



# TRANSOM WINDOWS

## MAIN STREET IOWA TECHNOTES

The traditional storefronts of downtown buildings have similar design elements. One of these elements is the transom windows. The transom windows are located in the upper portion of the storefront above the large display windows. They allow natural daylight to penetrate into the interior of the store. Over time, many original transom windows have been either covered or removed. Restoring the transom area can be one of the most effective ways to recapture the original design qualities of traditional commercial buildings.

Transom window glass comes in a wide variety of shapes, colors and styles. Some glass is clear, like the display windows, and some is frosted or etched to diffuse sunshine. Ribbed or reeded glass is also frequently used in transom windows. Varieties of stained glass, beveled glass and 4" square glass tiles are commonly used in leaded windows. Leaded windows have lead or zinc comes that hold together the pieces of glass. Angled reinforcing bars are also used to prevent the windows from sagging or bowing.

If your transom windows have been covered or altered, investigating the transom area is quite easy.

Often, original materials are simply covered and disguised rather than removed. By removing some of these later additions the condition of the windows can be determined.

First, from the inside check the ceiling area at the front of the store.

The original transoms may be intact above a suspended ceiling or they may be covered with sheetrock or plywood. This interior bulk-

head, or vertical wall, may have been built across the transom windows above the window display area. The bulkhead might have an access door to the transom window area. Insulation may have been installed across the transoms that can be moved for inspection, or the glass may have simply been painted to disguise the windows from the outside. When inspecting the transom area, be sure to check for any removed glass panels stored in the bulkhead space. Also check the basement or other storage areas.

Transom windows can be investigated from the exterior also. Any covering materials can be temporarily removed to check for transom

frames and windows. If removed carefully, the siding material can be replaced after inspection until a decision is made on restoring the area.

After the inspection is completed, the best restoration approach can be developed. Cracked or broken glass, missing glass tiles, and failing lead comes are common problems. It is also common to have transoms that were completely removed during previous remodeling and to have a suspended ceiling that has been installed, blocking the transom from view.

Cracked, broken or missing glass can be repaired by installing new matching pieces. Matching glass, however, can be difficult to find. Prismatic glass transom tiles are no longer manufactured and can only be salvaged from other buildings or found in architectural salvage yards or antique shops. Some types of frosted and reeded glass are still available. Check with a local stained glass company for more advice and examples of available glass.

### ***Transom window can be made of several types of glass:***

- ***clear***
- ***frosted or etched***
- ***ribbed or reeded***
- ***stained***
- ***beveled***
- ***4" square tiles***





If matching replacement glass is not available, it may become necessary to redesign and rebuild the transom windows. The best solution for redesigning a transom window can only be made on a case by case basis. Remember to incorporate as much of the original design and materials into the new window as possible.



Sensitive use of original materials and design will help maintain the historic character of the transom windows and the building.

Because matching replacement glass can be difficult to find, be certain to salvage any large or unbroken pieces that have to be removed. They may be useful to another project, even if they are no longer useful in their original location.

Entirely new transom windows can be built if the originals have been removed. New glass can be double or even triple paned, low-e glass, but it should be clear, not tinted. The frames should match the storefront windows in both material and detailing and should also be designed to follow the divisions of the storefront windows.

Sometimes a suspended ceiling is desired inside to

disguise mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems. By removing a section of the ceiling near the front of the building where there is little or no mechanical equipment, the transom windows and the light they provide can often be incorporated into the interior decor. The suspended ceiling can then be angled from the transoms to the lowered height.

A vertical bulkhead is another option for transition to the suspended ceiling.

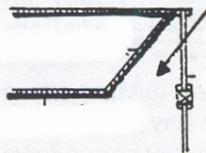
Transom windows can be made more energy efficient by adding additional glazing, commonly acrylic sheeting or plate glass, either on the interior or exterior. Additional glazing can also help protect the original glass from damage and abuse. Mounting and framing techniques vary for additional glazing, but both the frames and glazing should be

made as inconspicuous as possible. The secondary glazing can be either permanently fixed or removable, depending upon conditions and needs. Insulating curtains or shades can also be used to improve efficiency with the added benefit of controlling daylight.

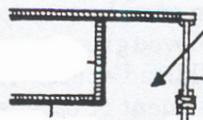
The natural daylight provided by transom windows is a pleasant addition to any type of business, and the transom window area is one of the most interesting portions of many historic buildings. With some good planning and guidance, the transom windows can easily become a major focal element in almost any building.

**By removing a section of the suspended ceiling at the front of the building, the transom windows can be incorporated into the interior decor.**

**The suspended ceiling can be angled from the transoms to the lowered height...**



**...or a vertical bulkhead can be built.**



### For More Information:

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### Additional Reading:

*"The Repair of Historic Wooden Window"*

*Preservation Brief #9  
U.S. Department of the Interior*

*"Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts"*

*Preservation Brief #11  
U.S. Department of the Interior*

*"Keeping Up Appearances" - A slide show and technical bulletin*

*National Trust for Historic Preservation  
Washington, D.C.*

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*"Traditional Window"*

*Mark London & Dina Bumbaru  
Heritage Montreal*

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