

Signs

In the early 20th century, the signs for the Wigwam in the Playhouse building on Wilsey Square were on the valance of its awning and gold lettering on the glass transom over the store's entrance.



Commercial signs add visual variety and vitality to the downtown commercial area. Early 20th century photographs of the Ridgewood Village Center Historic District document that historic signs took many forms. It was common to mount board signs on the frieze of the first-story storefronts. Another common approach was to paint signs directly on storefront windows, particularly on the upper transoms. Frequently this was done in gold leaf. Projecting signs which extended perpendicular to the front wall of the building were popular, as were signs mounted on upper cornices or “sky” signs on roofs. However, projecting and roof-mounted signs are now prohibited in the downtown by Ridgewood’s Code, and the size and placement of signs on upper stories are strictly controlled. An exception is the permanent marquee of the movie theater which is permitted.

Signs in the District should not only provide adequate identification of the business, but also enhance historic buildings and the total ambience of the district. They should reinforce the human scale of the District’s pedestrian environment. A sign should not overpower the building’s façade, but rather attract customers to the business through a design that harmonizes with the building and its visually related buildings. The philosophy governing signage in the District is that signs are new additions that should be designed so that they do not alter the character-defining features of the building on which they are located and of their streetscape. Signs may be of compatible contemporary design or reference appropriate design motifs from the past.

Guidelines

Do not destroy and hide historic materials that characterize the property.

Differentiate new work from the old and design signs that are compatible in design, size, scale, and materials with the building and its environment.

Commercial signs are closely regulated as to size, placement, clearance, and structural requirements by ordinance in Ridgewood (Section 190-122) and signs require a sign permit. The historic preservation regulation shall be in addition to this regulation. The sign code may allow a certain square footage for a sign, but a far smaller sign may be visually more in scale with the building’s facade.

The Historic Preservation Commission recommends this future change to the Ridgewood sign ordinance: In order to provide a location so that signs may be viewed by pedestrians include an additional principal sign on the glass area. The lettering on this sign should not be more than 4 inches and be painted or applied onto the glass with a color similar to the principal sign. A company logo may also be included not to exceed 12 by 12 inches. If the storefront exceeds 25 feet a second window sign may be included.

Signs

Recommended

For All Buildings

- Relate a sign's design and location to the overall design of the storefront and the façade of the building and make it compatible with visually related storefronts and buildings.
- Fit the sign within the features of the façade. Appropriate locations might include:
 - The frieze of the storefront. On many late 19th and early 20th century commercial buildings, the storefront frieze functions as a signboard and is a logical location for the placement of a sign.
 - A valance or vertical plane of the storefront awning.
 - Glass of the display window or entrance door. Permanently painted or applied window signs should not consume more than 20% of the glazed area of the window or 36 square feet, whichever is less.
 - Transom windows above display windows or entrance.
- Consider having the shape of the sign reflect the architectural style of the building or of the building's visually related buildings. For instance, a building with arches might have a sign of a different shape than on a building with a rectilinear composition.
- Use lettering (fonts) and graphic illustrations that suggest the overall design and historic period of the building as well as the business's image. Use lettering that combines easy readability with good visibility. Have value contrast between background and letters. Use as few words as possible. Studies show that signs are most effective with seven words or less.
- Use colors in the sign which relate to the exterior colors of the building, as well as those of immediately adjacent structures and signs. They should complement, not compete or clash with surroundings. Usually limit the number of colors used in the sign. Small accents of subdued colors are recommended. Use of bold color combination such as bright yellow and red or bright red on white, currently used by many franchises, usually is not acceptable.
- Use flush-mounted signs or signs that have minimal projection so that they do not compete with architectural features.



Recommended: Relating a sign's design to the overall design of the façade and of the storefront.



Recommended: Signs on glass of display windows or entrance doors.

Signs

Recommended (Continued)

- Paint or apply individual letters on the façade of a signboard rather than attaching them directly to the building where they may damage bricks, stucco, or stone.
- Use durable materials for the sign that complements the architecture of the building and are visually compatible with the building's exterior materials. Usually signs should not have excessive shine.
- Use non illuminated signs. When illumination is desired, use soft, indirect light which highlights the sign rather than attracts attention to the light fixture itself. Possible light sources include concealed lighting, a simple horizontal strip, or gooseneck reflectors. Place lighting fixtures on the building so that they do not negatively impact the composition of the façade.
- When multiple signs are permitted for a business, have a unified graphic appearance.
- When a building contains multiple storefronts of different businesses, relate the signs of the different businesses to each other in terms of type, height, proportion, and use compatible colors, lettering, and background values. Maintaining general uniformity among these characteristics reinforces the building's facade composition. Having limited, compatible variety permits each business to have a distinct identity. Consider a sign design program for larger buildings with multiple stores so that all signs for the building are of similar design.
- For permitted signs on upper-story windows, paint sign in gold leaf, black, or white using lettering (fonts) that is appropriate to the overall design and historic period of the building, as well as the business's image.
- For retail uses with a common entrance, professional signs, and any other secondary uses, utilize signs which in shape, material, color, lettering, and other design features relate to the overall façade design and to principal signs and to other secondary signs on the building.



The Wilsey Building at the corner of East Ridgewood Avenue and North Board Street is shown in an early 20th century postcard with signs of similar design and appropriately located over the display windows.



Recommended: The Wilsey Building today continues to have a building-wide sign program so that all signs have a unified graphic appearance.



Recommended: Signs for businesses sharing a common entrance should be of similar design.



Non-illuminated signs are recommended. When illumination is desired, indirect light might be obtained using simple fixtures such as gooseneck reflectors or lighting strips.

Signs

Recommended (Continued)

For Contributing Historic Buildings

- Reuse the original sign location, unless this location no longer conforms to Ridgewood’s sign regulations.
- Design the sign to enhance the significant historic architectural features, rather responding to later inappropriate alterations.

For Non-Contributing Buildings

- Design the sign to respond to its building and its streetscape, unless by so doing it continues or amplifies characteristics that are inappropriate in the Historic District. If this is the case, the sign’s design should reflect typical signs on contributing historic buildings in the district.

Not Recommended

- Covering, obscuring, interrupting, or destroying significant architectural detailing or features with signs.
- Using signs that overpower or clutter the façade, or otherwise distract from the historic character of the building and district.
- Extending a sign beyond the boundary of the architectural feature on which it is placed.
- Installing positive cut-outs (individual dimensional letters) on masonry contributing historic buildings when their installation may damage the historic material.
- Using directly (internally) lighted box signs or directly lighted letters on most buildings as they usually not compatible with the District’s architecture.
- Using signs that continue inappropriate alterations.
- Employing signs with unusual shapes that do not blend with the District’s character.



Not Recommended: Positive cut out letters on historic masonry. Installation will damage the building material.



Not Recommended: Shiny plastic box signs of bright colors.



Not Recommended: Sign that extends beyond the boundary of the architectural feature on which it is placed and obscures architectural features.



Not Recommended: Signage that overpowers the façade.

Signs

Not Recommended (Continued)

- Using unpainted wood backgrounds for signs as this rustic character is not compatible with the District's architecture and such signs are not durable.
- Installing franchise signs that do not respect the pedestrian and historic character of the District. Large internally illuminated, boldly-colored plastic signs are inappropriate and must be modified to more appropriate size, materials, lighting, and colors.
- Painting signs directly on a previously unpainted masonry wall or surface.

Resources

National Park Service, Preservation *Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs*,
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief25.htm>



This photograph taken around 1924-26 shows the signage on stores at 12-38 East Ridgewood Avenue. Many of these signs would not conform to Ridgewood's current sign code as they are larger than is allowable and have too many and too large letters. The placement of the signs on signboards on the friezes of the storefronts and on the glass of the transoms of the display windows are consistent with recommended locations today. The projecting sign is not.