

Shopfront design sheets 1 - 6

4. Materials; timber specification and finish

Informal Guidance to Support SPG3 and SPG4



Design sheet 4: materials, timber specification and finish

Materials

The choice of materials and finishes is significant for the appearance of a shopfront. They should be carefully chosen based on their appropriateness to the character of the area; their visual sympathy with the building above; and their long term durability. In view of the poor environmental qualities of many modern construction materials, the sustainability of the chosen material will also be considered in planning applications. There are a number of publications and online resource available that can help in the selection process (see further reading).

Traditionally, shopfronts were made of painted timber. It looks good, wears well and can be easily maintained. If properly primed and painted, timber can be extremely durable. Other materials, such as bronze, cast iron, marble and stone have also had a long tradition in shopfront construction.

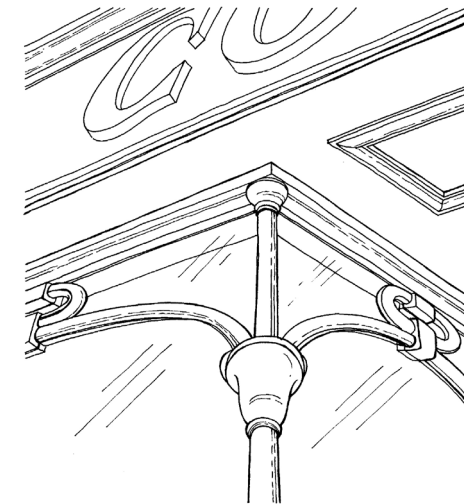
There are a number of modern materials whose smooth, shiny and flat texture make them sit uneasily in historic buildings. Stainless steel, natural finish or powder coated aluminium and plastic (uPVC) lack the visual quality of wood and are unlikely to find approval for Listed Buildings or buildings in a Conservation Area.

Timber Specification

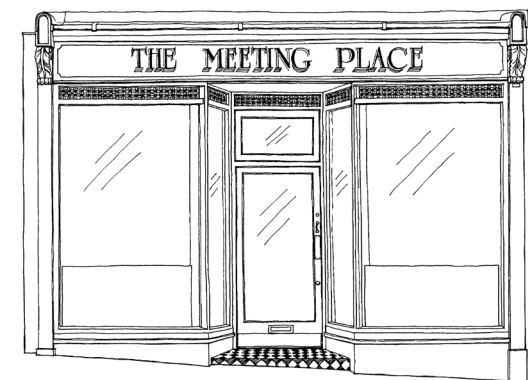
The choice of timber should be carefully considered at the design stage since it can have a considerable bearing on the visual appearance and future maintenance requirements of the shopfront. Good quality detailing from an experienced joiner is just as important as the quality of the timber being used itself to make the installation of a new shop front a worthwhile investment.

Softwood

The majority of traditional shopfronts were made of softwood and painted. Many of today's softwoods are of a poor quality not suitable for outside use, and their improper use - with subsequent early failings



Timber is the most versatile material available to create architectural details, mouldings and carvings that make a shopfront interesting and give it individuality



and high maintenance requirements - has brought wood into disrepute as a material for external joinery.

Generally, the softwoods available today do not match the quality of 19th century (or earlier) softwoods because they are grown relatively quickly, thus are less dense, and often are dried too quickly. Both factors affect their quality. Nevertheless, good quality softwoods, such as Douglas Fir or British Columbian Pine, suitable for shopfront design are still available.

Principles of selection for Softwood:

- Ensure that it is suitable for outside use
- Ensure that it is workable, i.e. it can be worked to the fine detailing
- Check its moisture content and the likelihood of movement
- Ensure that it is able to take a finish that will look good and be durable

Hardwood

Hardwood was only occasionally used in historic shopfronts. They were never painted but finished with a glossy varnish. Today, because of the poor quality of many softwoods available, hardwoods are being used for shopfront construction.

If obtained from an approved sustainable source their use is in principle acceptable, though a stained and varnished finish might not always be considered appropriate within a traditional High Street. If your building is listed or within a Conservation Area check with the Conservation Officer first before selecting such timbers.

Hardwoods can contain high amounts of natural oils and thus can be extremely difficult to paint and glue effectively. Because they have larger pores, the final appearance of painted hardwood is much more irregular than softwood.

Principles of selection for Hardwood:

- Ensure that it is suitable for external use
- Ensure that it is able to take a painted finish in case a varnish is not acceptable

- Ensure that it is supplied from environmentally sustainable sources.

The Timber Research & Development Association (TRADA) provides advice and technical information regarding the availability, quality and performance of timbers.

Plywood

Composite materials such as plywood and Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF) are not usually acceptable on listed buildings or for general use in conservation areas. Plywood has often been used for modern shopfronts, and where it is thought to be acceptable, attention should be given in selecting a grade of plywood suitable for outside use, e.g. marine quality ply. Note that plywood is not intended for direct finishing unless it is veneered or has received an adequate preservation treatment prior to priming and painting.

Further Reading:

English Historic Towns Forum: Book of Details & Good Practice in Shopfront Design (c.1993).

The Green Spec Directory: www.buildinggreen.com

Finish

Colour

Colour schemes for historic shopfronts were kept simple, often single-coloured, which put the goods of the window, display at the centre of attention. Today, colour schemes are often used to make the shopfront itself a form of advertising. Corporate schemes in particular are often imposed without any regard to the design and location, which can contribute to the erosion of the character of an area. Thus, in historic and conservation areas corporate retailers are expected to modify their standard design and colour scheme where this would be desirable.

- Dark shades of green, grey, blue, red, browns, or black are traditional colours for historic



If it is not of the right quality plywood can be prone to surface cracking and become unsightly and maintenance intensive

- shopfronts. Bright shades of yellow, orange and pink are inappropriate in sensitive historic areas.
- Minimalist and monochrome paint combinations combined with the use of a stylish script can result in high quality schemes. Garish colour combinations should be avoided altogether.
 - The change of colour of a shop-front, which is part of a listed building, may require listed building consent. It is advisable to contact the Conservation Officer to discuss the colour scheme before an application is submitted.

Examples of colours: In a historic context, a muted paint colour is most appropriate. Heritage colours are available on the market, for example, from the following suppliers:

Dulux Heritage Range:

Farrow & Ball Manufacturers of Traditional Papers and Paint:

The Little Greene Paint Company (English Heritage Colour Range)

Muted colours of the British Standard (4800) Range and the Dulux Trade Colour Palette Range are equally suitable.

Varnish and Exterior Wood Stains

Traditionally, timber shopfronts were painted. Transparent finishes, such as varnish, has been used occasionally for small external timber components where a high gloss natural finish is required. Exterior wood stains have been in common use in the UK only since the 1960's. Their use as a finish might not always be acceptable within the context of a traditional High Street, conservation area or Listed Building and should be checked with the Conservation Officer first.

Varnish and wood stains allow the wood grain and character to show as part of the finish. Because they have essentially no pigments (varnish) or only a low amount of pigments (i.e. stains, which are semi-transparent) they are susceptible to discolouring from water and sun. Suppliers' specifications should be carefully checked for these effects.



Example of a stained shopfront sill that has prematurely greyed and faded. Additional coats need to be applied to horizontal surfaces or areas of high sun exposure to ensure that they weather evenly with other parts of the joinery.