

Lights at Night – Terrific or Terrible?

Being hailed as the ‘Pearl of the Orient’, Hong Kong has long been a big magnet for visitors across the globe. When it comes to tremendous billboards and neon lights, this remarkable and cosmopolitan city is second to none. You standing in the modern streets at 8 pm, it is hard to tell whether it is day or night. This is where the real debate lies – is our night too bright? Some people claim that the use of outdoor lights should be regulated in order to curb light pollution whereas others counter that the lights are beneficial to our economy. What are their arguments?

First and foremost, lights are of vital importance to Hong Kong’s tourism industry, which is one of the major pillars of our economy. ‘Symphony of Lights’, a decorative light and laser multimedia display, clearly exemplifies this view. The show perfectly complements the panoramic night view of the Victoria Harbour, along with luminous decorations on outer walls of the skyscrapers, attracting tens of thousands of foreigners to visit the Victoria Harbour every day. It is believed that the use of outdoor lights can ultimately boost local tourism, improve business for local stores and create more job opportunities, which in return fosters Hong Kong’s economy. What if all these lights are forced to dim or even to be turned off under the new regulation? We are, without a shadow of a doubt, putting the tourism at risk.

In concord with the above is commercial advertising. It is prevalent that multinational companies capitalize on enormous LED billboards and spotlights to publicize their products and promote their brands. Not only can the billboards be noticed easily by pedestrians, they can also display animation and television commercials. For instance, large billboards with spotlights promoting luxurious brands like Chanel and Dior in Central are very eye-catching and appealing, which successfully fascinates young ladies and encourage them to purchase the extravagant handbags.

However, there is no rose without a thorn. Everything has both sides. On one hand, the use of outdoor lights can bring us pecuniary benefits; on the other hand, it constitutes light pollution and severely affects some of our citizens’ daily lives.

Fundamental to the disapproval of the use of outdoor lights are several factors, with light pollution the most paramount one. Environmentalists frown upon bright neon lights on the ground that excessive use of light is polluting our environment seriously. Hong Kong is known as the world’s worst city for light pollution, with innumerable neon signs, dazzling store windows and floodlit billboards. The night is so bright that it poses a grave menace to nearby residents’ health since strong light can lead to dizziness and insomnia. In long-term, lack of sleep gives rise to fatigue and the disruption of people’s biological clock, which eventually lowers the citizens’ living standard.

Another downside is the waste of electricity. Gone were the days when the night in Hong Kong is dark and peaceful. These days, closed shops and advertising signs all have their lights burning bright all night,

masking the twilight hours. For example, it is found that ample billboards in Causeway Bay and Mong Kok are still on until 5 am. This kind of unnecessary illumination squanders an immense amount of electricity every day, which exacerbates global warming and air pollution. Should the government still turn a blind eye to this over-illuminated city and ignore the desperate need for restricting the excessive use of outdoor lights?

All things considered, whether the use of outdoor lights should be regulated opens a can of worms. All parties including the tourism industry, businesses, environmentalists and the general public should set aside their differences and seek consensus. Any solution that tries to dump the problem on one sector of the community is flawed. It is time for the government, our legislators and district councils to confront the problem squarely and show true leadership in agreeing a practical solution to Hong Kong people.