

Exploring the Visual Representations of Neon Signs and Its Vernacular Tacit Knowledge of Neon Making

Authors : Brian Kwok

Abstract : Hong Kong is well-known for its name as "the Pearl of the Orient", due to its spectacular night-view with vast amount of decorative neon lights on the streets. Neon signs are first used as the pervasive media of communication for all kinds of commercial advertising, ranging from movie theatres to nightclubs and department stores, and later appropriated by artists as medium of artwork. As a well-established visual language, it displays texts in bilingual format due to British's colonial influence, which are sometimes arranged in an opposite reading order. Research on neon signs as a visual representation is rare but significant because they are part of people's collective memories of the unique cityscapes which associate the shifting values of people's daily lives and culture identity. Nevertheless, with the current policy to remove abandoned neon signs, their total number dramatically declines recently. The Buildings Department found an estimation of 120,000 unauthorized signboards (including neon signs) in Hong Kong in 2013, and the removal of such is at a rate of estimated 1,600 per year since 2006. In other words, the vernacular cultural values and historical continuity of neon signs will gradually be vanished if no immediate action is taken in documenting them for the purpose of research and cultural preservation. Therefore, the Hong Kong Neon Signs Archive project was established in June of 2015, and over 100 neon signs are photo-documented so far. By content analysis, this project will explore the two components of neon signs - the use of visual languages and vernacular tacit knowledge of neon makers. It attempts to answer these questions about Hong Kong's neon signs: 'What are the ways in which visual representations are used to produce our cityscapes and streetscapes?'; 'What are the visual languages and conventions of usage in different business types?'; 'What the intact knowledge are applied when producing these visual forms of neon signs?'

Keywords : cityscapes, neon signs, tacit knowledge, visual representation

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