



銀行

ELECTRIC AVENUE: THE NEON WORLD OF HONG KONG

From Wan Chai on Hong Kong Island to traditional Mong Kok over the water in Kowloon, Hong Kong is awash with bright neon lights. The city has a history of neon sign-making that goes back more than half a century - a business which has helped define the image of the city and inspired countless filmmakers and artists over the years.

Hong Kong regular Joe Mortimer finds out what's being done to prevent it from disappearing forever.



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Hong Kong's streetscape has been characterised by the glow of neon for decades. Now, competition from more efficient lighting systems is putting the city's neon culture into question.

As in any great theatre, the Hong Kong stage is illuminated by artificial light: the lurid glow of neon, which covers the city like thin mist. When the sun goes down, the lights come on; bright neon signs advertising everything from jewellery stores and knitting factories to mah-jong parlours and karaoke lounges. A galaxy of colours disperses into the night, illuminating the faces of people on the streets, reflecting in shop windows, and glinting off the surface of Victoria Harbour, which carves the city in two. Even the low clouds take on an ethereal hue where the lights shine brightest.

Today, many businesses are switching to more efficient LED lighting, and the urban renewal projects breathing new life into traditional neighbourhoods increasingly use high-tech laser lighting to illuminate state-of-the-art facilities.

Fortunately, several Hong Kong institutions have taken up the cause, launching initiatives to preserve and celebrate the city's neon heritage.

The **M+** museum of visual culture is currently under construction in the **West Kowloon Cultural District**, an urban renewal project that's transforming a huge swathe of harbour-front into an arts and cultural hub. Although it's not due to open until 2019, the museum's curatorial team are already working on the collection.

"From very early on, we were thinking of ways that we could break the mould in



terms of the kinds of things that museums like ours collect. We realised very quickly that one of the answers was all around us, and that was neon," explains Aric Chen, Curator of Architecture and Design at M+.

"As artefacts of visual culture, especially in Hong Kong, they're such a rich topic, and they allow us to look at them from all sorts of angles. You can look at the use of neon by visual artists; you can look at them in design and typography as a marriage between craft and industry; and they have certainly been used as a cinematic device."

Through its website, *neonsigns.hk*, M+ crowd-sourced more than 4,000 photos of neon signs. The images and a brief explanation are plotted on a digital 'Neon Map' of Hong Kong, noting the location and type of signs which are scattered throughout Kowloon and Hong Kong Island.

"In the first two weeks of doing that, about eight of the signs that had been sent in had already disappeared, so it is very quick, the decline," says Chen.

M+ also launched two online exhibitions in partnership with Google Cultural Institute, contrasting contemporary and vintage photos of Hong Kong streets to show the demise of neon culture, and a series of dedicated Google Street View images shot at night to capture several of the city's neon-lit streets.

In Kowloon, the length of **Nathan Road**, from **Tsim Sha Tsui** near the **Star Ferry Terminal**, through **Jordan** and all the way to **Mong Kok**, was once aglow with giant neon signs, turning it – in Chen's words – into "a cacophonous, neon-filled canyon". Today, most of those signs are gone.

In Mong Kok, home of the famous **Ladies' Night Market**, where rows of stalls sell a kaleidoscope of clothes, household goods, and tourist knick-knacks, many of the stores and shop-fronts are now illuminated by LED lighting. But the side streets still retain an authentic Hong Kong feel, with traditional handmade neon signs advertising money exchanges, teahouses, and chemists. On Hong Kong Island, the nightlife areas of **Lockhart Road** in **Wan Chai** and parts of **Central** like **Wellington Road** and **Lang Kwai Fong** have also guarded their bright luminescence.

One company that continues to manufacture neon is Nam Wah

NEON IN POPULAR CULTURE

Hong Kong's neon haze has inspired countless filmmakers and artists over the years. Ridley Scott's 1982 classic *Blade Runner* is set in a futuristic version of Los Angeles circa 2020, based on the Hong Kong of the late 1970s. The neon lights cast an eerie glow over the dystopian world, where residents wait at dimly lit bus stops carrying umbrellas with neon poles. Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai and cinematographer Christopher Doyle also love the effect of the electrified noble gas, which sets the tone for many of their award-winning movies, like *Chungking Express* (1994) and *Fallen Angels* (1995). UK bands Gorillaz and Blur have also paid tribute. The latter's 2015 album *The Magic Whip*, whose cover features a neon ice cream cone and Chinese characters, was partially recorded in Hong Kong, and from Gorillaz' 2007 release entitled *D-Sides*, the track 'Hong Kong' is an ode to the 'Fragrant Harbour' (from the Chinese for Hong Kong).





Neonlight & Electrical Manufacturing, a business run by second-generation owner William Tam, whose father started the company in 1953. At the peak of its history, Nam Wah was making around 70 per cent of the neon in Hong Kong, including the 20-storey National Panasonic sign on Nathan Road, recognised as the biggest in the world by *Guinness World Records* in 1973.

Tam recently teamed up with the **Conservancy Association Centre for Heritage** (CACHe) – a not-for-profit that works to preserve elements of Hong Kong culture threatened by the city's rapid development – to put on a series of workshops at his studio, showing people how neon lights are made. One group interested in the dying craft is visual artists, many of whom return to Nam Wah to be trained in the techniques required to make their own neon installations.

"Bending glass is a very boring kind of job," says Tam. "The youngest technician in our factory is already 40-something years old. In the next 20 years, nobody is going to pick it up, and I don't know if the tradition will continue in Hong Kong."

Which is why preserving what remains is of paramount importance. M+ started a physical neon collection when it acquired a sign from a restaurant called **Sammy's Kitchen** in the traditional **Sai Ying Pun** neighbourhood. The iconic sign – a giant Aberdeen Angus cow – had hung outside the restaurant for 37 years, and local residents were saddened by news of its departure following a decree from the Buildings Department.

As more and more neighbourhoods are swallowed up by development and businesses are ordered to remove

potentially hazardous signs, Chen and his team will be there to collect, preserve, and examine this wonderful luminescent heritage. But now is not the time for nostalgia: "A city's job is to change, and we don't want to get too hung up on holding on to the past," he muses.

"But at the same time, we want to celebrate something that is disappearing and understand what it was that made it special and why some of it at least ought to be worth preserving. If we can encourage a more thoughtful way of looking at something as seemingly prosaic as neon, I think we will have done our job."

Aric Chen will be speaking at the *New York Times: Art of Tomorrow* conference hosted by H. E. Sheikha Al Mayassa Al-Thani in Doha, March 12–15. ❌





MY HONG KONG

BY JOE MORTIMER



TAI O FISHING VILLAGE

One of the few areas close to Hong Kong Island that's escaped neon's powerful aura is the fishing village of Tai O on **Lantau Island**, which has remained unchanged for centuries. Stilted houses perched above the mud flats are home to what remains of a bustling fishing community, which continues to produce pungently scented shrimp paste. Take a boat ride into the estuary to spot white dolphins, and explore the ancient temples around the village.



A SYMPHONY OF LIGHTS

Every evening, at 8pm sharp, the buildings on either side of Victoria Harbour burst into life for the 15-minute spectacle known as A Symphony of Lights. Dazzling beams dance across the façades of 25 buildings as lasers and searchlights erupt from their roofs, all accompanied by a musical score and commentary. The best place to see it is from a boat on the harbour. It's not quite neon, but it's still worth a watch. tourism.gov.hk



JUMBO KINGDOM

Journey to the south of Hong Kong Island to dine at Jumbo Kingdom seafood restaurant, a culinary institution in Aberdeen Harbour since 1976. During the day, the colossal restaurant looks like a huge floating city – but at night, its façade is covered with thousands of neon bulbs designed and maintained by Nam Wah Neonlight. jumbokingdom.com



NEONSIGNS.HK AUDIO WALK

One of the best ways to bask in the light of Hong Kong's neon glow is to follow the hour-long audio walking tour created by M+. Each leg of the tour, which meanders through the streets of Kowloon from Jordan to Mong Kok, is accompanied by an audio track created by four Hong Kong artists: an electronic musician, a storyteller, a poet, and a sound artist. Listen via the website or download to your device. neonsigns.hk



HONG KONG TRAM

Amid all the sky-high development, the Hong Kong tram is a relic of times gone by. The double-decker cars run all the way from **Kennedy Town** on the northwest of Hong Kong Island, to the predominantly residential district of **Shau Kei Wan**. It's a fantastic way to experience the city, especially at night, when the neon lights glow bright. ✖ hktramways.com



FLIGHT FREQUENCY

Qatar Airways has two flights a day from Doha to Hong Kong