



Glow in the dark



Camille Levert's ongoing show at La Galerie Paris 1839 celebrates the iconic neon signs of Hong Kong. Soon after moving to Hong Kong in 2015, the French-born Levert was charmed by its neon-adorned vistas and equally concerned that this unique craft form, which contributes to the city's distinct identity, might be on its way to eventual extinction.

Since 2010, when Hong Kong's Buildings Department ordered the removal of hundreds of unauthorized and oversized projecting signboards, including those with neon lettering and designs, the gradual disappearance of this once-ubiquitous generic feature from Hong Kong's streets has appealed to a number of artists both at home and overseas.

As Tina Pang, curator of Hong Kong Visual Culture at M+, says, "Globally, many artists have been attracted to neon, both as a medium and a platform for communication." She believes contemporary works of art inspired by neon can help raise awareness about the craft and help preserve the craftsmanship involved in neon-making as a result.

Levert had a similar goal in mind as regards her eponymous exhibition titled *Neons*. The artist says it is meant "to draw attention to the peculiar beauty of these vanishing city lights."

Neons is a hybrid of photography, paper-cutting, collage and embroidery. Levert says she loves the fact that the show required her to utilize a variety of her skills — "all of which require time and patience." "I love the slow process of it, and the dedication of creating something unique," she says, likening her own practice to the time-consuming and painstakingly intricate craft of making neon signs.

"The signs created in the '70s, '80s and even earlier are being taken down one by one, and many people both here in Hong Kong and abroad feel sad about this," Levert says. "Hopefully, some people among the city's neon lovers are passionate and dedicated enough to put their energy into finding ways of preserving them, one way or another."

Craft turns into art

The preservation of Hong Kong's traditional neon signs — many of which can no longer be displayed in public spaces as per the new safety regulations — is high on the list of heritage activists. A number of Hong Kong's cultural institutes are actively engaged in the effort to protect, preserve and raise awareness about the city's neon heritage as well.

Last summer, the Tai Kwun Centre for Heritage and Arts teamed up with Tetra Neon Exchange to create *Vital Signs*. The show featured a number of original Hong Kong neon signs and a site-specific installation that reimagined a Hong Kong streetscape from the past, dotted with neon signboards. The organizers also invited artisans to observe and be inspired by the intricacies of the crafts practice of the neon masters.

"The two-month exhibition provided an ideal and impactful platform for people from all walks of life to get up, close with the signs that are normally a few meters above the ground in our streets. I wholeheartedly wanted to shorten the distance, both physical and emotional, between people and our neon signs," says Cardin Chan, general manager of Tetra Neon Exchange. "These signs are a vital part of us and should remain so."

M+ plays a major role in disseminating neon heritage awareness in Hong Kong. Since 2013, well before the museum opened its doors to the public in 2021, it has been acquiring neon signs that once lit up the streets of Hong Kong. The giant cow emblem of Sammy's Kitchen and the six-character Chinese name of the Kai Kee mahjong parlor, with the image of a rooster perched on it, are among M+'s early neon sign acquisitions. The museum also hosts an interactive online exhibition on Hong Kong's neon heritage. The archive contains over 4,000 images and related stories collected from the city's people.

Disappearing act

According to Google Arts and Culture, the use of neon signs for advertising

Is there still hope for Hong Kong's disappearing neon signs except that some of these might have an afterlife as museum pieces?

Faye Bradley takes stock of the initiatives to preserve a unique form of Hong Kong craft and the hurdles in their way.



In her photo collages, French-born Hong Kong resident artist Camille Levert has memorialized some of Hong Kong's much-beloved neon signs that have since been removed. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



The cow of Sammy's Kitchen (above) and the rooster of the Kai Kee mahjong parlor (left) are among the iconic Hong Kong neon signs collected by the M+ museum. PHOTOS COURTESY OF M+, HONG KONG



Left: Most traditional Chinese pawn shops use neon signboards. The typical symbol represents a bat hung upside down and a coin. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Above and left: Hong Kong's traditional neon signs stand out because of their unique symbol and distinguished typography. The Wei Bei font is a favorite. PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRIAN KWOK

IF YOU GO
Neons by Camille Levert
Dates: Through Jan 20
Venue: La Galerie Paris 1839, GF,
74 Hollywood Road, Central
lagalerie.hk



Cardin Chan of Tetra Neon Exchange says that she wants to bring the neon signs, normally displayed a few meters above the ground, closer to the audience in the *Vital Signs* exhibition. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Sign of the times

By FAYE BRADLEY

Only around 150 neon signs still adorn Hong Kong's cityscapes, down from 120,000 a decade ago, according to unofficial estimates.

One of the iconic neon signboards removed recently belonged to the Mau Lam Street branch of Tai Ping Koon, one of the city's oldest restaurant franchises. The piece was installed in 1964, which makes it the oldest preserved sign in Hong Kong on record, according to Tai Ping Koon's fifth-generation owner and managing director, Andrew Chui.

Neon signs have been a part of Tai Ping Koon's signature style since its inception. "We've been using neon signs ever since we set up our first branch in Hong Kong in 1938," says Chui, who is proud of the distinctive

calligraphy and other design elements of the neon signs associated with the brand.

He believes the neon signs on the restaurant's wall played a major role in building the enterprise's brand identity. It was almost as if the popularity of neon signs in Hong Kong and that of the Tai Ping Koon brand grew hand in hand. Chui says he is proud that Tai Ping Koon played a significant role in shaping the city's neon sign heritage.

As per the current government regulations, "owners need to uninstall all old neon signs and seek approval from the Buildings Department before putting up a new one". Many owners don't bother as "the costs of removal and re-installment are too high". Chui reveals that the cost of installing a new, Buildings Department-approved version of a neon sign at their Mau Lam Street

branch was more than HK\$200,000 (\$25,570).

The restaurant's remaining neon signs continue to draw visitors. Patrons are often seen taking photos of these. Chui says that he cannot help but notice that some of the returning customers are disappointed when they see the neon signboards they had come to love and cherish over the years have been cut to size.

Clockwise from above: Tai Ping Koon restaurant owner Andrew Chui; the original neon sign of the restaurant's Mau Lam Street branch was removed recently and replaced with a smaller, government-approved version. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



began in Hong Kong in the '20s and peaked between the '50s and '80s, when entire building facades would be covered with a dazzling array of neon signs.

While the 2010 government regulation has resulted in the removal of hundreds of neon signboards, there are a number of other factors causing their gradual disappearance from Hong Kong's streets. One of these is the growing popularity of LED lights. Advertisers have embraced LED lights as they are far more durable and consume less power than neon.

The third reason causing neon signs to disappear is that neon signs are a dying art form. There aren't that many craftsmen left in Hong Kong to sustain the craft on a long-term basis.

"Many experienced craftsmen have retired, and young people are not inclined to enter this profession," says Brian Kwok, associate professor at the School of Design of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The making and retailing of neon signs are usually handled by craftsmen's families. However, neon has limited appeal for the younger generations of these families.

Westley Wong, a visiting lecturer at the same department as Kwok, regrets that the descendants of neon-sign makers are showing "a disregard for their family's brand assets". As a result, many neon-sign owners are unwilling to invest "the substantial effort and financial resources required" for maintaining them, seeing that the prospects of getting after-sales service is next to nil.

Also neon signs can be a handful when it comes to maintenance. "The sheer size of these signs, which are visible from a distance, makes their conservation extremely challenging," says Wong. "Ultimately, these signs will probably only be seen in exhibitions and no longer grace the cityscape of Hong Kong."

The way forward

Opinions vary on the subject of museums trying to rescue neon signs removed from the streets and displaying them as works of art.

Kwok says the responsibility of preserving Hong Kong's neon signs ought not to be borne by museums alone, and requires greater and more active participation from the public.

"Neon signs were once integral components of Hong Kong's built environment and served as the 'skin' of the city," says Cecilia L. Chu, associate professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong's School of Architecture. "Their histories have always been tied to commerce and communication which contributed to the city's vibrancy and hence the documentation and re-presentation of neon as heritage should be done with these contexts in mind." The documentation of the "career" of neon signs is vital in understanding their significance, and hence treating them as museum relics might deter audiences from imagining the possibility of a future for these objects, Chu points out.

According to her, those concerned about Hong Kong's neon heritage should be asking whether "some of the elements salvaged from the removed neon signs could be put to use in new ways", and also if it might be possible to revive neon signs "intangible connections with commerce and industry". Chu believes raising such questions can lead to new ideas on the theme of "living heritage", and help heritage activists decide "what is worth keeping", for such decisions "should be based not so much on nostalgia, but our aspirations for the future."

However, Oskar Leung, who worked at The Conservancy Association Centre for Heritage — an organization promoting Hong Kong's heritage and cultural conservation — feels that by "displaying old neon signs as artworks, museums help to create new value for old objects". Such a strategy "offers the public an alternative perspective to understand and closely appreciate neon signs and the craftsmanship involved in making them as art, which, in turn, can help sustain the neon lights industry."