

# Storefront Improvements



**A Guide for  
Neighborhood  
Commercial Districts**

**NYC**  
Small Business  
Services

careers  
businesses  
neighborhoods

The Department of Small Business Services (SBS) helps unlock economic potential and create economic security for all New Yorkers by connecting New Yorkers to good jobs, creating stronger businesses, and building thriving neighborhoods across the five boroughs. For more information, visit: [nyc.gov/sbs](http://nyc.gov/sbs).

**Special thanks to the following New York City agencies and Mayoral offices:**

Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
Department of Buildings  
Department of City Planning  
Department of Transportation  
Department of Sanitation

**North American Partners:**

SF New Deal 501(c)(3) and the San Francisco City Planning Commission  
City of Minneapolis Great Streets Program  
City of Chicago Department of Planning and Development

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# Why Storefront Improvements Matter

**Storefronts are important to New York City neighborhoods.** They house local businesses, are a visible part of the street, and define the character and feel of a community. Well-designed storefronts support the economic health of a neighborhood and give identity to the commercial district.

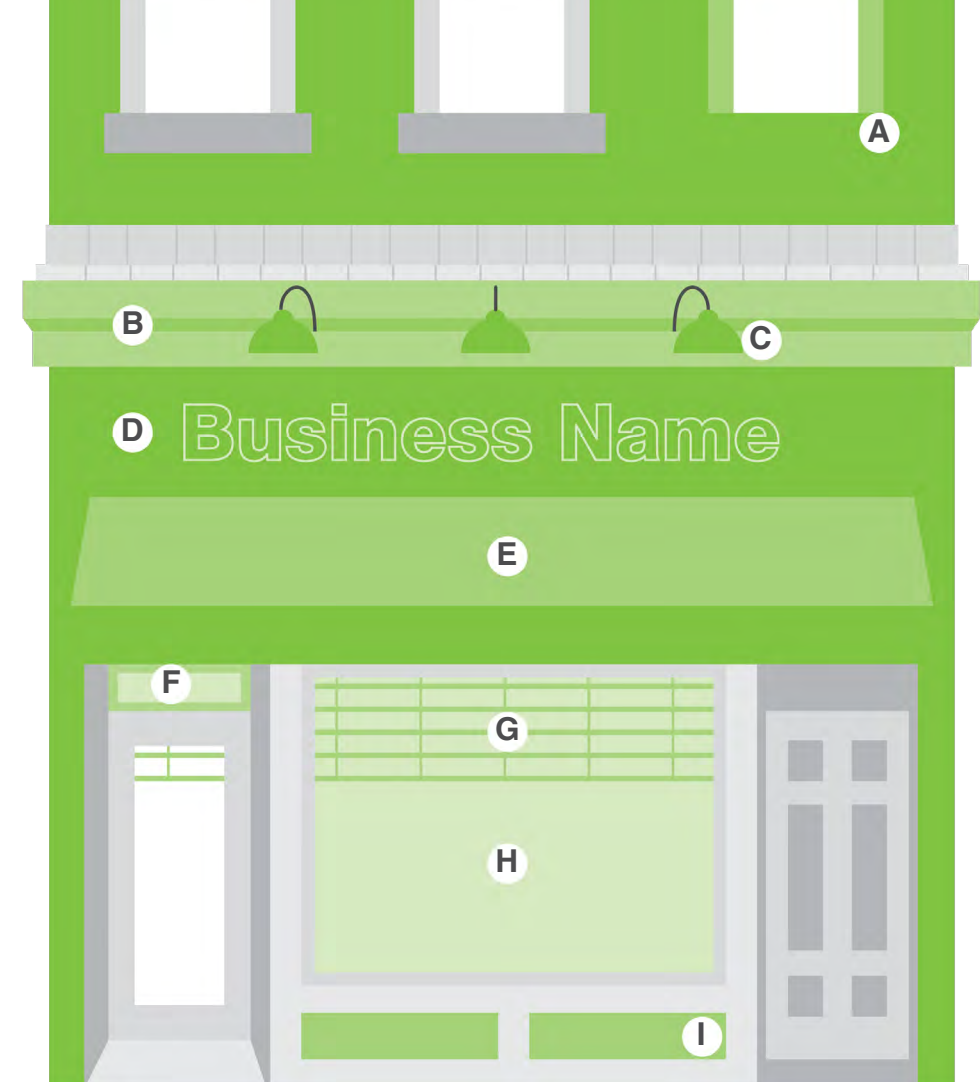
Storefront improvement is a simple way to upgrade the visual appeal of a commercial district, making it a place where people want to live, work, and play. Improving a storefront often results in increased customer foot traffic and sales.

This guide to storefront improvements will help you understand the parts of a traditional storefront—the sign, awning, lighting, display window, and security devices—and make good design decisions. It also includes an overview of some costs and regulations related to storefronts and guidance to activate vacant storefronts in your neighborhood.

# What Makes a Storefront?

**The guiding principle of good storefront design is to keep it simple.** Following these guidelines will help business owners attract customers, save money, promote a safe and active neighborhood, and follow city regulations.

Not all buildings have every part described here, but the following are common to most building types in New York City.



## A Windows

Upper floor windows should preserve and maintain existing building details.

## B Cornice

The cornice is a significant decorative and unifying piece of the storefront. Be sure to preserve existing materials.

## C Lighting

Lighting is used to illuminate signage and display windows. Good lighting is both eye-catching to shoppers and enhances safety.

## D Signage

Signs provide the best space to advertise the name of a business. Effective signs are simple; they are not too large and fit within the scale of the building.

## E Awning

Awnings add depth to the storefront and protect shoppers and window displays from sun and bad weather. They should fit appropriately above windows and doors and not project too far over the sidewalk.

## F Transom Window

Transom windows allow for more light to enter the store. Keep them clear of opaque materials like cardboard or air conditioning units.

## G Security

Security is important for protecting businesses and making customers feel safe. Open-grille security gates can be installed on the interior or exterior of the store.

## H Display Window

Display windows provide a great opportunity to show off merchandise. Be sure to limit visual clutter to preserve window transparency.

## I Bulkhead

Bulkheads create a defined platform for window displays and are located at the base of the storefront. They should be proportionate to the size of the building.

# Top 10 Storefront Tips

## 1 Get started and keep it simple!

Any storefront improvement is better than no storefront improvement. Your project does not need to be complicated or expensive. Even the addition of small planter boxes or a fresh coat of paint can do wonders to upgrade the appeal of your business!

## 2 The sidewalk is your friend

Well-designed sandwich boards and outdoor seating can help make the sidewalk attractive and encourage foot traffic. Remember to always refer to your local code to see what items you can and can not put on the sidewalk. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/sidewalks](https://nyc.gov/sidewalks)

## 3 Rethink security grilles

City law requires that all new and existing security grilles maintain at least 70% visibility no later than July 1, 2026. Replacing your security grille with an electronic security system or open-grille gate will increase the visual appeal of your business, improve nighttime security, and allow customers to window shop after hours.

## 4 Make it easy to see into your store

Let your merchandise speak for itself. Clear windows with minimal clutter invite customers into stores.

## 5 Show your building's history

Beautiful historic buildings are often covered by layers of modern materials. Removing these layers may reveal historic detail that will add character and draw attention to your store.

## 6 Know your neighborhood

Each neighborhood has its own unique character. Ensure the look of your storefront emphasizes this character and appeals to local customers.

## 7 Choose quality materials

Cheap materials break down and often need replacing. If your storefront is in disrepair, shoppers will be discouraged from entering. You will save more money in the long run by choosing quality materials.

## 8 Know who you're hiring

Most storefront work, including providing accessible access as well as the installation of awnings and large signs, requires a permit from the NYC Department of Buildings. Architects, engineers, and sign hangers must be licensed and insured. Choosing reputable contractors will help you avoid unnecessary fines.

## 9 Don't forget maintenance

Clean windows and awnings regularly, and keep signs, bulkheads, and lighting in good repair. A fresh coat of paint is a good investment as is regular repair of brick or masonry.

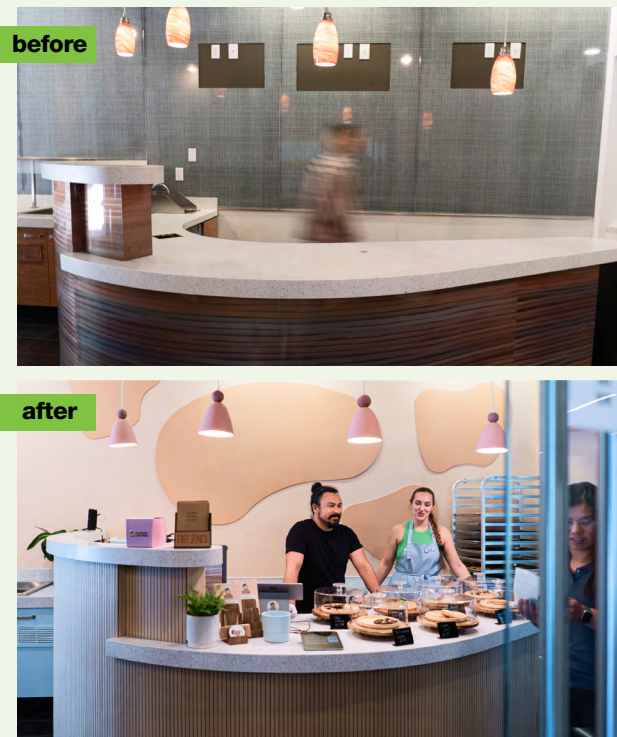
## 10 Use inviting lighting

Install lighting to showcase signage, window displays, or other building details. It makes the storefront more pleasant and the rest of the street safer.

# Storefront Activation Strategies

Storefront improvements are vital to mitigating the negative effects of storefront vacancies. While short-term storefront vacancy is a natural part of the commercial real estate cycle, sometimes signaling a healthy real estate market, long-term vacancies can hinder the vitality of a corridor. By activating vacant storefronts, corridors can increase foot traffic and improve perceptions of safety and vitality. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/storefronts](https://nyc.gov/storefronts)

New York City is not alone in its efforts to activate storefronts. Cities across the United States are deploying a variety of strategies to support their commercial corridors.



**City:** San Francisco, CA

**Program:** Vacant to Vibrant

**Facilitators:**  
SF New Deal and City & County of San Francisco Office of Economic Workforce Development

**Years active:** 2023 – present

- **Mission:** Vacant to Vibrant is a city-funded program that aims to revive San Francisco’s Downtown by helping small businesses, entrepreneurs, artists, and cultural organizations activate vacant storefronts through temporary pop-ups. Learn more at: [vibrantsf.org](https://vibrantsf.org)
- **Impact:** At the close of the first cohort, 7 out of 9 storefronts signed long-term leases.
- **Key Takeaways:** Activating vacant storefronts with temporary and lease-supported pop-ups can provide small businesses with the opportunity to expand to new neighborhoods and become long-term community partners.



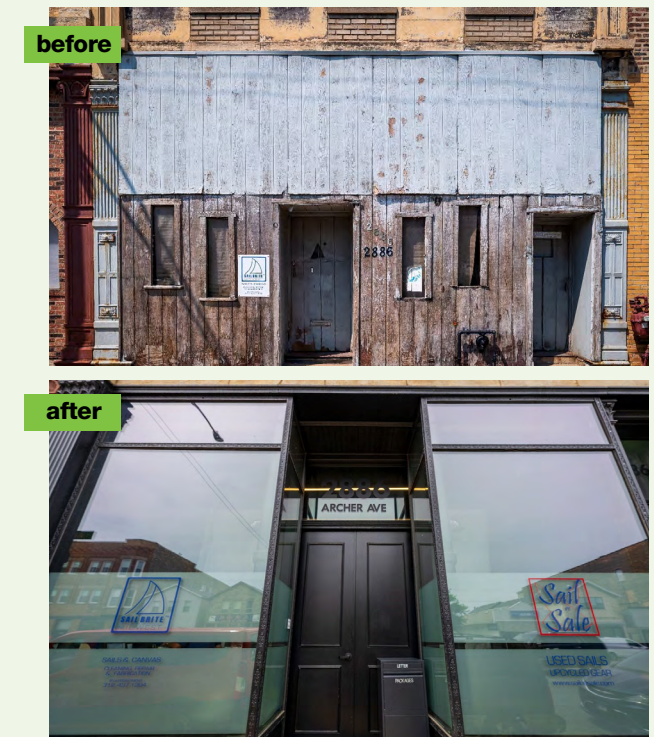
**City:** Minneapolis, MN

**Program:** The Great Streets Program

**Facilitators:**  
The City of Minneapolis Department of Community Planning & Economic Development

**Years active:** 2007 – present

- **Mission:** The Great Streets Program provides funding tools for commercial district revitalization through Façade Improvement Matching Grants, Business District Support Grants, and Real Estate Redevelopment Gap Financing Loans. The City partners with community organizations to implement these programs across Minneapolis. Learn more at: [minneapolismn.gov/government/programs-initiatives](https://minneapolismn.gov/government/programs-initiatives)
- **Impact:** The Great Streets program uses a holistic strategy to support the health of commercial corridors. In FY24, the Great Streets program funded art installations in vacant storefronts, outdoor markets, and holiday events, in addition to supporting storefront façade improvements.
- **Key Takeaways:** When it comes to activating a storefront, public events and community programs are just as important as façade improvements.



**City:** Chicago, IL

**Program:** Small Business Improvement Fund (SBIF)

**Facilitators:**  
SF New Deal and City & County of San Francisco Office of Economic Workforce Development

**Years active:** 2021 – present

- **Mission:** The Small Business Improvement Fund (SBIF) is a city-funded reimbursement program designed to facilitate capital projects on behalf of Chicago’s small business community along commercial corridors. SBIF is a non-competitive grant derived from Tax Increment Finance (TIF) revenues in designated TIF districts citywide. These funds help to activate storefronts and permanent building improvements for businesses that may otherwise have difficulty doing so.
- **Impact:** Since the program’s inception, more than \$118 million in grants have been provided to more than 1,570 businesses across Chicago.
- **Key Takeaways:** SBIF leverages public resources to provide small businesses with the unique opportunity to expand their operations and to modernize their facilities. This program helps to maintain the vitality and accessibility of the city’s commercial corridors, all while defraying improvement costs for small business owners.

# Signage

Signs are one of the most common and effective ways of drawing attention to a business. A good sign is memorable and showcases the quality and personality of a business and neighborhood. The simpler the sign, the more attention it will likely get. A bigger, busier sign is not necessarily better—if a sign is too cluttered, customers may pass it by. See the Regulations & Zoning section for more info.

## Channel Letter Signs

Channel letter signs are usually internally lit and made from metal or plastic. They can be highly visible and mounted directly to a building or sign panel.



## Flat Panel Signs

These common signs are mounted flat against the building between the cornice and awning. They can be made from a variety of durable materials like carved wood, metal, and acrylic.



## Window Signs

Signs located in display windows can be low-cost and attractive. These include hand painted signs and simple decals that don't cover too much window space.



## Blade Signs

Blade signs, also known as shingle signs, hang perpendicular to a building and are a good way to attract customers on foot, bike, or car. They are mounted to a building with brackets that can be simple or decorative.



No Permit Required

Non-illuminated signs that are six (6) square feet in total area or less, or those that are painted on an exterior wall, do not need a permit, but they must comply with the local zoning regulations for signs.

Keep in mind: signs greater than six (6) square feet in total area require a sign permit and all signs on landmarked buildings or in historic districts require a permit issued by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/landmark-storefronts](http://on.nyc.gov/landmark-storefronts)



Neon Signs

Simple neon signs are noticeable day and night. When well-placed and maintained, they add a unique and custom look to a storefront.



Historic Signs

When maintained, older signs can make businesses stand out and showcase the character and history of a neighborhood.



Illuminated Signs

Some commercial zoning districts allow illuminated accessory signs. Some don't. Flashing illuminated signs are prohibited in some areas and the Zoning Regulation should be consulted when near an arterial or public park.



Three-Dimensional Letter Signs

Three-dimensional letters, mounted to a sign panel or building façade, add interest and texture to a storefront. They come in a variety of materials that range in durability and cost.



❌ Don't install oversized signs that cover building details.



❌ Don't put too much information on signs. They appear cluttered and are hard to read.

# Awnings

Awnings help define storefronts and embellish the commercial street. They provide shade to protect merchandise from the sun and shelter customers from bad weather. Awnings should fit within or just above storefront doors and windows and should not be used to cover architectural details or damaged parts of a building.

This clean, simple awning is made from durable canvas material, fits well within the storefront framing, and does not cover building details.



Awnings should be placed below the sign and/or cornice and within or just above the window opening.

Lettering on awnings can be no higher than 12 inches and only the name and address of the business can appear.

Awnings may not project more than 8 feet beyond the street line provided that no part of the awning is less than 8 feet above the ground or sidewalk level, and provided that the awning box or cover does not project more than 12 inches.

Awnings can be no lower than 8 feet framed and 7 feet unframed above the sidewalk.

If the building and windows are in good repair, angled awnings without bottoms or sides appear cleaner and more open.

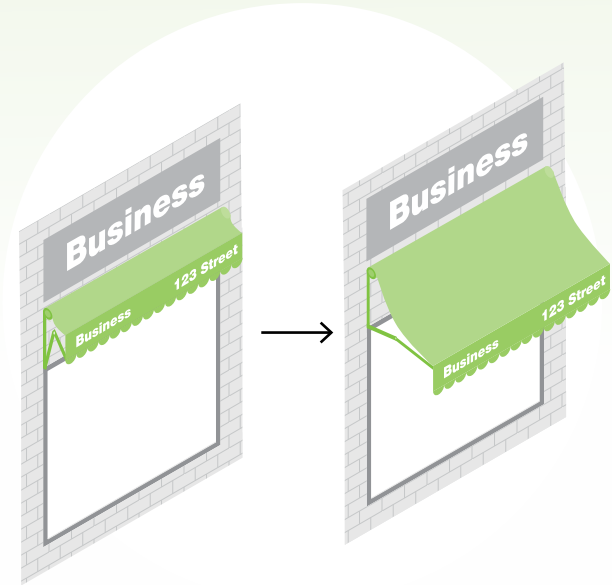
**Fixed Awnings**

Fixed awnings are durable and easy to clean. They should be made from high-quality, weather resistant canvas rather than cheaper alternatives like vinyl.



**Retractable Awnings**

Retractable awnings are a great choice for restaurants with outdoor seating or stores with products for sale in windows or on the sidewalk. Their classic look creates an inviting appearance to any storefront. Remember—signs and displays cannot extend more than 3 feet into the sidewalk from the building or higher than 5 feet.



**✗ Don't put corporate logos on awnings. Only the business name and address can appear.**



**✗ Shouldn't cover large portions of the building or hide architectural details.**



# Lighting

Lighting not only enhances the appeal of storefronts and the commercial street, it also increases public safety. Good lighting can help advertise products in display windows and allow customers to see inside during evening hours. All lighting should be energy efficient and installed by a licensed electrician.

Storefront lighting should be directed and used with purpose—to illuminate a sign, entrance, or display window. Refrain from installing too many fixtures or directing light away from the storefront.

## Exterior and Interior Lighting

Light fixtures should provide warm, ambient lighting to the sidewalk, enhancing the safety of pedestrians and attractiveness of the street. Interior lighting promotes the products and services inside a business at all hours. It can also prevent break-ins.

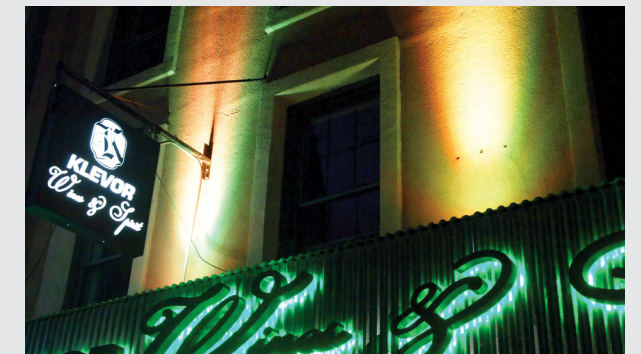


## Fixtures

Choose fixtures that complement the storefront design and building details. Gooseneck lights and sconces are popular options.



✗ **Don't** use flashing lights or lights that project above the storefront. They are against city regulations.



✗ **Don't** use lighting that shines into residential upper floors.

# Security

The security of streets and businesses is important. Business owners should feel their stores are protected and shoppers should feel they are safe in the neighborhood. Electronic security systems are recommended instead of security gates as they discourage graffiti and allow customers to view merchandise 24 hours a day.

## Security Camera Systems

Cameras, available in a range of sizes and styles, can be easily incorporated into any storefront. Various backup or video retention options and the ability to view footage from mobile devices make contemporary security camera systems a great alternative to security gates.

Security cameras can be installed discreetly on a storefront or in a prominent position to further deter crime.



## Open-Grille Security Gates

In 2009, the City of New York passed a law banning the installation of solid-panel security grilles for commercial stores. If you choose to install security grilles on buildings in occupancy groups B or M, city law requires that such grilles, when closed, shall permit at least 70% visibility from the sidewalk.

New and existing security grilles that do not meet this requirement must be replaced with compliant open security grilles by July 1, 2026. The Department of Buildings may fine non-compliant businesses \$250 for the first offenses and not less than \$1,000 for each subsequent offense. There will be no penalty for such violations if the respondent corrects the condition within 90 days and files a certificate.

Open-security grilles are just as effective as solid-panel grilles when it comes to preventing break-ins and allow customers and police to see inside a business at night. Open security grilles ensure merchandise is always on display, prevent graffiti, and allow interior light to shine on the sidewalk, improving corridor safety and vibrancy, especially at night. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/1175of2009](https://on.nyc.gov/1175of2009)

This retailer has installed open-security grilles inside the store for security and compliance with city law.



✗ **Don't** use solid-panel gates, they close off the streetscape and make an area appear darker and less safe.



✗ **Don't** use gates with less than 70% transparency, they attract graffiti and reduce visibility.

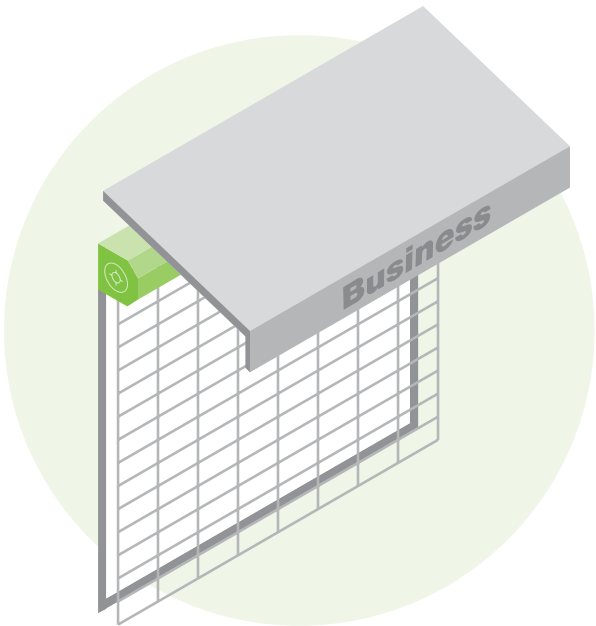
Gateboxes

Gateboxes that house security gates when not in use are unattractive additions to a storefront. Installing the gatebox inside the store, behind the display window is ideal. At a minimum, it should be hidden behind the awning. If none of these options are feasible, paint the gatebox to fit with the building or signage color scheme.



Inside

Interior installation conceals the gate’s mechanical systems allowing for a clean and open storefront.



Under Awning

Covering the gatebox with an awning can be a good alternative to interior installation. Be sure to keep the awning at a simple angle rather than build an odd shape around the gatebox.



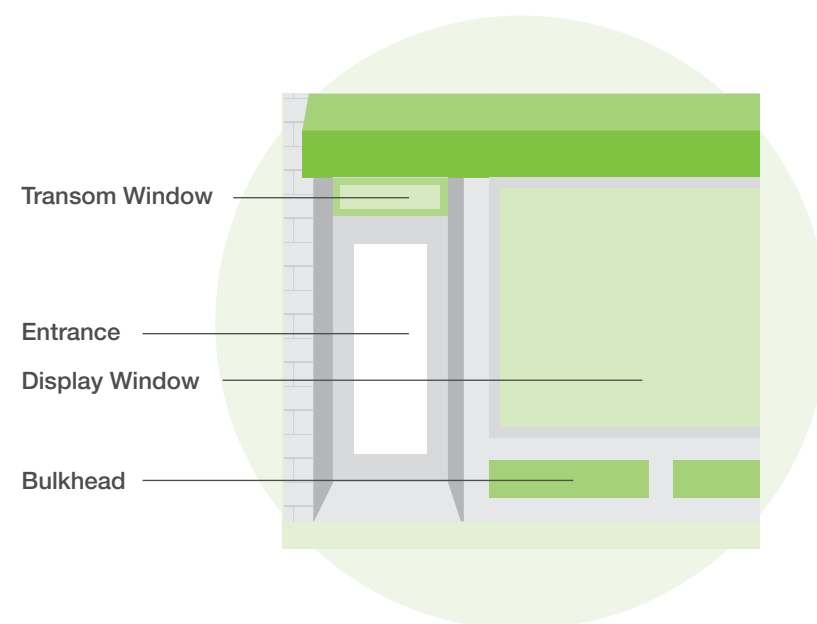
Painted

This painted gatebox complements the color and design of the storefront.

# Framing, Windows, & Entrances

Framing, windows, and entrances together make what is referred to as the “storefront system.” All the parts within the storefront system should be compatible; the materials, color, and scale of these parts should work together to make a pleasant design that attracts customers and enhances the commercial corridor.

When renovating and replacing a storefront system, be sure to consider all components, including solid framing and bulkheads, large display windows, transom windows, and inviting and barrier-free accessible entrances.



## Storefront Framing

The two most common choices for framing materials are metal or wood.



### Metal Frame

Metal storefronts come in a variety of prices, depending on the material (e.g., aluminum or steel) and finish (e.g., color coated or rustic finish).



### Wood Frame

Wood storefronts are an attractive option, especially if the wood is original to the building. Keep in mind that wood can be more expensive and may need more maintenance.

**Bulkheads**

Bulkheads are commonly made of wood or masonry. They can also be surfaced with ceramic tiling, metal panels, marble, or other materials. They create a defined platform for window displays and add interesting detail to the streetscape.



**Windows**

Storefronts should have plenty of window space, allowing customers to see clearly into the store. Transparent windows help increase the safety and appeal of the storefront by maintaining a visual connection between the interior of the store and the sidewalk. In historic buildings, new display windows should match or recall the historic display windows or be based on typical historic storefronts found within the historic district, to harmonize with the building and the neighborhood.

When installing new windows or replacing existing windows, an energy analysis in compliance with the current NYC Energy Code (NYCECC) is required. Learn more about the NYECC here: [on.nyc.gov/nycecc](https://on.nyc.gov/nycecc)

**Multipane Windows**

Using several panes of glass rather than one or two full-sized ones can help reduce costs and save expenses on maintenance when glass may need replacing.



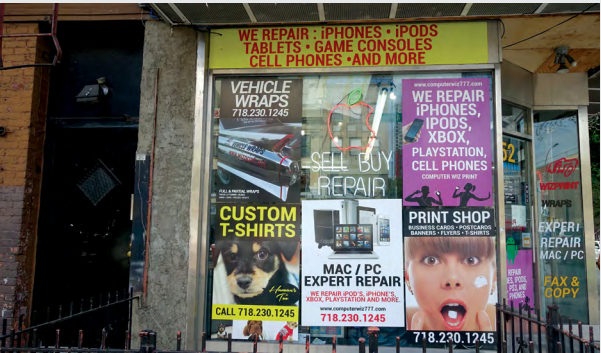
**Display Window**

Window displays provide a great opportunity to add creativity to a storefront and highlight merchandise without high costs. Lighting, color, and arrangement of products can leave a lasting impression on customers.



**Transom Window**

Clean transom windows allow for more light and can serve a decorative function.



**✗ Don't have too many signs, posters, or products that clutter windows.** City regulations require at least 50% transparency in display windows.



**✗ Don't fill transom windows with an air conditioning unit or opaque materials.** Air conditioning units often drip and make entrances unsightly.

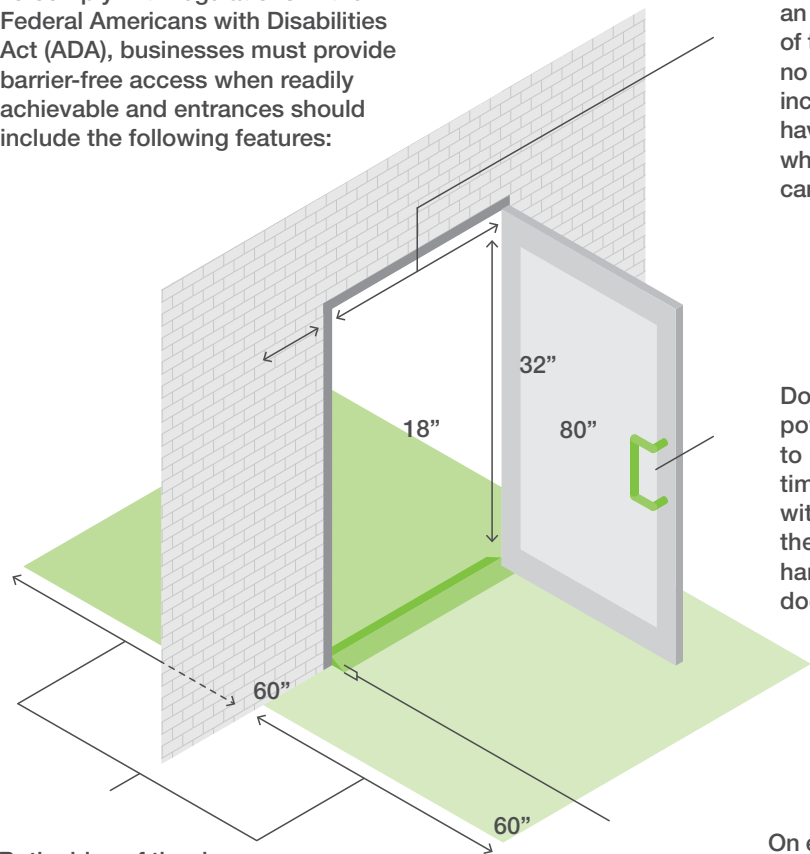
Entrances

Entrances should be clearly marked and welcoming to all customers. Doors should be made from durable, commercial grade materials and have large glass panels for maximum visibility.



ADA Accessibility

To comply with regulations in the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), businesses must provide barrier-free access when readily achievable and entrances should include the following features:



Both sides of the doorway should be level. Allow enough maneuvering room (at least 60 inches) on both sides of the door for a person in a wheelchair to get through easily.

Doors should be clear on both sides with a minimum width of 32 inches and an additional 18 inches on the pull side of the door. The door height should be no lower than 80 inches. The bottom 10 inches of the push side of a door should have a smooth surface because canes, wheelchairs, and other mobility devices can snag on uneven surfaces.

Doors should be easy to open or include power assist opening devices adjusted to provide adequate opening and closing times. Door handles must be operable with one hand without tight grasping of the wrist. Lever type handles and pull handles are good options, but round doorknobs are not accessible.

On existing buildings the door threshold (the sloped crosspiece that extends across the bottom of the door area) should be no higher than 3/4 inches with angled edges. For entrances with vertical heights greater than 3/4 inches, providing barrier-free access should be investigated.



# Sidewalks and the Public Realm

Storefronts play a vital role in creating a vibrant public realm. Well-designed storefronts can help make the sidewalk inviting for pedestrians, and in turn, benefit from increased foot-traffic. From outdoor dining to well-placed plants and advertisements, storefronts and small businesses have the power to activate the sidewalk and enhance the pedestrian experience.

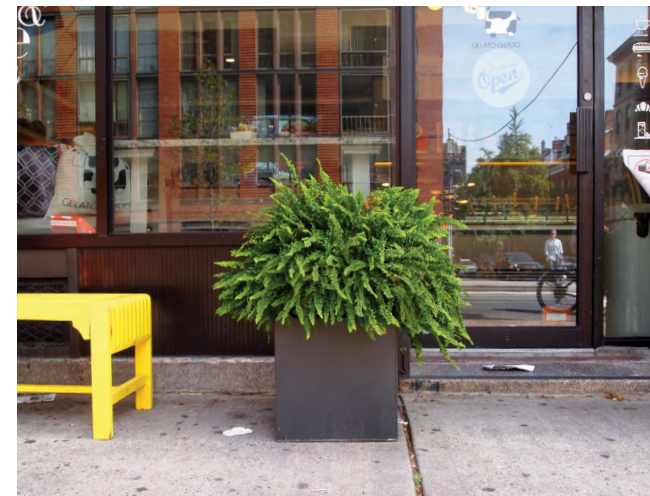
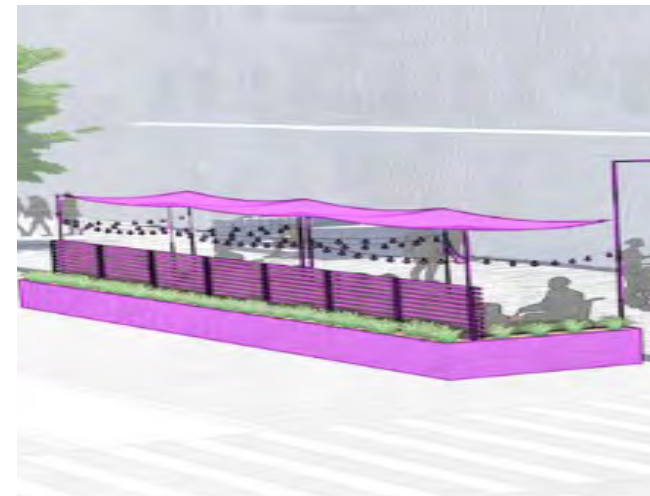
Keep in mind, businesses are responsible for keeping the public sidewalks outside their buildings free from obstructions. This includes advertising signs, ATMs, construction, grass and weeds, merchandise, outdoor dining, and sidewalk stands. Signs and displays cannot extend more than 3 feet into the sidewalk from the building or higher than 5 feet.

Check rules and regulations before setting up any structure on the sidewalk outside of your business. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/sidewalk-street-bizrules](https://on.nyc.gov/sidewalk-street-bizrules)



## Sidewalk-Sized Advertisements

Appropriately sized advertisements like A-frame signs and extended lighting can help draw pedestrians into your store and enhance the sidewalk. Keep in mind, A-frame signs must not extend beyond 3 feet of the building line or block traffic. A-frame signs that are larger than 6-feet must be approved by the Department of Buildings.



## Outdoor Dining

Outdoor dining helps invigorate the public realm and allows New Yorkers to enjoy curb and sidewalk spaces. The City's permanent outdoor dining program, Dining Out NYC, provides eligible food service establishments with clear design and operational guidelines to ensure that outdoor dining remains equitable across the boroughs and successful in the long term.

Eligible food service establishments may apply for outdoor dining in the roadway, sidewalk, or both! Sidewalk cafes may be operated year-round, while roadway cafes may operate from April 1 through November 29. Both sidewalk and roadway cafes require a license and revocable consent from the NYC Department of Transportation. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/diningout](https://nyc.gov/diningout)

## Plants & Planters

Plants near entrances and in front of windows add beauty and color to a storefront and make a big visual impact on the street. They can also be used as a way of maintaining accessible maneuvering clearances.



**Do** ensure that your sidewalk or roadway cafe abides by the official Department of Transportation guidelines by submitting an application to: [diningoutnyc.info/apply](https://diningoutnyc.info/apply)



**Don't** forget to properly maintain your sidewalk or roadway cafe. Poorly maintained sidewalk or roadway cafes can attract rats, depress the streetscape, and incur fines.

# Historic Detail

Highlighting historic detail is an easy way to create a distinct and memorable storefront. In most cases, preserving, repairing, and maintaining existing architectural detail is recommended over covering them or installing new materials. If your business is within a landmark building, historic district, or special use district, preserving these details may be required. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/landmark-storefronts](https://on.nyc.gov/landmark-storefronts)

## Architectural Details

Columns, carved stonework, decorative cornices, and tiling should be highlighted on all storefronts. Finding these special features and exposing them help maintain the character and history of a neighborhood.



## Landmarks, Historic Districts, and Special Purpose Districts

The city's Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) has rules for protecting historic and architecturally significant buildings and areas. When making changes to buildings in designated historic districts, business owners must follow the rules unique to that district and get a LPC permit. Special purpose districts are areas with distinct characteristics and restrictions tailored to the needs of the area. Businesses in these districts are also subject to a specific set of regulations. To determine if your building is in a historic or special purpose district, visit the city's zoning and land use map at: [maps.nyc.gov/zola](https://maps.nyc.gov/zola)

# Maintenance

Regular maintenance goes a long way toward improving the appearance of a storefront. Because they are durable and easier to maintain, quality materials can save time and money. Establishing a regular schedule for cleaning and repairs can have a big impact with little cost. Poorly maintained stores with peeling paint, ripped awnings, or broken windows make streets and storefronts appear unattractive to customers.

- Some recommended tasks to be completed regularly and as needed:
- Wash windows and sidewalks
  - Apply a fresh coat to painted areas
  - Repair windows and window frames
  - Replace broken light fixtures
  - Clean and repair brick, stucco, masonry, and other building materials
  - Clean, repair, and replace signs and awnings as they become dirty or damaged
  - Remove all old or non-functioning signs, brackets, and other fixtures
  - Fix or replace planters, seating, and other non-permanent fixtures
  - Update window displays to showcase new merchandise

## Murals

Storefront murals can help create attractive corridors, driving foot traffic toward the local business districts. Murals can also be an attraction and destination for locals and visitors alike.



## Graffiti

Murals can make storefronts and streets appear more vibrant and give the neighborhood a unique look. However, unwanted graffiti can disrupt the visual appeal of a storefront and be costly to clean. The Graffiti-Free NYC Program—the city’s street-by-street graffiti cleaning service—is free of charge to property and business owners. Property owners and their tenants can request these services through 311.



# Costs

Storefront improvements include costs for materials and labor (hard costs), as well as professional services and obtaining required building permits (soft costs). These soft costs might include an architect’s fee, asbestos testing, building permits, sign hanging permits, and more. To obtain a work permit from the Department of Buildings, a licensed architect or engineer will need to file plans.

Additional expenses may also be involved in providing barrier-free access. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) provides federal tax incentives to businesses to cover the costs of making access improvements for customers with disabilities. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/disabled-access-credit](https://on.nyc.gov/disabled-access-credit)

Sample budget for a typical 20-foot-wide storefront improvement project:

Soft Costs*		Hard Costs*	
Architect Fee (includes the cost of permit filing)	\$3,500	A Aluminum Sign	\$1,500
Asbestos Testing	\$500	B Canvas Awning	\$1,300
DOB Permit Fee	\$800	C Window Decals	\$200
Sign Hanging Permit Fee	\$50	D Aluminum Storefront Framing and Glass	\$9,000
		E Gooseneck Lighting	\$1,300
		F Motorized Open-Grille Security Gate	\$2,000

\*costs are estimated and will vary



# Regulations & Zoning

Several New York City agencies and local laws regulate improvements to storefronts and building façades. New York City is divided into residential, commercial, and manufacturing districts that dictate the different types of building uses.

## The City of Yes

Adopted in 2024, the City of Yes for Economic Opportunity reforms lift zoning barriers to make it easier for small businesses to grow and expand. Most small businesses with traditional storefronts are likely located in C1 and C2 districts. The new City of Yes for Economic Opportunity reforms allow C1 and C2 districts to share the same business types with a few exceptions. Additionally, the zoning resolution allows all permitted commercial uses to locate on the ground floor and permits commercial uses on the 2nd floor of a residential building in all commercial districts citywide if additional requirements are met. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/YesEconomicOpportunity](https://nyc.gov/YesEconomicOpportunity)

## Signs and Awnings

The city’s Zoning Resolution includes detailed guidelines for storefront signage. The maximum areas of signs on buildings or other structures in Commercial Districts can be found in the Zoning Resolution in Article III, Chapter 2, Section 32-60. Learn more at: [zr.planning.nyc.gov](https://zr.planning.nyc.gov)

## Permits and Professionals

DOB reviews and approves building alteration plans and issues work permits. Accessible features, awnings, flagpoles, and signs require permits from DOB before installation. DOB also manages the licensing of building professionals, including architects, general contractors, electricians, and others. All storefront improvements should be performed by licensed professionals.

Find a licensed sign hanger or other licensed building professional at: [nyc.gov/buildings](https://nyc.gov/buildings)

Find a certified Minority and/or Women-owned Business Enterprise (M/WBE) at: [nyc.gov/buycertified](https://nyc.gov/buycertified)

## Sidewalk Structures

To use space on the sidewalk for things like benches, planters, ramps, and other structures, businesses must apply through the Department of Transportation (DOT). Learn more at: [nyc.gov/dot](https://nyc.gov/dot)

## Outdoor Dining

To use space on the sidewalk or roadway for things like sidewalk cafes or roadway cafes, business must apply through Dining Out NYC. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/diningout](https://nyc.gov/diningout)

## Accessibility

By law, businesses must provide entrances that are accessible to all customers. Many of these regulations are set forth in the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which is enforced locally by DOB. A licensed architect can provide designs that comply with ADA requirements. Learn more at the Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) website: [nyc.gov/mopd](https://nyc.gov/mopd)

## Sidewalk Cafes

The Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP) manages the regulation of the city’s sidewalk cafes. Applications for sidewalk cafes must be submitted to and reviewed by DCWP. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/consumers](https://nyc.gov/consumers)

## Energy Efficiency

The New York City Energy Conservation Code (NYCECC) includes energy requirements that apply to storefront windows, doors, and more. A licensed architect can provide designs that comply with DOB requirements. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/buildings](https://nyc.gov/buildings)

## Landmarks and Historic Districts

Building plans for businesses located within a historic district or a designated landmark must be submitted to the city’s Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) in addition to DOB. The LPC will review plans to ensure the proposed renovations respect the historic character of the building or neighborhood. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/landmarks](https://nyc.gov/landmarks)

## Business Services

The Department of Small Business Services can help you understand key city rules and requirements, avoid fines and violations, and coordinate reviews and inspections from city agencies. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/nycbest](https://nyc.gov/nycbest)

To contact these city agencies, call 311 or visit [nyc.gov/311](https://nyc.gov/311)

# Fines

The Department of Buildings can issue violations and charge fines for work that is not properly permitted or does not follow the city’s sign or building codes. Following all the city’s required guidelines will help avoid these fines, which can quickly grow into thousands of dollars.

Some common fines associated with illegal storefront improvement include:

Violation	Fine
Skipped Asbestos Report	\$2,400
Failure to Comply with a Stop Work Order	\$2,000
Work Without a Permit	\$250-\$2,500
Work Does Not Conform to Approved Plans	\$500-\$2,500
Sign Code Violations (Outdoor Advertising)	\$2,500 - \$10,000
Security Gate Violations	\$250-\$1,000

Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/dob-violations](https://on.nyc.gov/dob-violations)

Storefronts in a Historic District or Landmark:

Violation	Fine
Storefront Work Without LPC Permit	\$1,500
Sign Installation Without LPC Permit	\$250

*Fines are subject to change and may vary based on the unique circumstances of each storefront. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/landmark-storefronts](https://on.nyc.gov/landmark-storefronts)*

Source: [on.nyc.gov/2iDCvvt](https://on.nyc.gov/2iDCvvt)

# New York City Sign Code

The New York City Sign Code is a set of regulations that governs everything from the size of signs to the text allowed on awnings. Signs found in violation of the sign code can warrant a fine from the Department of Buildings.

Every property in NYC belongs to a zoning district. Most businesses are located within a commercial zoning district, and each commercial zoning district has a distinct set of sign regulations. For example, a business on Madison Avenue might have different regulations that a business on Queens Boulevard. However, some regulations apply to every business in NYC.



## Citywide Regulations

- The following are not permitted on any storefront in NYC:
  - Signage projecting more than 12 inches over the sidewalk and any projecting signage less than 10 feet above curb level or within two feet of the curb line.
  - Signage attached to a fire escape, exterior stair, required door or window, or obstructing required light or ventilation.
  - A ground sign projecting beyond the street line.
  - Light fixtures attached to a storefront that project more than two feet from the building or less than eight feet above the sidewalk.
- There are exceptions for theatres and marquees, as well as double-faced signs which may project 18 inches from street line in specified commercial and manufacturing districts.

# Commercial Zoning Districts

Many small businesses in NYC are in commercial zoning districts C1 or C2. The following is a summary of sign regulations for these two zoning districts. For more detail or to determine the zoning district for a particular building, call 311 or visit [nyc.gov/planning](https://nyc.gov/planning).

**Advertising Signage**  
Advertising signs are permitted in certain districts: C6-5, C6-7, C8, and M-districts, and limited by maximum area.

**Illuminated Window Signage**  
Illuminated signs within windows are permitted if the zoning district allows illuminated signs and if the sign within the window in addition to all other signs on the property have a surface area below the maximum. Signs smaller than 8 square feet within a window are exempt from limitations on surface area and illumination.

**Signage Size**  
In C1 and C2 Districts, signage with a surface area greater than three times the street frontage of the business' zoning lot is prohibited, with a maximum sign area of 150 square feet allowed. Other size limitations apply in other zoning districts.

**Illuminated Signage**  
Illuminated signage is only allowed in specified commercial or manufacturing districts and different maximum surface area limitations apply in different districts.

**Street Lines**  
Double or multi-faced signage projecting more than 18 inches across the street line is prohibited. Parallel or wall signage projecting more than 12 inches across the street line is prohibited.

**Awning/Canopy Signage**  
Signage Illuminated awning/canopy signage is prohibited. Text or graphics found on an awning/canopy cannot exceed 12 square feet. Lettering found on an awning/canopy cannot be higher than 12 inches. The awning/canopy can only display the name and address of the business.

**Signage Height Above Curb**  
In the districts indicated, no sign shall extend above curb level at a height greater than the following.

Districts	Maximum Height
C1 C2 C3 C5-1 C5-2 C5-3 C5-5	25 ft
C4 C5-4 C6-1 C6-2 C6-3 C6-4 C6-6 C6-8 C6-9 C6-11 C6-12 C7	40 ft
C6-5 C6-7	No restriction as to height

**Signage Height Above Roof**  
In commercial districts, vertical signs not wider than 28 inches can extend no higher than 15 feet above the roof. All other signs extending above the roof are prohibited.

**Signage Angles**  
Signage facing at an angle less than 165 degrees away from and within 100 feet of a residence district or public park is prohibited. Advertising signage facing at an angle less than 165 degrees away from and within 100 feet of a residence district or which adjoins a public park is prohibited. Other signage at such location is subject to C1 zoning district regulations.

Signs may face within 165 degrees of the district boundary line or park edge (if the park is at least ½ acre) if it complies with the C1 district rules and is not an advertising sign.

**Residential Building Signage**  
In C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, and C6 Districts, signs for businesses found within the residential portion of a building's façade shall conform to the sign regulations for Residence Districts set forth in the NYC Zoning Resolution. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/32-68-zoning](https://on.nyc.gov/32-68-zoning)

# FAQ

**Q I would like to put a mural on the exterior of my storefront. What permits do I need?**

**A** Artwork does not require a DOB sign permit. If the mural includes commercial logos or business signage then a sign permit is required. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/dob-sign-permit](https://on.nyc.gov/dob-sign-permit)

**Q I would like to host events outside of my storefront. What permits do I need?**

**A** The Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO) issue permits for street festivals, plaza events, production events, block parties, farmers markets, press conferences, health fairs and other events on the city's streets, sidewalks and pedestrian plazas. If your event includes activities that interfere or obstruct the public's regular use of the city's streets, sidewalks and pedestrian plazas, you will need to obtain a permit from the SAPO. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/sapo-permits](https://on.nyc.gov/sapo-permits)

**The exterior of my storefront has been vandalized with unwanted graffiti, are there any city resources available to help me remove the graffiti?**

**A** You can request free graffiti removal from a residential or commercial building, sidewalk, and street. If the graffiti is on the second story or above, it may not be able to be cleaned. You cannot request the removal of graffiti inside a building. You can request free graffiti removal through 311 or by submitting a complaint at: [on.nyc.gov/graffiti-complaint](https://on.nyc.gov/graffiti-complaint)

**Q I have a security gate, how can I make sure that my security gate is in compliance with city regulations?**

**A** City law requires that security grilles on buildings in occupancy groups B or M, when closed, shall permit at least 70% visibility from the sidewalk. Electronic security systems and open-security grilles that permit at least 70% visibility into the storefront are compliant. Learn more at: [on.nyc.gov/ll75of2009](https://on.nyc.gov/ll75of2009)

**Q I have outdoor seating, how can I make sure that my outdoor seating is in compliance with city regulations?**

**A** To operate a sidewalk or roadway cafe, you must obtain a Dining Out NYC permit from the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT). Applications are accepted year-round. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/diningout](https://nyc.gov/diningout)

**Q How do I know if my storefront is in a historical district?**

**A** To determine if your storefront is in a historic or special purpose district, visit the city's zoning and land use map at: [maps.nyc.gov/zola](https://maps.nyc.gov/zola). If the storefront is in a historic or special purpose district, business owners must follow the rules unique to that district and get a LPC permit to alter the façade of their storefront. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/landmarks](https://nyc.gov/landmarks)

**Q How do I know if a contractor is licensed to perform work on my storefront?**

You can use the NYC Department of Buildings – Building Information System to search for licensed contractors. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/bis](https://nyc.gov/bis)

**Q How can I find a certified M/WBE to perform work on my storefront?**

**A** You can use the Online Directory of NYC Certified Businesses to search for businesses that are certified as an M/WBE. Learn more at: [nyc.gov/buycertified](https://nyc.gov/buycertified)

**Q I am a small business owner; can I certify as a Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise (M/WBE)?**

**A** To certify as an M/WBE, you must meet certain eligibility requirements. You can check your eligibility and learn more at: [nyc.gov/getcertified](https://nyc.gov/getcertified)

# Appendix & Resources

The following resources support the information presented in this guide. Small business owners and community partners are encouraged to use these tools to ensure compliance, access grants and permits, and improve storefront design.

## City Agencies & Government Resources

- NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS):** Business guidance, permit navigation, and M/WBE certification
- [nyc.gov/business](https://nyc.gov/business)
  - [nyc.gov/buycertified](https://nyc.gov/buycertified)
- NYC Department of Buildings (DOB):** Building permits, sign codes, contractor licensing, and ADA enforcement
- [nyc.gov/buildings](https://nyc.gov/buildings)
  - [nyc.gov/bis](https://nyc.gov/bis)
  - [on.nyc.gov/dob-sign-permit](https://on.nyc.gov/dob-sign-permit)

- NYC Department of Transportation (DOT):** Sidewalk usage, outdoor dining, street furniture, and revocable consents
- [nyc.gov/dot](https://nyc.gov/dot)
  - [nyc.gov/diningout](https://nyc.gov/diningout)
- NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC):** Guidelines and permits for storefronts in historic or landmark districts
- [nyc.gov/landmarks](https://nyc.gov/landmarks)
  - [on.nyc.gov/landmark-storefronts](https://on.nyc.gov/landmark-storefronts)
- NYC Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP):** Permits for sidewalk cafes
- [nyc.gov/consumers](https://nyc.gov/consumers)

- Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD):** Accessibility design guidelines and support for ADA compliance
- [nyc.gov/mopd](https://nyc.gov/mopd)
- NYC Department of Sanitation (DSNY):** Sidewalk clearance rules, signage, and sanitation compliance
- [on.nyc.gov/sidewalk-street-bizrules](https://on.nyc.gov/sidewalk-street-bizrules)
- Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO):** Permits for events in front of storefronts
- [nyc.gov/site/cecm/permitting/permit-types.page](https://nyc.gov/site/cecm/permitting/permit-types.page)

## Citywide Laws & Codes

- City of Yes for Economic Opportunity:** Zoning reform to expand commercial activity in C1 and C2 zones
- [nyc.gov/YesEconomicOpportunity](https://nyc.gov/YesEconomicOpportunity)
- Zoning Resolution:** Signage, commercial use, and special district regulations
- [zr.planning.nyc.gov](https://zr.planning.nyc.gov)
- NYC Energy Conservation Code (NYCECC):** Standards for energy efficiency in storefront components
- [on.nyc.gov/nycecc](https://on.nyc.gov/nycecc)
- Local Law 75 of 2009:** Requires 70% visibility for commercial security gates by 2026
- [on.nyc.gov/ll75of2009](https://on.nyc.gov/ll75of2009)

## Graffiti & Murals

- Graffiti-Free NYC:** Free removal of graffiti from commercial storefronts
- [on.nyc.gov/graffiti-complaint](https://on.nyc.gov/graffiti-complaint)
  - Call 311
- Financial Incentives & Grants**
- IRS Disabled Access Credit:** Federal tax credit to offset ADA improvement costs
- [on.nyc.gov/disabled-access-credit](https://on.nyc.gov/disabled-access-credit)
- Avenue NYC Program:** Grants for nonprofit-led storefront improvement projects
- [nyc.gov/avenuenyc](https://nyc.gov/avenuenyc)

## Zoning & District Tools

- NYC Zoning & Land Use Map (ZOLA):** Check if a property is in a historic, commercial, or special district
- [maps.nyc.gov/zola](https://maps.nyc.gov/zola)

# Notes

Dotted lines for note-taking.

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