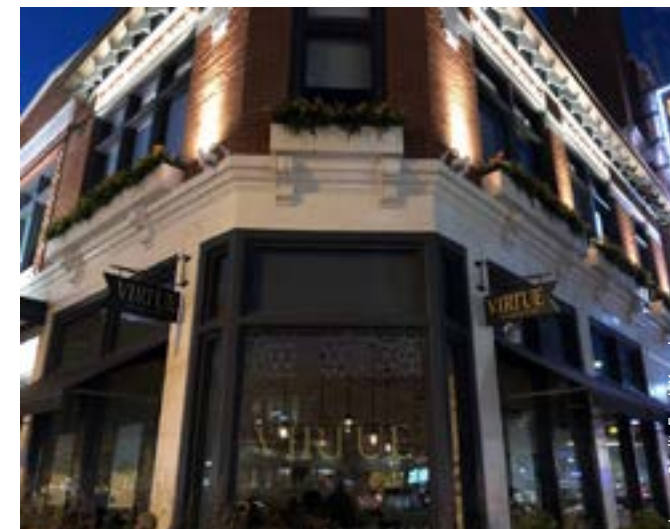
[Vintage Sign Ordinance \(Section 17-15-0600\)](#) [Small Business Improvement Fund \(SBIF\)](#) [City of Chicago Pedestrian Streets](#)



Classic storefront façade with transom windows.



Preserved architectural style and unique design.



Chicago red brick façade with traditional details emphasized with thoughtful lighting.



Chicago red brick with mural art activating a blank wall and restored original sign.



Corner entry with interesting architectural details and column.



X Not Recommended: Using materials that don't complement the architectural style and infilling the existing window openings.

FAÇADE DESIGN

5.0 FAÇADE MATERIALS

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Façade materials that are durable, attractive, and well maintained are an investment in the building, business, and neighborhood, and saves on future maintenance and repair costs.

Examples of façade materials

5.1 Publicly visible building materials must be high quality and sturdy for the outdoors. Examples include brick, stone, weather-treated wood, and durable architectural metal. Avoid materials such as Stucco, CMU and Exterior Insulation Finishing Systems (EIFS) since they do not withstand Chicago weather well.

5.2 Consider the context of the style and type of surrounding buildings when selecting complementary materials and finishes.

5.3 Retain, repair, and re-use existing high quality building materials, when possible.

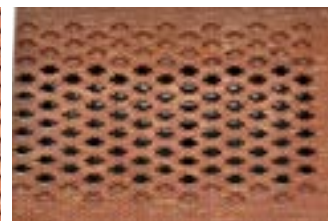
5.4 Invest in tuck-pointing and masonry repair of brick buildings instead of installing paneling over damaged walls.

5.5 While not recommended, when painting exterior brick surfaces, durable weather resistant paints should be used as directed. Avoid the use of non-durable or low-quality paint such as acrylic that can lead to quick deterioration and frequent need for repainting.

5.6 Consider using reclaimed materials such as steel, brick, stone or timber to build more sustainably and possibly save on cost.



Brick



Decorative brick pattering



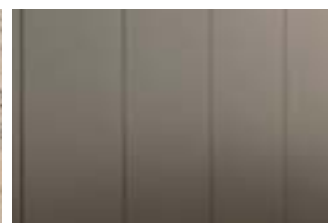
Terra-cotta



Concrete



Stone



Architectural metal panels



Painted brick and metal panel



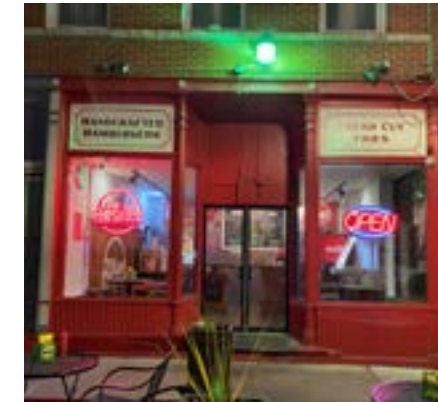
Terra-cotta



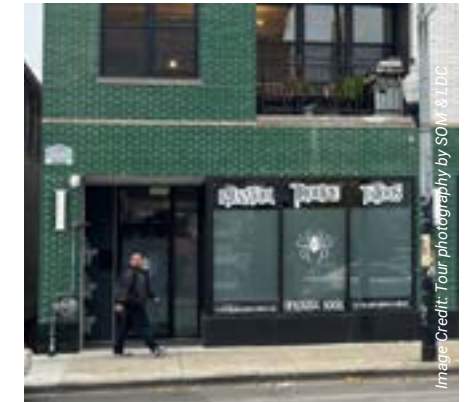
Multi-color brick



Aluminum paneling



Wood paneling



Glazed brick



Wood paneling



Brick & wood



Stone and tile



Textured panel



X Not Recommended: Mismatched use of brick, corrugated metal or wood siding over brick that reduces window size and may cause water damage.

FAÇADE DESIGN

6.0 DOORS

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Accessible and clearly identified entries welcome customers, promote energy efficiency and manage weather and security concerns. Entries must meet accessibility requirements.

6.1 Select glazed doors with panels and frames that are made of durable materials such as solid wood, iron, steel, and safety glass.

6.2 Select or retain doors with a complementary style to the building façade and consider the style of surrounding buildings.

6.3 Doors that allow visibility from the sidewalk into the commercial building are encouraged. If using a solid door, consider adding sidelites with safety glass for enhanced security and transparency.

6.4 Exterior doors should include sturdy frames with deadbolts and other high-quality hardware for safety.

6.5 Outward door swings must be placed within recessed entries to avoid conflicts with pedestrians. Consider retractable doors or garage-style doors to allow for fresh air and an additional outdoor connection on good weather days.

6.5 Security features such as shutters, vertical bars, and roll-down gates are discouraged. If these features are unavoidable, they should be mounted inside, removable during business hours, and allow clear views through the glass when closed. If they can't be mounted inside, they must be flush with the facade, designed attractively to complement the building's architecture, and open fully.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE:
[City of Chicago Accessibility Requirements](#)



Double door

Single door



Centered door with sidelites

Retractable or sliding door



Sliding door.



Doors fold to the side for air flow in good weather.



Double doors consisting of wood and small glass panels.



Single door with a sidelite.



Decorative security gates that open fully.



X Not Recommended: Fully opaque shutters.

FAÇADE DESIGN

7.0 WINDOWS

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Storefront windows allow natural light and visibility into a business, making your business eye catching and welcoming to potential customers.

7.1 General window character, including scale of glass panes, frame styles, and materials, should complement the rest of the façade design.

7.2 Keep visible indoor spaces neat and open. Placing plants, art, or products on display in the window can add privacy screening while still being attractive from the sidewalk.

7.3 75% of the window area should be uncovered and clear. Avoid blocking views through windows with temporary or permanent coverings, inward-facing stock shelves and refrigerators, signs, or black-out curtains that cover more than 25% of the window area.

7.4 When possible, use transparent and operable windows to optimize natural light, improve ventilation, enhance customer comfort, and increase your business' appeal.

7.5 Consider laminated, insulated (low-E) and shatter-resistant commercial window glass to reduce energy loss and enhance security.

7.6 Install bird-safe solutions such as window decals and patterns while maintaining transparency.

7.7 Distinct window characteristics, complementary trim colors, and unique concepts are encouraged.

7.8 Security features such as shutters, vertical bars, and roll-down gates are discouraged. If these features are unavoidable, they should be mounted inside, removable during business hours, and allow clear views through the glass when closed. If they can't be mounted inside, they must be flush with the façade, designed attractively to complement the building's architecture, and open fully.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE:

[American Bird Conservancy for more ways to prevent bird collisions](#) [Chicago Construction Codes](#)



Vertical bi-fold windows for better airflow in good weather.



Minimal window decals that permit views into the store.



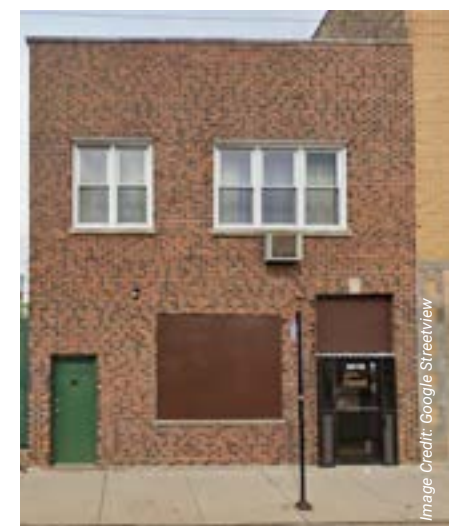
Frosted glass signage allowing visibility to storefront.



Interior mounted semi-transparent security shutters.



Large display windows and complementary sign styles.



X Not Recommended: Shrinking and boarding the windows with paint or wall material.

FAÇADE DESIGN

8.0 SIGNAGE

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

A well-designed sign is one of the most effective ways of attracting customers, branding your business, and complementing the character of the neighborhood.

8.1 While a variety of sign types and styles are allowed, they should be complementary to the general style and context of the building. High-quality, well-designed signs brand the business, integrate with the building design, and complement the character of the neighborhood.

8.2 Install permanent signs that are legible, clear, durable, and visible from the street, with minimal amount of text, and easy to read. Avoid signs that exceed 20% of the building facade or cover windows.

8.3 Awnings should be integrated with the proportions of the façade and historical period of the building and not obscure character features. Awnings must be a min. of 9' above the public sidewalk and be mounted in existing masonry openings.

8.4 Use materials that are weather-resistant, fade-resistant, durable, and easily cleaned and maintained. Materials may include polyester and acrylic for awnings, and acrylic, aluminum, PVC, vinyl, or metal, for permanent signs.

8.5 Signs and awnings on multi-storefront buildings should have consistent style, size, and placement.

8.6 Avoid LED and flashing signs. Avoid using temporary vinyl signs in place of permanent affixed signs and over-saturation of signs. Temporary signs should be replaced with permanent signage within 60 days per [sign permit requirements](#).

ADDITIONAL REFERENCE:

[Vintage Sign Ordinance \(Section 17-15-0600\)](#) [Sign Permit Requirements](#)



Awning sign



Blade sign



Sign over multi story commercial



Sign placement options



Consistent signage in multi-storefront building.



Simple and durable blade sign.



Painted sign.



Heritage neon signage (require additional permit review).



Channel letter signage.



X Not Recommended: Excessive use of signs or using canvas signs permanently.

FAÇADE DESIGN

9.0 EXTERIOR LIGHTING

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

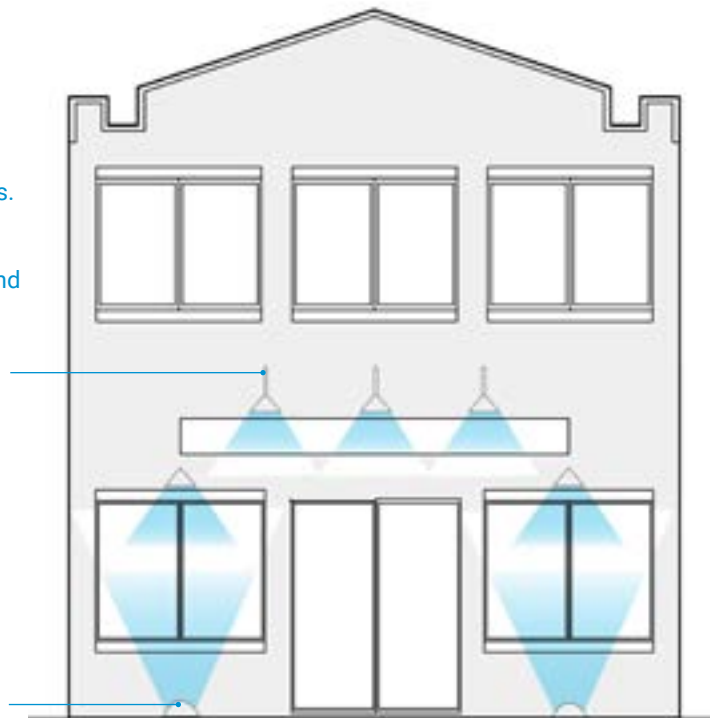
Storefront lighting promotes a sense of safety and security, creates an inviting atmosphere, showcases products and signage, and boosts visibility to attract customers.

9.1 Select durable and decorative lighting fixtures appropriate for commercial outdoor use.

9.2 Consider using different lighting types for different uses. Options include: goose-neck lights, wall washing lights, artistic lights, down-lighting, and sconces.

9.3 Provide exterior lighting adjacent to sidewalks to enhance storefront security and pedestrian safety.

9.4 Use minimal lighting such as up-lights or spotlights to accentuate architecture features, signage and merchandise displays.



9.5 Provide additional lighting at recessed entries, along accessible routes, and within building setbacks or landscaped areas.

9.6 Consider artistic lighting using colored lights, LED lights, or other custom lighting displays to add visual interest.

9.7 Flashing lights, animated lights, industrial wall pack lights, strobes, motion sensor lights, and excessively bright lights on commercial corridors are strongly discouraged and may be prohibited.

9.8 Creative, distinct lighting fixtures enhance neighborhood identity and add visual interest.



Goose-neck lighting to illuminate the sidewalk.



Wall wash light fixture to illuminate design elements.



Artistic light display with wall light.



Down-lighting used to accentuate the store sign.



Sconce light along storefront facade.



X Not Recommended: Excessively bright or strobing lights.



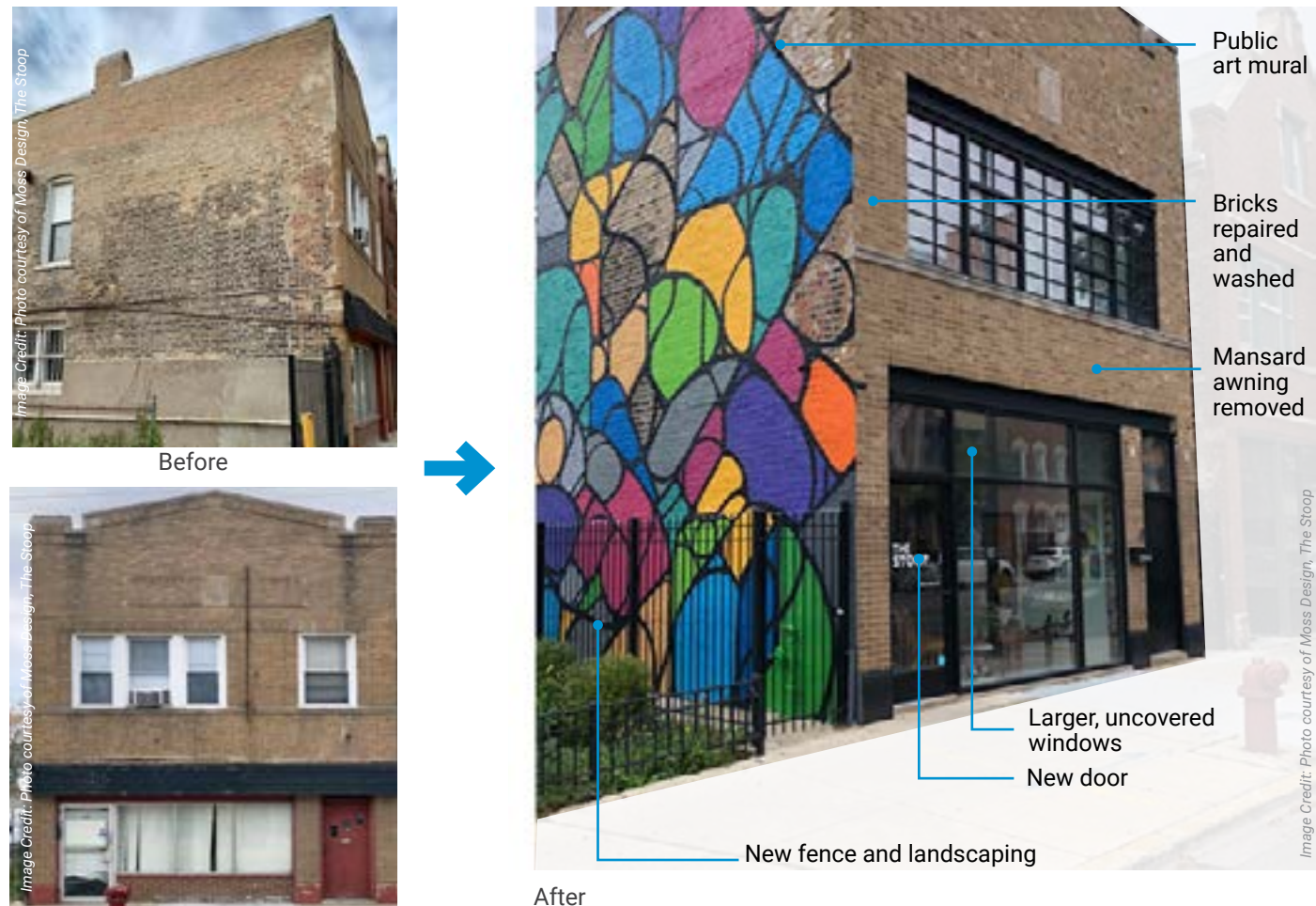
03

CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDIES

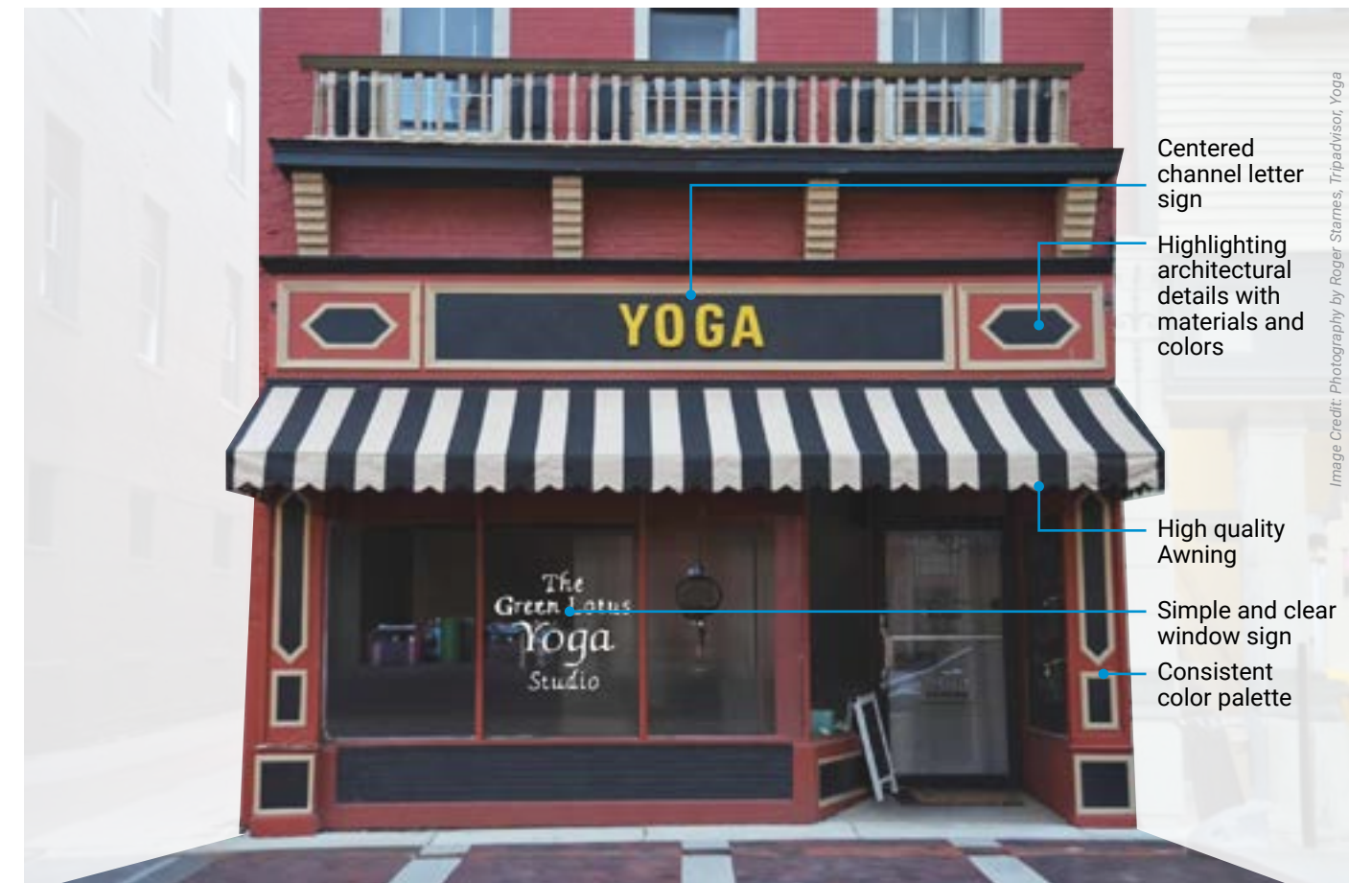
EXAMPLE 1

In this Chicago Avenue facade renovation, new high-performance insulated windows and doors provide durability and long-term thermal energy savings. Upgraded double-glazed, operable windows enhance natural ventilation and transparency. New facade materials are consistent and match. A new mural adds value and interest to the building, creating a local landmark.



EXAMPLE 2

Improvements and maintenance done to existing buildings such as the one pictured below can improve customer engagement and improve the overall look. Updates such as eye-catching color palettes, high-quality materials, and clear signage can attract visitors to the store while blending harmoniously with the existing building design.



EXAMPLE 3

This corner coffee shop attracts visitors with a clear entrance and large transparent windows. The lower panels of this design give a sense of privacy to customers as they sit at the interior tables, but allows views into the store from the sidewalk. Improvements in the public way include outside seating areas and additional lights around the entrance.



EXAMPLE 4

Updates made to this storefront add visual interest by using various materials, large display windows and transom windows. These large format windows let in more light and allow views of product displays from the sidewalk. Adding planters makes the outdoor area more appealing to pedestrians and draws them into the store. The store maintains its original character even with these updates, fitting in well with its neighbors.



EXAMPLE 5

This new construction storefront creates an inviting and functional environment for its customers. The cohesive mix of brick, lighting, metal, windows, and signage enhances the building with a fresh appearance. Windows can fold open in warm weather, which allows for circulation and light into the space, creating a welcoming atmosphere.



EXAMPLE 6

This bookstore design within a multi-store development enhances the building's existing features and showcases the store's character through large windows that make displays visible from the sidewalk. The design of the storefront puts emphasis on the books on display. The lighting design under the awning extends browsing hours into the evening and improves safety. The awning is the same shape and color as the surrounding storefronts, but the store's branding is still clear.





04

REFERENCES

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- [Public Way Use Permitting](#)
- [Business Licensing](#)
- [Sign Permitting](#)
- [Zoning](#)
- [Interactive Zoning Map](#)
- [Outdoor Dining](#)
- [Building Permits](#)
- [Pedestrian Streets](#)
- [Small Business Improvement Fund \(SBIF\)](#)
- [Neighborhood Design Guidelines](#)