Red Light Neon: A History of Vancouver's Sex Trade

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Vancouver wasn’t just lit by neon; it was illuminated with stories. Atkin clearly remembers the tales that illuminated his childhood. When he was a boy, he used to cycle through the inner city on his way to swimming practice. For history hasn’t been kind to Vancouver’s neon. Did it signal glamour and big-city living or was it a vulgar display that vandalised a city? From the 1950s to 1970s, this was the question that divided the city, with neon becoming a symbol of a deep civic controversy and a lightning rod for critics. By the 1960s, a growing suburbia meant neon had become demonised and associated with urban blight. You can have civilisation, or you can have neon, said one detractor, the criticism ironically lit up as a display at the museum.