

The Role of Design and Shop Frontages in Urban Regeneration

Liz Davidson

Project Director, Merchant City Initiative

Glasgow and the Merchant City Initiative

A historic photo of the Trongate shows that there was once a throng along here, a sense of purpose and order, and a buzz. If windows are the eyes of a building, shopfronts are the smile of any urban commercial space.

Glasgow has lost so much of its historic fabric. The Merchant City THI is trying to not just restore shopfronts but it is about bringing back confidence, pride and style and the tradition and quality which the area once had. However, in the City it is not easy to unpick more recent alterations and find a lovely cast iron shopfront behind as things were often completely swept away. During the 1960's and 1970's there was a resort to quick fixes and in some ways that has been the city's wonder but it is also its undoing. This has resulted in a loss of almost all of the historic fabric and it is not just a surface gloss.



Typical modernised shopfront

To try and help bring back the confidence and style, the THI produced a leaflet on shop guidance. There are no rules in it however, such as what materials to use or design to choose. The idea was to allow retailers to come up with their own ideas and to encourage confidence in what they were trying to sell. The scheme offers a grant up to 65% of eligible works under the Heritage Lottery category of 'reinstatement of architectural detail' but this does not cover internal works like lighting so the total grant may be 40% of entire works scheme. To be eligible they must employ an architect or a designer.

Projects

The critical project in the first scheme was the Rochhead building. It was awarded grants under two headings for building repair, as the upper floors had been vacant for about 20 years, and on the basis of reinstatement of architectural detail. It is a Category A listed building and its renovation involved a £14 million scheme to bring it back as a hotel using THI grants and investment from the building owner. Work involved stone reinstatement and shopfront improvements as it had lost shopfronts and the heavily dentilled cornice band separating these from the commercial upper floors. The new shopfronts have a stained finish and although not ideal, photographs did suggest this was used in the past. Overall it is a compromise but it is a result and it is fully occupied.



Rochhead building

The second project was at the Tron steeple which was formerly a city improvement scheme. Both shops there had gone out of business and the shops above used for storage. Instead of re-letting the City Council agreed to work with the THI and placed the building with the Glasgow Building Preservation Trust. They unpicked the shopfronts and tried to get back to the original frontage. The new shops were occupied by a special needs arts group on the ground floor which is a very good use and there is a fabulous upper floor space.



Tron Steeple project



Corner of King Street

On the corner of King Street there was a tenement with ground floor shops overlaid in aluminium with dropped fascias. The THI worked with the owner to unpick it and put back what was there with a high fascia and low stallriser. The wide bands behind hide down-pipes from the bathrooms and other plumbing installed in more recent times in the City Improvement Trust tenements above. These were boxed out in an ugly fashion which all has to be worked with but the improvements now make for a very respectable block.

Along Trongate and Glasgow Cross the shopfronts had deteriorated and there was only two active retailers remaining in the block. Here in particular there was a complete abandonment of style, hope and confidence and it became a case of not just trying to get back what was absolutely authentic. In some cases the shopfronts were so far gone that it was difficult to know where to start. The THI worked with the Council as owner to strip out and put re-instate entire frontage and small decorative details such as console brackets. There is now a burgeoning music scene in the area so shops like Drum Central came in.

These are largely new businesses and the City Council allowed the THI to sit in on interview process for tenants. Cheap goods shops and betting shops were outbidding many local tenants

but the Council agreed to work with the THI to let these refurbished spaces not just on the basis of the highest tendered rent but also on the basis of the robustness of the business, its fit with the arts, culture and design ethos of the area and also on the contribution that business would make to the Merchant City as a whole; this allowed small indigenous business to become established by offering the unit at low rents or rent free. 90% of these businesses have survived.



Drum Central with renovated shopfront

Design Issues

The THI is not just involved in retro-fits but modern design is also welcomed such as 'Guitar Guitar' by JM Architects. The modern façade with structural glass was very appropriate for the retailer.



Modern shopfront

Using Archive Evidence

The THI have found it very useful to work with the Mitchell Library, Royal Commission and also Aberdeen University with their George Washington Wilson Collection. These archives have been invaluable. Postcard collections have also been useful, for example, the former Clydesdale bank frontage in Trongate erected in 1908. The Aberdeen archive provided an image and Gordon Urquhart of the Glasgow City Heritage Trust uncovered a Valentines postcard showing the fish-scales in the stallriser which are by Macfarlane's Foundry. The owner of this building is going to reinstate some of the detail found on the historic photographs.

Number 3, Trongate

Many of the projects undertaken are about compromises such as the former Capital Frozen foods shop. It was in a very poor state of repair when the hoardings were removed but it has now been fully renovated. Compromises are necessary as it is hard to ever recreate the originality where a building has gone through a brutal period of occupation as this can result in the loss of much historic fabric.

Do Architecture

This shop had competing bids for its occupation ranging from a pet clothing shop and a newly established architects firm - Do Architecture. The architects moved in. They unpicked the property and retained the bare brick walls which suits their use of the building and is a successful use of this shop.



Security

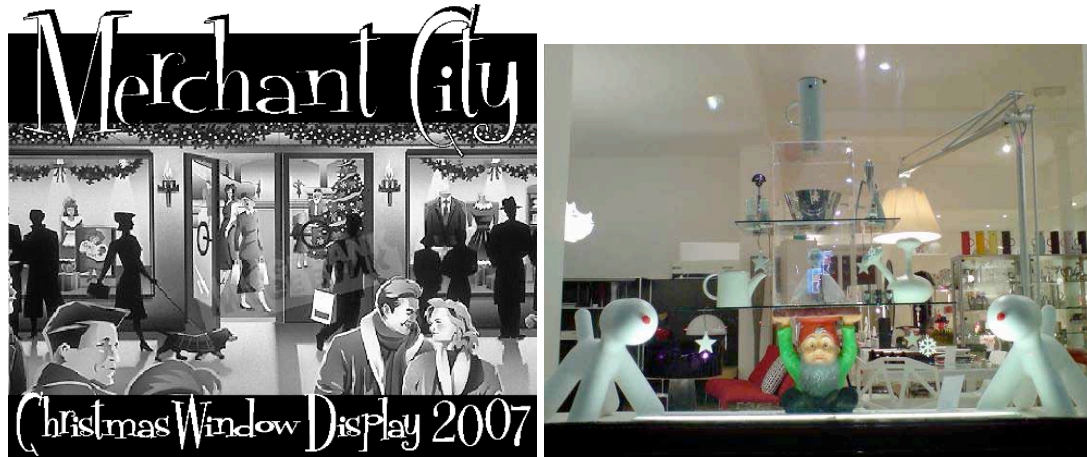
Security is very important for shopkeepers and the reality is that this area has a high incidence of petty crime, so a special grant scheme offers 65% to take off external shutters and put behind-glass lattice shutters. Parnie Street shops originally had timber gates but it had ended up with mesh shutters on all of the shops which meant that the windows were never cleaned. The THI worked with the Art Exposure Gallery owner to remove shutters with drop down shutters behind the glass. The whole street has now been improved by the shop owners with removal of external shutters, hanging baskets, repainting and washing their windows.



Parnie Street

Merchant City Christmas Window Competition

The Christmas window competition was introduced to instil back into the Merchant City the history of Christmas displays which there used to be in the large department stores. The competition runs every year with a total of 46 entries last year. This year the THI is working with RSAMD and their set design students to do something special with windows and to help out those who are less confident in window design.



Christmas window competition

Temporary measures

- Some shop fronts are either scheduled for demolition or otherwise subject to retail flux
- Capital funding used as 'quick fix' to assist in maintaining the general street scene

For example, the Selfridges Site where we have put in small bits of art work which is really a sticking plaster on a wound although it improves the street scene temporarily.



Art work in a vacant bank building, Trongate

Saltmarket

The Saltmarket is not in the THI area and there was no money for grants. However, we set up the 'Saltmarket Spectrum' and helped shop owners to paint shops and remove sub fascias and to unpick some of the poor detail. We put in art work to animate the empty shops.



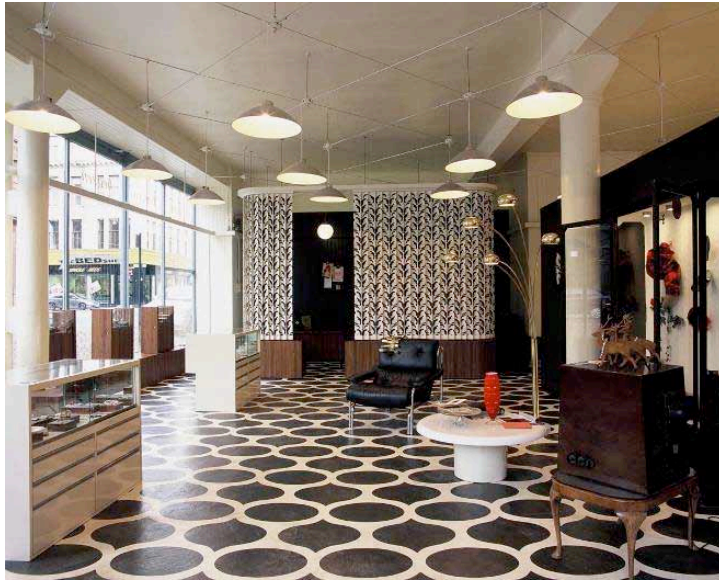
Behind the Scenes

This is also very important. Glasgow City Heritage Trust have new offices with displays behind the glass.



Glasgow City Heritage Trust offices with window displays

In other shops we have worked with local art students who, in the case of Brazen jewellers, came in and painted the floors and walls and created a design workshop area at the back of the shop.



Finally

This quote is incredibly pertinent:

'A land full of places that are not worth caring about will soon be a nation and a way of life that is not worth defending.'

James Howard Kunstler : *The Geography of Nowhere*

It is a very difficult and challenging area to work in and we are really inching along rather than making huge leaps but just trying to make that smile brighter and a bit more real.