

Neon Nuisance

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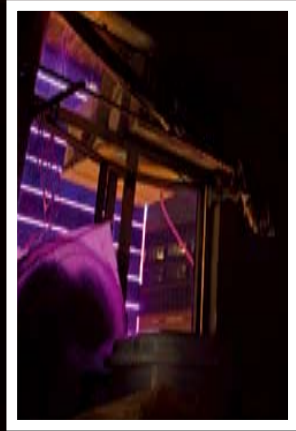
This is a city of lights. In a typical street in Mong Kok, huge billboards hang from the walls of residential buildings, reflecting the logo of a sports products company onto a window next to it. A row of dozens of closely packed spotlights circles the roof of a shopping mall. Neon-light boards two storeys tall shine in ever-changing patterns. It is midnight, but you can hardly tell as the night sky is half illuminated.

“The lighting in Hong Kong is stunning, just like any other big cities in the world, such as New York and London,” says Kevin Goodworth, an Australian visitor on a business trip, as he snaps Hong Kong night scenes from a pedestrian bridge in Wan Chai.

The always-illuminated night scenes might be an impressive feature of Hong Kong, but for those living next to colourful signboards and billboards, the dazzling lights can be a huge nuisance.

Flats' exterior walls are red from the neon panels outside their windows.

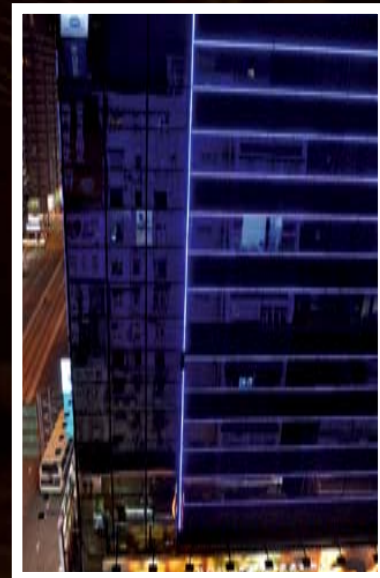
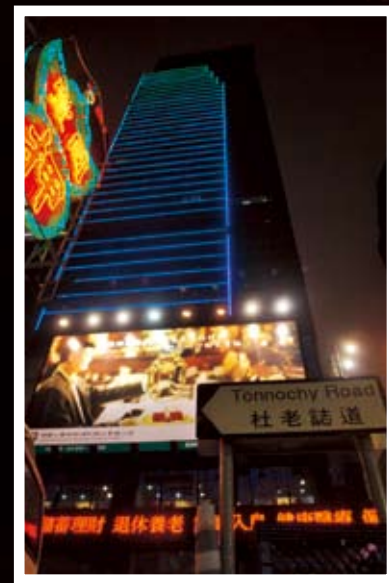




Cheung is annoyed by the lights that intrude into her apartment. Her flat faces the illuminated wall of the China Life Insurance Company office in Wan Chai.

“It is so uncomfortable when there are flickering lights of various colours cast onto your wall,” says Cheung. “The whole place (her flat) is just like a disco.” Parallel strips of lighting in moving patterns that were installed on the exterior of the office building in March last year, were left on overnight.

After receiving complaints that the lights were disturbing nearby residents, China Life toned down the light display. The lights now change colours less frequently and in gentle transitions. Still, Cheung finds a way to “make use” of the lights. “They are so bright that sometimes I don’t even need to turn on the light at night,” she says.



Flickering light from the China Life Insurance Company building changes from green to blue and other colours repeatedly.

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Radiating lights from neon light boxes not only intrude into residents' flats, they can also pose a threat to their health. Brenda Ho recalls how her health suffered when she lived in Mong Kok 20 years ago.

"I could no longer sleep after the installation of the neon signboards outside my bedroom," Ho says. She responded by hanging up more layers of curtains but the light still seeped through the thick and dark curtains. In the end, she had to sleep in her sister's room.

After nights of fragmented, poor quality sleep, Ho's health suffered and she went to see a doctor. "He said that keeping the room dark is crucial for good sleep. Exposure to light during sleeping affects our body's internal cycle and thus weakens our immune system. That's why I fell sick," Ho says.

In the first five months of 2009, the Environmental Protection Department received 92 complaints about light pollution, 10 more than the total for the previous year. The rising number indicates that light pollution is getting more serious.

The Government announced it would conduct studies of light pollution and take legal action if necessary in the 2008 Policy Address. However, until now, laws concerning external lighting are not strictly adhered to as some shops and restaurants just ignore removal orders issued by the Buildings Department. 



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