

A number exercise of a different kind

Even with a map in hand, have you ever found it difficult to locate a building or a ground-floor shop in Hong Kong, due to elusive building numbers?

The Rating & Valuation Department launched the Building Numbering Campaign earlier this month to encourage building owners to display building numbers properly.

The campaign features promotional activities like sending letters and leaflets to owners and occupiers of ground-floor premises, as well as owners' corporations and mutual-aid committees of residential buildings. It also includes a radio promotion message, posters, promotional memo pads and postal chops displaying the campaign slogan "For Everyone's Convenience, Display Building Numbers".



All in the numbers: Commissioner of Rating & Valuation Mimi Brown (left) calls on businesses and residents to correctly display the building numbers of their premises, and spot checks by the Rating & Valuation Department will be conducted across Hong Kong to ensure compliance (right).

Building numbers help services

Commissioner of Rating & Valuation Mimi Brown recently told news.gov.hk the correct display of building numbers not only helps people to locate a building, it also facilitates postal, police, ambulance and fire services.

If a separate building number has been allotted to each ground-floor unit of a building, each unit should display its building number. In cases where one single building number is allotted to the whole development, the building number should be displayed at the building's main entrance.

Follow-up inspections will be conducted after the promotional activities. Under the Buildings Ordinance (Cap.123), the Commissioner of Rating & Valuation is empowered to serve an order requiring the owner of a building to mark the building with the allocated building number. Those who fail to comply are liable to six months' imprisonment and a \$2,000 fine.

"For non-display cases found during site inspections, the department will first issue advisory or warning letters to the owners or occupiers, reminding them to display the building numbers properly," said Mrs Brown. "In cases where owners still fail to display the building numbers after receiving the advisory or warning letters, the department will serve display orders."

If they still do not comply with the display orders, legal advice will be sought on whether prosecutions should be instigated. Since April 2007, more than 3,600 advisory or warning letters and 41 display orders have been issued.

Most non-displays not deliberate

Mrs Brown said: "We understand most failures in displaying building numbers are not deliberate. The owners may simply have forgotten the matter after renovation or redevelopment of their properties. That is why we are launching this publicity campaign to remind people about it.

"Securing the co-operation of owners and occupiers is always our preferred course of action, and prosecution is the last resort."

As the way of displaying building numbers differs and number plates also vary in size and colour, owners and occupiers can refer to the practice note issued by the department in 2007 to show the proper way of displaying building numbers.

The department took up sole responsibility of allocating building numbers across Hong Kong from late 1990. Prior to 1990, it was responsible only for allocating building numbers in the urban area while the District Land Offices were responsible for the New Territories.

The situation changed when the Buildings Ordinance was amended. From December 14, 1990, the department was given the responsibility citywide, enabling it to undertake numbering work more systematically and consistently.

Numbering criteria

In allotting a building number, the department will refer to the starting point and running direction of the street, which is defined in the gazette notice on the street's name issued by the Lands Department and an index of streets, house numbers and lots published by the Land Registry.

The general rule is, buildings on the left of a street will be given odd numbers while those on the right will be given even numbers. It should not disrupt the continuity of the building numbers of neighbouring buildings. There should also be sufficient numbers reserved for neighbouring sites or buildings upon redevelopment.

The same principles apply when allocating numbers to government buildings, public facilities and tourist attractions for easy identification. Examples are the Central Library which has been given number "66" on Causeway Road, the Peak Tower is "128" Peak Road, the Hong Kong Cultural Centre is "10" Salisbury Road, the Hong Kong Museum of History is "100" Chatham Road South, and the Noah's Ark in Ma Wan is "33" Pak Yan Road.

One number, one development

Mrs Brown said the department's general practice at present is to give a single building number, rather than a range of numbers, to a development project. It allows flexibility for the developer or owner to change the designations of the ground floor units upon their amalgamation or division. For example, if the official number given to a property development is "10", the developer can designate the ground floor units as Shop A, B, C, and so on.

She also said, in the past it was common for property owners in the New Territories to display their own unofficial building numbers for postal or other reasons. The department will consider whether the existing unofficial building numbers can be retained as far as practicable.

"Should there be no number left for allocation between two existing numbers, suffixes such as A, B, C, D, et cetera, will be used."

For a new property development, a provisional number will be given on the developer's application in writing after the consent to commence building works has been given. This will help developers prepare brochures and legal documents in advance and facilitate the Land Registry in assigning primary addresses before sale and purchase agreements have been registered.

When the occupation permit or certificate of compliance of the development has been issued, the department will allocate the official building number within a month of receiving the document.

Requests must meet criteria

Occasionally the department receives requests from the public for auspicious numbers like 3, 18 and 168. There have been cases in which the owners want an even number, even though their properties are located on the odd-number side of the street.

Mrs Brown said: "We appreciate owners may have preferences and will try to meet them as far as practicable. However, the allocation must still be based on the established numbering principles. We hope the public will understand special requests which run against these principles cannot be met."