

Simple Building Improvements for (Almost) No Money

Or....

The Power of Paint!

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Many property owners and tenants, especially in small towns want to improve their property, but they simply can't afford to do an expensive total rehabilitation. Learn how even very small budget projects can have a big visual impact on a building and help create the very important positive momentum for your revitalization program.

Presentation Overview:

- Importance of simple improvements
- Types of simple low cost building improvements
- Appropriateness of simple projects
- Determining the “look”
- Analysis and Investigation
- Examples

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Defining “almost no money”

- Generally from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars
- Typically one or two story single bay buildings.
- The larger the building the higher “almost no money” gets!

Role of Low Cost Improvements

- Build Momentum for Revitalization Program

People can easily relate to a completed façade improvement. In most communities, there is not the immediate capacity to undertake large extensive (and costly) building rehabs. By getting some lower cost, highly visual projects completed, the program can begin to show results and create excitement and momentum for the revitalization efforts.

These projects can also help reinvigorate a program that may be struggling for any number of reasons.

- Show Possibilities to the Community

Early in the life of a program, people have misperceptions about what is meant by using historic preservation as a development tool. Successfully implementing some high quality low cost highly visual projects helps show people that preservation does not have to be costly to be effective.

- Build Capacity in Community

People learn most by example. People also mimic or copy successful strategies they see others use. Successful projects build investor confidence, and also improve the skills and experience of contractors, bankers and investors.

- Expand pool of participants in Design Improvements

For a variety of reasons, not every owner/business can implement a full scale total rehab. However, even a new signs, some paint or some other low cost improvements can provide an opportunity for almost every building owner to participate in property improvements.

Types of Projects

- Paint

Perhaps THE most dramatic improvement to any building can be a new, well coordinated paint scheme. It is important to think of the façade as an entire composition, not just the storefront. Use consistent colors from top to bottom. Some contrast and highlights help bring out the architectural character too.

- Signs

Every business should have a sign. There is no excuse for not having a well designed sign that is compatible to both the character of the building and the image of the business. Most signs can be installed with minimal impact to the integrity of the building. Signs that damage or remove façade components should be avoided.

- Awnings

One of the most common improvements to traditional commercial buildings are awnings. Awnings add color and texture. They also add additional character to the façade. They can also be very effective in disguising inappropriate alterations to facades – like transom removal, and the reduction in size of upper floor windows.

- Drop Ceilings

Suspended acoustical ceilings have been installed for a number of reasons. One common reason is to improve energy efficiency. Often, they simply cover new mechanical systems and wiring and house new light fixtures. Uncovering a historic pressed metal ceiling is one of the most dramatic interior improvements an owner can implement. The cost can vary dramatically depending upon the amount and type of systems in place above the suspended ceiling.



One technique that can be used to achieve positive results with less cost is to remove only the front portion of the suspended ceiling.

This creates a “wow” factor at the entrance/front of the building and minimizes the need to relocate services.

- Siding/Slipcovers

Various elements of facades get covered with a wide variety of materials for a wide variety of reasons. Removing these materials from the façade almost always has a very dramatic visual effect on the façade.



Slipcovers are often installed quickly and inexpensively so they can be easily removed as well. However, it is CRITICAL to investigate these projects carefully because the costs can quickly escalate depending upon the conditions of the original façade and the siding and anchoring systems used. Slipcovers and siding that have been installed in limited areas (like transom windows) are usually the easiest and least expensive projects.

- Transoms

One of the areas most commonly altered on traditional downtown buildings is the transom window area. As suspended ceilings are installed and large over scaled signs added, the traditional transom often becomes obscured. The advent of higher quality lighting systems also reduced the need for the natural light transoms provide for the



store interior.

Transom windows often have decorative and unique glass elements. These unique components are not typically used in contemporary construction and add a great deal to the quality and character of a storefront.

The historic transom glass is very often intact behind newer siding systems. The farther the contemporary materials are built out, the better chance original transoms are intact. Also, the presence of historic window frames and other details reinforce this. Often the entire intact transom can be seen with a little investigative digging.



•Upper Windows

As upper floor spaces were abandoned, the windows commonly are covered to minimize maintenance needs. More times than not, the original windows are intact and simply covered with plywood or other similar materials. Uncovering them is fairly straightforward.



The costs of repairing existing windows will vary greatly depending upon condition. It is a fairly labor intensive project to repair the sash, glazing and other components. Sash are typically deteriorated and need repairs including epoxies and/or reinforcing. Total sash replacement is rarely needed unless the upper floor is undergoing total renovation.



A very effective project that dramatically improves the appearance of the upper floor windows is a “curtain program”. Installing curtains in upper floor windows of vacant space helps create the image of occupancy. This can be as simple as tacking old sheets across the tops of the windows and adding simple tie-backs. Local service groups including Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts can undertake an upper floor curtain program.



Q) Is this an Appropriate Strategy?

- A) That depends.....

Communities that have a history of undertaking (and completing) rehab projects will find this strategy less important. The need for implementation should not over ride the importance of doing high quality historic preservation projects.

There is also a danger that people will think that they are “finished” with improving their properties once they’ve implemented a simple, low cost improvement project. It’s important to stress that buildings need constant care and attention. Regular maintenance is critical.

Determine the “Look”

- Design Assistance Programs

Many revitalization programs will provide professional assistance to guide building rehabs. Many state or regional programs provide this type of service. However, many communities do not have access to these services and must provide their own.

There is a wide variety of resources available even if no design professionals are available locally.

These include materials available from the National Park Service and the National Trust. There are also various materials available from the private sector including paint schemes and awning swatches.



- Assessing the Current Situation

Both a physical and a photographic analysis should be completed as part of any building or façade rehab project. Each will give some clue as to what materials are still intact and how the building appeared at various times. Many times it is quite easy to remove later alterations and materials to uncover original materials that are still intact. A variety of historic photos are invaluable to help analyze alterations over time.

It’s always important to get a little lucky too! We’ve found removed transom window panels still on site in various places and even found entire storefront systems stored in the basement – with glass still intact!

As important as façade improvements are, it is critical to first address any and all maintenance and structural concerns. Foundations, roof and drainage systems should be repaired before cosmetic improvements are made. While these projects aren’t particularly “sexy” they are critical.



- Restoration versus Beautification

Many of these simple visual projects will never win restoration awards. However, they do have a large “bang for the buck” impact and often can be very high quality. If done well, they do have a strong positive impact on the general appearance of the district.

One of the keys in making any rehab project successful is using the assistance of experienced design professionals or at least experienced “rehabbers”. Many projects face similar issues, chances are someone in the

community has faced a similar situation or knows someone that can offer good advice and assistance. **Get advice!**

Implementation

•Investigation and Analysis

Many projects will include any number of the individual elements described above - some selective removal, painting, some upper floor window treatments, a new sign, maybe a new awning. On site investigation and some selected demolition can help prioritize an implementation strategy. Budget constraints and visual impact must be considered too. Some high impact projects can be finished in just a few hours – like uncovering a transom window or installing curtains in upper story windows. Others are more labor and time intensive like repairing wood window sash.

•Hire or “DIY” or volunteers?

Each choice has both pros and cons. Hiring all the work done will increase the costs and may delay implementation if it is difficult to locate and secure a contractor. However, it should remove any liability concerns and some things are best left to professionals, like repointing. “Do-It-Yourself” (DIY) is the most cost effective but it also assumes that you have both the skills and the time to do the project. Using volunteers can be good, but it can also be a “crap shoot”. The skill levels and commitment of volunteers needs to be carefully analyzed and weighed.



There are also liability concerns with volunteer labor.

•Long Term Issues/Responsibilities

A major drawback with low cost improvements is the psychological implication that a project has been completed and therefore needs no further attention. Ideally, these projects will become a catalyst for additional investment in the district and improve the overall economic climate in the community to the point where a more significant rehab is justified. And as stated before, most of these projects are cosmetic; they do not substitute for necessary structural repairs and on-going maintenance.

Many of these projects are fairly short term- paint doesn't last forever. Signs will change as the business changes. Awnings need new fabric in about 10 years. And many will fail to address some issues that detract from the historic character of the building.

Low cost façade improvements play an important role in the revitalization process. But they are just one component.

Case Studies/Examples Questions?

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