The Death and Life of Hong Kong’s Illegal Façades

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Due to a combination of removal campaigns and comprehensive urban interventions over the years, the streetscape of Hong Kong has been cleared of most of its illegal façade structures, including its iconic street signs and neon billboards. As a consequence, the semiotic richness and immaterial heritage value that once reflected the dynamics of local businesses, collective memories and popular crafts has disappeared from what is now an increasingly sanitised urban landscape. Titled in reference to Jane Jacobs’ landmark work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), this essay studies the rise, persecution and contemporary reappraisal of Hong Kong’s illegal façades within the city’s historical and legal context – with a special focus on the activism of the not-for-profit neon preservation group called Street Sign HK.

Keywords: Hong Kong; street signs; illegal construction; informality; cultural heritage; neon lighting; visual imagery

Introduction

The once jostling and glittering city lights of Hong Kong seem to be fading. Their demise is the latest phase of Hong Kong’s longstanding struggle with informal façade modifications, a phenomenon which has challenged lawmakers and planners since early colonial times. Along with an amalgamation of spontaneously erected artefacts such as cages, sunshades and illegal rooftop extensions, neon street signs are potentially hazardous in the face of typhoons and thus may endanger the lives of pedestrians if maintained poorly (Figure 1). Hence in 2020, after attempts that have used a variety of policies and approaches, the transformation of Hong Kong’s building stock – alongside its social and business fabric – appears to be gradually but definitely removing these extraneous structures.

Interestingly, as Hong Kong’s façades become clearer and safer, there is a growing interest in these illegal practices of customisation as a form of urban identity invested with its own aesthetic codes. As Douglas Young, the founder of design brand GOD, explains: ‘We wanted to create a brand that would reflect the Hong Kong spirit. But what is the Hong Kong spirit? We had to find out first’ [1, p.162]. One answer might well be the omnipresent streetscape of customised windows and illegal add-ons hung from residential buildings that taps into the early childhood memories of his millennial audience, prompting feelings of embodied authenticity and local identity.

This essay thus offers a contemporary reappraisal of Hong Kong’s street signs and neon lights within the broader context of the city’s historical struggles between law, custom and identity. It therefore covers policies such as the prohibition, tolerance and regularisation of informal dwelling practices, focusing upon the stigmatisation of the ‘composite blocks’ of the 1960s, as well as subsequent building and urban management policies. The essay concludes with a showcase of contemporary creative projects – and, in particular, it discusses the advocacy campaign of a not-for-profit neon preservation group called ‘Street Sign Hong Kong’, as founded by Kevin Mak and Ken Fung.

Illegality versus Tolerance: Historical Overview

Hong Kong’s story includes a long record of struggles between norm and practice, empiricism and ritualised custom, planning and sheer necessity. It is precisely the colony’s renowned rule of law and legal security, the pride in which can still be felt in every statement made in the past by British colonial officials, which makes...
this ongoing conflict so vivid and interesting. Hong Kong Island constituted the first area under the original treaty negotiated by Britain with the Chinese government in 1843, and then, just over five decades later, the ‘Order in Council’ issued on 20th October 1898 extended this special status to a new swathe of land on the mainland – titled the New Territories – such that the latter now fell under the ordinance through which colonial rule was applied [2]. Chinese customary law was allowed to apply in non-criminal cases, under the primacy of British rule, but this mainly affecting landownership, family disputes and inheritance issues. In
practice, Chinese law was very rarely invoked in Hong Kong courts due to the preference for non-criminal cases to be settled in extra-judiciary agreements under the moral authority of village and temple leaders, albeit overseen by colonial district officials [3]. This in effect overlaid two kinds of legitimacy that led to the creation of an ‘enclave British society’ that was governed by British law, with the subordinated ‘native’ population left to apply their own rules – thus avoiding the need for the British to preside over local conflicts outside their colonial interests.

The rules of Chinese law often differed from village to village, and merged ritual, faith and social prestige into juridical acts, much to the bewilderment of British colonial magistrates [2]. Regrettably, most of the original records of customary practices collected by colonial district officials were destroyed during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong from December 1941 to August 1945 [3]. However, it is evident that the British colonial authorities in the New Territories found themselves in the situation of having to agree to obscure norms that related to the practices of a long gone ruling state, the Qing Dynasty that ruled China from 1644–1912, having been brought by the Chinese mainlanders who had moved to the colony – and which had also by the twentieth century developed into local customs with their own distinctive ‘Hong Kong flavour’.

Meanwhile, on Hong Kong Island, the Anglo-Cantonese shophouses known as Tong Lau’s – another local adaptation of South Chinese lifestyle practices – were becoming the most idiosyncratic building typology in the colony [4, p.200]. Tong Lau’s were tenement buildings of three or four storeys in which the business area occupied the entire ground floor, and the private domestic rooms for staff or family members were on the upper levels. Restrictions on building volume, intended to ensure sufficient daylight and ventilation, were imposed by the Public Health and Buildings Ordinance of 1903, largely motivated by a major outbreak of bubonic plague in 1884. These restrictions, along with a system of rear access lanes, gave birth to the Tong Lau shophouse typology that was to be consistently iterated, with countless stylistic and functional variations, right up until the Second World War.

In Tong Lau’s, all the façades at ground floor level were dedicated to trade and retail. Privacy was at the bottom of anyone’s list of priorities, and there was rarely any independent access to the domestic rooms above, as any staircases would have taken valuable space away from business activity. Living and trading thus remained inseparable for the occupants of Tong Lau’s, and from the outside, signs and advertisements covered most of their upper façades, merging in with other add-ons such as clothe-lines. Signs were carefully adapted to a façade’s architectural elements, such as pillars, lintels and verandas, thus giving rise to a rich variety of advertising formats.

Although the 1935 Buildings Ordinance reinforced the volumetric restrictions set by its 1903 predecessor [5, p.1473], Hong Kong at that stage still lacked any comprehensive housing policy. Only after the tragic Shek Kip Mei fire in Kowloon in December 1953 did Hong Kong’s government become truly aware of the risk posed by poor dwelling conditions in shantytowns to the colony’s political stability [6]. Around 50,000 immigrant residents were left homeless by the fire. The Resettlement Department was immediately formed to help victims of the catastrophe, and soon afterwards, in 1954, the newly founded Hong Kong Housing Authority went on to implement major long-term housing policies. Their ‘Mark I’ housing blocks were the first of a still ongoing series of multi-family housing blocks that have done so much to signal the creation of Hong Kong’s modern identity, thus also constructing the collective memories of millions of citizens [7].

Hong Kong was also at the mercy of larger conflicts and events in the global region throughout the 20th century: for instance the Chinese Civil War (1945–49), First Indochina War (1946–54), ‘The Great Leap Forward’ (1958–62), The Cultural Revolution (1966–76), as well as the Korean War (1950–53) and Vietnamese War (1955–75). The border between China and Hong Kong always remained relatively easy to cross and so it is difficult to determine accurate numbers of migrants who crossed it. According to the Guangdong archives, more than half a million Chinese residents ‘escaped’ to Hong Kong between 1949 and 1974, although Chen Bingan estimates that the actual numbers were several times higher [8]. Additionally, as Carina Hoang documents in a website titled ‘Vietnamese Boat People’, the arrival of refugees from Vietnam peaked in 1979, due to the Sino-Viet crisis, when there were more than 68,700 newcomers to Hong Kong [9]. Although most of the refugees were eventually relocated in Western countries, a swathe of informal settlements and government-sponsored refugee camps grew up on the outskirts of Hong Kong, generally in areas prone to unsanitary and hazardous conditions and as such not attractive to building developers [10, p.210].

According to Alan Smart, in 1984 there were still 750,000 people living illegally in these informal settlements in the colony [10, p.219]. Hong Kong’s government found itself facing the dilemma of either regularising these settlements, and thus encouraging further encroachments, or taking a high political risk in clearing away the unauthorised dwellings. The hybrid designation of ‘Temporary Housing Areas’ was introduced as a short-term palliative to describe the illegal settlements, although neither this nor subsequent
terms such as ‘Permitted Areas’ or ‘Cottage Areas’ ever really conferred, even implicitly, any legitimation upon them. Instead they were tolerated as quasi-legalised settlements that still remained essentially unauthorised – thus any further consolidation of the existing buildings was strictly banned, as indeed were any other improvements or the provision of a better infrastructure [10, p.216]. The key to successful implementation of this balanced policy was to carry out accurate and timely surveys to discover any potential dangers, in combination with firm coercive measures to that sought to reduce the moral hazard posed by the unauthorised communities. Unlike slum programmes abroad, Hong Kong’s slum policies never aimed to transform these areas into liveable neighbourhoods, but rather simply kept them under control until the occupants could be effectively evicted.

A further Buildings Ordinance in 1955 dramatically increased the size and impact of private developments in the city, part of Hong Kong’s continued post-war business growth. This new category of buildings was also subject to volumetric constraints depending on the width and category of adjoining streets [11, p.5]. Daylight setback angles (Figure 2) were enforced above certain heights, creating what have become

![Figure 2: A 'composite building' with setback planes in Sheung Wan [Photograph: Francisco Garcia Moro. All rights reserved].](image)
the characteristic so-called ‘composite blocks’ (i.e. large mixed-use buildings) in various districts of Central and Kowloon, with perhaps the most noteworthy being Wanchai House (1959), 475A Fuk Wa Street (1959), Peony House (1961), Chunking Mansions (1961), Mirador Mansion (1962), Mei Wah (1963), Kam Wa (1964) and Metropole (1967).

Light industries, small businesses, manufacturing workshops, apartments; for many households, these ‘composite buildings’ would bring them the first opportunity to own a modern home. In her essay ‘The City in a Building’, Eunice Seng sketches out the social history of Hong Kong’s ‘composite blocks’ [12]. Their mixed-use programmes gave rise to myriads of small retail businesses, domestic industries and rental apartments, extending their internal circulation routes out into the surrounding streets of Hong Kong. In actuality, their intricate inner spatiality proved particularly suitable for ways to escape government surveillance, not least because of the multiple entrances/exits located around the perimeter. During the student riots of 1967, several examples of this type of building became strongholds of left-wing groups and pro-communist factions protesting against the colonial government (Figure 3). In retaliation, British forces used helicopters

Figure 3: Photograph of the 1967 riots: ‘1st Battalion, The Welsh Regiment cordon in Hennessy Road, Wan Chai’ [Source: Ming Pao Daily News on 12th July 1967. Hong Kong, Sing Tao Micro-file Centre, 1980. Fair use for non-commercial purposes].
to assault Kiu Kwan Mansion (Figure 4) in North Point on Hong Kong Island – only recently built in 1966, and at the time the highest tower in the whole region. Labelled as ‘leftist buildings’ or ‘communist strongholds’ by the Hong Kong media, they were clearly regarded as a sinister phenomenon. In subsequent years, sensationalist news items about fires, murders, drugs and other grisly events helped to represent these ‘composite blocks’ as being, in Seng’s words, a “jungle” where bodies and things collide and hide, which fascinated film-makers, sociologists, anthropologists and other seekers of alternative culture and history beneath the official ‘where east meets west’ line’. [12, p.97].

The large and generally utilitarian façades of these ‘composite buildings’ in Hong Kong were however also by now becoming profusely modified with external cages, storage cabinets, TV antennas, signboards and – following the widespread adoption of air-conditioning – condensers [13]. Changes in their internal layouts required the reconfiguration of the building’s whole infrastructure, notably in relation to drainage pipework, adding yet another layer to the intricate network of fixes and add-ons. Even more audacious structures comprised fully cantilevered rooms, wet storage boxes, sunshades, clothes racks, pocket gardens and balustrades.

Figure 4: Kiu Kwan Mansion, North Point, Hong Kong Island [Photograph: Francisco Garcia Moro. All rights reserved].
Setbacks on upper storeys as required by Hong Kong’s daylight rules were particularly instrumental in enabling the erection of extra rooms without the hassle of needing expensive cantilevering structures: it also meant that the new rooms could remain hidden from visual inspection at street level [14, p.480]. The result was a cacophony of anarchically positioned, precarious, poorly built extensions that hindered ventilation and blocked sunlight to the streets below. Among many other hazards, Campbell lists the blocking of fire escape routes, the danger of loosely attached elements falling on pedestrians’ heads, wind-blown projectiles, major leaks, and the general accumulation of dirt and grime [15]. Rooftops were also systematically encroached upon through the erection of unauthorised dwellings for low-income workers, again blocking access to the rooftop if needed for fire evacuation [14, p.481].

Overall, these huge ‘composite buildings’ blocked daylight and airflow at street level, creating a discomfiting ‘canyon effect’ for Hong Kong’s pedestrians (Figure 5). As a consequence of these hazards and inconveniences, further legislative changes were considered in 1962, albeit not implemented until four years later. Another genuinely local building type emerged as a result: the ‘podium tower’ (Figure 6) [11, p.6]. This was because plot development ratios were now set at 8:1 and total site coverage was permitted for

Figure 5: Extreme example of the ‘canyon effect’ in North Point [Photograph: Francisco Garcia Moro. All rights reserved].
non-residential uses, encouraging developers to locate retail unit in ground floor podiums along with car parks, while the apartments above were raised up as tall, slim towers, such as the Tung Fai Building on the eastern edge of Hong Kong Island (1975). This new typology made high-density housing more compatible with also providing adequate airflow and sunlight at street level. However, the podiums became almost entirely dedicated to parking, creating what has been described as a ‘pedestrian wasteland’ composed of ‘decorated garages’ in which most of the visual and semiotic richness of older Hong Kong streets disappeared [16]. Since the apartment blocks were by necessity stepped back from the podiums, there was little or no interaction between residential units and street life below. The new arrangement made the placement of signs or billboards pointless and, as a consequence, the only spaces still available for self-generated modifications by inhabitants were in the retail shops at ground level.

Furthermore, the adoption and improvement of prefabrication techniques by the construction industry also hindered informal customisation practices. By 1989 the Hong Kong Housing Authority was utilising precast façades on a large scale [17, p.3]. All their façades, including window frames and pipework, were manufactured in factories, and the wall openings were designed in such a way that they could hardly be modified subsequently by exterior add-ons. This construction system soon became the standard for all public and private residential buildings in Hong Kong, and indeed still is today.

### The Death of Illegal Façade Modifications

By the time of the handover ceremony on 30th June 1997 – whereby the British government returned Hong Kong to China under certain stipulated conditions, and China denoted the city as a Special Administrative Region – the colony had already transitioned from a colonial industrial port to an advanced global service economy. ‘Asia’s World City’ was the motto adopted by the new Hong Kong government in 2001, promoting the region as ‘one of the most cosmopolitan and vibrant cities in Asia’ [18]. The redevelopment of the city to fulfil the needs of an international financial centre took place on two fronts: on the one hand ‘urban renewal operations’ were implemented, and on the other a series of policies to tackle what were termed ‘Unauthorised Building Works’. The conflicts and contradictions made by these two lines of action are highly revealing of the tacit agreements and social customs under which informal construction practices had previously flourished.

Today, in 2020, there are 7,680 buildings in Hong Kong older than 50 years – of which 3,556 are more than six storeys in height, presenting a serious challenge in terms of management and maintenance [19]. To manage the redevelopment of run-down neighbourhoods, the Urban Renewal Authority (URA) had been founded in 2001. Unlike its predecessor, the Land Development Corporation, the URA had the legal right to expropriate land, a power which would streamline and simplify new redevelopment programmes under the umbrella of ‘urban renewal operations’. These primarily consisted of the demolition of clusters of post-war
apartment buildings, and the erection of contemporary mixed-use developments that fused the podium residential tower typology with upscale retailing (Figure 7).

However, in spite of proclaiming a ‘People First, District-Based, Public Participatory Approach’ [20], the URA received strong criticism because of two projects in particular: ‘Wedding City’ and ‘Graham Market’ [21]. The demolition of Lee Tung Street in the Wan Chai district of Hong Kong, which had been popularly known as ‘Wedding Card Street’, was promoted by the Secretary of Development (and now Chief Executive), Carrie Lam. Arguing that the apartment buildings in the street had ‘little historic value’, and ignoring the immaterial heritage value of the neighbourhood despite an intense backlash in the mass media and academic circles [22], the buildings and associated market in Lee Tung Street were finally demolished to allow new development.

Similarly, the URA’s counter-proposal for Graham Street Market in Central consisted in a historicist pastiche stripped away of its hitherto social fabric, lacking the complexity and intricacy of local spatial patterns and the granularity of small businesses and bustling street markets. The consequent demolition of Graham Market, only partially achieved due to various scandals and legal difficulties, has however contributed to an awareness in Hong Kong of the important of built heritage and immaterial heritage as a collective wealth that transcends the mere preservation of old monuments.

In regard to the other strategy to gentrify Hong Kong as a global finance city, the designation of ‘Unauthorised Building Works’ (UBWs) is the official term for informal building modifications as defined by the Hong Kong Building Department [23, p.1]. The first legislative efforts to tackle UBWs were back in 1975. At a time when the Vietnam War was coming to an end and immigration from China was reaching new peaks, the most urgent task for the colonial government of the time was to prevent further building encroachments [10, p.215]. Municipal officials were thus instructed to report and order the demolition of any UBW they found in newly erected buildings [20] – but in practice, due to chronic understaffing, it was decided to optimise resources by allowing staff to focus only on the most urgent and flagrant cases [10, p.216]. In 1988, therefore, illegal structures in Hong Kong started to be classified into ‘actionable’ cases that should be immediately demolished and ‘non-actionable’ ones that could be tolerated as long as there were no safety concerns. A similar mentality was applied to informal street signs and neon lighting in the city.

What this meant was that by 2001 there were some 800,000 UBWs and 220,000 non-compliant signboards dotted across Hong Kong [20]. In 2011, after long parliamentary enquiries and audit efforts and, particularly after the collapse of a building undergoing illegal renovation in Ma Tau Wai Road in Kowloon in 2010, which involved four fatalities, stricter monitoring of illegal construction practices was implemented. The Building Department was given powers to obtain court warrants to access contentious properties. These new policies combined a stepped system of notifications, warnings and penalties with an instructive approach aimed at providing assistance and education for owners. As a result, the Mandatory Building Inspection Scheme was implemented in 2012: this introduced the compulsory regular inspections of older buildings in Hong Kong, to be carried out by certified inspectors (Figure 7).

Likewise, the Minor Works Control System had already been implemented in 2010, including the ‘Validation Scheme for Unauthorised Signboards’, which set out strict guidelines for the erection of new street signs [24]. Detailed written and graphic descriptions now needed to be submitted for any projecting

Figure 7: Left: A cluster of ‘Tong Lau’ shophouses in Johnson Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong Island, as seen in 2005 prior to their restoration by the Urban Renewal Authority [Photograph: Francisco Garcia Moro. All rights reserved]. Right: As seen in 2011 after the URA’s renovation process [Courtesy of CNN Travel. Fair use for non-commercial purposes].
signboards, including information about location, structure and dimensions (*Figure 8*) [25]. Simultaneously, voluntary self-reporting schemes were launched in 2012 and 2017 for the so-called ‘Exempted Houses’ in the New Territories, these being the planning-free dwellings that male residents are allowed to erect in older towns and villages. Again, the strategy was aimed at acknowledging the illegality of the structures yet without necessarily punishing a customary practice that had been adopted by a sizeable part of Hong Kong’s population. By requiring the engineers involved to comply with strict certification and licensing rules, responsibility was shifted from occupants to building contractors who are easier to monitor and sanction (*Figures 9 and 10*). Using this approach, some UBWs can be removed once they have gone beyond their ‘safe life’ as a consequence of the absence of any qualified, licensed contractors who are willing to repair or upgrade them [26, p.24].

*Figure 8*: Diagram of the permitted signage areas on facades according to the regulations stipulated by the Hong Kong Building Department [Image by Francisco Garcia Moro based on the Building Department’s brochure].

*Figure 9*: A non-compliant neon sign on a 1950s building in Kowloon [Photograph: Francisco Garcia Moro. All rights reserved].
By following this ‘risk-based’ approach, which prioritises the forced removal of the most hazardous structures, about 27,000 UBWs are now being cleared annually across Hong Kong. The Building Department provides comprehensive statistics about the number of warning notices, demolition orders and prosecutions [27]. However, a more direct and intuitive grasp of the long-term impact of Hong Kong’s policy on UBWs and urban signage/neon lighting can be obtained by comparing the situation one sees today with the historic photographs (Figure 11) that have been collected by the not-for-profit body that calls itself Street Sign Hong Kong – whose founders note ruefully that ‘we are at (or perhaps near the end of) the painful period where most of the old signboards accumulated in the past decades are disappearing’ [28].

This strategy of controlled tolerance in Hong Kong has been criticised for weakening the rule of law, although others praise it for its sensitivity and humanity [29]. Several parliamentary inquiries [30, 31, 32] have raised concerns about alleged privileges in terms of the enforcement of UBW regulations following
scandals involving high-profile officials such as Teresa Cheng (Figure 12), Henry Tang Ying-Yen and Donald Tsang Yam-Kuen. These inquiries have also challenged the general assumption that informal building modifications in Hong Kong are limited to poor and marginal contexts; instead they reveal that the illegal transformation of buildings is a widespread practice not restricted to any particular social class. Denouncing a UBW on someone’s property has indeed become an effective political tactic to cast doubt on the probity of a public person. For instance, the illegal house extensions of the urban rights activist Paul Zimmerman, in spite of being under demolition order since 2008, remained in place at least until 2018 and was only acted upon once the case was publicly aired during the 2019 Legislative Council elections [33]. More recently, in the wake of the anti-extradition bill protests of 2019–20 and immediately after the detention of the campaigner Jimmy Lai, the local progressive newspaper Apple Daily denounced the fact that Police Commissioner Chris Tang Ping-Keung enjoyed the benefits of a 40-square-metre rooftop extension – ironically referred to as ‘Feng Shui House’ – in the apartment he rented from 2016 to 2019 [34]; similarly, some expat Hong Kong police officers who openly supported the Hong Kong government’s tough response to the protesters, such as Vasco Gareth Llewellyn Williams, David John Jordan and Rupert Dover, were also exposed for having erected UBWs and related infractions.

Reappraisal of Illegal Façade Modifications

It is now worth panning back from Hong Kong for a moment to consider the wider question of commercial signage in capitalist cities more generally. Large, high-level signboards can be understood as offering revealing hints about a particular building’s inner complexity, and as result of their profusion, in our streetscapes we can see a collection of businesses, associations, churches, schools, leisure establishments and dwellings all being juxtaposed along with their conflicting agendas (Figures 13 and 14). Down at street level in the capitalist city, myriad dazzling electrified signs compete for our attention. Hanging audaciously above pavements and roads, they merge in with other urban structures such as temporary scaffolding or the empty framed signs of abandoned businesses (Figure 15).

The use of neon lamps for advertisements were patented by Georges Claude in France in 1915, and then first adopted soon after in the USA by a car dealership in Los Angeles [35, p.6]. Over subsequent decades, the growth of tourism and entertainment industries fuelled the widespread adoption of neon lamps for street signs and roadside signs [35, p.7]. In the case of Hong Kong, neon lights only became extensively used as a result of its rapid economic growth in the post-war period. As Chan Shao-Yi points out, the glowing signs
that offered sophisticated shops and restaurants not only appealed to the desires of consumers but also subtly glorified the presumed superiority of Western capitalism over socialism in mainland China [36, p.153]. Hong Kong’s array of neon lights therefore reflected its economic dynamism as an open international port, as well as its status as an oasis of capitalist civilisation in the midst of Asia – a recognisable, Western-like resting post that stood between the vastness of communist China and the laid-back exoticism of southeast Asian countries. However, the decline in the USA from the 1960s of downtown areas led to the stigmatisation of neon signs, which became increasingly associated with unsavoury night trading [37, p.20]. In particular, safety concerns and racial prejudice towards American Chinatowns began to affect the perception of Asian language and imagery as expressed in neon signage [38, p.107]. Neon has gone out of fashion in recent decades, with contemporary capitalism seeming to prefer the smoother, more homogenous world of LED signs and pixelated digital screens for its downtown urban landscapes.

This socioeconomic transformation can be seen readily in contemporary Hong Kong. Its collage of old and new buildings creates a sharp contrast through the juxtaposition of new modern towers associated with international capital flows and older-style local alleys and shabby run-down blocks. Kowloon Walled City, probably still the best-known product of Hong Kong’s informal development, was repeatedly characterised...
as an ungovernable criminal hideout, and as a result was demolished in 1994 [12, 39, 40]. The high-rise structures and cramped spaces produced during the densification of Hong Kong in the 1960s can be seen as a stark representation of the pressure of conflicting forces: West and East, communism and capitalism, misery and affluence, humanity and technology; places where human fascinations and silenced desires are conveyed vividly by city lights. ‘Multiple temporalities superimposed on one another’, creating ‘uchronias’ in which mythology and modernity coexist, is one description of them [36, p.150]. The neon signs that grew within the vertical amalgamation of urban infrastructure networks in Hong Kong are seen now as having
been converted ‘into a transnational currency of archaic modernity’. Nowadays, the post-war ‘composite blocks’, even if they now lack most of their former illegal modifications, retain that ramshackle but imposing appearance that makes them attractive as locations for recent films such as *Transformers: Age of Extinction* [41] and *Doctor Strange* [42].

The streetscape in the manga film *Ghost in the Shell* – which first appeared in comic form in 1989, then as a Japanese film in 1995, and a US film in 2017 – likewise draws its visual props and scenery straight from the 1956 Ordinance regulations [43]. The street signs in the comic and the movies combine Japanese *kanji* ideograms with both traditional and simplified Chinese so as not to convey any readable message that might distract viewers, in spite of the fact that this would normally be the primary purpose of any advertising sign. Instead, the signage is used to add to the palimpsest of architectural forms, fractured social classes and hybrid biomechanical devices to create a futuristic city that tries to belong to no time and no place. Similarly, Tom Southwell, who was the art director of Ridley Scott’s hugely influential film, *Blade Runner* (1982), has

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**Figure 15:** A typical streetscape in Hong Kong as seen in 2008 [Photograph: Francisco Garcia Moro. All rights reserved].
explained how the movie’s signboards – also in *kanji* – were creatively modified to prioritise their exotic visual appeal for Western audiences [44]. *Blade Runner’s* street signs deliberately lack any message or reference to particular businesses or places, thus creating a vague sensation of strangeness and dislocation. Cities that depict futuristic technology, overcrowded conditions and precarious lifestyles are created that fit the ‘high-tech, low-life’ description coined by Bruce Sterling in his preface to William Gibson’s collection of short stories titled *Burning Chrome* [45].

Neon signs, which are artefacts purportedly designed to arouse want and desire among consumers, stand as a metonym for Hong Kong’s original character as an outpost of capitalism at China’s gates; a haven that could provide comforting familiarity to Westerners while retaining some oriental flavour. According to Fung and Mak, Hong Kong – unlike other major capitalist cities – experienced a long period without stringent regulations for its commercial signage, making diversity one of the defining features of the resulting streetscape: it stretches ‘from Chinese calligraphy to digital screen with computer fonts, from crafted materials to fabricated light boxes’ [28]. The prevailing language that is used changes from street to street, turning streetscapes into experiences of varying exoticism and familiarity. This merging of calligraphy and contemporary visual language, in the words of Chan, ‘encapsulated the zeitgeist of zhongxi hebi’, referring to the merging of Chinese (Cantonese) and Western elements [36, p.148].

A sweetened version of historical change – ‘Memory without pain, in which history becomes a kind of surface decoration’ [46, p.20] – creates in effect an aesthetic universe, a social code, where anxieties about the present can be projected and diluted. As an example, the illustrations of Alan Chan trace themselves back to a pre-war, colonial Shanghai imbued in the cosmopolitanism of foreign concessions and the architectural splendours of the Bund. In this sense, the luxury clothing brand of Shanghai Tang, as Huppatz notes, goes even further in terms of the merging of past and future by combining Maoist kitsch with Warhol industrial colours and Chinese motifs, using ‘mutually conflicting historical narratives for the “armchair” nostalgia enthusiast, creating a Chinese historical pastiche invested with the aura of tradition’ [46, p.22].

In contemporary Hong Kong it has thus become popular among new businesses to return to somewhat dated but atmospheric neon lighting for their interiors – for example in the Ping Pong Bar on Hong Kong Island, and Mum’s Not Home and Anchoret Café in Kowloon. Mido Café, a genuine 1950s eatery still managed by Wong Shing-Fan in Yau Ma Tei in West Kowloon has repeatedly been an object of interest because of its well-preserved vintage atmosphere [47, 48]. Nostalgic films like *Echoes of the Rainbow* (2010) have also drawn upon the urban imagery of an older local feel, being based on 1950s buildings, neon signs, and small street-side family businesses [49]. The 2018 animated film, *Dragon Delusion: The True Colour of Hong Kong*, made by Kong Kee at Penguin Lab, depicts the city as a cyberpunk ‘imperial’ capital garnished with vintage technological artefacts that appeal to millenial attitudes by evoking the childhood memories of the first generation of Hongkongers who, as Douglas Young notes, grew up in actual opulence (Figures 16 and 17) [1, p.162]. Hence the depiction of Hong Kong’s street signs is not really about what is purportedly being sold. ‘The advertising contains valuations and connotations that go beyond the original meaning of the product or the company’, notes Huppatz [46]. There is thus a meaningful message beyond the merely enunciative performance of the street signs, as built up through the accumulation of symbols and display devices. It is not the individual sign that is engaging or seducing, but rather the resonance of multiple individual actions – an organic agglomeration of competing messages.

The reassessment of local customs and lifestyles in Hong Kong as representing forms of living heritage can also be seen in their stylisation and revival as craft industries and high value-added marketing products. Mary Chan, founder of MCCM Creations, a publishing house which specialises in local design and architecture, cites as an example how the brand GOD managed to create its own imagery of 1950s Hong Kong in ‘much the way Ralph Lauren has done for American culture’ [50, p.134]. The graphic novel title *City of Powder: The Disappearing Hong Kong* (2008), created by Stella So, depicts the artist’s nostalgia via a series of everyday situations, objects and places [51]. Drawn upon the square grids typical of the notebooks that Chinese children use to learn calligraphy, So’s book consists of strange fish-eye views of various urban scenes in Hong Kong – for example, Tong Lau shophouses and ‘composite buildings’ decked out with all sorts of everyday artefacts such as cages, lamps, birdcages, Chinese lettering, and such like. The scenes in the graphic novel trace back to the author’s childhood imaginary, revealing the social history told by these spaces that has made her illustrations so prominent among local pop culture. This represents a sense of nostalgia not only for modes and artefacts, but for the larger ‘semantic volume’, as Diane Agrest would say [52] – a mass of multiple, contradictory meanings and signifiers, all stacked against each other in liminal urban space and depending upon the small family businesses and light industry activities of Hong Kong in its previous guise before its metamorphosis into a global financial hub [54].
The crime-comedy film *Her Fatal Ways* (1990) narrated the adventures of Shuonan, an austere mainland Chinese detective on a mission in Hong Kong [53]. The culture clash between her and the local police force revealed represents, according to Chan, a Hong Kong identity that is vividly conveyed by the seduction of the neon lights of Kowloon’s main shopping street, Nathan Road [32, p.147]. In the film, Shuonan becomes somehow fascinated with the alluring appeal of these streetlights, implying a restrained romantic liaison with her local counterpart. Through this narrative, from all the available possibilities, the city is identified by shopping arcades that are densely packed with tilting signboards, and with the awakening of desire, greed and lust rather than the more ascetic sense of decorum found in the People’s Republic of China.

It is also a problematic situation. The more that Hong Kong is cleared of these informal structures, and the reunification process advances in a very gradual – if still bitterly contested – convergence again with China,
then such encrusted signs and lights will be seen as flagships of the city's urban identity (Figure 18). It is a conundrum that has also faced other capitalist cities. Elacio Cagasan, who boldly proposed a set of preservation guidelines for the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, sees three main vectors of cultural value for neon signs: craftsmanship, given that they are typically made by local family businesses, implying a close connection between maker and community; self-representation, being witnesses of their own rise, success, and demise; and finally, collective history, in the sense of being testimonials to places and businesses that have or have had a relevant foothold in their community [35, p.53].
As mentioned, the emergence of LED technologies also seems to be leading to the replacement of neon in favour of newer and more versatile systems that allow for more intricate designs because the lamp strips can be bent easily while being more energy efficient. The lighting artist Teddy Lo makes a very strong case in his book *LED Planet* (2015), by interviewing a diverse range of industry players, including LED manufacturers, curators, event organisers, art directors, and experimental designers [55]. Practically all feasible fields of development are covered in his book, and he studies also the most promising solutions available, making it hard to dispute Lo’s optimistic view of the advantages of LED technology over neon lighting [56]. Although always focusing on an international multicultural approach, catering to tourism and international capitalism, Lo’s designs like ‘Phaeodaria’ (2008) still explicitly refer to Hong Kong (Figure 19) – whereas ‘Shades Dynamicism’ (2015) adheres to similar principles of organic, data-driven fluidity as the late Zaha Hadid (Figure 20). In Lo’s view, LEDs need to be understood as the natural development of Hong

![Figure 19: Installation 'The Constant – Overlap' (2010) [Courtesy of Teddy Lo. All rights reserved.]](image1)

![Figure 20: Installation ‘Shades Dynamicism’ (2015) [Courtesy of Teddy Lo. All rights reserved.]](image2)
Kong’s particular attachment to street lighting, connecting now to its 5G, bluetooth and wi-fi networks in order to make use of the ‘underlying energy and information flowing through the heart of Hong Kong with LEDs programmed to react to the invisible frequencies and radiation’ [57]. Lo even goes on to speculate that, just as information is now projected onto large outer walls through street signs, much smaller LED projections could be delivered on a far more personalised basis, such as on elements such as handrails or doorknobs in our homes.

Given the technical advantages for large-scale imagery, it would seem that major retail venues in Hong Kong all decided to opt for LED lighting long ago – with the only competing field that may remain being ‘Mom-and-Pop’ stores where older signs are still in close proximity to pedestrians. Some new commercial enterprises, such as Amazing Neon HK (set up in 2020), cater for a renewed interest in the vintage appeal of neon lights while also taking full advantage of new technologies. Mak and Fung have spotted an analogy between these lighting technologies and other previous battles for technological supremacy: vinyl vs CD vs mp3 vs streaming, or physical books vs eBooks; the older formats are not readily obsolete, and a niche will remain [28].

It must be pointed out at this point that LED street signs lack the intricacy of the spatial layering involved in making hand-bent neon tubes. LED signs are cheaper to produce and consume less energy, yet their lighting mechanism is different to the bulbs in neon signs. LEDs have to be mostly unidirectional regardless of how they are arranged, whereas neon tubes are able to omit light all around them. Together with the reflection that comes from the signboard’s surface, neon lights create a unique aura not yet achievable with LEDs.

The heritage value of neon signs thus transcends their mere aesthetic appeal, lying rather in the intersection between handcraft tradition and collective memories. ‘I Miss Fanta’ (2012) by Leung Mee-Ping is an installation that reuses the typical Coca Cola neon sign which for decades could be seen at the intersection between Avenue Almeida Ribeiro and Leal Senado Square in Macau. This billboard had become an eminent icon in Macau’s urban scenery. Interestingly, its first known photographic depiction was in a pro-communist demonstration during the 1967 riots, which, unlike in Hong Kong, ended with the colonial authorities publicly acknowledging mainland China’s supremacy (Figure 21). This sign, which had been earmarked for

![Figure 21: Left: Photograph of the 1967 demonstrations in Avenue Almeida Ribeiro, Macau [Courtesy of Leung Mee-Ping. All rights reserved]. Right: ‘Coca-Cola’ signboard in Avenue Almeida Ribeiro, Macau, as seen in 2008 [Photograph: Francisco Garcia Moro. All rights reserved].](image)
removal due to safety concerns, was subsequently dismantled and then reassembled in Hong Kong in order for it to be temporarily exhibited by the M+ Museum in Yau Ma Tei (Figure 22).

In 2014, Lau Wan, who is a craftsman at Nam Wah Neon Light & Electrical Manufactory Ltd, donated to the archives of West Kowloon Cultural District a broad selection of sketches and templates for neon signs that had been made at the company since its foundation in 1953. The conjunction of handcraft, local know-how (including design, calligraphy and bulb-making) and the sheer aesthetic values that make Hong Kong street signs unique have also been brought together in contemporary artworks such as ‘Electroprobe Installation #2 – Magnetic Guangzhou’ (2007) by Troika, and ‘Generate Electricity’ (2007) by Xin Yun-Peng. Later on, in 2015, the M+ Museum presented an online exhibition titled ‘Mobile M+: NEONSIGNS.HK’, as curated by Aric Chen, Chloe Chow, Kingsley Jayasekera and Gloria Wong [51], which included a geo-located mapping of notable surviving street signs.

Furthermore, in 2017 the Hong Kong Neon Heritage Group was created. The international mass media also started to pay attention to the gradual cleansing of Hong Kong’s façades, interviewing neon-sign makers like Wu Chi-Kai and Brian Kwok – who described the changes from a chaotic environment in which everybody just built whatever they wanted to into a highly regulated situation, as well as noting the dire implications of a dramatic fall in business orders [47; 58].

More recently still, the aforementioned Street Sign HK is a voluntary group founded by Kevin Mak and Ken Fung in 2018 to advocate for the preservation of Hong Kong street signage as cultural heritage (Figures 23–26). It was featured in the 2019 London Architecture Festival. When questioned on the challenge of preserving the city’s signboards without compromising their authenticity as a living cultural practice, they note: ‘We seldom see signboards as individual artworks. We think they belong to the streets: keeping a demolished signboard away from its context is always the last resort. The best museum would be the streets themselves – where historically, cultural or aesthetically significant signboards’ [28]. As an alternative, Mak and Fung propose a regulatory approach, in the form of ‘new preservation guidelines’, which would go beyond the current rules exclusively based on dimension and structure. Until now, old signboards have been earmarked ‘to be taken down if they exceed certain sizes, regardless of how well they are maintained’, and earlier structural records certifications are very hard to obtain. Street Sign HK therefore advocates for a ‘mechanism where the value of old signboards, on the request of shop owners, can be assessed.
individually, similarly to historic sites – and thus they believe that old neon signs and new LED creations could find their on legitimate place in the streetscape as part of the confluence between market forces and the preservation of cultural heritage.

**Figure 23:** Photographs showing the removal of Kai Kee Mahjong’s sign in Yau Ma Tei, Kowloon, in 2020 [Courtesy: Street Sign HK. All rights reserved].

**Figure 24:** ‘Chee Lick Electrical’ signage in Thomson Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong Island [Courtesy of Street Sign HK. All rights reserved].
A Look into the Future: Authenticity, Safety and E-commerce

Through its profuse agglomeration of signboards, customised windows and other micro-interventions, Hong Kong’s streets acquired semiotic density – a feature that, as Jane Jacobs might have said in her noted book on *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), provides ‘a rich, ordered scene of manifold offerings and also provides clues and anticipations about what lies behind the currently visible layers’, thus reflecting the ‘genuine content of economic and social diversity’ [59, p.101]. The growth and demise of Hong Kong’s informal façades is likewise the result of the homogenisation of the city’s social fabric as brought about by urban renewal operations, generational shifts, the replacement of the post-war ‘composite buildings’ by podium towers, and major long-term government policies.
According to Tanasescu, Chui Wing-Tak and Smart, Hong Kong post-war policies on informal building consisted of ‘interlocking approach-and-avoidance stances by diverse government departments’ that were aimed to preserve the legitimacy and image of effectiveness by the municipal government, but without undermining the supply of low-cost labour and illegal trades that were still vital for the city’s functioning [14, p.482]. In 1959, Charles E. Lindblom described the prevalence of tentative public policies intended to mitigate a specific problem rather than solving it as the ‘Science of Muddle Through’. In certain scenarios where, due to the complexities of modern decision making, comprehensive planning would be unrealistic or unenforceable, such tentative approaches can perhaps be seen as surprisingly effective [60, p.86].

In this sense, the selective and constrained tolerance deployed in Hong Kong towards UBWs and unofficial street signs has allowed its municipal government to address the most urgent housing issues while also refraining from setting any precedents that might lead to a consolidation of informal encroachments. The municipality has manifestly succeeded in their goal of clearing away the great majority of illegal façade additions in the city; it is also expected that illegal rooftops will be similarly dealt a fatal blow in the coming years. The pragmatic temporary acceptance of the less pernicious examples of these kinds of informal encrustations undoubtedly avoids traumatic city-wide prohibitions; instead, illegal structures and signboards are simply removed whenever either their working life is over or the companies that are advertising go out of business. On the other hand, wherever resistance to these changes might be high, as seen in the occupants of clusters of older ‘composite buildings’. Hong Kong’s government can instead make use of the considerable powers presented by the URA, implementing various ‘urban renewal operations’ that leave very little wriggle-room for contestation. It is, in sum, an exemplary implementation of the minjian power relationship described by Chen Kuan-Hsing in Asia as a Method (2010), being based on the government’s paternalistic care for the ‘common folk’, an which a strict implementation of the law is just left as a punitive measure of the last resort [61, p.238].

The act of preserving Hong Kong’s street signs as a phenomenon of cultural heritage involves striking a balance between conflicting ideas. Street signs can be seen as living testimonials to the aspirations, labours and tastes of local business dynamics; as such, they are built on the logic of ephemeral capitalism and open competition. However, these ‘peeling urban skins’, to use the words of Kwok and Coppoolse [62, p.71], although still triggering lust and greed among the citizens, demand to be preserved as historic artefacts which are frozen in time at the supposed peak of urban exuberance. Such illegal façades were built up in the context of older struggles of planning versus spontaneity, custom versus sanitation, colonial governance versus local practices, globalisation versus local identity, and Chinese communism versus Hong Kong/Western capitalism.

Such contradictions are addressed in contemporary projects in Hong Kong streets through which the construction of projective spaces, or the conception of futures outside of time and place, aim to demonstrate how identities, memories and cityscapes can work as influences and feedback on each other to create the city’s visual imaginary. In resorting to vintage nostalgia and revivalist aesthetics, Hong Kong hopes to heal the trauma of past conflicts in a time when humanitarian worries have somewhat abated. The challenge now shifts instead to the preservation of urban authenticity and of the crafts and know-how employed by small-scale local artisans and business people, beyond the usual hollow junkspace representations created for the temporary amusement of uninform ed mass tourists.

As argued by Kevin Mak and Ken Fung, the rise of e-commerce and home food delivery networks will likely influence the evolution of Hong Kong’s street signs in ways still to be experienced. We may foresee a time when virtual signs and brick-and-mortar signs complement each other, deepening the interdependence of retail experiences taking place in physical and digital public spaces. A window of opportunity for the preservation of small local family businesses may unexpectedly help to preserve the signs in Hong Kong: ‘as long as there are commercial needs, we expect to see a renaissance of signboards’. The Minor Works regulation does not as yet fully ban signboards on building facades, and indeed it sets out a system to simplify procedures so as to allow occupants to ‘build legal and safe new signboards’ – albeit smaller and less structurally challenging [28].

As the final word, by the time of finalising this essay in March 2020, it has already become clear that the ongoing COVID-19 virus pandemic will leave a lasting footprint upon how cities are lived in. In these unprecedentedly difficult times, Hong Kong’s local crafts and family businesses are facing extraordinary retail pressures alongside the sanitary protections more or less agreed by the worldwide network, to an extent and depth that it is yet to be seen if it can work. Time will only tell if the richness and semiotic density of Hong Kong’s street signs and neon lights can be organically re-established so that they can become once again a genuine reflection of the vitality and diversity of the city.
Competing Interests
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