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Vernacular Design: a History of Hong Kong Neon Signs

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Abstract

Neon signs dominated Hong Kong's urban landscape from the 1950s to the early 2000s. This visual vernacular, however, has begun to vanish from Hong Kong's streets over the past decade due to stricter regulations and the emergence of cheaper alternatives. As a result, scholars, media and the general public have become more engaged in recording and preserving neon signs and have begun to recognise them as a form of Hong Kong's vernacular design. This engagement serves as an entry point to investigate the application of Western views of vernacular design to Hong Kong using neon signs as a case study. A collection of 218 original neon sign designs were donated by the Nam Wah Neonlight & Electrical Factory (Nam Wah) to the Information Design Lab (IDL) at Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPolyU). Using these original designs and photos of neon signs taken from different districts in Hong Kong, this article provides historical and socio-cultural perspectives from which to examine vernacular design to identify other attributes such as aesthetics, bottom-up participation, architecture and the urban environment that should be taken into account. The article aims to contribute and broaden the study of vernacular design and the design history of neon signs.

Introduction

Considering neon signs as a form of popular design, this article aims to make a substantial contribution to the study of the vernacular design history of Hong Kong. This article reviews the European modern concept of vernacular design including its definitions and implications as well as the attributes of being highly location-based, and having a long history, fixed population and strong local consciousness, and questions whether it can be fully applied to Hong Kong, using neon signs as an example. By examining neon signs from an aesthetic perspective and considering the socio-cultural, historical and urban conditions particular to Hong Kong, this article provides a new point of view from which to study Hong Kong's vernacular design. This framework will hopefully contribute to studies of vernacular design in cities comparable to Hong Kong.

Background

Neon light was discovered in 1898 by English scientists Sir William Ramsay and Morris W. Travers. However, it was French entrepreneur Georges Claude who popularised the medium for commercial advertising. Claude wrangled neon lights into letterforms and images, which formed the first commercial neon sign on Boulevard Montmartre in Paris.[1] Neon technology soon swept across the globe. According to an early 1930s periodical by Claude's manufacturing company, a 1926 neon sign in Tokyo was the first of its kind to appear in Asia.[2] In the same year, China erected its first neon sign in Shanghai.[3]

The first wave of Chinese neon makers emerged shortly after neon technology came to China in the 1920s.[4] Using neon signs as a form of advertisement became especially fashionable in Shanghai. During the 1920s and 30s, Shanghai was known as a commercial centre and trading port where local and international businesses thrived. Many neon signs were needed to cater for the advertising needs of these companies, causing a boom in Shanghai's neon industry. However, due to the political instability caused by the 1937 Japanese invasion of China and the Civil War, many neon sign makers relocated their businesses from Shanghai to Hong Kong and brought their capital, human resources, skills and knowledge with them.

Neon lights would not grace Hong Kong until 1929. The Hong Kong Telegraph praised the lighting of neon signs as a modern 'Art of Illumination'.[5] The first foreign neon manufacturer in Hong Kong was Claude Neon Lights Fed., Inc., established circa 1932; the company had opened factories in worldwide cities including Shanghai. It was said that their Shanghai branch at the time employed around 400 experienced neon workers, who had manufactured much of Hong Kong's neon lights before the local branch opened, in response to increasing demands in the Hong Kong sign market.[6]

In the 1940s and 50s, Hong Kong's neon lights symbolized fashion and imported Western technology, but were not affordable for every business. As the prosperous 1960s unfolded, businesses in Hong Kong — especially entertainment and restaurants — flourished in a booming economy. Neon light designs became more elaborate as the local market soared; the media Overseas Chinese Daily News would refer to Hong Kong neon signs as art objects.[7] At the time, the advanced neon technology of making complicated neon tube shapes and forms, making neon lights brighter and offering a variety of colours had been considerably developed.[8] In the 1970s, a large variety of neon signs were erected on top of commercial buildings along Victoria Harbour, creating an urban spectacle that shaped the city's night view. Records showed that there were more than 80,000 neon signs in Hong Kong during this period.[9] In the 1980s and 90s, numerous foreign companies utilized Hong Kong's unique position to expand into overseas markets, which along with the city's growing economic strength created a global metropolis.

Regrettably, Hong Kong's neon signs have been on a steady decline since the 2000s, mainly due to a sustained effort by the Buildings Department to demolish dilapidated, abandoned, hazardous and illegal signboards under the 'Minor Works Control System' regulations. According to the Housing Department, 4,154 signs were demolished between 2014 and March 2020, with a yearly average of 700 — neon signs included,[10] which means that the number of neon signs on Hong Kong streets are only going to dwindle. Further, many small businesses have abandoned neon lights for LED signs in order to reduce building and repair costs. Most local neon workers are also in their later years without feasible successors; these factors have all contributed to an ongoing, rapid downturn of the industry.

When witnessing the disappearance of neon signs and the immense changes in the urban landscape caused by rapid development, citizens in Hong Kong began to feel nostalgic about this unique aspect of visual culture. In the past, neon signs were not considered to be part of Hong Kong’s cultural heritage and vernacular design; they were only seen as commercial products for visual communication and advertisement. Local cultural scholars have therefore been paying more attention to the craftsmanship and aesthetics of these signs and their contribution to Hong Kong's unique visual culture.[11] But they did not examine the impact of neon signs from the perspective of vernacular design. Some NGOs and institutional initiatives (for example M+ museum) recognise neon signs as part of Hong Kong’s vernacular design and cultural heritage and support the preservation of the signs.

Research methodology

This study is rooted in content analysis and field observation. The former concerns a collection of neon sign drafts dating back as far as the 1950s, which were donated by a local neon manufacturer established in 1953 and analysed visually. The latter involves the research team photographing and observing neon signs located in Hong Kong’s major districts, in an attempt to analyse the relationships between the signs and street spaces. It is hoped that such methodologies would shed light on a significant part of Hong Kong’s vernacular visual aesthetics.

The Nam Wah donated 218 original neon sign artworks to the Information Design Lab (IDL)[12] at HKPolyU in 2016. These precious artworks, which were made for the Food and Restaurant industry and hand-painted by neon artists, serve as an entry point into an analysis of neon signs. These sign artworks were made for the restaurant industry from the 1950s to the 1970s.[13] Although the number of designs is limited, they are representative to a certain extent and can serve as a reference point for analysis.

Such designs were essential in the manufacturing process, since the neon artists visualised signboard design concepts in the early stages. After client approval, neon workers would manipulate neon tubes according to the drafted designs. The first step after receiving the 218 artworks was to categorize the collection so as to identify visual content and its aesthetics changing over time in the restaurant industry; those signs were roughly divided into Chinese and Western style eateries and subdivided into 14 categories. Chinese restaurant signs dominated the collection with about 164 artworks. There were also 38 Western restaurant sign artworks, followed by nine for Hong Kong-style eateries and seven in miscellaneous ones (Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

As the year of manufacture was not indicated on every draft, most drafts could not be dated precisely. Approximations were made instead by referring to the company phone number listed on each piece and cross-referencing the lengths of phone numbers with those listed in all old local Chinese newspapers. For example, five digits in phone numbers found under the newspaper's masthead for promo advertisements correspond to the 1950s, six digits correspond to the 60s and seven digits correspond to the 70s. While this method is admittedly imprecise, we believe that it is valuable to a certain extent.[14]

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

About 175 out of 218 artworks in the collection contained phone numbers. Using the above method, we found 54 artworks from the 1950s, 75 from the 60s, 46 from the 70s and 43 were from an unidentified year (Table 2). The numbers indicate a steady increase in neon sign usage from the 50s, which peaked in the 60s. While such numbers alone do not necessarily reflect the whole picture, they provide valuable reference points. The decrease shown in the 70s does not mean that neon lights were definitely declining; some artworks may have been returned to customers. Therefore, these statistics offer a revealing if less than accurate glimpse of Hong Kong's neon history.

Given that neon sign artworks are 2D graphics, it is necessary to further understand vernacular design by examining the spatial relationship between neon signage, architecture and street space. This article is also based on fieldwork conducted from August 2015 to December 2016, which was undertaken in various districts of Hong Kong to record and photograph neon signs that now no longer exist. Various types of neon signs and their aesthetics, installation and placement were recorded alongside information concerning their relationship to the streetscape and urban environment. More than 400 neon signs were photographed, and some of the data collected contribute to the analysis in this article. In addition to this documentation, four Hong Kong neon sign masters aged from 57 to 80 were interviewed. Three of them were retired while the youngest one, who has been working for more than 30 years in the neon sign industry, is still working in the industry.

Concept of Vernacular Design

Using neon signs as an example, this article examines how the concept of vernacular design can be broadened in the context of Hong Kong. In this article, the European modern concept of vernacular design is reviewed to determine whether the attributes of vernacular design identified by the scholars are applicable to the Hong Kong context. The notion of 'vernacular' and the extent to which it can be applied to Hong Kong and Hong Kong's neon signs are then discussed. The article ends with an analysis of neon signs in Hong Kong from historical, architectural and socio-cultural perspectives.

Based on a review of Western modern scholarly accounts of vernacular design, the concept is highly location-based because there is a strong link to the place where the design is practised. Vernacular design is related to popular and folk design in that it draws influence primarily from the locality.[15] First, it is developed and practised by people in a certain community or locality, and thus the traditions and culture of these people are represented in the design. Because the resultant products are authentic in relation to a specific locality, local visual language and aesthetics are represented.[16] Second, the production process has a high degree of informality. The artisans and craftsmen involved in the synthesis of vernacular design are 'non-expert ordinary people' without professional training or education.[17] Their production skills and techniques are usually acquired through an informal process of artisanal production, practised over time.[18] Last but not least, vernacular design is also fluid and represented in different forms at different times. Vernacular design is dependent on different social conditions.[19] Due to increasing social complexity over time, the forms of vernacular design are fluid, open-ended and ever-changing.[20]

On The Nature of Vernacular and Hong Kong's 'Indigenousness'

Based on this review, it is perceivable that Western modern scholars generally link the concept of vernacular design to products or processes indigenous to a specific locality that is created or used by a particular community. For instance, one of the summarised attributes of vernacular design is its embodiment of references to local customs and native visual language and aesthetics. Using Western modern scholarship to define the 'vernacular', it is apparent that the scholars consider vernacular design to be comprised of products or processes practised by a community with a long history, a fixed population and strong local consciousness.

Although most of this concept of vernacular design can be applied to Hong Kong, both factors of a long history and a fixed population are to be argued because of Hong Kong's unique historical development, which makes it difficult to define what is 'native' or 'indigenous' in Hong Kong. Firstly, one can certainly assert that 'the indigenous population of Hong Kong' refers to inhabitants who have long resided in the traditional fishing or walled villages on the outskirts of Hong Kong and that Hong Kong's indigenousness should be based on that definition. However, the culture and lifestyle of these 'indigenous' inhabitants are primarily based on southern Chinese traditions and do not correspond to the general modern understanding of Hong Kong and Hong Kong identity. Hong Kong has a relatively short but complex history, so the development of local identity and consciousness is also a complex subject. From the beginning of British colonial rule in 1841 to the mid-20th century, Hong Kong slowly developed into a successful entrepôt. Before 1841, Hong Kong was populated by Chinese fishermen and farmers from various villages. After Hong Kong became a free economic zone in 1842, it became an important entrepôt between China and Western countries. This attracted many Western and Chinese trading businesses to set up in Hong Kong, which allowed Hong Kong to develop its economy and become increasingly influential. Many factories in the labour-intensive and export-oriented light industries were also established in Hong Kong, which laid the foundation for Hong Kong's later industrial success.[21]

Secondly, Hong Kong had a shifting demographic and fluid population before the 1960s.[22] Economically, Hong Kong shifted its focus after World War II from being an entrepôt to light industry due to the embargo imposed on China by the United Nations. Demographically, Hong Kong received a flood of refugees from the mainland, which rapidly increased the city's population. This influx of Chinese refugees supplied Hong Kong with a large amount of low-wage labour, which immediately helped to boost development in the light industries. Hong Kong local identity was nearly nonexistent at this stage because most of these Chinese immigrants only intended to stay in Hong Kong temporarily. They thought that they would return to the mainland once the unrest had calmed down.

Nonetheless, Hong Kong local consciousness and identity were increasingly strong in the 1960s, when Hong Kong's economy became stable and started to thrive, whilst the second generation of immigrants were born and brought up in Hong Kong.[23] The labour-intensive light industry continued to make up the main economic activity in Hong Kong. Given this rapid population growth, the British colonial government took an active role in the development of public housing and infrastructure. Two riots, in 1966 and 1967, also set the stage for the colonial government to settle social problems by improving its social policies. This effort helped to promote the identity of 'Hong Kong people' and the local consciousness inherent in the assertion that 'Hong Kong is our home'.[24] For example, the Festival of Hong Kong, first organized in 1969, was held in the hopes of developing a sense of belonging and identity among Hong Kong people. With a life that had greater quality and stability, many people began to call Hong Kong home and started families here, leading to a baby boom. This second generation of Chinese immigrants is seen as the 'first wave of post-war local consciousness' by Law Wing-sang[25] and 'the coming of age of the "Hong Kong people"'.[26]

From the 1970s onwards, Hong Kong prospered on the world stage economically, and the local consciousness and identity of 'Hong Kong people' had strengthened. With Hong Kong on the world stage and largely influenced by Western cultures, local lifestyle and culture started to differ from that of the mainland, and Hong Kong citizens began to more strongly reject identification as mainland Chinese. This is what Law refers to as the 'second wave of post-war local consciousness'.[27] Therefore, instead of relating the nature of 'vernacular' and the 'indigenousness' of Hong Kong to the indigenous inhabitants from traditional villages, this article suggests that Hong Kong's concept of indigenousness is rooted in this post-war local consciousness emergent from the 1960s, which contributed to the formation of a Hong Kong identity.

Neon Signs as a Form of Vernacular Design in Hong Kong

When looking at Hong Kong's neon signs, most of the above-mentioned attributes of vernacular design are applicable to the description of neon signs and their production as a form of vernacular design.

Hong Kong's locality

As opposed to high-style design, which is usually practised with a clear organisational structure and is predominantly undertaken by educated and professional designers, the production of neon signs in Hong Kong can be seen as a kind of 'low' design practice, which is smaller in scale and artisanal, with a degree of anonymity afforded to designers. In comparison to products of high-style design, whose audience can be universal, Hong Kong's neon signs were for local use and not export-oriented. Although there were also international clients, the neon signs were made to be erected locally.

Neon sign production was also generally not seen as a practice of design. When the neon industry started to thrive in Hong Kong in the 1950s, the concept of 'design', which was 'associated with marketing, scientific production, artistic pattern and new style',[28] was not adopted in Hong Kong. Instead, terms like 'crafts', 'decorative arts' and 'commercial arts' were more commonly used.[29] The term 'design' only received an official translation (sheji, 設計), mutually agreed on by Taiwan and Hong Kong, in the 1960s.[30] Beforehand, there had been no such expression as 'neon designers', but rather 'artisans', 'craftsmen' or 'neon masters'.

Informality of Hong Kong's neon production

These first-wave neon masters in Hong Kong witnessed the thriving of the neon industry from the 1940s to the 60s. These neon masters, though experienced, generally did not receive professional training or education. They had mastered the required production skills by constant repetition, which made them proficient in the art and craft of neon sign production.

Another wave of neon sign makers came during the 1960s. Many of these were trained and educated in the Academy of Fine Arts in Shanghai or Guangzhou. They brought traditional aesthetics and craftsmanship to Hong Kong. In the neon masters interview, Master Lau Wan, who entered the neon industry in 1957, recalled that a few Shanghai-born artists were particularly skilled; Shanghai's technologies and trends impressed the young master deeply.[31] He felt that Shanghai was a leader in both fashion and neon manufacturing. Even though such artists had a professional background in the arts and were highly skilled in traditional craftsmanship, they lacked marketing and professional design know-how and had to pursue a more commercial and market-oriented way of making a living. They thus took up apprenticeships with established neon masters.

The training process in the neon industry is informal. Most neon sign makers learned their trade through apprenticeships with an experienced neon master, who passed his knowledge on to the apprentice. Master Lau explained that 'visitors used to be turned away to maintain technological secrecy'. This type of apprenticeship (shituzhi, 師徒制) was highly popular in the craft industry. The apprentice worked under close guidance of the neon master and learned the skills and techniques of producing neon signs via constant hands-on imitation and correction thereof. Master Lau explained this hardship in an interview with the author:

> In the first 2 to 3 years I was only allowed to do some basic duties like cleaning and taking care of my neon master … There was also no systematic approach to teaching and learning and everything was based on observation, imitation and correction … I only had time to practise during off-duty times or after work.

As a result of working very closely for a long time, the neon master often began to treat the apprentice like a family member and expected the apprentice to inherit the skills and knowledge of sign production and pass them on to future generations. In short, although the understanding of 'indigenousness' is different in Hong Kong, Hong Kong's neon signs and sign production possess most of the attributes of vernacular design.

Factors Influencing Neon Signs as Part of Hong Kong's Vernacular Design

Other than the Western attributes delineated, several other forces influence neon signs' inclusion in Hong Kong's vernacular design. Hong Kong's history, aesthetics, architecture and sociology contribute to an analysis of how they relate to neon signs and how the signs have been affected by these different conditions.

Design identity and influences

Like the identity of Hong Kong people, Hong Kong's design identity has gone through several different stages, and various influences on design are evident in each stage. Some of these influences had huge effects on Hong Kong neon sign designs and are showcased in Hong Kong's neon signs, such as a mixture of Western and Chinese symbols, typefaces and eclectic blend of visual styles. This reflects the nature of Hong Kong culture, which is neither entirely Chinese nor entirely Western and can be seen as a negotiation between Western styles and Chinese traditions, new technologies and hand-made solutions, and global branding and local solutions.[32] In her book, Wong Siu-yi discusses Hong Kong identity and traces how Hong Kong's design influences changed in the 20th century.[33] To study whether the design influences identified by Wong had an impact on the neon sign designs, 218 Nam Wah original neon sign designs were used as references for analysis.

With regard to Hong Kong's design influences, they can be traced back to early 20th-century China. The May Fourth Movement saw a surge of artists and scholars reject traditional thought to pursue modernisation; they longed for Western aesthetics to bring fresh developments to the country. Young artist Liu Hai-su, for example, established the Shanghai Institute of Fine art in 1912, which taught Western art courses relating to oil painting, three-dimensional perspective, and more, in contrast with concepts from traditional Chinese art education such as aerial perspective and linear design.[34]

At the same time, political and educational reformations accelerated the adaptation of Western art and knowledge across China. This was particularly evident in Shanghai, which had become China's first modern metropolis. With a mixed population, European modern aesthetics and design were ubiquitous in the city, and Chinese artists explored Western art through magazines and advertising. In the 1930s, Art Deco became the most popular European modern art style, known for its experimental geometric decorations and bold colours and patterns.[35] Art Deco's influences extended into neon signs, manifesting in ways such as strong geometric line art, simplified lettering (in geometric forms such as circles and triangles), and the replacement of certain character strokes with dots and curved lines.[36]

As a cultural melting pot, Shanghai attracted a large number of working artists from across China, who began to incorporate Western elements and techniques into their work. Such localised decorative art, with its blend of Western and Eastern design, was described by certain scholars as 'Western design with Chinese motifs and symbols', possessing 'modern Chinese appearance' [37] or 'subtle Chinese aesthetic references'[38] — merging with local elements to form a 'modern Chinese design style'.[39] Culturally, this unique mixed style had emerged as early as the 19th-century Chinese 'Self-strengthening Movement', which was dubbed '*Zhongti Xiyong*', or 'Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application'.[40]

However, following the political turmoil of the 1960s Cultural Revolution, Shanghai Art Deco and related art and cultural movements were dispossessed in mainland China.[41] A number of artists and scholars from Shanghai and Guangzhou fled to Hong Kong. Large numbers of refugees and industrialists joined them, bringing capital, technology, and labour capacity that would propel the city towards developing light industries. Shanghai-born industrialist Tam Wa Ching was one of them, having established the Nam Wah Neonlight & Electrical Manufactory Limited in 1953.

According to design historians, the Art Deco style could be found in early Hong Kong calendar posters and magazine covers – both popular mediums of advertising.[42] Early versions of local neon signs were also distinctly influenced by the style, having evolved from intersections between Eastern and Western design aesthetics.[43]

With the emergence of communism and in response to the growing manufacturing industry in Hong Kong, Hong Kong took over Shanghai's role in developing modern Chinese design styles. Since the 1960s, the 'East meets West' hybrid came into fashion in design. The pre-war Modern Chinese Style began to be regarded as outdated and became unpopular in the 1960s. As it lost popularity, design direction experienced a creative void.[44] During this period, many artists and designers embraced elements of Chinese arts and Western design. With the influx of American companies, the 1960s saw 'local' Chinese designers (many of whom had come from Guangzhou and Shanghai) adjusting to new forms. The Austria-born, America-trained designer Henry Steiner is one of the most renowned designers who came to 'incorporate Chinese cultural symbols and written characters into his Western-style designs'.[45]

In the West, neon signs had lent themselves (and vice versa) well to the decorative style of Art Deco and when neon technology was introduced to Hong Kong, also the visual form of Western signs was also adapted. A significant number of Hong Kong's signs resembled the Art Deco style, specifically their frames (Figure 1). Besides these Art Deco styles, however, Hong Kong's neon landscape presented plentiful Chinese decorative frames while the pictorial language of signs presents its own eclectic mix of symbols and icons. Lettering adds a final layer of eclecticism to neon signs. In Hong Kong, lettering is either entirely in Chinese, bilingual with an emphasis on Chinese, or tri-lingual (including Japanese). Much of the Chinese lettering originates from the calligraphic tradition, meaning that regardless of their Art Deco frames many signs combine Western styles with traditional calligraphic forms. However, some signs feature Chinese Art Deco typography, borrowed from Shanghai's distinct Art Deco style of the 1930s.[46]

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

The popular Art Deco style continued to have an effect on neon sign designs in the 1960s. The new generation of academy-trained neon artisans continued to incorporate Art Deco elements into sign designs. Although the style was no longer in fashion, no other obvious trends in design could be incorporated into neon signs, and thus Art Deco continued to exert a significant influence. However, unlike in other areas of design where the new 'East meets West' trend took hold, as noted by Wong,[47] no obvious new changes occurred in neon sign design.

In order to support form and frame analysis, we traced the outlines of each of the 175 sign designs[48] and looked at their transformation over time. Initial observations revealed a large variety of irregular arcs and graphic shapes in the 1950s, bold in flow and rhythm (Figure 2, top). By the 1960s, arcs and angular line work had become relatively restrained; with the popularity of vertical, simple line art came rectangular signs (Figure 2, middle). In the 1970s, signs had become increasingly simple and clean, with limited graphic shapes on the edges (Figure 2, bottom). We could thus conclude that while Hong Kong neon signs produced in the 1950s to 60s were mostly influenced by the Art Deco style, their forms had moved towards the clean and highly functional graphics of international style by the 1970s.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

To sum up, Hong Kong's early neon sign designs were largely influenced by the Art Deco style in graphic design. Later, sign designs became more plain, basic and information-driven, possibly due to the emergence of other advertising media. From the 1970s, no obvious design influence dominated neon sign design. However, Chinese calligraphy had always had an enormous impact on neon sign design, especially in the design of typography and the outer frame.

Besides the eclectic combinations of Art Deco frames and Chinese lettering, or the bilingual presentations of Chinese lettering and print-like roman typography, forms of traditionally "high" arts and popular "lettering" come together in Hong Kong's neon-lit streetscapes. Bilingualism in signs, the aesthetic form of the respective typographic combinations, and most of all the technical, cultural, and socio-economic conditions that necessitated such bilingualism reveal a visual and contextual story not simply about form and commercialism, but about human relations, material and visual particularities in the everyday, and most of all, about a political space with a unique modern history. As Keith Tam rightly states, ‘the bricolage of styles is perhaps not the most harmonious visually, […] it is […] characteristic of Hong Kong and representative of certain periods’[49] in the history of Hong Kong. Through a close analysis of the graphic forms of neon signs in combination with an ethnography-inspired component to grasp the everyday politics that vernacular involves, new stories will emerge about particular moments in the history of graphic design in the region.

Hong Kong’s Unique Urban Environment

It is impossible to talk about Hong Kong’s neon signs without mentioning their relationship to the city’s unique built environment and urban landscape. Neon signs are most commonly found attached to or on the building façades of Chinese shophouses (tong lau) and composite buildings, which were the dominant building types in Hong Kong before skyscrapers. Most of the pre-skyscraper buildings in Hong Kong are mixed-use buildings because the local population surged from 2,000,000 to 3,790,000 in the 1960s due to post-war birth boom and civil war-related immigration.[50] Buildings had to accommodate both residential and commercial needs; shop signs were thus often found attached to buildings or on building façades. This excessive use of signs is one of the most important elements of Hong Kong’s iconic urban landscape.[51]

The most common typologies of Hong Kong’s signs have been summarised.[52] The most common signs were in banner form, which extended from a building over the street. These signs can be sub-categorized into three types: horizontal ‘projecting banners’, vertical ‘projecting columnar banners’ and ‘projecting irregular banners’, which feature non-rectangular shapes. Some signs were flush with the building façades: horizontal ‘shop front fascia signs’, vertical ‘building columnar signs’ and ‘façades coverage signs’ (Figure 3).[53]

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Early urban landscape – pre-war Chinese shophouses

In the pre-war period, Chinese shophouses were the predominant building type in Hong Kong. They had an important role in shaping Hong Kong’s urban landscape, which is a partly linear urban form.[54] The earliest shophouses were mostly unregulated; regulations regarding building dimensions and the relationship between building height and street width were only implemented from 1902. During this period, the number of storeys of most of the shophouses ranged from two to four. [55] Some five-storey buildings were also built, which had to be constructed of fire-resistant materials. [56] These shophouses also typically had a colonnade or a veranda connected to the façade of the building, forming a walkway that allowed domestic or commercial activities to take place on the walkway or sometimes on the street.

The ground floor of a shophouse was for commercial use, and the upper floors were for residential and sometimes commercial use. These shops and service providers took advantage of building design and mounted signs attached to the building or directly on the colonnade or veranda for advertising use. ‘Projecting banner’, ‘shop front fascia’ and ‘building columnar’ signs were common.

This tradition of mounting signs continued after the introduction of neon signs in Hong Kong in the 1930s. Because pre-war shophouses were low-rise, neon signs attached to them were mainly of the ‘projecting banner’ type, extending horizontally from a building over the street (Figure 4). This heightened advertising impact, because signs could extend far into the street to maximize visibility, allowing pedestrians to see them.[57] Some vertical ‘projecting columnar banners’ could also be found, but in smaller number. This sign type is the most commonly found one in Hong Kong.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Later urban landscape – post-war Chinese shophouses and composite buildings

After WWII, these shophouses, along with the newly introduced composite buildings, started to dominate Hong Kong’s cityscape. Many new buildings were erected during the 1950s under the new building regulations implemented to help Hong Kong to accommodate the large influx of immigrants from mainland China. The Building Ordinance of 1956 increased the height limit of buildings to 21.3–24.4 metres, twice as high as the limit previously set by the Ordinance in 1935.[58] This led to the creation of a new building type: the composite building. At first, composite buildings could have up to nine floors without elevators under the 1956 Ordinance. The later 1966 Building Code even allowed for greater height and mass, which led to the creation of a new generation of composite buildings. As a result of the new regulations, many pre-war buildings that were two to four storeys high were torn down, and higher and larger composite buildings were built to replace the old ones.[59]

The new composite buildings preserved the mixed-use nature of shophouses. Because the new buildings could be built higher, the possible number of commercial floors in a single building increased to three. There were also no strict restrictions on the use of the upper floors, and therefore not only dwellings but also shops, service providers and associations could be found there. This continued mixed use of buildings and the increase in building height and mass led to even more frequent use of signs, creating an urban signscape (Figure 5).

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

The increase in building height and mass and advances in sign production technology enabled the size of signs to evolve. Signs that were remarkably larger started to appear in the streets. For instance, vertical ‘projecting columnar banners’ and ‘façades coverage signs’ (Figure 6), which typically cover a large area over the length of two or three floors, started to become more commonly used, due to the increase in building height and developments in technology. The National Panasonic sign in the 1970s, located in Jordan, was the biggest neon sign in Hong Kong, covering an entire side of a 20-storey building. More than 4,000 neon light tubes were used to produce the sign, and it broke the Guinness World Record as the world's largest neon sign. In short, the designs of neon signs depend not only on design influences but also largely on the relationship with Hong Kong's peculiar built environment and various types of buildings.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

Bottom-Up Autonomy

The government generally had a laissez-faire attitude toward neon sign regulation. Though there were several attempts to regulate the aesthetics, licensing and installation of neon signs, they were mostly disregarded. In respect to aesthetics, the Advertisement Regulation Ordinance was legislated as early as 1912 to manage all kinds of signs and advertisements.[60] However, because the implementation of the Ordinance was not very strict, it failed to stop people from erecting unauthorised signs. The design and placement of neon signs followed a bottom-up scheme, based on grassroots wisdom. The unregulated nature of this model allowed for grassroots wisdom to play out in the signs' designs and placement. Spatial battles ensued, in which each sign was designed to stand out from the rest in order to be the centre of attention. Sign owners and makers would try to make signs in new forms and shapes, make them in larger sizes or place them differently to outshine extant signs.

Urban sociologist Yamaguchi Fuminori was one of the scholars studying Hong Kong signs in the 1980s. He wrote that Hong Kong's street spaces at the time were 'crammed like something drawn by a schizophrenic and space-phobic patient; above the streets is an astonishing forest of signs'.[61] He described the shifting density of Hong Kong's street signs as a person's growth from childhood to youth and middle-age. Signs on middle-aged streets have extended into 'chaos'. Yamaguchi wrote 'If you understand why the signs look like this, you will naturally understand Hong Kong'.[62] Hong Kong's signscape is unique in its order amongst apparent chaos, which has entirely resulted from bottom-up participation and constructs an organic portrait of local life. As a result, the organic placement of neon signs created a unique urban landscape, which consists of many contrasting and complex design and visual languages.[63] Yamaguchi describes this as a laissez-faire kind of sign placement, which created a 'forest of signs with full individuality, no blank space, no order in terms of size, balance and harmony' (Figure 7).[64]

[INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE]

Though this bottom-up approach to sign placement might not have been able to attain the best visual and aesthetic results, this process reflects the way of life and grassroots thinking of the citizens of Hong Kong and the quotidian culture and vibrancy of the city. This bottom-up approach can also be enabled to place attachment and a sense of belonging through which residents establish affective connections to a specific place.[65] These cannot be planned by means of a top-down approach but rather are cultivated through the everyday practices of the citizens. French spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre stated that specific spaces in society are constructed through consistent human participation in daily living, or Spatial Practice.[66] Humanistic geographer Tuan Yi-Fu posited ‘The place is the centre space of human emotional values’.[67] American urban planner Lynch Kevin wrote about the emotional connection to place experienced by city dwellers, who create images or impressions about their own cities through memory and personal interpretation.[68] Pedestrians respond to everything on a street — including signs — with different senses; the composite of such sensual experiences are instrumental to the construction of The Image of the City.

To sum up, Hong Kong's neon signage is not only influenced by Western attributes, but also by various local factors, such as Hong Kong's design history, East-meets-West aesthetics, unique urban environment and bottom-up autonomy. These factors give us a more comprehensive understanding of Hong Kong’s vernacular design.

Conclusion

Following the disappearance of neon signs, Hong Kong’s urban vibrancy and liveliness have also diminished. Nowadays, they might be seen as items of nostalgia, which people try to replicate to represent and consume Hong Kong culture.

By looking at Hong Kong’s neon signs, some unique attributes of Hong Kong’s vernacular design can be summarised into a few points. First, it has a high degree of fluidity and uncertainty, owing to Hong Kong’s rare sociocultural, political and demographic conditions. As a fluid form of vernacular design, it is slowly dying out and being replaced by other, similar design products. Second, it is not based on an indigenous culture refined by its long history. Hong Kong’s neon signs reflect the vernacular of Hong Kong, which is neither entirely Western nor entirely Chinese. While neon signage itself is a Western invention, both Western and Chinese elements were incorporated into sign design when it was introduced to Hong Kong, expressing Hong Kong’s ‘non-East, non-West’ identity. This shows that Hong Kong is a melting pot of cultures in which multiple cultural influences exist and interplay with each other to create cultural hybrids. Third, it is important to take not only graphic dimensions but also urban and spatial conditions into account for the study of vernacular design, particularly in public spaces. As shown in the analysis, neon signs have a close relationship with urban landscape and architecture. Fourth, grassroots forces played an important role in influencing the design of Hong Kong’s neon signs. This bottom-up autonomy reflects the way of life and the quotidian culture and vibrancy of the city.

By using neon signs as an example, this article offers further possibilities in future analyses of vernacular design. Although the European modern framework can definitely serve as a reference in the study of vernacular design, many other factors must be considered when it is applied to places beyond its original scope. Therefore, it is critical to note that the vernacular can indicate something different depending on its locus. It is hoped that this method of looking at vernacular design can contribute to its further study and the design history of neon signs.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

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[26] Turner, 1995, op. cit., 24.

[27] Law, op. cit., 25.

[28] Turner, 1989, op. cit., 87.

[29] W. S. Wong. 2011. ‘Design History and Study in East Asia: Part 2 Greater China: People's Republic of China/Hong Kong/Taiwan.’ *Journal of Design History* 24, no. 4: 375-95; Wendy Siuyi Wong. 2018. *The Disappearance of Hong Kong in Comics, Advertising and Graphic Design*. Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 193.

[30] Wong, 2011, op. cit.

[31] In order to better understand the process of neon sign production and vernacular design, the research team interviewed four neon sign masters from 2017 to 2018. Some had been apprentices since they were in their teens and have been engaged in the neon sign industry for more than 50 years. Three of them have retired.

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[34] Minick, Jiao, and Jiao, Ping. *Chinese Graphic Design in the Twentieth Century*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.

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[38] Wong, 2018, op. cit.

[39] Ibid.

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[40] Huppatz, 2018, op. cit.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Wong 2018, op. cit., Turner 1988, op. cit., Huppatz 2018, op. cit., Turner, 1988, op. cit.

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[46] Kwok, 2018, op. cit.

[47] Wong, 2018, op. cit.

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Figures

Figure 1. Art Deco style is commonly seen in decorative frames of Nam Wah neon sign artworks from the 1950s to the 1960s. For example, slanted shape on Nam Shing Tea House sign (left), V-shape on Golden Sea Tea House sign (middle) and arc shape on Rainbow Tea House sign (right).

Figure 2. In the study of horizontal neon signs, there were more irregular arcs and graphic shapes in the 1950s (top), half regular form and half curved shapes in the 1960s (middle) and signs became simple and clean in the 1970s (bottom).

Figure 3. There are more than ten types of neon signs found in Hong Kong. Both vertical projecting columnar banner and horizontal projecting banners are very common. These sign placements are interrelated to the city's building structures, which constructs a peculiar visual streetscape.

Figure 4. On the left-hand side of the picture is a series of early Chinese shophouses. Various neon signs extended over the road. Wanchai, 1963. Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Government Records Service.

Figure 5. The development of composite buildings emerged because of the rapid growth of the population in the 1970s. Various commercial types of neon signs can be seen in the residential areas. In the foreground, the neon sign of a camera shop is erected. North Point, 1975. Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Government Records Service.

Figure 6. This neon sign covers the façade of the entire six-storey building. Due to the size of the neon sign being prominent, it became a landmark of the district. Jordan, 2016. Photo taken by the research team.

Figure 7. This picture of a ‘forest of signs’ reflects the hustle and bustle of streets of the past in Mongkok. This represents the visual shock of the unique streetscape produced from the bottom-up approach to sign placements. Mongkok, 1979. Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Government Records Service.

Table

Table 1. Categorisation of the contents of 218 Nam Wah neon sign artworks.

Table 2. Number of Nam Wah neon sign artworks from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Chinese restaurants (164)	
Ice chamber	6
Choi kwun	7
Tea house	8
Tea room	9
Herbal tea shop	9
Noodle shop	9
Lau	12
Chinese restaurant and tea house	14
Fan dim	21
Chinese restaurant	69
Western restaurant (38)	
Western restaurant	27
Café and cakes	11
Hong Kong style restaurant (9)	
Cha Chaan Teng	9
Miscellaneous (7)	7

Artworks by era/orientation	Horizontal	Vertical	Others	Total
1950s	24	27	3	54
1960s	34	37	4	75
1970s	30	14	2	46
Unidentified year	27	13	3	43

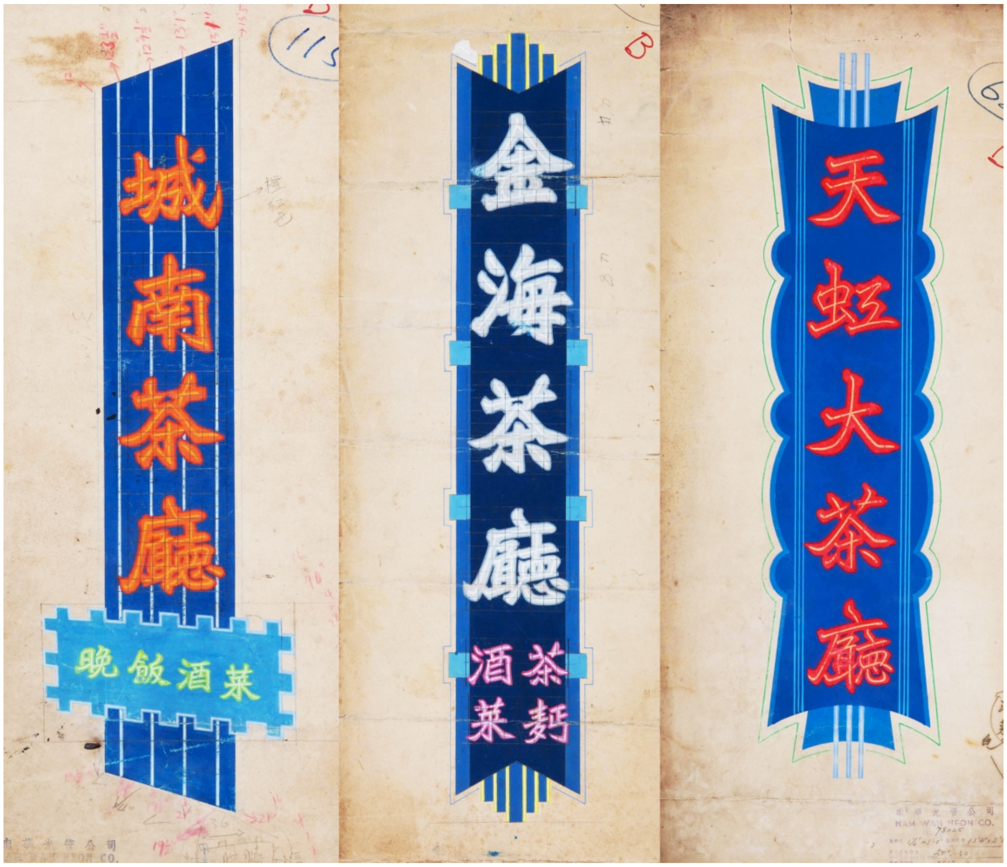
城南茶廳
晚飯酒菜
金海茶廳
茶麪酒菜
天虹大茶廳

Figure 1. Art Deco style is commonly seen in decorative frames of Nam Wah neon sign artworks from the 1950s to the 1960s. For example, slanted shape on Nam Shing Tea House sign (left), V-shape on Golden Sea Tea House sign (middle) and arc shape on Rainbow Tea House sign (right).

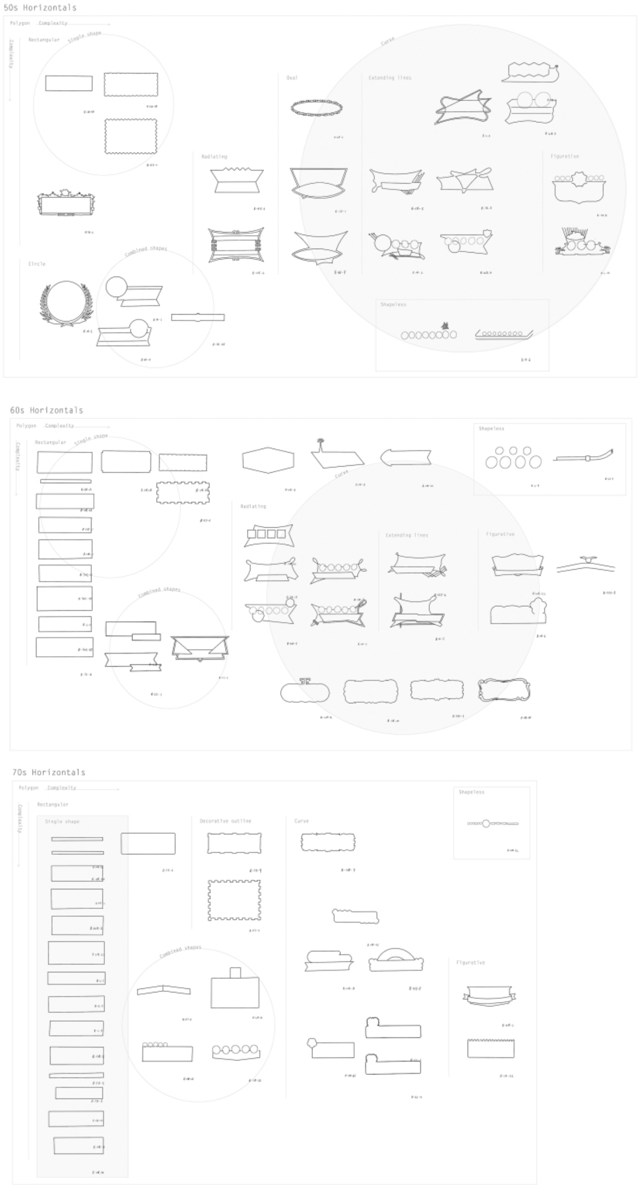
50s Horizontals
Polygon
Complexity
Complexity
Rectangular
Single shape
Curve
Oval
Extending lines
Radiating
Figurative
Circle
Combined shapes
Shapeless
60s Horizontals
Polygon
Complexity
Complexity
Rectangular
Single shape
Shapeless
Curve
Radiating
Extending lines
Figurative
Combined shapes
70s Horizontals
Polygon
Complexity
Complexity
Rectangular
Single shape
Decorative outline
Curve
Shapeless
Combined shapes
Figurative

Figure 2. In the study of horizontal neon signs, there were more irregular arcs and graphic shapes in the 1950s (top), half regular form and half curved shapes in the 1960s (middle) and signs became simple and clean in the 1970s (bottom).

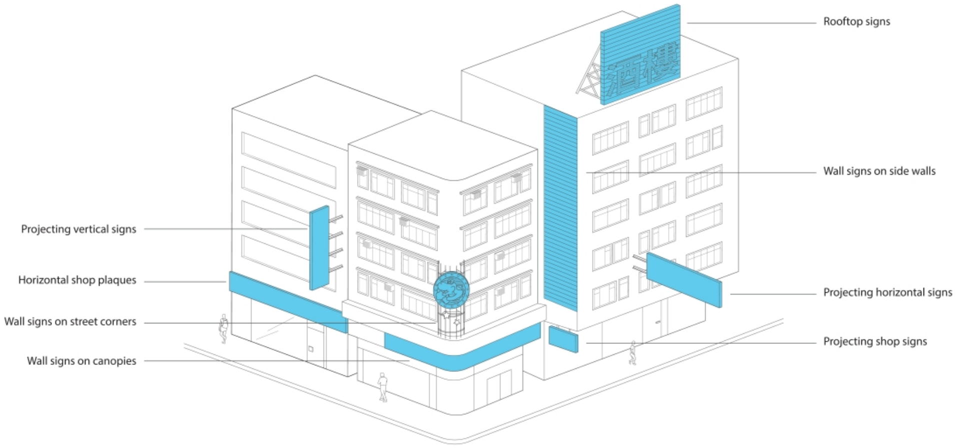
Rooftop signs
酒樓
Wall signs on side walls
Projecting vertical signs
Horizontal shop plaques
Projecting horizontal signs
Wall signs on street corners
Projecting shop signs
Wall signs on canopies

Figure 3. There are more than ten types of neon signs found in Hong Kong. Both vertical projecting columnar banners and horizontal projecting banners are very common. These sign placements are interrelated to the city's building structures, which constructs a peculiar visual streetscape.

907x474mm (600 x 600 DPI)

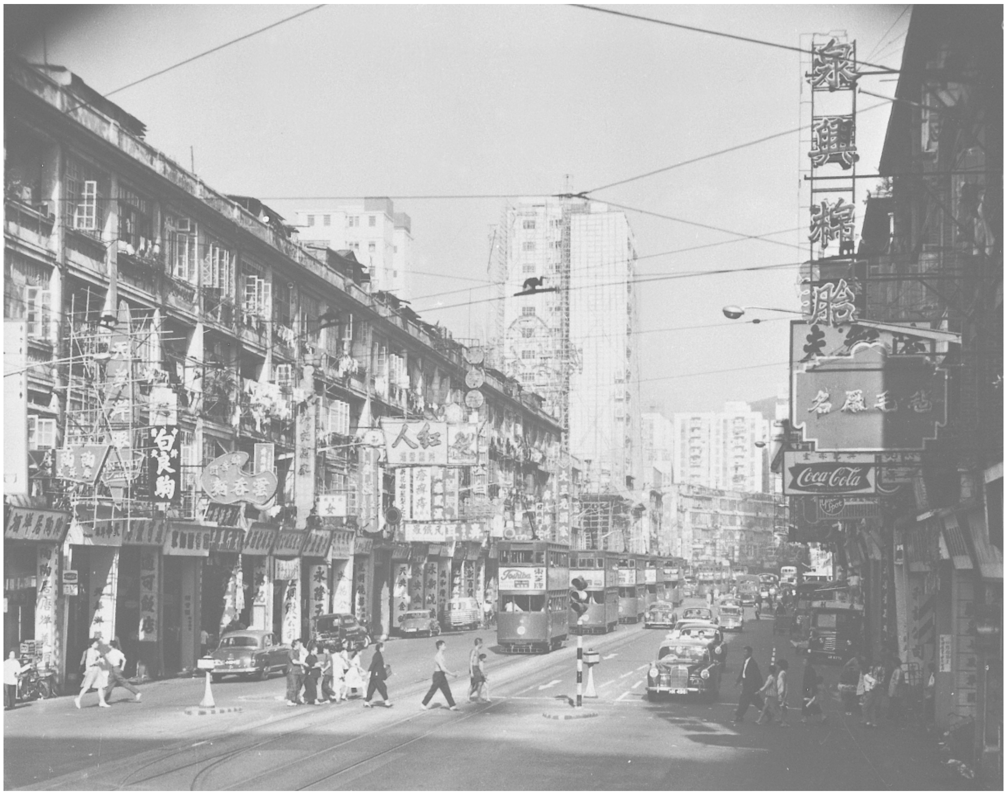

Figure 4. On the left-hand side of the picture is a series of early Chinese shophouses. Various neon signs extended over the road. Wanchai, 1963. Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Government Records Service.

449x353mm (300 x 300 DPI)

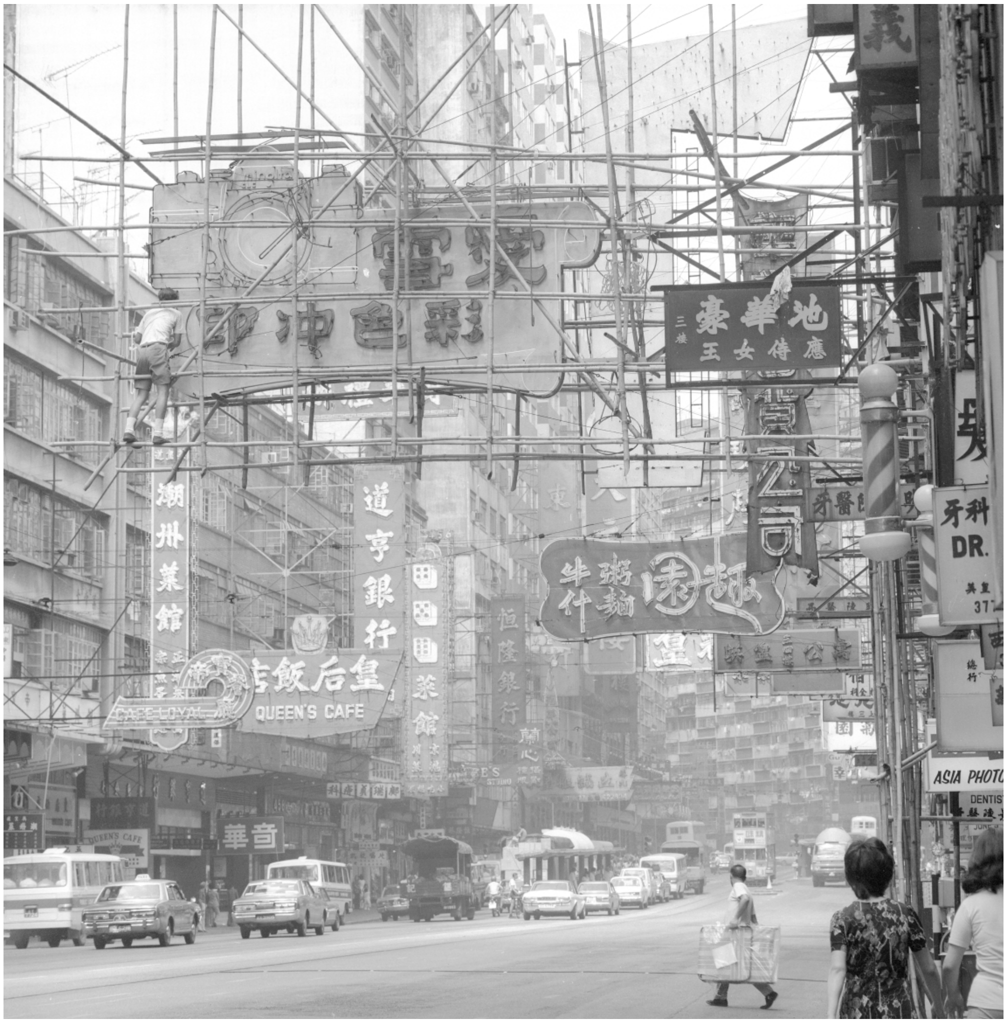
彩色沖印
潮州菜館
道亨銀行
恒隆銀行
皇后飯店
QUEEN'S CAFE
CAFE LOYAL
DR.
ASIA PHOTO
DENTIST

Figure 5. The development of composite buildings emerged because of the rapid growth of the population in the 1970s. Various commercial types of neon signs can be seen in the residential areas. In the foreground, the neon sign of a camera shop is erected. North Point, 1975. Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Government Records Service.

387x394mm (300 x 300 DPI)

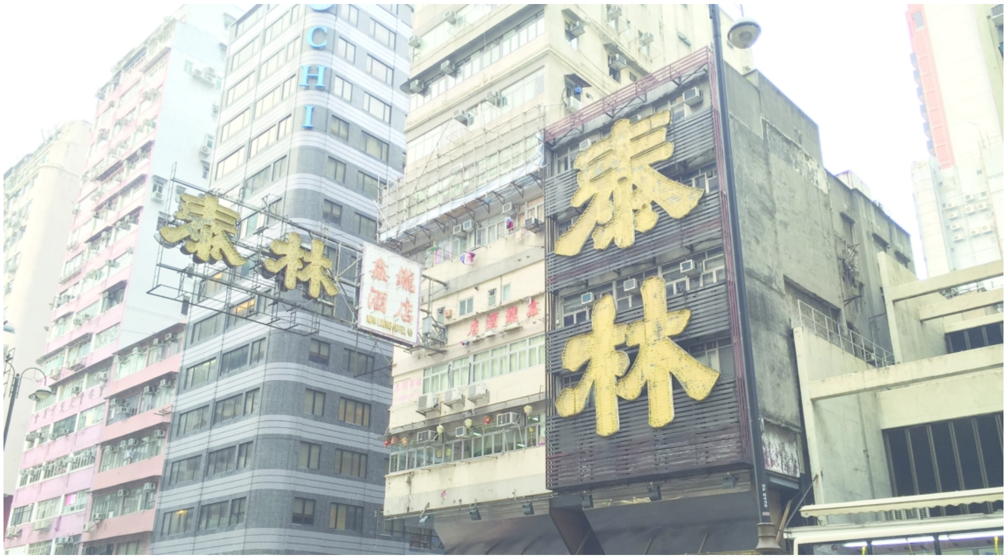

Figure 6. This neon sign covers the façade of the entire six-storey building. Due to the size of the neon sign being prominent, it became a landmark of the district. Jordan, 2016. Photo taken by the IDL research team.

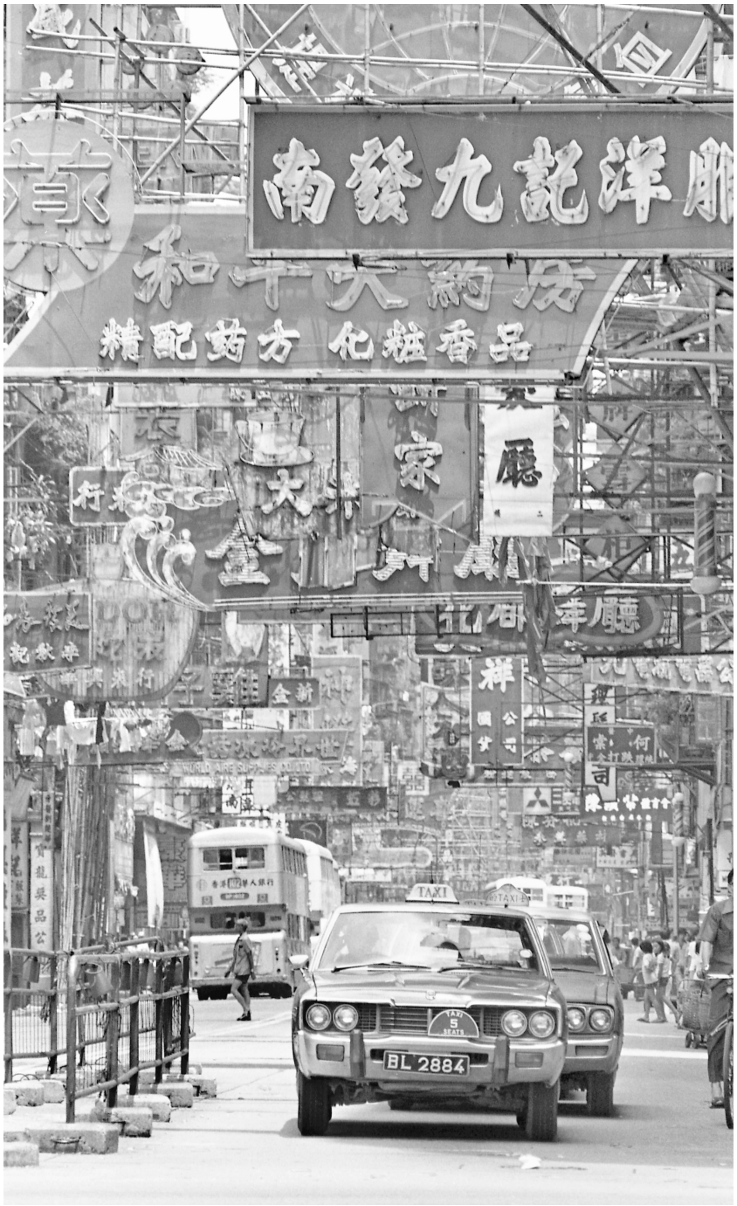

Figure 7. This picture of a ‘forest of signs’ reflects the hustle and bustle of streets of the past in Mongkok. This represents the visual shock of the unique streetscape produced from the bottom-up approach to sign placements. Mongkok, 1979. Photo courtesy: Hong Kong Government Records Service.

317x521mm (300 x 300 DPI)