



CORNICES

MAIN STREET IOWA TECHNOTES

The uppermost decorative trim on a building, the cornice can be one of the most character defining elements of the façade. The cornice is a visual “cap” to the façade that helps define the building and unifies the entire composition.

Cornices can be made from a number of materials and come in a wide variety of styles. One usually relates the term cornice with the ornate decorative metal cornices common on turn-of-the-century historic commercial buildings. But actually cornices are constructed from a number of materials in many different styles.

The earliest downtown buildings were often made of wood and incorporated a decorative cornice band. The cornice had brackets made by layering wood pieces cut in decorative patterns. Atop the brackets is a flat projecting panel faced with a molding or trim. While wood buildings in downtown are becoming scarce,

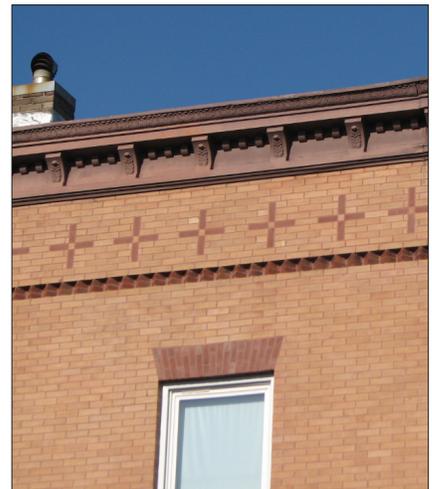
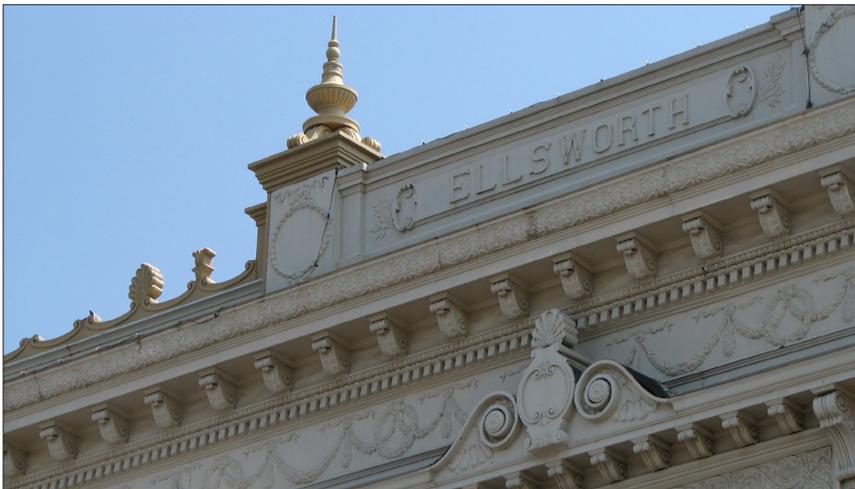
wood cornice brackets are still commonly seen on turn-of-the-century homes. Wood cornices face deterioration from moisture and rotting if they are not kept adequately painted. Repairs are straightforward; either fabricate a new matching piece or repair small areas of deterioration with wood epoxies.

Brick, terra cotta and stone are also common cornice materials. Bricks can be a portion of a larger composition or be a cornice by themselves. Brick corbels, where the individual bricks stair step out from the façade is one technique. A soldier course, where the brick is stood on end is another method. Soldier bricks are sometimes angled to create a “saw tooth” effect. Brick cornices are more common on buildings constructed after 1900 as designs and detailing became more simplified.

Terra cotta can be molded into limitless shapes and colored with

shiny glaze. Individual pieces are anchored to the façade with metal ties and mortared together. Glazed terra cotta often experiences spalling where a piece of the glaze breaks off, usually do to freeze-thaw cycles. Another common maintenance problem with terra cotta is that the metal anchors rust and swell causing the pieces to break or come loose.

The common metal cornice is actually constructed from a number of individual pieces. Decorative trims including dentil molding, egg and dart moldings, scrollwork and floral designs, and even lion’s heads and gargoyles are common. Typically a cornice will also have a series of regularly spaced brackets. Additional decoration can include finials or freestanding urns atop the cornice. Commonly, the cornice would incorporate the construction date of the building and it might also include the name of the original owner/builder.



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Metal cornices are reinforced and often attached to the façade with wood framing. If water is allowed to penetrate into the cornice, the framing can deteriorate and the lightweight metal can easily rust through. Once a hole is made in the cornice it becomes a favorite location for all types of birds since the interior is basically hollow. For this reason it is important to keep a metal cornice well maintained.

One of the most important, and easiest, maintenance procedures for a cornice is to keep it painted. Painting a metal cornice in a scheme that coordinates with the overall façade (whether a single color or a highly detailed scheme) helps to unify the entire building.

When painting the cornice any small cracks or holes should be patched and sealed. This can be as simple as caulking a seam. Also soldering a loose piece of a bracket or installing a small sheet metal

patch can help maintain the integrity of the cornice. Keeping the cornice watertight includes maintaining the top flashing so that it sheds water to keep the cornice from rusting.

The only solution for extremely deteriorated or missing pieces of a metal cornice is to replace them. Trims, brackets and ornamentation are still available from specialty suppliers. The most widely known supplier of cornice materials and decorative metal work is W.F. Norman Corp. of Nevada, MO. They have a broad inventory of components or they can custom manufacture pieces if needed.

If the entire cornice is missing, a new replacement can be constructed. The basic structure can be made by a sheet metal contractor and the trim pieces attached. Historic photos, and any physical evidence on the building should be used to design a true duplicate cornice.

Contemporary materials are also

available for constructing decorative cornices. Synthetic resins and plastics, like fiberglass, are becoming more and more prevalent as replacement materials for a variety of architectural ornamentation. These materials are lightweight and durable.

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One caution on replacement cornice designs: The new cornice should be an exact replica of the original design. If documentation is not available for the original design of the cornice, its design should be simplified and not over decorated. Just because the details and ornamentation are available does not mean they should be used!

With regular care, upkeep and occasional repairs as needed, a decorative cornice can continue to grace the upper portion of any turn-of-the-century commercial building for all to enjoy for many years to come.



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