

## Expose Your Transoms

If you have been in any Main Street or historic downtown area in Oregon, you have seen many commercial buildings whose potential architectural beauty and viability as a storefront has at one point been hidden by alterations and cover-ups. You have also seen the remarkable transformation when these buildings are restored to their former glory. One common alteration that can easily be restored is the covering of transom windows.

Transom windows are components of historic storefronts and are traditionally placed above some entrance doors, display windows, and in other locations. Transoms were originally meant to provide adequate ventilation and natural light to a storefront, and when electricity and air-conditioning became more common, it became more efficient for many building owners to simply drop the ceilings heights for ductwork, cover the windows, and bring in electric lighting and temperature control. It also was a way to provide additional signage space on the façade of a business. As technology and understanding of historically-used passive temperature control methods have improved, we have developed approaches for the restoration of original transoms including both the



*(Top) Dayton downtown block before restoration. (Bottom) Dayton downtown block design assistance suggestions, including revealing covered transom windows.*

restoration of the original ceiling height with maintained energy efficiency and a more frugal restoration that allows dropped ceilings to remain in the interior. Uncovering transom windows and replacing transoms where they have been removed improves a building's appearance and its historic character.

A damaged transom window can be repaired just like any other window in your building. If your storefront was remodeled in the past, the original transoms may still be there and simply hidden under 20th-century remodeling materials such as plywood or stucco. These windows may even be simply hidden under metal or fabric awnings attached to your building's façade!

### Evaluating Your Storefront

- Research for historic documentation and physical evidence of the original materials and fenestration patterns. Check your local historical society or museum for photographs of your building. If there is not enough existing documentation and you would like to undertake a transom restoration project to improve your storefront, consider using detailing that is reflective of the building's historic character.
- Determine if you would like to retain the dropped ceiling or restore the original ceiling height, if applicable.



**Oregon Heritage**

[www.OregonHeritage.org](http://www.OregonHeritage.org)

[oregon.heritage@opr.d.oregon.gov](mailto:oregon.heritage@opr.d.oregon.gov)

(503) 986-0690

## Beginning Your Project

- Define a budget and identify the local government-design guidelines for your neighborhood. These can likely be found on the website for your city or county.
- If your building is on the National Register as a single property or part of a historic district, familiarize yourself with the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation](#).
- Identify contractors or consultants with experience on historic buildings to assist with your project. (See [Heritage Bulletin #8](#) for tips on finding the right contractors for your project)

## Exposing Your Transom

- If your project does not have the budget for a full restoration, consider reconfiguring the existing drop ceiling with a setback that allows the transom to be visible from the exterior of the building.
- Try to match the original materials and construction techniques of your windows as much as possible during preservation, maintenance, and repair.
- If the glass itself is in need of repair or re-glazing, consider hiring a professional with expertise in historic windows and glass for this portion of the project.
- Share your clear goals and standards for the final product with the contractors who will be undertaking the process of exposing your storefront's transoms.

No two historic buildings are exactly the same, and every feature has something special to bring to your business and your community. By exposing the transom windows of your building, you will have taken a step toward improving the character and quality of your entire neighborhood. Thank you for doing your part to preserve Oregon's heritage!



*Oregon City's Busch Building before project started (top). Busch Building during construction (middle). Busch Building after project is completed (bottom).*

**Written by Samantha Gordon**



**Oregon Heritage**

[www.OregonHeritage.org](http://www.OregonHeritage.org)

[oregon.heritage@opr.d.oregon.gov](mailto:oregon.heritage@opr.d.oregon.gov)

(503) 986-0690