

Modernism on Main Street: The Dilemma of the Half-modern Building

Mike Jackson

Fig. 1. Jackson's, Rushville, Illinois, 1879. This building, with its 1950s storefront, exemplifies the half-modern building. Modern-style shopfronts have been often ignored in the architectural-survey process because they fell outside the temporal boundaries of the National Register of Historic Places historic-district criteria, leading to problems with interpretation and treatment. All photographs by the author unless otherwise noted.



Preservation of modern buildings and those that changed over time is a complicated and delicate undertaking.

They have been hacking in Chamberlain and the merchants are keeping up with each other in the storefront game. This is an endless contest of tearing off storefronts in a spirit of free competition to be sure that you have a more “modern” storefront than the shoe store across the street or the La Parisian dress shoppe next door. This goes on night and day all over America. Above the first floor the old original windows with their 12-light sash look down benignly on the rotations. —Richard Bissell, *How Many Miles to Galena*, 1968

Fig. 2. Isabey Shop, 20 Rue de la Paix, Paris, France, designed by René Herbst. Starting in the late 1920s, American architectural periodicals often featured new commercial designs from Europe. Storefronts provided great opportunities for architects and designers to experiment with what are now called moderne and art deco-style storefronts. *Architectural Forum*, June 1929.



Fig. 3. B. J. Klotz, 3 Rue Miromesnil, Paris, France. Planar surfaces and large graphic signs were features of modern storefronts. Traditional stone materials were utilized, but innovative new products such as structural glass and porcelain-enamel panels made this architectural style easier to install. *Architectural Forum*, June 1929.



Fig. 4. Gebrüder Sinn, Gelsenkirchen, Germany, designed by Bruno Paul. This department store was a prototype for the streamlined modern style of commercial architecture popular in the 1930s. *Architectural Forum*, June 1929.

The architectural revolution created by the modern movement was pioneered by architects and daring clients who commissioned innovative residential and institutional buildings. These stories are well known and provide the “textbook” examples of high-style modern architecture. Less well known is the rapid acceptance of modern architecture in the commercial sector, particularly the storefronts and movie theaters of America’s Main Streets. (Fig. 1)

The frequent renovation of storefronts to accommodate new businesses or changing architectural styles has been a constant on Main Street, but the

changes that occurred in the modern era were even more dramatic. This transformation was promoted by the architectural media, the sign industry, and the marketing departments of building-product industries. While owners of most commercial buildings did not read architectural magazines, trade publications from retailers and sign companies with the same modernization message were widely distributed.

By the mid-1930s the combination of architectural-design competitions and savvy architectural promotions would have shopkeepers across the country ready to join the modern

movement. The result of this marketing push to “modernize” was a rapid transformation of storefronts and shop interiors, even when the upper part of building facades remained untouched—hence the “half-modern” building. As buildings of the modern movement have gained historic status, the portfolio of half-modern buildings creates evaluation and treatment challenges for the preservation community. Many of these half-modern building facades are now more than 50 years old, the usual interval that allows for historic designation. It is important to understand this design evolution, the designation options, and the treatment protocols.

The Modern Era Begins: Art Deco and Art Moderne Storefronts

In the 1930s a design revolution that began in Europe reached America, and a truly revolutionary transformation in storefront design began. What we call modernism today was a radical departure from the typical commercial architecture then found in America's downtowns. This new form of architecture was not based upon traditional styles and motifs. The larger story of the modern movement is well documented, and the early masters of this new architecture have been identified, recognized, and celebrated. The story of modernism on Main Street is just as interesting, as a combination of architectural media, World's Fairs in Chicago (1933) and New York (1939), and the savvy marketing of the building-product industries made these new designs more appealing and affordable for Main Street shop and building owners.

In 1929 Henry-Russell Hitchcock published *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration*, his first book on the new architecture coming from Europe. Hitchcock called the architects of what we now call modernism the "New Pioneers." He analyzed the new architecture, with its emphasis on volumes and surface planes, and made the particular observation that "The New Pioneers set out therefore without ornament and they have consciously remained without it."¹ The buildings illustrated in Hitchcock's *Modern Architecture* are a mix of residential, industrial, and commercial structures but do not include any examples of storefront alterations. Architectural periodicals were quick to fill this gap, as storefronts offered designers a faster path to showcasing this new design revolution.

The June 1929 issues of both *Architectural Record* and *Architectural Forum* featured commercial architecture with a special emphasis on new storefront designs from Europe. *Architectural Forum* featured an opening essay by architect Ely Jaques

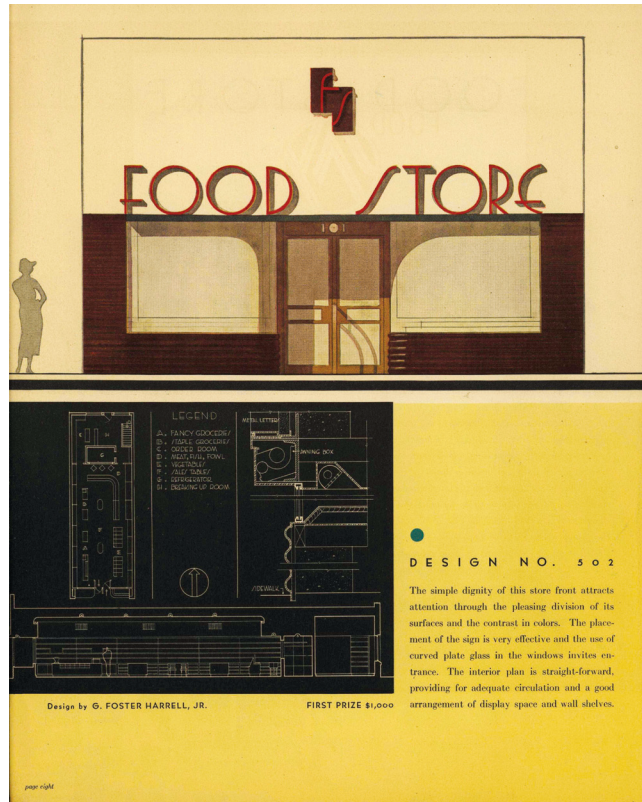


Fig. 5. *Modernize Main Street*, Libbey-Owens-Ford Glass Co., Toledo, Ohio, 1935. This is the winning entry in the food-store category in the national design competition called *Modernize Main Street*. Winning designs were published by the Libbey-Owens-Ford Company in *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass*. This competition was publicized in *Architectural Record* and had a widespread impact on building-product companies for storefronts and glazing. APT Building Technology Heritage Library, <https://archive.org/details/LOF52DesignsForMainStreet>.

Kahn on "The Modern European Shop and Store." Kahn summarized the current situation: "Most of the quarrel with the old work is that it is burdened with applied decoration that has no significance to our generation. The beauty of a plain surface, relieved in whatever way the artist may desire, is the ideal."² Parisian storefronts (Figs. 2 and 3) and German department stores (Fig. 4) were both featured in this issue. The new storefronts had planar surfaces and integrated graphics, hallmarks of this new style. Large plate-glass display windows were still prominent, but signs were a much more integrated part of the designs. From this point on, the American architectural publications were reporting from Europe on the modern movement. Special issues and features on commercial architecture, particularly small retail buildings and shops, became regular stories in the architectural media throughout this decade.³

In 1935 the Libbey-Owens-Ford Glass Company sponsored a national architectural competition on storefront

design entitled *Modernize Main Street*. Several thousand entries were received from architects across the country (Fig. 5). The results were promoted in a large-format publication entitled *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass* and in a special feature in *Architectural Record* in April 1935. These publications and the resulting marketing blitz from glass companies brought the modernism message to retail storeowners both large and small. The federal government also aided in this transformation through the National Housing Act of 1935, which included a program to assist small businesses in renovation.⁴ Architectural publications were directly involved in promoting this Depression-era program.

In addition to the stylistic revolution, new materials and technologies aided in this transformation.⁵ Extruded aluminum for storefronts and windows was one of the most important innovations. This new material was a sharp contrast to the copper, bronze, and painted wood used in earlier buildings. Flat panels of both structural

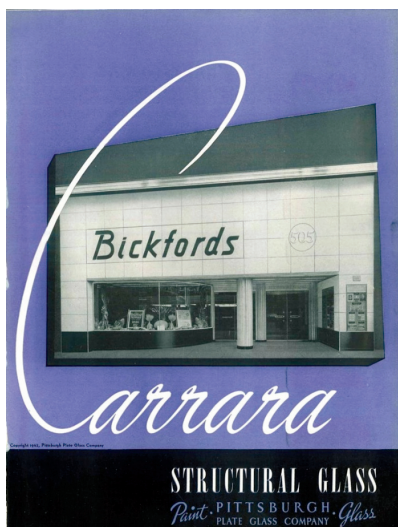


Fig. 6. Carrara Structural Glass, Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co., Pittsburgh, Pa., 1942. New flat panels for exterior facades included both glass and metals. The Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company marketed its structural-glass panels under the tradename Carrara Glass, a reference to the Carrara marble of Italy. APT Building Technology Heritage Library, <https://archive.org/details/CarraraStructuralGlass>.



Fig. 7. *How to Plan and Construct Modern Storefronts*, Libbey-Owens-Ford Glass Co., Toledo, Ohio, 1938. The Libbey-Owens-Ford Glass Company was a leader in producing design and technical publications to show architects and builders the latest fashions and materials for storefronts. The company marketed structural-glass panels under the trade name Vitrolite. APT Building Technology Heritage Library, <https://archive.org/details/HowToPlanAndConstructModernStorefrontsOfExtrudaliteAnd>.

glass and porcelain enamel for walls also aided in storefront renovation. The Modernize Main Street competition drawings highlight what we now call art deco or art moderne designs. Stylistically, these new designs were characterized by a lack of ornament, strong planar surfaces, and strong graphic lettering.

The use of planar surfaces was a great opportunity for new storefronts to be installed over existing facades, including the upper stories. Two new materials emerged for this purpose, structural glass and porcelain-enamel panels. Structural glass was marketed by the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company as Carrara Glass, while the Vitrolite Company and Libby-Owens-Ford called their product Vitrolite (Figs. 6 and 7). These companies heavily promoted structural glass for its modern look and its ability to be used in remodeling, as well as new construction. The other new lightweight cladding material, porcelain-enamel metal panels, had the same general effect in producing planar surfaces.

Two new important lighting technologies were also part of this revolution—neon exterior lighting and fluorescent interior lighting. Neon signs were first imported to the U.S. from France in the 1920s but did not gain wider use until the American neon industry ramped up in the 1930s and 1940s.⁶ For many business owners, the addition of a projecting neon sign on an older facade was the beginning of their entry into the modern movement. While fluorescent lighting was seldom used on exteriors of buildings, its efficiency inside allowed for the elimination of the transom windows over front doors and display windows, an area that could now be transformed with graphics.

The Open Front Approach
The Modernize Main Street competition sponsored by Libby-Owens-Ford in 1935 was eventually followed by the Storefronts of Tomorrow competition in 1942 (Fig. 8). The results were published in *Pencil Points* (later renamed *Progressive Architecture*) and featured a whole

new approach to storefront design—the “open front.” At its most basic, the idea of the open front was an attempt to make the entire shop interior the display window. This was a fundamental difference from the arcaded shopfronts of the 1910s and 1920s, which used larger, recessed display windows for maximum pedestrian-oriented displays. Large areas of glass, including all-glass doors, were one of the features of the open front. Lighting was also important to this look, and publications often featured nighttime views to emphasize the illuminated shop interior.

The use of large glass surfaces continued in the 1950s, but unit masonry of rough stone or brick was also used to contrast with the smoothness of glass. Asymmetrical compositions, angular-signage pylons, and projecting glass display windows were some of the other characteristics of this style. The use of lightweight materials that could be used for new construction or renovation was also common, with metal panel systems a major innovation. The open front would not really become popular until the 1950s and 1960s and was accomplished more easily in new one-story buildings than in the renovation of older structures.

The Architectural Slipcover
Another design treatment that evolved during the post-World War II-era was the “architectural slipcover,” a completely new facade that covered the front of an older building in a manner that largely left the old facade as a structural base. When integrated with the design of the first-floor storefront and larger signage, the architectural slipcover had a stronger impact on Main Streets than a typical storefront renovation. The architectural slipcover is a particularly vexing issue for today’s preservationists.

The cladding materials use in architectural slipcovers varied from simple metal covers and grilles to elaborate combinations of masonry, glass, stucco, plastics, and composite materials. In many cases, the new cladding was attached to an applied

exterior framework that made these materials easy to install (and just as easy to remove). In other cases, extensive facade renovations were made to upper stories, including the removal of projecting cornices and window hoods. These upper-story slipcovers often indicated the downgraded use of the upper floors, including their marginal use as storage. For many owners, it marked the point at which they discontinued the use of residential units on upper floors. Most slipcovers covered the windows, although some did allow natural light through grilles or translucent plastics.

Responding to Market Needs

Most building and storeowners did not read architectural magazines, but they did respond to advertising and kept abreast of current trends in retail design through trade publications such as *Chain Store Age*. America's glass industry, particularly the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company and the Libby-Owens-Ford Glass Company, produced a steady flow of marketing materials aimed at storefront materials and designs. Another important national marketer was the Kawneer Company, which got its start in the metal-storefront business in 1906. This firm was an industry leader in the development of metal-storefront systems. In 1946 they produced a large-format publication entitled *Machines for Selling*, a not-so-subtle play-on-words of the Corbusian term "machines for living." *Machines for Selling* featured the open front, with an emphasis on single-story buildings, but at least one illustration features a typical Main Street building with a new open front (Fig. 9). The steady push of trade literature to downtown storeowners was very effective in motivating them to make architectural changes. The typical Main Street today has a large percentage of post-World War II storefronts, as well as storefronts from virtually all other eras of the community's development. The half-modern building, now 50 years of age, is today part of the preservation protocol.

Throughout the post-World War II era, design on Main Street was also

affected by the changes brought about by larger stores and the increasing need to serve the automobile-based shopper. Larger stores, which were not very well adapted to Main Street's narrow structural bays of brick walls, moved out of downtown or were accommodated through demolitions. In other cases, smaller businesses, including offices, were often able to fill these smaller buildings. New responses to the automobile, such as drive-up windows, were not very well adapted to downtown either, with the possible exception of banks where they could be added to the rear of an older building. The preservation movement itself is now a part of this story of architectural evolution. The storefronts of the modern movement are now entering the temporal boundaries of historic status within a design culture that tends to honor the original rather than the altered later storefront design, particularly those of the post-World War II era.

The Modern Movement and the Half-modern Building

Organizations like Docomomo and websites like Retro Renovation champion mid-century architecture and represent a growth area for the preservation movement. The appreciation for the modernist storefront within a context of an older historic commercial building and district is a different story. Only a small percentage of commercial buildings from the nineteenth century still have their original cast-iron and wood storefronts. The preference for "stylistically whole" building facades (where the storefront and upper stories date from the same period) is often promoted in preservation design guidelines, a restoration approach rather than an evolutionary approach. In general, preservation guidelines prefer harmony rather than contrast, even though the evaluation of contributing buildings to historic districts often calls for recognition of "change over time." The National Park Service, in the development of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the *Preservation Briefs*, has consistently supported the evaluation of

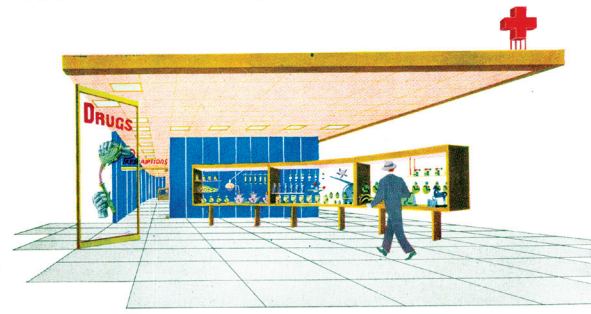


Fig. 8. Storefronts of Tomorrow Competition winner, *Pencil Points*, 1942. *Pencil Points* sponsored this competition. The winning designs promoted total transparency in storefronts, a design approach that was called the open front. This style would become popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Image courtesy of Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.



Fig. 9. *Machines for Selling: Modern Store Designs*, Kawneer Co., Niles, Mich., 1946. The open-front design for a storefront promoted the idea of the whole interior as the display window. This approach was relatively easy with new one-story commercial buildings, but more difficult with older buildings. This design shows the alteration to a typical mid-nineteenth-century commercial building on Main Street. Image courtesy of Southern Illinois University Library.

significance based upon the principle of change over time. The recognition that art deco storefronts were a significant feature of 1930s and 1940s buildings was one of the early illustrations of "significance over time" in preservation publications. When *Preservation Brief No. 11, Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts*, was first published in the 1982, these art deco storefronts were not yet 50 years old, but they were being recognized as significant for their

City of Berwyn		Cermak Road Architectural and Historical Survey	
Street Number: 6738			
Direction: West			
Street: Cermak			
Suffix: Rd			
PIN Number: 16-19-424-018-0000			
Evaluation/Rating			
Local Significance Rating: Contributing			
Potential contributor to NR district? Yes			
Potentially contributing secondary structure? No			
Listed on existing survey? No			
General Information			
Category: Building		Current Function: Medical Offices	
Condition: Good		Historic Function: Commercial; Tea Store	
Building Integrity: High		Reason for Significance: Associated with	
Storefront Integrity: Medium		Cermak Road's first period of significance between	
Secondary Structure: No		1910- 1940; storefront from second period 1945-1965.	



Photo 1

Fig. 10. Survey form for Cermak Road Architectural and Historical Survey, Berwyn, Ill. This commercial-district survey includes a two-part evaluation for the significance of the facades based upon the storefront and the upper story. Each part of the facade can have a separate period of significance. Survey prepared by Lakota Group.

architectural integrity and character. The open-front designs of the 1950s were not mentioned in this important *Preservation Brief*.

Downtown Commercial District Surveys

The standard tool for beginning a preservation-planning process is the architectural survey. For residential areas this is a well-developed process with new online tools and great reference guides to architectural styles and features. Virtually every preservation curriculum begins with a survey class as part of a professional education. Unfortunately, the survey materials for commercial architecture are far behind those for residential architecture. Richard Longstreth's book, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*, first published in 1987, still stands as the basic classification guide for anyone doing architectural surveys and National Register nominations. The classification system emphasizes overall facade composition. The typical two-story building on Main Street is classified as a "two-part commercial block," an indication that the first-floor storefront and the upper-story facade read as separate compositional elements. Longstreth mentions the modern movement in a short epilogue, which emphasizes

the larger commercial architecture of suburban development.⁷ *Preservation Brief No. 11, Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts* was written in 1982 by Ward Jandl and has not been updated. It contains more about storefront treatment options rather than storefront history but does include one art deco storefront as an example of "significance gained over time." There is a major need for an updated survey guide to the architecture of Main Street that includes the evolution of storefronts. The era of storefront design since the 1950s is largely missing from most design guidelines, which serve as the de facto survey tool for many communities

A New Survey Protocol for Main Street

The typical description of a Main Street building facade using the methodology outlined by Richard Longstreth in *The Buildings of Main Street* is the two-part commercial block. This form recognized the common format of a first-floor shopfront that is distinct in style from the upper-story facade. In most cities, the upper story was brick, and the shopfronts varied from the original construction to anything that came later. The two-part composition is further identified by the stylistic attributes of the upper stories and shopfront, but in general the status

of the structure as a contributing building to the historic district rests on the integrity of the upper part of the facade. If the upper facade meets the age and integrity criteria for the historic district, the structure is usually classified as historic regardless of the integrity of the shopfront.

Since the standard preservation-survey protocol for downtown historic districts uses this two-part evaluation, it should be an easy step to add the significance evaluation of the shopfront to the survey process. This is not typical in most surveys, however. This process requires the surveyor to be familiar with the changing architectural styles of the storefronts up through the mid-twentieth century and beyond. Dating shopfronts visually can be problematic because there can easily be a 20-year-period during which common construction materials and designs were utilized. This two-part evaluation strategy was recently applied in a survey of Berwyn, Illinois (Fig. 10).

Main Street Design Guidelines

Many communities have Main Street design guidelines, which provide a framework for deciding about changes to buildings. Main Street design guidelines were developed in the 1970s and generally include a stylistic summary of historic buildings typical of the district. One of the first places to begin to update preservation policies is to acknowledge mid-century architectural resources, including storefronts. The idea that an existing storefront from the 1960s can be an appropriate, functional example of its time is often missing from the discussion. Storefront guidelines often contain language that promotes the restoration of the original design. One guideline states that "If a storefront is altered, restoring it to the original design is preferred."⁸

Storefront renovations that covered the whole upper facade, described above as architectural slipcovers, can be the most problematic. As these slipcovers come into the temporal boundaries of a historic district, they will start to gain historic status. There will be some that have excellent integrity of design and physical condition, while others will have deteriorated. Many have already been removed, as they were often made of very lightweight materials that did not prove to be durable. When the original building is relatively intact under the slipcover, the removal of the later storefront is generally noted as being a successful preservation project. Preservation issues will arise with well-designed and durable slipcovers whose removal or major alteration is necessary for the conversion of the upper floors back to their original residential use. This situation would be a logical situation in which to apply the concept of economic hardship, which should be part of a historic-preservation commission's review criteria. The requirement to document the slipcover design before demolition would be a part of the preservation process.

Further complicating the topic of preservation of mid-century storefronts is the rapid rate at which businesses changed. An outstanding storefront design with a sign embedded in the architectural materials is an obvious problem when the building use or ownership changes. Removing a hanging sign is easy, but what happens when the whole facade is basically a sign for an obsolete business? A new business needs to promote its identity, and a new sign is often one of the first major changes in repurposing a building. When the original sign is recessed into the storefront or set flush with a flat surface, it can often be covered over with a new sign without any demolition. The old sign becomes a piece of "commercial archaeology."

A survey program that identifies significant signs is another important local preservation tool (Fig. 11). The National Register of Historic Places does include the designation of "objects," and signs have been included in this designation. The National

Route 66 initiative is one program in which the signs have been preserved as historic objects even when the rest of the building is gone.

New sign ordinances are another source of preservation friction, as changing standards for the size of signs or materials often mean that older signs are out of compliance. The recognition of an old sign as a contributing feature in a local preservation district would make an out-of-compliance sign eligible for a building code variance based upon historic status. Ephemeral elements such as older painted wall signs (sometimes called "ghost signs") is another character-defining feature of older commercial districts that are being identified and classified as cultural resources worthy of preservation.

Updating Older Commercial District Designations

Another issue related to the 50-year rule and downtown resources is the lack of easy tools to update National Register nominations. A nomination written in 1986 would have had an end date of 1936 for the period of significance, and virtually all post-1936 storefronts would have been considered non-contributing alterations, regardless of their design integrity. Today, the preferred method for changing a National Register nomination is a comprehensive re-survey and revised nomination process, which can be both expensive and time consuming.

While a 1986 National Register nomination may not be as good as one based on a survey done today, updating the period of significance to the 1960s would bring a whole generation of storefronts and buildings under preservation review; these areas have often experienced little in the way of major demolitions or new construction since the 1970s. While there may be some downtown districts that have been so altered that they need a new survey, many would benefit from such a temporal boundary update. Local preservation commissions should have the flexibility to make these changes on an individual building basis. The National Park Service and the State

Historic Preservation Offices already have some discretion on the changing temporal boundary when reviewing projects for tax-act certification and regulatory reviews

Interpretation: Condition Assessment

Another common problem is the fragility of the thin, lightweight, modern materials installed over an older building facade. Furthermore, it is difficult to find replacement materials for broken structural-glass panels, broken plastics, and dented porcelain-enamel panels. Another typical material problem has been the difficulty of repairing materials that were originally designed to be "maintenance-free." The condition-assessment question and material integrity present a new set of preservation-maintenance issues. The conservation of mid-century materials has become a frequent topic in modern heritage preservation conferences and workshops.

Conclusion

The modern movement had a dramatic impact on Main Street, even within the overall framework of nineteenth-century commercial districts. The renovation of only the first-floor storefront on an older structure where most of the facade remained from an earlier era has created a preservation challenge—the half-modern building. When individual buildings are listed



Fig. 11. Modern Pastry Shop, 257 Hanover Street, Boston, Mass. A distinctive angled sign with integrated neon lighting was used to add a mid-century design with a high degree of design quality and integrity to an older storefront. The sign could be easily threatened if the business changed.

in designated historic districts, the dates of major alterations are usually included in the overall description and evaluation. For commercial buildings, a two-part evaluation criteria for storefronts and their facades should be the new preferred methodology. The storefronts of the modern movement are now coming into the comfort zone of preservation designation. Surveying and resurveying commercial districts for their mid-century resources should now be the standard protocol, up to and including the 1970s. The next generation of preservationists should be prepared to enter a modern era of preservation in which the Ruskinian principles of “anti-scrape” address a pallet of materials that Ruskin would have never imagined.

Mike Jackson, FAIA, is a preservation architect in Springfield, Illinois. He was the chief architect for the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office for more than twenty-five years. During his career he was active in historic preservation nationally, focusing particularly on topics related to Main Street, modern heritage, and sustainability. He is currently the co-director of the APT Building Technology Heritage Library.

Notes

1. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Modern Architecture: Romanticism and Reintegration* (New York: Payson and Clark, 1929), 214.
2. Ely Jacques Kahn, “The Modern European Shop and Store,” *Architectural Forum* 1:6 (June 1929), 789.
3. A more thorough history of the architectural connections between European storefront design and the American architectural media is provided in chapter four of Martin Treu, *Signs, Streets and Storefronts: A History of Architecture and Graphics along America’s Commercial Corridors* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012).
4. Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, Center for American Places, 2008). This publication is an excellent economic history of the National Housing Act and the programs for owners of small buildings.
5. The history of modern materials of this era is well covered in Tom Jester, ed., *Twentieth Century Building Materials* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2014). This publication was the outcome of the 1995 Preserving the Recent Past Conference on modern heritage. The history of such materials as aluminum, porcelain enamel, and structural glass are discussed, as

well as contemporary conservation approaches. A more detailed history of modern-era storefront materials can be found in Carol Dyson, “Mid-century Commercial Modernism: Design and Materials,” in Proceedings of the Mid-century Modern Structures: Materials and Preservation Symposium, National Park Service, 2016.

6. The history of the neon-sign industry is well covered in Rudi Stern, *Let There Be Neon* (New York: Abrams, 1979).
7. Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987). The epilogue focuses on new freestanding suburban shopping centers and stores, with little on the half-modern storefronts. There are 1987 and 2000 editions of this publication.
8. City of Dubuque Downtown Design Guidelines, 2009, <http://www.cityofdubuque.org/DocumentCenter/Home/View/1482>, accessed June 21, 2016.

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