

# SLIPCOVERS

## MAIN STREET IOWA TECHNOTES



In efforts to modernize storefronts and create a new image, many owners installed a metal, plastic or wood siding material that covered the original facade of the building. These new exterior cladding systems are often called slipcovers.

Slipcovers are generally installed in an inexpensive and rapid fashion. The typical slipcover is attached to the original building facade by a series of furring strips or anchoring brackets. In order to facilitate the rapid installation and keep costs at a minimum, many slipcovers are extended out past the original projecting details of the facade like cornices, window hoods, sills, and column capitals.

These attempts at modernization have been installed for a number of reasons. Often times, the new sleek siding material was installed in an attempt to mimic the appearance of the new suburban construction. Other times, owners are attempting to disguise required facade maintenance projects in an effort to cut costs. Slipcovers installed for these reasons are detrimental to the long term care and maintenance of the building. The slipcover can also prevent any monitoring of the

condition of the materials behind the covering, thereby preventing any further maintenance until the need becomes critical, and thereby much more costly and difficult to rectify.

Lightweight metals, like aluminum, are a common material used in slipcovers. Many of these metal panels were designed with a grill pattern or series of shapes stamped into the metal to create decorative designs. These designs, while intended to be aesthetically pleasing, actually prove many times to be a nuisance, or at worst a possible health hazard.

These small openings and the spaces between the slipcover and the original facades often become a haven for birds, especially sparrows, and possibly pigeons. The birds not only are a nuisance from their noise and their presence, but the fecal build up and the other debris from nests and birds can be a health hazard and cause the respiratory ailment, histoplasmosis.

Slipcovers also cover the architectural details of a building and make them into generic metal boxes. While thought to be modern and contemporary when installed, they soon become tired and dated. It is much more desirable to retain and maintain the original design elements of a building. Instead of continually having to change and modify the building to stay with current design trends, maintaining and enhancing the original architecture of the building will always be an effective design motif. If retained, the original design, including the storefront, will function for the life of the building, and still allow for



many adaptive and multiple uses.

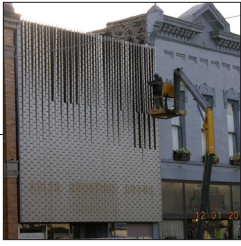
When considering the removal of an existing slipcover, simple investigations are advisable. The first place to look is historic photos. Often times, the latest photo before the installation of the slipcover are the most useful because it most closely represents the condition behind the slipcover.

A quick check of the slipcover and its relationship to the facade can give some clues as to the condition behind the cover up. If the slipcover extends beyond the storefront more than just a few inches there is a very good chance that all of the original projecting details exist behind it. If the slipcover is very flush with the storefront, some of the details may have been totally or partially removed during installation.

A good place to get a better view of the condition of the facade is through any existing upper floor windows behind the slipcover. Because slipcovers are often installed away from the facade in order to



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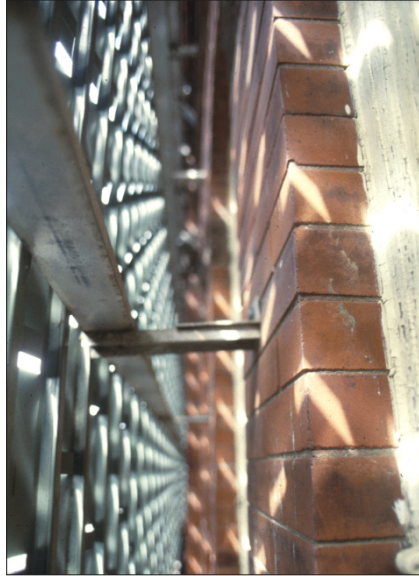


clear existing details, a space between the slipcover and the facade is created. This space allows for visual inspection of at least portions of the original facade, and depending upon the size of the space perhaps the entire facade. This space also provides a chance to analyze the installation techniques of the slipcover and possible problems with its removal and required repairs after removal.

If there are no upper floor windows, or for some reason the facade cannot be inspected from them, a partial removal may be required before facade restoration can be implemented. Since most slipcovers are a series of individual vertical strips (from 8-24" wide typically) one or two of the individual pieces can be removed to inspect the original facade. These pieces should be removed carefully to minimize possible damage to the materials. Then if for some reason the facade restoration project is delayed or abandoned, the slipcover materials can be replaced for removal at a future date.

Once the analysis has been completed, the slipcover can be removed. Typically the materials are long interlocking strips applied vertically to the facade. Depending upon the overall height of the slipcover and the number of anchoring locations and type of anchors, slipcovers can be removed by as few as two people, one on the roof and one at the bottom.

The slipcover materials, especially if aluminum or other metal, should be recycled. Sometimes the value of the recycled metal will help pay the labor associated with the removal process.



Once the slipcover has been removed, there will likely be some facade repair required. This can range from simple cleaning to remove dirt and minor stains to extensive repairs including total replacement of bricks and all details.

Typically some minor repointing will be required where the slipcover was attached to the building. Usually the repointing is straightforward, because the anchoring systems were installed into the mortar joints. Mortar is softer than brick, and therefore more easily accommodates the anchors. Unfortunately, anchors are sometimes attached directly into masonry units. The units become damaged during the removal. These can also be repaired by a good mason during repointing.

Window frames also are typically neglected behind slipcovers and need regular maintenance like paint and new glazing putty. Some simple curtains or mini blinds (if the upstairs is vacant) help finish the windows and enhance the entire facade.

Sometimes projecting facade ele-

ments like decorative cornices or hoods might have been removed or damaged during the installation. These elements were removed to help "flatten" the facade to facilitate the installation of the furring strips and the entire slipcover. The extent of removal and damage of these elements directly impacts the cost and feasibility of facade restoration. Therefore, a good preliminary analysis will help clarify and itemize the costs of facade restoration after slipcover removal.

Slipcover removal makes a dramatic and immediate visual impact for a building and for an entire district. The restoration of an upper facade dramatically enhances the architectural integrity of historic properties. Dollar for dollar, the removal of "tin can" slipcovers are one of the best, and actually one of the easiest, design improvements for any Main Street program.

## For More Information:

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## Additional Reading:

*"Aluminum and Vinyl Siding on Historic Buildings"*

*Preservation Brief #8*

*U.S. Department of the Interior*

*"Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts"*

*Preservation Brief #11*

*U.S. Department of the Interior*

*"The Use of Substitute Materials on Historic Building Exteriors"*

*Preservation Brief #16*

*U.S. Department of the Interior*