

Shading Downtown: Awnings and Canopies



Awnings are fabric structures on a metal frame or roller system that are bolted to the front wall. Canopies are usually flat projections that are suspended over the sidewalk entry usually built with beams extending into the interior of the structure, usually at the ceiling joists, to support the canopy and often with chains or rods tied back to the second-floor wall for additional bracing. Canopies would not be a good choice for new storefront improvements if they didn't exist already as they can cause a major structural stress load on the front wall of the building.



An awning or canopy can be both a decorative and functional addition to your storefront. It serves as an energy saver by regulating the amount of sunlight that enters your window. Shaded by an awning or canopy, shoppers are enticed to stop, look, and step inside. Awnings contribute color and variety to the building design and can soften the transition between the lower and upper portions of the façade. Original awnings or canopies found on buildings should be maintained, be structurally sound, and should not be removed from the building. There are a variety of new awnings and canopies that could be appropriate to use, depending on the building's time period of construction.

Canopies were generally not used on downtown storefronts until about the 1920s or 1930s. If there is currently a canopy, then one may consider taking it off and using a canvas awning, which might be acceptable if it is not the original treatment on the building. However, owners may also focus on repairing or refinishing an existing canopy. Some canopies historically served as the ledge for signage with lettering resting on top of the edge of the canopy or by placing lettering on the edge/face of the canopy. The following points will help determine the best solution when selecting an awning or canopy for your historic building:

- 1. Atmosphere:** An awning or canopy creates a pleasant space in front of your building. It provides shade, shelter, and a resting place where pedestrians can pause and get out of the flow of traffic.
- 2. Temperature Control:** Awnings and canopies regulate the amount of sunlight that comes in your windows. Buildings facing north probably don't need an awning or canopy but for a south facing building, awnings and canopies can be excellent climate control devices.
- 3. Type:** Operable or fixed? An operable, roll-out awning shades your window during the hot, sunny days. It also lets sunlight into your building on cold days, allowing the heat into the interior. Granted, operable awnings are more expensive; however, the reduced energy consumption utilizing one could offset the extra cost.
- 4. Visual Appeal:** As a visual element, an awning or canopy can add character and interest to your storefront. Be sure to look at the neighboring buildings and imagine what impact the addition of an awning or canopy will have on the character of the streetscape. Generally, flat awnings are more appropriate to match the style of the building.
- 5. Materials:** Awnings can be constructed from a variety of materials. The choices are endless with canvas, vinyl, metal, and acrylic. A vinyl awning can be very attractive but be sure to consider the look with the rest of your building. Vinyl is also shiny most of the time and tends to be inappropriate for buildings on Main Street.
- 6. Fastening:** Canopies are usually constructed of metal and wood. They should be securely fastened to the façade typically with steel beams and rods or chains angled back to the wall for added support. Be sure to position these rods or chains so that they blend into the design of the upper façade.

Shading Downtown: Awnings and Canopies



Before choosing a color for your awning or canopy, look at the entire building. If your building has minimal architectural details, then a bright colored awning or canopy may be appropriate. However, if your building is more decorative, then a subtler colored awning or canopy would be more appropriate.

- Select an awning or canopy color that enhances the existing building features and colors.
- The choice of pattern would depend on the character of the façade.
- Awnings and canopies have long been used to display the names of businesses. Keep the message simple and direct. Signs are best located on the sides and flaps of the awnings to be visible to pedestrians and be sure that they are attached at the fascia of the canopies.
- Make sure the material that you choose is guaranteed weather resistant. Most woods and metals used in canopies should be painted to resist weathering. Sun bleaching is another aspect of weathering that needs to be fully considered.



- Awnings or canopies are not appropriate solutions for every storefront design. However, when they are well-designed and properly placed, awnings or canopies can save money, protect window display merchandise, spruce up the storefront, and create a pleasant sidewalk space for shoppers.
- Ensure proper placement for awnings by placing them at the edge of display window and entry openings. They may not need to extend to the outer edge of the façade.

Please refer to Preservation Brief 44 for additional information

