



DUMBARTON TOWN CENTRE

SHOPFRONT DESIGN GUIDE



WHY SHOPFRONTS ARE IMPORTANT TO AN AREA

Shop frontages, along with their associated signage and advertising, make a significant impact on the locality in which they are found. Whether this impact is positive or negative depends on how the shops are presented. A well designed shopfront gives a favourable perception of a business: a series of attractive shopfronts can enhance a street, encouraging more visitors and inviting them to spend longer in an area. This can benefit everyone who is part of a town centre economy and promotes an impression of collective pride.

Poor design, low quality materials and colour schemes, intrusive lighting, excessive signage and advertising, and historically inappropriate styling can create a poor first impression of a shop or business and the area in which it trades, and where situated in a Conservation Area, can detract from the unique characteristics.

Shop frontages can be found on banks, restaurants and pubs, cafes, retail outlets, building societies, and even offices, and where attractive and welcoming help to draw in customers.

This design guide aims to provide helpful information that can assist businesses in the improvement of their street presence. Although it does not form part of West Dunbartonshire Council planning policy, it will be used as planning guidance to assist with determining planning applications. Over time, improvement of shop frontages in line with this design guide will visibly enhance the town.

WHAT MAKES DUMBARTON TOWN CENTRE SPECIAL

In recognition of its historic street pattern; interesting range of building types (from churches to tenements, and from banks to municipal buildings); and spread of buildings from different periods in history, Dumbarton Town Centre was designated a Conservation Area in October 2019. It is recognised as an area of special architectural or historic interest. The 2022 Conservation Area Appraisal can be found [online](#).



High Street pictured in 1890.
Picture Credit: West Dunbartonshire Libraries

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DUMBARTON'S SHOP FRONTAGES

In a Conservation Area, planning control is directed at maintaining the integrity of the area and taking positive action to enhance its special character. This extends to shop frontages, where every architectural period had a different style, allowing for a range of improvement solutions.

Built in 1693, Glencairn Greit House is the town's sole survivor from the late mediaeval period, but it is no longer typical of its time following the creation of three large round-arched openings at street level in the 1920s. These replaced a modest shopfront in which was once located the Dumbarton Fish Market, along with a stone staircase leading to the floors above.

Dumbarton's Georgian shops have been mostly demolished, including MacKenzie House, built in the 18th Century, and which had small doors and display windows at street level,

which was typical of the time. A greater number of examples survive from the Victorian period, including mid-century buildings such as No. 129 High Street, which is dated 1854, and has small-paned windows but which would have had a conventional shopfront. A flurry of construction during the 1890s saw an eclectic collection of banks, shops and tenements built in town, including No. 17 High Street, which was built for the British Linen Company Bank.



No. 17 High Street with traditional lamp



High Street pictured in its heyday



Two other unusual properties were the former National Boot Depot at No. 63 High Street (pictured left), and Nos. 125-129 College Street, built at the same time as Dumbarton Central Station (pictured below).

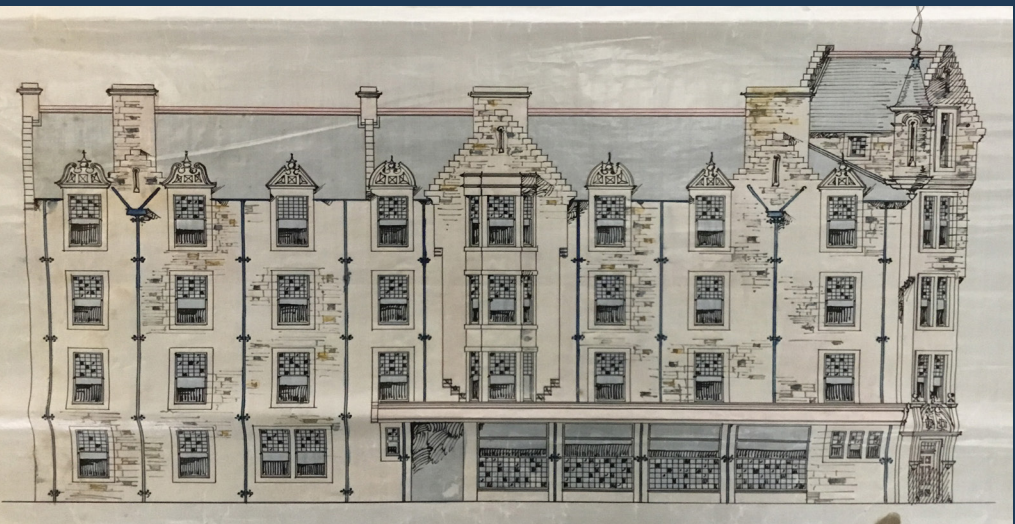
All dating to the late-Victorian period, these properties once had shopfronts designed to catch the attention of townspeople, whether to bank, shop or enjoy food, drink and entertainment.

Of course, Dumbarton was once a shopping destination for Cardross, Helensburgh and the Gareloch, and the Vale of Leven. This is borne out by the number of buildings surviving from the

period of retail expansion in the 1920s and 30s by former household names such as Burtons, Claude Alexander, City Bakeries, Woolworths and the Co-op. As a result of this there is a surprisingly large number of buildings on Dumbarton's High Street that exhibit Art Deco detailing, typified by zig-zags, chevrons, flagpoles and fins, and the use of faience (tile) and splashes of strong colour. Thirties buildings – are normally sleek and streamlined, and Dumbarton is fortunate to have a good collection of buildings from this innovative and exciting period in architecture, such as Burtons.



Picture Credit: West Dunbartonshire Libraries



Picture Credit: West Dunbartonshire Libraries

THE COMPONENT PARTS OF A SHOPFRONT

Since shops on main shopping thoroughfares normally occupy the ground floors of taller buildings (quite often, tenements), there is usually a strong horizontal subdivision between the retail unit and the floors up above. This is typically expressed in the form of a **fascia**, which might have some decoration above (called a **cornice**) and brackets at either end (called **console brackets**). The console brackets often correspond to a vertical feature called a **pilaster** (effectively a column). Fascias are important since it is here that lettering and branding can be displayed: they are high enough to be visible from a distance. Nineteenth and early twentieth century shopfront fascias are mostly timber, but during the 1930s they tended to be less elaborate and are sometimes missing altogether. Often, the fascia will incorporate an **awning**, or sunblind, to protect the goods on display from sunlight and shoppers outside from inclement weather.

There will be an entrance door, sometimes with a **fanlight** (often designed to be openable for ventilation). These are normally recessed but can be flush. Where set back from the frontage, there are sometimes attractive lobbies (called **platts**) that are decorative, such as that seen at Glencairn Greit House, which is finished in small tiles called mosaic. The windows next to the entrance door provide **display areas**: following the invention of plate glass in the 1830s, these tended to become larger and with fewer subdivisions, allowing for a greater opportunity for promotion of goods and services (not to mention more daylight to the shop interior). Below the windows would be a **stallriser** – the area between the window cill and pavement – which would protect the glass from damage and raise the display up to a comfortable level. Stallrisers were normally finished in stone, brick and render, tiles (sometimes granite) or even glass prism lights if there was a basement below.



THE DESIGN OF NEW SHOPFRONTS

A successful shopfront improvement will relate to the scale, proportions, materials and character of the parent building, as well as adjacent buildings and other features of the area, and ideally will secure the retention or reinstatement of traditional detailing and architectural features. The retention of heritage features helps tell the story of a building and can create a talking point. During shopfront improvement works, any historic features that are unveiled, including evidence of former businesses that traded from the same location, should be preserved if at all possible, or at least properly recorded for posterity. Assistance with the design of a new shopfront that draws on historic research, as well as advice on appropriate materials, can be had by consulting a conservation-accredited architect or other heritage specialist.

HISTORIC RESEARCH

Dumbarton Central Library has an excellent collection of newspapers, drawings, picture postcards and photographs of the town through the ages, and this can provide a good starting point for the design of a new shopfront in keeping with the area. Too often, shop frontages have been altered with over-



Archive drawing of a well-proportioned shopfront
Picture Credit: West Dunbartonshire Libraries

sized fascias, unattractive signage and corporate branding: archive drawings and photographs can provide clues as to the original design and materials.

FASCIAS & STALLRISERS

Quality and variety are welcomed, but a degree of uniformity may be needed where adjoining shops are part of a larger building: the red sandstone tenement at No. 84 High Street is a good example of a single, large building designed to have a range of ground floor shops that would have had similar proportions and consistent architectural details. The design of fascias and stallrisers is important in this respect since these features form strong horizontal lines: fascias should be as close to the original historic dimensions as possible and can be slightly sloping outwards as well as flat. Sometimes an original fascia is found beneath modern panels, and this should be restored as far as possible. Fascias should not overlap adjoining properties, and where there are console brackets these should be retained or replicated.



Ill-matched fascias can spoil a traditional building

Similarly, stallrisers should be retained or reinstated where appropriate and no greater than 600mm in height. Stallrisers can be finished in a range of materials, but these should be hardwearing, easily cleaned and complement other materials used on the shopfront. Decorative vents in stall risers can introduce fresh air at solum level.

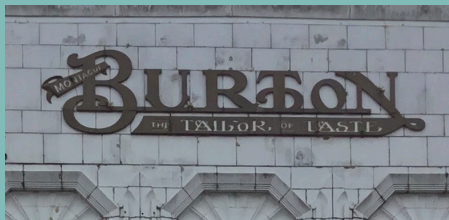


Hand painted signage can enliven a shopfront

Often fascias have decoration in the form of a cornice, or little timbers called dentil blocks. Where possible these should be retained or reinstated. Traditionally, fascias provided the principal opportunity for advertising, and many were artworks in themselves. There are websites devoted to historic signage that has been uncovered beneath modern coverings!

SIGNAGE, LIGHTING & AWNINGS

New signage, if directly mounted onto a fascia, should be confined to the depth and length of the fascia and limited to trade names and product information. It should not protrude in the form of a box. Alternatively, individual raised letters in timber or appropriate metals can be effective since they create a dynamic, three-dimensional look.



The distinctive lettering of Burtons

Traditional professional signwriting can also be impactful, as well as period-appropriate designs (for instance, 1930s shopfronts used more stylised fonts). Not appropriate will be modern fonts, or excessively large lettering. A well-designed and lettered fascia speaks volumes about the quality of the business at that address and can be an effective promotional tool.

Lighting of shopfronts can be achieved in a number of ways, with traditional overhanging lights acceptable provided there is historic precedent and the materials used will not tarnish or discolour. Illuminated boxes with lettering are discouraged, but slimline LED lighting may be considered.



Hand lettered signage and consistent colours can transform a shopfront. Picture Credit: Rachel E Millar



A crisp, clear hanging sign and neatly-designed shopfront

Lighting schemes are expected to enhance the “after dark” experience and help promote a safe environment, but fluorescent tubes in window display areas do not create the variety and interest that an attractive shopfront should have, and alternatives should be considered.

Projecting signs can also be found on historic buildings, but these are less common nowadays, and where proposed should be based on historic precedent. Finishes should be durable and the signs sufficiently high off the pavement and back from the roadway that they will not cause an obstruction. They must be robustly secured to the building frontage. Similarly, traditional retractable awnings and blinds can be designed as an integral part of a shopfront but must be made

of a durable material such as canvas or rayon and should not project further than 2.0 metres from the building frontage or be closer to the pavement than 2.5 metres in height. Fixed rigid canopies are discouraged, and retractable awnings should have recessed boxes below fascia level, which is traditional. There are a number of products on the market, including those that have old-style zig-zag arms: most can be manually operated using a simple pole.



This tiled dado and traditional awnings make for an eye-catching shopfront. Picture Credit: Laura Scott-Simmons

Modern interiors often incorporate lowered ceilings, and where these cannot be avoided (for instance, where there are hidden services), they can be adjusted to slope back from the glazing of the shop windows, or alternatively a clerestory can be created to hide the ceiling. This is a horizontal subdivision at the head of a display window that contains opaque or coloured glass.

Entrances that are recessed, and curved or angled windows are encouraged, but doors should be clearly defined and designed with care.



Traditional features, such as this hanging clock, can create interest. Picture Credit: Vivien Thomson

SECURITY & SHUTTERS

It is appreciated that large display windows require out-of-hours protection, but solid security shutters will be resisted since they create an unappealing environment while shops are closed. Open lattice shutters or grilles (along with toughened or laminated glass) allow for window shopping out-of-hours and help enliven a streetscape. Doors can be protected by decorative metal gates or open lattice shutters (there should be provision allowed for postal deliveries). Where shutters are installed, the shutter box should be concealed behind the fascia and have the guide rails recessed into the pilasters or framing. Shutters should be coloured to match or contrast with the main shopfront colour scheme and any electronic controls should be recessed into the shopfront frame.

It is recognised that multiple retailers have a house style, and that these will form an essential part of the design of the shopfront. That said, West Dunbartonshire Council will resist a standard solution being imposed if this produces a shopfront that is of low quality, is historically inappropriate, or uninteresting. Street numbers should be incorporated into signage: this assists with deliveries and wayfinding.

ACCESSIBILITY AND SAFETY

Accessibility is important in attracting customers from all walks of life. Entrance doors should be wide enough for wheelchair users and shoppers with walking aids, buggies and prams. Entrances should be level wherever

possible, and door ironmongery easily visible and compliant. Large areas of window glass can be confusing: where there is the possibility of impact, there should be manifestations (markings) to prevent this and the glazing should be strong enough to withstand impact. New shopfronts should comply with the legislation set out in the Scottish Building Standards Non-Domestic Technical Handbook (April 2024 Edition).

Care should be taken when dismantling existing shop frontages to have an asbestos inspection carried out in advance, and care should be taken when cleaning or scraping off paint since historic paint products may contain lead.

MATERIALS FOR NEW SHOPFRONTS

Materials should be chosen for their durability and appropriateness to the location: these may be different depending on the age of the main building but should not be plastic. Timber is encouraged since this is traditional for Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian shopfronts, but all wood should come from a sustainable source.



Clean lines and controlled use of colour enhance the streetscape. Picture Credit: Renfrewshire Council

Galvanized steel and untreated aluminium are not encouraged, but powder-coated aluminium will be considered if the parent building is not listed. Professional preparation and decoration of all timber surfaces is important and will improve the longevity of the work. Varnish does not successfully disguise different types of timber and should only be used where the timber is consistent across all parts of the shopfront and ideally hardwood.

Dumbarton's Art Deco frontages used granite (sometimes marble), sandstone, leaded glass windows, and bronze for decoration. Vitrolite, a coloured glass cladding material that rose to prominence in the inter-war period, is no longer made, but may be possible to source second hand. Existing Vitrolite, chrome, granite and bronze are all materials that are valuable, and should be repaired or cleaned by a specialist. Similarly, any leaded glass, or prism glass, should be repaired by a conservator.



Tiled platt at Glencairn Greit House

Painting of existing stonework is not recommended, and removal of paint from stone should be carried out by a specialist stonemasonry company. Samples of paint removal must always

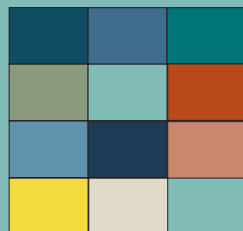
be tested on an inconspicuous area in advance, and approval sought from West Dunbartonshire Council.

The most cost effective and sustainable way to improve a shopfront is to repair materials that have years of life left. Existing door and window frames can be repaired rather than renewed, new glazing can be installed in existing frames, and colour schemes can be refreshed, and signage updated. Wherever possible, materials should be re-cycled or up-cycled. Historic features should be celebrated!



THE DUMBARTON COLOUR PALETTE

After years of modest trade in salmon, herring, cloth and hides, Dumbarton at last derived prosperity from the production of glass, which began around 1776 with the establishment of the Dumbarton Glassworks. For a period, while producing bottles and then window glass (using kelp ash from the Western Isles), the company's three tall conical



kilns located on the east bank of the River Leven were as much a defining feature of the skyline as Dumbarton Rock. Today, the glass-making tradition has inspired a range of colours that are recommended for use on new or restored shop frontages.

The blue tones reflect the sky and water wrapping around Dumbarton Rock, while the aquas, turquoise and yellow-greens are inspired by objects held in the West Dunbartonshire Council's Museums Collection (including glass and coins). The earthier colours are inspired by the boats, buildings and ropes along the River Leven.

STATUTORY CONSENTS

There are a number of permissions that may be required to alter a shopfront, and West Dunbartonshire Council's Planning Department will be able to advise on the procedures to be followed. **Planning Permission** will be required for any alteration to a shopfront that changes the character or external appearance of the building. Examples of these are altering fascias, adding blinds, awnings or shutters, or changing doors or display windows. There are a number of "listed" buildings in Dumbarton that are of architectural or historic merit, and any external or internal changes to a shopfront on a listed building will require **Listed Building Consent** (on which Historic Environment Scotland may be consulted). Since Dumbarton Town Centre is a Conservation Area, high standards of design and materials will be required to any shopfront within the CA: additionally, **Conservation Area Consent** may be required. Every

application will be dealt with on its own merits.

A **Building Warrant** may be required to ensure that any alterations are structurally sound and in accordance with the Scottish Building Standards Non-Domestic Technical Handbook (April 2024 Edition) in respect of safety, accessibility and sustainability. Additionally, **Advertising Consent** may be needed for the erection or replacement of advertisements and signs.

To make any of these applications to West Dunbartonshire Council, accurate "before and after" drawings in plan and elevation (as well as photographs) will be needed. Assistance in the preparation of these can be given by a chartered architect or building surveyor. The permissions must be in place before any construction work begins.

During construction work, it may be necessary to erect protective hoardings (or similar) and use a skip to dispose of debris and construction materials as work progresses. Encroaching on a pavement, even for a short time, or placing a skip on a road, requires permission from West Dunbartonshire Council. The builder or shopfitter should be able to organise these permits.

West Dunbartonshire Council can advise on any other restrictions that may be imposed during the construction or shop-fitting process, including storage of materials, disposal of rubbish and debris, control of noise and vibration, protection of pavements and roadways, working hours, and liaison with neighbours.

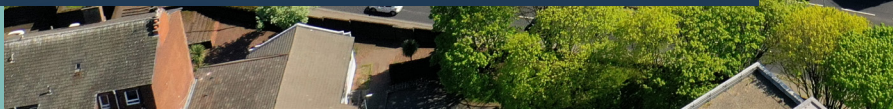


USEFUL CONTACTS AND FURTHER READING

For further information visit:

<https://www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk/business/> and <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/>
for a Short Guide on Scottish Traditional Shopfronts.

For a list of conservation-accredited architects visit www.rias.org.uk



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