

TILED STOREFRONTS OF THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA – A CURATED SELECTION:

- Nearly all of these installations date from 1925 - 1940.
- These photos were taken between 1987 and 1991.

The “humble” tiled storefronts of the U.S. have not received recognition commensurate with their importance in the social life of the nation. They were/are part of everyday life for several generations. They exist on the street and serve to build excitement for the vibrancy of retail shopping districts in cities and towns. There are many familiar threads of pattern and many distinct differences to give identity to each building. Looking back in time we see how they influenced and were influenced by their specific period.

Tiled storefronts were ubiquitous in the downtowns of towns and small cities. In larger cities they were not seen downtown so much as in the commercial shopping districts of the neighborhoods. In some cases the tiled storefront was at a corner store which had no other nearby commercial activity. This gave a friendly, interesting sense of place - an anchor, a hub for the neighborhood. The location of the tilework is on the face of the low bulkhead wall below the display window of commercial spaces, extending down from the window to the sidewalk - and turning at an angle as the side walls lead to the front door. Often the tilework will also extend up an adjacent stucco surface or clad a column. But the defining characteristic is that the tilework fills the space between display window and sidewalk. Most all have perforated vent tiles because that was part of the system for ventilating the walls in keeping with construction methods of that period.

This collection fulfills two objectives. First is to show the full range of styles. Second is to celebrate the most attractive and interesting examples. The collection starts with a presentation of all that is typical. The most basic tiled storefronts of this period used factory made off-the-shelf glazed dust-pressed tiles mostly in $4\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ or $6'' \times 6''$. Some installations consist simply of a grid. But most have articulating features such as bands, inserts or geometric patterns using two or more colors of tile. There is a good deal of thematic overlap as for instance seen in various permutations of simple checkerboard patterns. These photos show many ways in which color and pattern were used to “jazz things up”. Tilework along with window displays and signage including neon brought color and visual complexity to the retail areas. This is a vernacular art. Some installations are captivating, some simple and elegant, some verge on tacky or muddled. They add to the visual interest of the streetscapes and seem to “fit like an old shoe” as the saying goes.

Most of these storefronts were surely installed by tile crews who had experience doing a great many installations of this type. The tilers would presumably install whatever pattern/color they were told to, or would be able to cook up some simple variation of a pattern if need be. Certainly executing the geometry of the layout was in the hands of the installer. The goal of every installation is to make the tiles end up looking like they comfortably belong in the particular space – even though there is no correlation between the module of the tile size and the dimensions of the space to be tiled. That is the normal situation within which the tile installer operates. One can stop and look at examples where the tile setter had to abridge the pattern to fit the space, sometimes more gracefully than others.

These photos were taken when the installations were about 50 to 65 years old. 25 years later a number of these installations have been torn out. Minor damage to storefront tilework is a fairly common problem. There are two main causes: stress-induced cracking chipping, or loosening of some tiles, and

damage from impact (vandalism, collisions from hand trucks making deliveries, etc.) Proper restoration requires procuring replacement tiles that are a good match for the damaged ones. Some problems are exacerbated by lack of routine maintenance. Dirt, grime and graffiti can detract from the appearance, leading the building owner and public to devalue the installation. After WWII these storefronts slipped in importance because Main St. shopping lost much of its prominence to shopping centers. Therefore many of these storefronts went through a few decades of decline and neglect. Starting about the 1980s the pendulum swung back to make many of these old commercial areas more desirable again.

These storefront facings are often accompanied by tilework on the floor of the entryway. The plan view of the entryway is in the shape of a truncated pyramid; it opens wider at the street side and seems to welcome - even funnel - foot traffic from the sidewalk into the store. There has been no systematic attempt here to document the tiled floors, though snatches of them may be seen here or there. The floor tiling (typically ranging from 12 - 25 sq. ft.) is nearly always a commercial ceramic mosaic, often with a pattern and often with a border element. Surprisingly there seldom seems to be any aesthetic connection between the facing and floor tiling in terms of color or style. (It is as if two wheels of probability were spun independently in order to choose the specific floor and wall tiles. The two separate outcomes were then executed to create the final product.) In some cases the entry floor was simply done in concrete as an extension of the sidewalk.

Some of the installations use unglazed tiles and have an austere Arts & Crafts simplicity. Some are extremely colorful. Some use expensive art tile accent inserts or bands and some are made up entirely of expensive highly artistic tiles. The installations will speak for themselves. Here is a selection.

Addresses of storefront tiles:

1. 3160 24th St., S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
2. Cortland near Bennington, S.F. (can't find on Google Maps 3/2/17)
3. 20th St. & Eureka, S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
4. Grant Ave. & Washington St., S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
5. 798 Bush St., S.F. (tiles have been removed 3/2/17)
6. 8th Ave. & Anza, S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
7. 1498 9th Ave., S.F. (tiles have been removed – plain stucco 3/3/17)
8. 3046 MacArthur Blvd., Oakland (still intact 3/5/17)
9. Unknown
10. 1858 Divisadero, S.F. (still intact 3/5/17)
11. 705 Columbus Ave., S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
12. 425 Columbus Ave., S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
13. 1309 9th Ave., S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
14. 1607 Jackson St., S.F. (tiles have been removed)
15. 100 B St., San Mateo (still intact 3/2/17)
16. 1800 Union St., S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
17. 4771 Mission St., S.F. Royal Bakery (still intact 3/2/17)
18. 2235 Greenwich, S.F. (still intact 3/2/17)
19. 601 Columbus, S.F. (cannot locate on Google Maps)
20. 2701 San Bruno Ave. (still intact 3/2/17)
21. 2820 Balboa (cannot tell from Google Maps)
22. 3320 16th St., S.F. (Address looks wrong based on Google Maps)
23. Main St., Martinez (long walk with Google, but couldn't find it)

24. Lakeshore between Lake Park & Trestle Glen, Oakland
25. 2103 Taraval, S.F. (Cal Art; still intact 3/5/17)
26. 739 Valencia St., S.F. (cannot find this on Google Maps)
27. 1843 Stockton St., S.F. (cannot locate on Google Maps)
28. San Pablo Ave. & Dwight Way, Berkeley (intact 3/5/17 – some painted over)
29. 1525 Union St., S.F. (Tiles removed; plain stucco 3/5/17)
30. 3285 21st St., S.F. (cannot determine from Google Maps)
31. Gough St. & Greenwich St., S.F. (still intact 3/5/17)
32. 650 Clement St., S.F. (Cal Art; question this address – topography looks too flat)
33. 872 Sacramento St., S.F. (still intact 3/5/17)
34. Unknown
35. Filbert & Mason St. S.F. (still intact 3/5/17)
36. 3231 24th St., S.F. (cannot locate on Google Maps)
37. 284 Noe St, S.F. (cannot determine from Google Maps)
38. Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Berkeley betw 40th & 41st (Kraftile?; appears to have been removed)
39. 5461 College Ave., Oakland (cannot find on Google Maps)
40. Shattuck & Delaware, Berkeley (cannot locate)
41. 1049 Sutter St., S.F. (appears to have been removed)
42. 5619 Mission St., S.F. (Field tiles are Cal Art; cannot locate on Google Maps)
43. 21 Throckmorton, Mill Valley (still intact 3/5/17)
44. 1906 Fillmore, S.F. (still intact 3/5/17)
45. 235 Gough St. S.F. (still intact 3/5/17)
46. Cortland betw. Anderson & Moultrie (cannot locate)
47. 1901 Clement St., S.F. (cannot locate)
48. 2903 San Bruno Ave., S.F. (still intact 3/5/17)
49. 5549 Geary Blvd. S.F. (cannot locate)
50. 4th St. near Broadway, Santa Monica (cannot locate) Claycraft decorative tiles
51. 1611 Irving St., S.F. (AET deco; still intact 3/5/17)
52. 400 block of Broadway, King City (Calco or Malibu deco; cannot locate)
53. 3552 20th St. S.F. (Claycraft deco; appears not to be there now)
54. 200 block of Chestnut St. near Fillmore, S.F. (probable AET deco; cannot locate)
55. Baldwin & B St. San Mateo (still intact) S&S tiles
56. 302 Baldwin Ave, San Mateo (continuation of 55 above; S&S, still intact)
57. 220 E. 3rd Ave. San Mateo (S&S; still intact 3/5/17)
58. 236 E. 3rd Ave. San Mateo (S&S; cannot locate)
59. Post St. & S. Almaden Ave., San Jose (S&S deco; still intact 3/5/17)
60. 610 Hyde St., S.F. (Academy Of Art U. bus is blocking Google street view)
61. 691 Chenery St., S.F (still intact)
62. 236 3rd Ave., San Mateo (S&S; cannot locate on Google)
63. 1336 Gilman St., Berkeley (still intact) Was an early Safeway grocery store
64. 3795 Niles Blvd., Fremont (still intact) May have been a Safeway? (see 63 above)
65. E. 18th St. & 13th Ave., Oakland (tilework removed; plain stucco)
66. 64 Stanyan St. , S.F. (cannot locate)
67. 3149 Balboa St., S.F. (still intact)
68. 346 18th St, S.F. (address is wrong; should probably be in the Mission but can't find it)
69. 18th St. & Douglas, S.F. (torn out; plain stucco)
70. 24th St. & Rhode Island, S.F. (still intact)
71. 3215 Mission St, S.F. (cannot locate on Google)

72. Leese St. & Richland St. S.F. (appears to be torn out – 100 Leese St.)
73. 2125 Powell St. S.F. (torn out and replaced by simple contemporary tilework)
74. 499 Silver Ave. S.F. (tilework intact; see Google Street View for more nuance)
75. Unknown
76. 40th & Broadway, Oakland (replaced by new retro-style tilework – incl. vent tiles)
77. Corner of Gilman & Santa Fe, Berkeley (replaced by tilework I installed Sept. '90)
78. 2324 Alameda Ave, Alameda (still intact) S&S tiles on Masonic building's storefronts
79. E. 14th near Begier Ave., San Leandro (Google view blocked; Cal Art, painted over last time I saw it)
80. 3506 Woodruff, Oakland (Tropico tiles torn out around 2000; plain stucco)
81. 2975 Mission St. S.F. (Cal Art; painted stucco replaces tiles or is on top of tiles)
82. Fillmore & Clay St. S.F. (Cal Art; cannot locate)
83. Domingo St. betw. Claremont & Ashby, Berkeley (still intact; Handcraft tiles)
84. Telegraph Ave. & Stuart St., Berkeley (still intact)
85. 800 4th St., San Rafael (Cal Art; looks like it isn't there any more – Google)
86. 2633 Clement St., S.F. (Cal Art; believe it's there, behind cartons in Google street view)
87. 518 Valencia St., S.F. (Google view obstructed; can't tell) Cal Art tiles
88. 567 Mission St. S.F. Cal Art (I question the address; should be in Mission or beyond??)
89. 2832 Diamond St. S.F. (Cal Art; obstructed on Google street view, think it's there)
90. Sacramento St. & Ashby, Berkeley – Cal Art (destroyed by a truck in late '90s; retiled)
91. 2900 College Ave, Berkeley (still intact)
92. 23rd & Broadway, Oakland (Calco?; Julia Morgan auto showroom; torn out c. 2000))
93. Unknown (believe it's near 51st & Telegraph, Oakland)
94. College Ave. betw. Ashby & Webster, Berkeley (still intact)
95. 1100 Burlingame Ave., Burlingame (S&S tiles; still intact)
96. 2000 block of Fillmore St. S.F. (please identify decos; can't find it on Google)
97. Grant Ave. near Washington St. S.F. (still intact)
98. 4410 Cabrillo, S.F. (torn out; replaced by plain stucco)
99. 4403 Geary Blvd. S.F. (still intact)
100. 3975 17th St., S.F. (still intact)
101. 820 Bush St, S.F. (still intact)
102. Fillmore St. & Jackson St., S.F. (still intact)
103. College Ave. & Webster, Berkeley (Tunisian tiles; still intact)
104. College Ave. & Webster, Berkeley (Tunisian tiles; still intact)
105. 4247 Piedmont Ave. (Malibu or Calco; still intact)
106. 4247 Piedmont Ave. (detail of 105 above)
107. 3rd St. & Polk St, San Juan Bautista (S&S tiles; still intact)
108. Overall view of 107 above
109. 1335 Lincoln Ave., San Jose (S&S; still intact)
110. Carmel, CA (Tunisian; no address)
111. 2nd Ave & B St, San Mateo (S&S; still intact)
112. 236 3rd Ave. San Mateo (S&S; can't find it, but doubt that it was torn out)
113. 302 Baldwin Ave. San Mateo (S&S; notice vent tiles; can't find it on Google)
114. 1237 Polk St, S.F. (S&S; fabulous vent tiles; still intact; was covered with plywood in the '90s)
115. 3800 Park Blvd., Oakland (S&S; still intact)
116. 16th St. & Guerrero, S.F. (S&S vent tile set in mortar; all remaining tilework painted black)
117. 40 S. 1st St. San Jose (S&S; still intact inside the El Paseo 3/5/17)
118. Ramona St. betw University & Hamilton (S&S; can't see it on Google, but am sure it's still intact)
119. 100 block of 10th St, S.F. (once a tile showroom; now apparently gone; intense recent development)

120. Close up of 119 above
121. 312 Broadway St, King City (please identify; can't find it on Google)
122. 200 block of B'way St, King City (Claycraft; can't find this either; I fear the worst)
123. 8 12th St, S.F. (still intact)
124. 1155 Harrison St. S.F. (Former Rossman warehouse/showroom; still intact, poorly cared for)
125. 1051 Green St., S.F. (address questionable; looks too residential)
126. 5344 Geary Blvd. S.F. (can't find it on Google)
127. 2139 Taraval, S.F. (stuccoed & painted over; one small section still exposed)
128. 2777 Shattuck Ave, Berkeley (stuccoed & painted over; originally Berkeley Bowl bowling alley)
129. Bayshore Blvd. near Arleta Ave., S.F. (S&S upper section; Appears to be no longer there)
130. 432 Castro St. S.F. (has been removed and retiled)
131. 5032 Telegraph Ave. Oakland (Kraftile decos; still intact 3/3/17)
132. 2nd Ave. betw Pomona & Ceres (Appears to have been replaced by new tilework)
133. S. La Brea Ave. & s. Orange Dr., Los Angeles (has been replaced with brickwork)
134. San Pablo Ave. & Dwight, Berkeley (This section has been painted over, seems intact underneath)

*Odd notes:

*42. This deco is the same one used in the public bathroom at Coit Tower

Storefront 63 and 64 are listed as both having probably been Safeway stores. After a little armchair research online I have confirmed that all three of the examples below were indeed former Safeway stores. The one on Niles Blvd is in the Odd Fellows building which was constructed in 1930 and Safeway was an original tenant. This particular bold and distinctive (I wouldn't say exactly beautiful) tile design was apparently intended to brand the stores as Safeway. But that feature was far from uniform, maybe an idea that spread to some extent but never became ubiquitous like McDonald's Golden Arches from its early years. I know of a few other former Safeway storefronts which do NOT display tilework of this type.

There is another such tiled storefront that I know of and I can't remember where.