

**THE DESIGN OF DISSENT: PROTEST AND URBAN SPACE IN HONG KONG'S  
UMBRELLA MOVEMENT**

by

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# **THE DESIGN OF DISSENT: PROTEST AND URBAN SPACE IN HONG KONG'S UMBRELLA MOVEMENT**

Paige Anderson, B. Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh, 2016

Democracy and public space have been inextricably linked since the agora of Ancient Greece. In modern times, spaces such as Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park have been brought to the forefront of global media as the stages upon which their respective societies fight against their perceived oppression. In September 2014, the students of Hong Kong began protesting in Tamar Park at the Central Government Complex in Admiralty after it was determined their “free elections” would be chosen from a panel of candidates decided by China’s communist party. In the following weeks, the protest expanded to many other demographics and three occupied sites within the city-state, each with their own identity and narrative.

In my thesis, I will examine the role of architecture and space in the Umbrella Movement at Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mong Kok from three distances. First, I will look at the historical context of the spaces and their geographical network within the city. Then I will look at the urban context of each space, the protest’s relationship with their audience, and the consequences of Hong Kong’s very limited and unique public spaces. Finally, I will analyze specific spatial strategies employed by protesters and police in efforts to manipulate space in their favor. As a critique of marxist Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the “right to the city”, my analysis will look at space as an extension of economy, but also as a dynamic symbol of democracy, revealing the gravity of oppression and the conviction of the oppressed.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: A FESTERING IDEA



**Figure 1.** Tamar Park in Admiralty, Hong Kong, photo by author.

Nestled within the financial district of one of the world’s densest cities sits a small, grassy park. It is pie-shaped such that it wedges itself beneath a large government building designed as a squared arch with the green space running beneath (see Figures 1 and 2). At the Southern point, escalators connect it to the sidewalk and the five-lane street below. The larger end of the park overlooks Hong Kong’s bustling harbor. There are many paths, benches and a small concrete stage. On September 22, 2014, student activists and academics gathered in Tamar Park during a class boycott opposing government censorship of educational material and the recently decreed election terms that many thought violated the principle of “one person, one vote”.<sup>1</sup> Student leaders and activists gave speeches on the stage. Dwarfed by the looming Central Government Complex, they begged the politicians inside to listen. A week went on without any reaction as

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<sup>1</sup> “Umbrella Revolution Timeline.”

the park's population climbed from a few hundred to a few thousand. Unsatisfied, the protesters marched to Hong Kong's highest ranked political official's home, Chief Executive CY Leung.<sup>2</sup> Ignored once more, they returned to Tamar Park to find the space overtaken by a pro-China rally. Their interactions with the new occupants of the park led most to believe that the pro-Chinese demonstrators primarily consisted of actors presumably paid by the state.<sup>3</sup> Instead of leaving, the original protesters moved to the street on the Complex's Eastern edge. Unassumingly and organically, the Umbrella Movement had been born.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2.** The Central Government Complex Building, photo by author.

In this moment of protest, the three spatial choices for protest sites represented the concerns of the protesters. Each of the spaces demonstrated a different interpretation of the protesters' "right to the city", and in doing so, exposed the extent of Hongkongers' oppression

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<sup>2</sup> Tse, Riots, Unrest, and the Umbrella Movement: Hong Kong Rising.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Pasquier, Admiralty and the Umbrella Movement.

under the Beijing government, as well as the potential of the protesters' collective power. In this thesis, I am relying on a foundation of Marxist geographers, but also using this analysis of the Umbrella Movement to critique Marxist framework's top-down interpretation of the urban environment, which undermines the potential of subversion and counter-production of space.

In my thesis, I argue that the protesters' strategic, subversive actions upon urban space affirm their right to the city and the subsequent reactions to these actions act as testament to the injustices they were proclaiming. The Umbrella Movement addressed concerns of access, legitimacy and the power of the collective masses at the local level, and in doing so, created ripples expanding into global, urban institutions of power.

I am investigating the Umbrella Movement and its three protest sites, Admiralty, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay, through a lens of geography, urban space and architecture. I want my interpretation of the movement to emerge from understanding the perspective of its creators and the impact within Hong Kong, so my analysis does not derive from the gaze of an omniscient, removed commentator. Instead, I have analyzed the spaces from the three scales that a protester within urban space would perceive it: as a point in the city-state's geography, within a certain neighborhood, and finally, as an intervention upon a specific street. The protesters affirmed their presence at all three of these scales, so in recognizing these spaces as the protesters do, as important, complex fortresses symbolizing their rights, I can better understand the implications of the actions within them.

My ideas draw upon a theoretical framework informed by Marxist geography, which applies Marxist ideas to the infrastructure and design of urban space. Marxist geography exists with the understanding that the city is not just a place where people live, but composed of urban infrastructure designed for and by institutions of capitalism. The construction of the city is

funded by surplus extracted from the working class by the elite, upper class, who then create urban space so that the city becomes an engine with which to further extract profits. It is rooted in Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city", which describes the working class' right to access urban resources. It has been expounded upon by the likes of David Harvey, Manuel Castells and Andy Merrifield, who attempt to redefine the concept for the modern age. This thesis uses the Umbrella Movement as a case-study, offering a real example to critique these theoretical concepts and offer insight to the modern application and interpretation of the right to the city.

Although my interpretation of the Umbrella Movement and its implications is much more spatially intimate, it is imperative to situate the foundations of the movement within the context of three larger geopolitical networks. The narrowest of them is the Hong Kong city-state. Ackbar Abbas asserts that in the 1970s Hongkongers began to recognize their own unique cultural identity, separate from both China and Great Britain, the latter of which had been the colonial power of the territory since 1842.<sup>5</sup> The signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration Act in 1984, which established a transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty back to China in 1997, brought the dichotomy of British and Chinese cultural influence to the foreground. As part of the 1984 Act, Hongkongers were ensured fifty years of political autonomy, including the democratic election of their representatives. However, the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and their violent end, just five years after the signing, signified a clear distinction between the authority of China and of Great Britain. Hongkongers expressed their solidarity with the protesters in Beijing with their own protests, which involved nearly 18% of Hong Kong's population gathering at Hong

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<sup>5</sup> Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance.

Kong's then embassy of mainland China.<sup>6</sup> Hongkongers began to recognize Beijing as a threat to their budding identity and political autonomy. Consequently, an emphasis was placed on decidedly un-Chinese components of their culture, like their freedom of speech and press, and their democratic rights. In 1986, over a thousand protesters occupied a Hong Kong theatre demanding direct elections of the city's legislature; it was the city's first significant protest revolving around elections and Beijing responded by providing Hong Kong with eighteen directly elected representatives.<sup>7</sup> Many more instances of protest, including hunger strikes, rallies and petitions followed so that by the time of the handover on July 1, 1997, protest had become a distinctive aspect of Hongkonger's cultural identity. The eminent date of July 1st emerged as a national holiday upon which Hong Kong citizens rallied as a demonstration of their freedom of speech, democracy, and the rights of minorities.<sup>8</sup> Tensions between Hongkongers and the Beijing-based government reached a climax when Basic Law Article 23 was passed in 2002, prohibiting "any act of treason, secession, sedition, or subversion against the Central People's Government".<sup>9</sup> The largest July 1st rally yet followed in 2003. It was a cry for universal suffrage and freedom of expression. In hindsight, it could be argued that these annual protests acted as an incubator for the Umbrella Movement, which would emerge eleven years later.

Additionally, in the major cause of establishing autonomy, the geopolitical border between mainland China and Hong Kong's Kowloon Peninsula needed to be re-established in a cultural and political sense. When Hong Kong was given to Britain, it was barren land, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Wark, *Virtual Geography*. 114.

<sup>7</sup> Kuo, "A Brief History of Hong Kong's 30-Year Fight for Democracy."

<sup>8</sup> Shiu-hing, "Decolonization and Political Development in Hong Kong."

<sup>9</sup> "Basic Law Full Text."

city was established under remote leadership. Even during its brief occupation by Japan, there was still a geographic distance between the city and its authority. Since 1997, the geographic position of Hong Kong as being annexed to China via the Kowloon Peninsula very literally heightened the threat on Hongkongers' way of life and placed an important symbolic significance on the border between Hong Kong's Kowloon Peninsula and mainland China.

The second of these geopolitical networks is the East Asian region. Taiwan and Singapore also have historically contentious relationships with China. In fact, many saw the establishment of "one country, two systems" relationship between China and Hong Kong as a method for the former to lure Taiwan into re-joining the People's Republic of China.<sup>10</sup> Surely, the Umbrella Movement convinced the Taiwanese otherwise, but this is an example of the strong sense of regional identity in Eastern Asia. Taiwan and Hong Kong certainly have a distinct empathy for one another's politics and many Hongkongers regard Taiwan as the regional precedent of freedom of speech and press.<sup>11</sup> The region is also connected by an economic thread. The "Four Asian Tigers", Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, are known for their powerful, free-market economies.<sup>12</sup> Hong Kong is the only of these four regions without political autonomy. Like Hong Kong, Singapore is a city-state and was a British colony until 1955, though protests are almost nonexistent due to an authoritarian government. In Taiwan, concerns regarding the effects of unbridled capitalism and collusion between government and business, similar to some of the concerns of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, resulted in many protests, including the Sunflower Movement of 2013. In recent history, social media has made the

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<sup>10</sup> Moser and Kuo, Hong Kong Protests and Suicide.

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous, The Umbrella Movement: Social Media and Public Space in Hong Kong.

<sup>12</sup> Schenk, "Economic History of Hong Kong."

relationship between Taiwan and Hong Kong even stronger.<sup>13</sup> Blogs and social media websites transmit images, like a widely-circulated photo of a protester's bloodied face mask in Mong Kok during the Umbrella Movement, that attest to protester abuse and promote their beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Following the Umbrella Movement, the many commonalities between Hongkongers and the Taiwanese people, including their Chinese ethnicity and fraught connections to mainland China, are brought to the forefront.

That leads me to the largest geopolitical network: the global, virtual network of humans seeking civil liberties, representation, and a voice. Preceded by the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, which began in the US but spread across the world, the virtual geography of dissent had become a phenomenon with focal points throughout many geographic regions. Geographer Mackenzie Wark describes modern people as lacking cultural origins and proposed that we instead have terminals - momentary localities throughout a global, urban network.<sup>15</sup> Social media, however, can emphasize the sensation of place and transport humans back to their origins with images and rhetoric that unite them as a culture and a people. For instance, during the Umbrella Movement, Hongkongers abroad could participate in the protests virtually. Some translated blog posts and disseminated images, while others were even convinced to return home to occupy space.<sup>16</sup> Broadly, these virtual networks allowed the Umbrella Movement to connect to a larger narrative of civil liberties, providing unparalleled global empathy. Social media has

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<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, The Umbrella Movement: Social Media and Public Space in Hong Kong.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Wark, Virtual Geography. XIV.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, The Umbrella Movement: Social Media and Public Space in Hong Kong.

championed a modern form of cosmopolitanism that suggests injustices upon any protesters are furthermore abuse of an international community of activists.

Marxist geographer Manuel Castells has chronicled the influence of social networks within geopolitical atmospheres previous to 2012 and stated that their power comes from their ability to circumvent existing networks of power, which often represent powerful elites, to establish “the networks that are”.<sup>17</sup> These networks “that are” are both global and local. While the global is the modern phenomenon that has unlocked seemingly endless potential for spreading ideas, the local is the scale at which these ideas can truly transform into change. In urban societies, space is a precious commodity with universal demand, regardless of socio-economic class. In 2014, Hongkongers could express solidarity towards the universal ideas of the Occupy Movement and draw inspiration from the powerful precedent of the Arab Spring, but their injustices could not be adequately acknowledged or even begun to be solved without addressing specific issues and a specific audience. The specifics of these demands could only be manifested in the particular localities of their urban space.

Placing the Umbrella Movement within the global context of contemporary protests could suggest that it is merely a more recent, Asian interpretation of the Occupy Movement. After all, one of the original names of the movement was “Occupy Central With Love and Peace”. However, that would be to overlook the specific injustices the Hongkongers were protesting. Their message is culturally and geographically unique to Hong Kong, and was represented in the nuances of the protesters’ spatial strategies. Some have speculated that the Occupy Movement failed to reach its full potential because it did not foster a single, unified

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<sup>17</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. 9.

demand.<sup>18</sup> While there was a certain genius behind the branding of Occupy that aroused protests in nearly a thousand cities, Occupy's ambiguity was perhaps its demise if the goal was to bring about specific changes to policy or leadership. There is a lot of evidence that the ideas of the "99%" linger today, but the protest's momentum within localities has not lasted as long as many protesters hoped. Most cities did not establish unique demands for their unique political circumstances; rather, the Occupy Movement's demands broadened with time to foster a larger demographic group and establish a clear majority.<sup>19</sup> This is proven when individual protest sites are studied. Almost always, Occupy protesters in the United States mimicked Zucotti Park, the original protest in New York City, by occupying a public square or park near a financial district. Although this encouraged the universal message and afforded the Occupy Movement global publicity, their outrage was watered down by a common spatial typology that seemed disconnected from the protesters' specific, local concerns. The Umbrella Movement advanced the notions of Occupy by creating a dynamic and multi-faceted protest that capitalized on the power of space. In chapter one, I examine how the protesters interpreted their geography and used the protest to reinforce their border with China and encourage the unity of Hong Kong's citizens. In chapter two, I look at the protests locally. Within each district, they addressed their oppressors directly and aggressively by assuming responsibility of the public spaces around them. In my final chapter, I discuss the details of the protest spaces themselves and the protesters' strategies to reinvent public space so it represented their ideals with symbolic interventions and inclusive architectural design. These three scales of interpretation illustrate the clear proclamation of the protesters' right to the Hong Kong city.

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<sup>18</sup> Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*.159-219.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Marxist geography provides an invaluable platform for this analysis. David Harvey's recent book *Rebel Cities* emphasizes the power accumulated by capitalists with monopoly rent, a concept that applies to Hong Kong more than maybe any other place in the world. Unique policy regarding real estate and the acute demand for it, due to the topography of Hong Kong and its important international position, makes Harvey's analysis especially pertinent to Hong Kong and I've benefitted from his perspective greatly, particularly in understanding the protesters' audience (in chapter 2). However, like many Marxist geographers, Harvey looks at urban space as an abstraction of capitalist power and falls short of recognizing the average citizen's reality - particularly the potential of their manifested power during a time of protest. Additionally, I was influenced by Manuel Castells' *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, which analyzes the power of social media to work around institutions of power. He discusses social media's capacity to bring together the outraged so that they can foster hope while acknowledging the importance of urban space and the many ways it becomes intertwined with social media during a time of protest, but does little to elaborate on the implications of these spaces before, after and without social media's influence. In his most famous book, *The Urban Question*, Castells criticizes Lefebvre's ideas because he does not commit to the elusive idea of the "urban" and its inhabitants, and instead relies on the security of form (also known as the physical city) to negotiate the implications of capitalism.<sup>20</sup> Andy Merrifield modernizes these concerns with his interpretation of the right to the city. He asserts that the city, in modern times, is no longer a viable foundation for interpreting capitalist power because current city centers are merely focal points atop a global urban fabric.<sup>21</sup> Globalization has redefined capitalism, trade, connectivity, and the "working

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<sup>20</sup> Merrifield, *The Politics of the Encounter*. 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

class” since Lefebvre’s time, so Merrifield perceives urban protest as foremost a global endeavor. Within the global, contemporary timeline of urban protest, it is undeniable that the Umbrella Movement was aware of, and in many ways, relied on, the ambiguous, international “urban” and the equally enigmatic institutions of capitalism. Architect and theorist Keller Easterling has created the term “extrastatecraft” to describe the power of global capitalist networks through urban infrastructure, particularly in free-trade zones. She describes Hong Kong as one of the most “highly-prized zone models” to global business and its elusive partner, the state, who relies on economy to “camouflage” its own infrastructural endeavors.<sup>22</sup> Her assessment of infrastructure “disposition” is most valuable to my analysis because it prioritizes the city’s “active form” over its “object form”.<sup>23</sup> This is precisely how I believe Lefebvre’s definition of the right to the city is still applicable to the modern city. Infrastructure may have global origins representing ambiguous, contemporary institutions of power, but the disposition of the city concerns the elemental relationship between people and urban space. Easterling explains disposition as “a tendency, activity, faculty, or property in either being or objects”.<sup>24</sup> My analysis is from the perspective of the protesters: a group of Hong Kong idealists who see urban infrastructure as potential. The post-Umbrella Movement mindset, too, can be described as a cognitive form of disposition because, as Easterling phrases it, the protests represent a change in the city’s “chemistry of the soil”.<sup>25</sup> Disposition includes the interstitial space of the urban plan being a tool of democracy. These ideas mimic French Situationist Michel de Certeau’s famous

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<sup>22</sup> Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*. 69, 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 21, 72, 92.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 72.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 214.

1980 essay on walking through a city. He describes walking as either a decided act of compliance or of dissent, which emphasizes the tremendous role of the citizen's perception in determining the power of a city's infrastructure. In dissent, the common perception of urban space is challenged, so Certeau's ideas become increasingly relevant.

My bottom-up approach does not focus only on the geography, infrastructure and architecture of the capitalists and the state, but more-so on the subversive, dispositional weapons wielded by the protesters. It challenges the meta-narrative of many modern-day Marxist geographers and relies most heavily on Lefebvre's original concept by prioritizing the physical form of the city over the vast theoretical notion of "the urban". This is because I am looking at the spaces as the protesters, local Hongkongers, do. All of their efforts go against Merrifield and Castells' assertion that the city is no longer a viable entity. My thesis is, at its heart, entirely about subversion: the counter-production of space that, to citizens, only exists at the street level within Hong Kong's urban design. Hongkongers' actions during these protests were a proclamation that the city of Hong Kong still exists to them as a single entity with its own distinct cultural and political landscape, not as merely a focal point within a figurative urban fabric. In focusing on the form of the city, Lefebvre uses the idea of *transduction* to describe the nuanced relationship between theory and form. The emotions of theory and the reality of urban infrastructure ebb and flow, gradually manifesting into urban form, rather than all at once producing an urban utopia. Similarly, Marxist's total revolution is a theoretical concept only. The Umbrella Movement is not a total revolution, but an urban, physical demonstration of the theories of protest "transducting" within Hongkongers' city. It is not about empirical data, like Harvey believes, or really even about a global urban population, like Castells believes. To Hongkongers, their injustices are about the space of Hong Kong and their feelings towards it:

their sense of place, sense of culture, sense of independence, and sense of control. The protests were a wholly emotional proclamation that these sensations still exist and stand in defiance of the perception of Hong Kong by mainland China and the global capitalist class as simply an economic engine and mechanism of globalization.

The city-state of Hong Kong is an ideal city for such analysis because it has such a dominant urban identity. In the Occupy Movement, for example, the city acted as representative of the majority, but in Hong Kong, the city is who the protesters are and exactly what they are fighting for. Hong Kong has the best metro in the world and ninety-nine percent of citizens own public transportation passes, which has emphasized the city center as Hong Kong's economic and cultural core.<sup>26</sup> The dominant industries of banking, business/professional service, and trade make up nearly forty percent of all Hongkonger's jobs, all of which rely on the urban center and its harbor.<sup>27</sup> As the Umbrella Movement progressed, the protesters' anxiety of assimilation by mainland China emerged as a dominant motif. The Goliath that is mainland China and its enormous urban expanse threatened to absorb Hong Kong's vital position within the global economy, while ignoring its cultural and historic autonomy. Demands for universal suffrage, access to honest education, and freedom of exploitation by the government and business synthesized as an overwhelming appeal to protect the essence of Hong Kong. The ideology of the right to the city became represented in form - in architecture, in infrastructure and in public space. Virtual networks, theories and ideas of revolution cannot result in change without these forms because these forms are reality. The actions upon, within and around the urban form are the result of the idea of the right to the city, and consequently also the facilitator of it.

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<sup>26</sup> Wong, "The World's Most Envied Metro System."

<sup>27</sup> HK Census and Statistics Dept., "2011 Hong Kong Population Census."

My research focuses on the Hongkongers' counter-methods of production created by citizens during this time of protest to undermine these institutions within the existing urban space. With their demonstrations, particularly the occupations, protesters flipped the authoritative context of these spaces on their heads and took control of the space. The research methods I have adopted mimic the perspective of these protesters by looking at the spaces not solely as a prison contrived of capitalist power. The protesters have shown the potential of the spaces in-between, above and below the infrastructure of the powerful as well as the resounding hope public space offers. In observing the strategies of the "networks that are", I am revealing a far more compelling, even hopeful narrative of Hong Kong and its future. The protesters' actions imply that subversion of space can overpower the production of space. Marxist theorists might argue that the Umbrella Movement failed because it did not achieve total revolution, but a more dynamic understanding of the Umbrella Movement proves this to be untrue. Marxists focus on capitalist injustices and then on proletariat revolution, but inadequately examine what happens in between. The protesters' subversions of space represent developments in their perspective of urban space and their authority figures. The space is not just a foundation for oppressive architecture, it is their home and every interstitial space between, below, and around these buildings is still a space that has the potential to represent their right to the city. The Umbrella Movement may not be representative of the Marxist utopia where the ruling capitalist is overthrown by the working proletariat, but it is the cumulative clamor of a society revealing their social aspirations and defining their identity not with the institutions of the powerful few, but the decisions of the collective "we" within, and upon, the urban environment.

## **2.0 CAUGHT IN THE WEB: THE GEOGRAPHIES OF PROTEST**

Woven into the saga of Hong Kong's birth all the way to the Umbrella Movement is a dominant theme of political control. The Umbrella Movement began as fight for control of Hong Kong's right to self-govern and ultimately catalyzed the strongest illustration of a united Hong Kong populace in history. On September 22nd, the demonstration in Admiralty became violent when the police rained teargas onto the protesters. Almost instantaneously, the other two protest sites, Mong Kok and Causeway Bay were born. The specific locations of these sites were organic developments with sincere and revealing implications. All three sites were a direct product of geographic circumstances, including the historical, cultural, and political contexts of the districts within the city-state. Powerful historical connotations stood in contrast with the others, but by asserting control of the three sites equivalently, protesters proved to their audience in Beijing and to the rest of the world that they stood together as a single, unified force. Protesters used the geography of these sites as a three-pronged net within which they captured the city they had declared their right to. Initially, it may seem that geographic barriers to vehicular traffic would be the protesters' most dangerous weapon. However, it was the geographic emotional declaration of unity that would send the most powerful message to Beijing and have the greatest political impact and residual effects on the city.

## 2.1 HONG KONG'S HISTORICAL IDENTITY

In 1842, the island of Hong Kong was handed over to the British as part of the Treaty of Nanking, concluding the Opium Wars. In 1860, British control was expanded to the Kowloon Peninsula, then into the New Territories in 1898. Hong Kong is not yet 175 years old, yet it has a present-day population over seven million and incredible international significance culturally, through technology, food and art, and economically, especially as one of the world's most successful free-trade megalopolises.<sup>28</sup> Hong Kong as a geopolitical marvel represents a global shift in the history of colonization from a statement of imperialism to an act of globalization. The influx of international businesses, languages and cultures cultivated a quasi-culture characterized by Ackbar Abbas as a "city of transients."<sup>29</sup> However in 1984, the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration Act promised the return of the city-state to China in 1997 as a Special Administrative Region (SAR). This act fostered a budding sense of identity among Hongkongers as they increasingly began to understand their city not as an appendage of the British Empire, but as having its own political identity.<sup>30</sup> Politics has a profound significance on the identity of any space, but Abbas' theory that the signing of this single act could so greatly

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<sup>28</sup> Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 4

affect their perception of identity helps us understand the weight Hongkongers currently place on political autonomy.

Even though it was not fully embraced by the Hong Kong populace for so long, Hong Kong developed an exceptional culture wholly unique to its 1,070 square kilometers. Not only did it develop under the influences of both British and Chinese culture, but the influence of a very distinctive topography. On the Southern edge, Hong Kong Island runs into steep mountain range, and on the other side, it is almost immediately barricaded by the Pacific Ocean. These factors and cultural influences resulted in an innovative, vertically-oriented urban design to house one of the most diverse populations in Asia. Then, just five years after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration Act, the deplorable, violent events at Tiananmen Square made China's contempt of the ideals of democracy abundantly clear and raised concerns whether Hong Kong would ever receive their promised political autonomy under an authoritative Chinese Communist party in Beijing and preserve their newfound sense of identity. When Wark described modern citizens as identifying with temporary terminals, rather than origins, Hong Kong is a city whose globally-influenced and connected citizens could have previously been characterized as the epitome of this idea due in part to their historically Western influence. However I believe the perceived threats of Beijing's authority reasserted Hongkongers' attention to their origins, the Hong Kong city, and consequently, on the border between Hong Kong and mainland China. These events greatly influenced Hongkongers during a time when they were establishing what it means to be from Hong Kong, pushing their identity in a decidedly un-Chinese direction.

## 2.2 BORDERS

The specific boundaries of Hong Kong were originally defined by British naval officers and cartographers. Actually, their ability to survey land and create a geographic image of a space played an integral role in their success expanding the British Empire into the East.<sup>31</sup> These borders have immortalized British influence within Hong Kong because, even today, colonial demarcations define who is a Hongkonger and who is not. On the 28th of September, 2014, when the protests began in Admiralty, Hongkongers were forced to consider their identity and their allegiances, subconsciously bringing these borders to the forefront of every citizen's mind.



**Figure 3.** The geography of Hong Kong., map by author

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<sup>31</sup> Bremmer and Lung, "Spaces of Exclusion." 228.

However, the colony of Hong Kong was founded upon a doctrine of division. The British acquired Hong Kong as a tactic for British merchants to monopolize Asian trade, including avoiding discriminatory Chinese laws, including the denial of any foreign women in China.<sup>32</sup> Once in control, intense discrimination was instituted on the non-European citizens of Hong Kong, like having to obtain night passes when out past 10PM.<sup>33</sup> This division between colonial powers and the native citizens became easily embodied in the city-state's geography with the very literal division of the Kowloon Peninsula and Victoria Island by the Pacific Ocean (see Figure 3). At the time of acquisition, the inhabited population of Kowloon was approximately 3,000 fishermen and farmers, but when migrant worker population exploded, the colonial government felt increased pressure to distance themselves from the Chinese population.<sup>34</sup> A "paranoia of invasion" towards both the prospect of a physical invasion by Chinese troops and a potential cultural invasion brought by these migrant citizens, became a commanding mentality in early British environmental planning.<sup>35</sup> In 1877, colonial authorities went as far as to reserve most of Hong Kong Island (then called Victoria Island) for Europeans only.<sup>36</sup> However, this emerged as more of an economic exclusion than a racial one. An influx of Chinese migrant workers, necessary for the colonial economy, was directed to the Kowloon Peninsula and a settlement on the Western coast of the island, but wealthy Chinese found loopholes allowing

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<sup>32</sup> Bremmer and Lung, "Spaces of Exclusion." 226.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 226.

<sup>34</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*. 47.

<sup>35</sup> Bremmer and Lung, "Spaces of Exclusion." 243.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 235.

them to live on the hallowed Victoria Peak and within the region now called Central.<sup>37</sup> In response, colonial authorities began using architecture to assert cultural control of these spaces. In Kowloon, the Chinese shop-house was the dominant typology.<sup>38</sup> This tenement-style housing usually had four floors (tall for the time) and was informally designed to accommodate shops and warehouses on the first floor. The density of these spaces and lack of services provided by the colonial government perpetuated racial stigmas that Asians were unorganized and unclean, justifying British prejudices that depicted the Chinese as a potential threat to the health of European women and children.<sup>39</sup> On Victoria Island, Britain's firm sense of authority manifested as neo-classical architecture, which dominated the landscape. These buildings effectively perpetuated British culture and social behavior.<sup>40</sup> In British artistic depictions of the city of Victoria, emphasis is often placed on monumental, classic buildings, with only small details, like lingering groups of Chinese onlookers or mountains fading into the background, to suggest the Asian geography. These classical forms were symbols of liberty to the British Empire, which was surely a source of irony to the oppressed ethnically Chinese population. The British saw Hong Kong foremost as a geographic tool of economic freedom from Chinese-imposed tariffs, spawning the contemporary perception of Hong Kong as Western culture's portal to the East. Although these architectural styles are almost non-existent in Hong Kong today, the remnants of this mindset have come to define the city's plan.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 245.

<sup>38</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*. 44.

<sup>39</sup> Bremmer and Lung, "Spaces of Exclusion." 244.

<sup>40</sup> Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*. 78.

The protest sites of Admiralty and Causeway Bay are on both on Hong Kong Island, which remained segregated and inaccessible to the Chinese until 1946.<sup>41</sup> Admiralty has perhaps the most clear historical allusions to British colonization of any Asian region. As late as 1997 it had held one of Britain's most significant and enduring navy stations, called the HMS Tamar.<sup>42</sup> Now, in a dramatic reversal, it has become home to Beijing's governmental representation, the Central Government Complex. The Beijing-based Chinese government visually reclaimed this space shortly after the handover with an iconic building whose arched shape acts as a window between the shore and Hong Kong's primary financial district. However, the name of the space under the structure, Tamar Park, connotes the historical legacy of Britain's colonization.

### 2.3 HONG KONG ISLAND

As British neo-classical forms subsided, the architecture of Hong Kong came to represent economic prosperity.<sup>43</sup> The skyscraper fulfills a contemporary interpretation of these goals, while also addressing problems with overcrowding. Within Hong Kong today, there are 558 skyscrapers, nearly 200 more than New York City.<sup>44</sup> Similar to colonists' attempts to control the culture of the island with neo-classical architecture, the megastructures of Hong Kong Island, built by wealthy financiers and many Chinese companies, represent Hong Kong's role in the global capitalist economy, as well as dictate the the uses of the space and consequently,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 244.

<sup>42</sup> Associated Press, "Base Closure to End Royal Navy's Far East Presence."

<sup>43</sup> Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*. 79.

<sup>44</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*. 5.

influences who maintains the right to the city. Marxist geographers see this as an obvious example of capitalists' production of space advancing their own agenda until the space is almost entirely devoid of the presence of a local culture, as Sharon Zukin calls it, "the market eroding place."<sup>45</sup> As the financial region of the third largest international financial city behind New York and London, the abundance of global leaves no room for the local.<sup>46</sup> The tall buildings, with the exception of the Central Government Complex and a few others, are a monotonous series of towers (See Image 1). The streets lack the trademark density of other areas of Hong Kong due to a "second ground" of platforms and footbridges that encompass the entire Admiralty region and distance people from vehicular traffic at street level.<sup>47</sup> Admiralty thus offers a shiny and sanitized rendition of the urban Hong Kong experience. I.M. Pei's Bank of China Tower in Admiralty and Norman Foster's Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) building in nearby Central represent the role of Chinese businesses in the development of high-profile mega-architecture. The beauty of these buildings and their international prestige acts as a faux culture, particularly to international visitors, and suffocates other aspects of authentic Hong Kong culture around them.

Admiralty was established by a foreign, colonial government and transferred to another non-local authority, China. It acts as the epicenter of international political influence upon Hong Kong and as such has never truly belonged to Hongkongers. The protest site here came to most represent the concern that Hong Kong was turning into "just another Chinese city", meaning a city more concerned with financial prowess and global perceptions of power than the well being

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<sup>45</sup> Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*. 63.

<sup>46</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*.

<sup>47</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*. 160.

of its citizens.<sup>48</sup> The impressive, gleaming buildings towered over the protest space as proof of their concerns. The concept of the “right to the city” takes on a different meaning in Admiralty because of its historical context. Hongkongers were boldly declaring a right to a space they had never truly had much influence upon before. In many ways, the protesters’ occupation of Harcourt Road, the primary road of Hong Kong Island between these massive, international buildings, can be perceived as the first declaration of authentic Hong Kong culture in the Admiralty district.

Causeway Bay lies to the East of Admiralty along this same primary road, though it changes names from Harcourt Road to Hennessy Road between the two. The first form of public transportation, established in 1903, was a tram running this same route from Kennedy Town through Central and Admiralty and then to Causeway Bay, eventually extending all the way to Shau Kei Wan.<sup>49</sup> From Admiralty, extending the protests East sent a much stronger message because in early colonial Hong Kong, Sheung Wan, on the West coast near Kennedy Town, had been the only location on the island where the local Hong Kong population had been permitted to settle and build in their own architectural style.<sup>50</sup> Hence, that area has developed into a small enclave for Hong Kong’s people and culture. Instead, by establishing a presence to the East, the protesters were furthering their invasion into areas more dismissive of Hong Kong’s own sense of culture, and therefore, also less hospitable for them as protesters.

Although Causeway Bay had once been a busy fishing region, it is now an extremely upscale retail district. Like many globalized, highly capitalist regions, East Asian societies have

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<sup>48</sup> Tse, Riots, Unrest, and the Umbrella Movement: Hong Kong Rising.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>50</sup> Bremmer and Lung, “Spaces of Exclusion.” 245.

generally associated economic freedom with civil liberty; the correlation became so direct that when civilians' democratic rights were threatened by the events in Tiananmen Square, the tragedy prompted a surge in consumerism- a phenomenon that was dubbed “doom and boom” economy.<sup>51</sup> Yet more recently, perhaps in part due to the rhetoric of the Occupy movement in the United States, the Hong Kong population began to recognize that their consumerism actually profited the upper class, therefore increasing the influence of the wealthy elite.<sup>52</sup> The Causeway Bay site was the natural site to denounce this influence, in part, because it is central to an area that has experienced extensive gentrification that has slowly pushed local Hong Kong culture out. An example is the street Lan Kwai Fong, just South of the Causeway Bay protest site. A unique aspect of Hong Kong’s urban design was the development of small “ladder-streets” extending North and South off of the primary East-West axis.<sup>53</sup> As previously mentioned, Hong Kong’s topography turns into a steep incline as it gets further from the harbor and closer to a line of fifteen mountains including the most famous, Victoria Peak. These ladder-streets were developed as pedestrian markets rather than as transit due to their short, steep design.<sup>54</sup> One of the steepest, Lan Kwai Fong, provided refuge from busy East-West traffic, so developed into a bustling, mixed-use neighborhood with shops and residences.<sup>55</sup> When an increased emphasis on native culture developed in the 1970’s, this district emerged as the epitome of the vernacular, urban street typology. However, soon after, this increased attention attracted capitalists,

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<sup>51</sup> Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*. 5.

<sup>52</sup> This is detailed much further in chapter 2.

<sup>53</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*. 42.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and Politics of Disappearance*. 88.

triggering destructive gentrification. Today, Lan Kwai Fong is the premier nightlife district among tourists and visiting businessmen, but is usually avoided by local Hongkongers. What seemed at first a promising model of Hong Kong culture turned out to simply be another example of capital suffocating sense of place.

## 2.4 MONG KOK



**Figure 4.** The regions previously inhabited by British military, map by author

In 1880, the East-West axis of Hong Kong was connected to the Kowloon Peninsula by the inauguration of the Star Ferry.<sup>56</sup> At this time the Southern point of the peninsula, Tsim Sha Tsui, and the area directly North of it, Yau Ma Tai, were British military districts, so the local Chinese population was pushed further North into the region of Mong Kok, the Umbrella Movement's

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<sup>56</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*. 160.

third protest site (see Figure 4).<sup>57</sup> Mong Kok developed into an “old vibrant and partly seedy” mixed-use neighborhood.<sup>58</sup> Despite the British military leaving long ago, residual effects of their occupation are evident in Mong Kok’s development as a sub-par living environment. For example, despite architectural similarities with Tsim Sha Tsui, Mong Kok now has far inferior air quality due to reduced air flow caused by its distance from the harbor and general disregard by urban planners.<sup>59</sup>

In stark contrast to the expansive malls of Admiralty and Causeway Bay, Mong Kok is famous for its street markets, a cultural remnant of the Chinese shop-house’s influence. With pedestrian flows sometimes exceeding 4,000 per hour, every turn is teeming with Hong Kong culture and people.<sup>60</sup> Several street blocks exceed population densities of 775,000 people per square mile, making it one of the densest regions in the world.<sup>61</sup> To deal with this density, Mong Kok employs another architectural allusion to the traditional shop-house: stacking. It might be the only place in the world where one can find high-rise horse stables, multi-story cemeteries, and an abundance of roof-level schools and churches.<sup>62</sup> As density inevitably increases, the locals find ways to cope, using the streets for their markets, intersections as their public squares, and alleys for refuge from the rest of it. Géraldine Borio and Caroline Wüthrich of Parallel Lab emphasize the importance of interstitial spaces as “edge public spaces ... providing breathing

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 161.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 160.

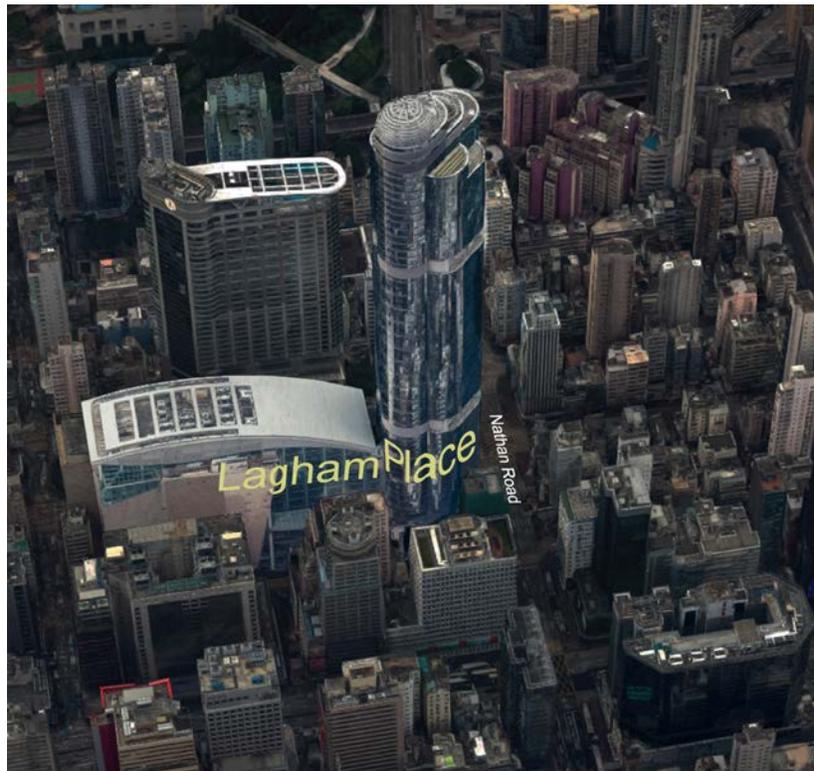
<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 167

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 107.

room” to the congestion of Hong Kong’s day to day.<sup>63</sup> Very thin, secondary streets in Mong Kok provide just enough room for lively markets to emerge specializing in ladies clothing, flowers, and even pet goldfish. Alleyways no wider than four or five feet provide students and workers invaluable relief from the incessant activity of the streets for a snack or a cigarette. Other small public spaces are woven into the urban fabric in the forms of rooftop sports centers and “pocket parks.”<sup>64</sup>



**Figure 5.** Langham Place in Mong Kok, diagram by author

However, as density reaches beyond what many presumed possible, “island mentality” seeps into the urban design of Mong Kok- a region historically defined by its contrast to Hong

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<sup>63</sup> Borio and Wuthrich, *Hong Kong In-Between*.

<sup>64</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*. 166.

Kong Island.<sup>65</sup> Langham Place, a fifty-nine story multi-purpose building, including a fifteen story shopping mall, was built at the heart of Mong Kok in 1999.<sup>66</sup> It is integrated into Mong Kok's metro station, a fundamental transportation hub connecting most of Kowloon Peninsula to the New Territories. It took five years to build, and the resulting structure was outrageously short of the specifications outlined by the Metro Plan published September 1991, only providing eight of the mandated nineteen required hectares of open space.<sup>67</sup> This plan was designed to provide for the diverse populations of Mong Kok, but as of 2014, Mong Kok is still missing a multitude of key features including twenty-six social centers, three youth centers and a total eighteen post-offices.<sup>68</sup> Instead, Langham Place is adorned with outdoor escalators and footbridges, making it a new, expansive pedestrian tier to the region. This system may seem pragmatic, but broad alterations to the sensitive composition of the day-to-day activities threatens Jane Jacob's notion of the "ballet of the sidewalk" and its "complex order" derived from the many layers of the everyday.<sup>69</sup> It removes pedestrians from the life and markets of the street below, instead diverting them through a network of internationally-owned commercial centers. The tall, shiny tower of Langham Place is what archaeologist John Costonis describes as an architectural "alien", reminiscent of Hong Kong Island's commercialism and capitalist expansion (see Figure 5). Surrounded by the comforting "icons" of the region, like the markets and historic Old

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

Kowloon Police Station, this alien threatens the very identity of Mong Kok.<sup>70</sup> To the citizens of Hong Kong, it has become a built symbol for inevitable encroachment of the Chinese authoritarian regime, who many fear to be worse even than that of the British Empire.

Within the geography of the Umbrella Movement, Mong Kok represents Hong Kong's most local and marginalized citizens. Compared to its partners on Hong Kong Island, Mong Kok has far less international influence and therefore, far less of an international audience. Admiralty was victim to the first and most famous act of violence by the police, the tear gas on September 28th, but Mong Kok experienced by far the most police brutality. At one point during the struggle for Nathan Road, the primary axis of the Kowloon Peninsula, the intersection at Shantung Street became a recognized battleground between police and protesters. The protesters were very loyal to their leaders who urged them to remain peaceful, so were unarmed and only had minimal defenses, such as goggles, helmets, and make-shift armor made of miscellaneous foam pieces.<sup>71</sup> However, riot police were armed with CL liquid, a new weapon similar to tear gas that was given to them specifically for the protests, and batons, which they used aggressively against unarmed citizens.<sup>72</sup> Mong Kok is stereotyped as a home to many thugs and gangs. The government has been accused of extorting this reputation by hiring many of these thugs to do what they could not, that is blatantly abuse protesters.<sup>73</sup> This allowed the government to incite added violence on the protesters with minimal responsibility, but more importantly, it implied that there was fragmentation among the protesters. The government needed to discredit the Mong

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<sup>70</sup> Costonis, *Icons and Aliens: Law, Aesthetics, and Environmental Change*.

<sup>71</sup> Tse, *Riots, Unrest, and the Umbrella Movement: Hong Kong Rising*.

<sup>72</sup> Tse, *Hong Kong Silenced*.

<sup>73</sup> Anonymous, *The Umbrella Movement: Social Media and Public Space in Hong Kong*.

Kok protesters as representatives of the Hong Kong majority because that would weaken the Umbrella Movement as a whole. While the architecture of Causeway Bay and Admiralty act as Hong Kong's global facade, Mong Kok threatened Beijing because it added a third, localized dimension to the protest that authenticated the Umbrella Movement as representative of the whole of Hong Kong.

## 2.5 A GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

The shift of balance is obvious geographically (see Figure 6). While Causeway Bay and Admiralty sit in relatively close proximity to one another on the primary axis of Hong Kong Island, running East-West, Mong Kok is across the harbor on Kowloon Peninsula. The protest was primarily on Nathan Road, the dominant axis of the peninsula running North-South. It did expand at the Argyle St. intersection, though, until it occupied the area beneath Langham Place.<sup>74</sup> Most of the streets of Mong Kok are dominated by pedestrians and therefore not automobile-friendly, but the protesters did not choose those streets. Instead, they interrupted the rampant traffic flow of Nathan Road, blocking thousands of drivers coming from the New Territories from accessing the ferries at the peninsula's end, and therefore Hong Kong Island.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, the metro below Mong Kok, one of the core stations of the extremely successful and popular MTR system, was mostly unaffected. Their occupation attacked the transit of the mostly upper class who owned and relied on cars, without effecting the average citizen, demonstrating

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<sup>74</sup> Parallel Lab, "Mong Kok."

<sup>75</sup> Chu, Hong Kong's History of Protest.

that they too deserved, and were capable of asserting, control of these primary roads. The MTR also permitted potential sympathizers of the Umbrella Movement easy access to and from the site. Bringing these public roads back to their original intent, transportation for the wealthy, was most likely the primary pragmatic reason for the police's aggression and urgency in clearing the Mong Kok occupation. However, it was the threat of a unified Hong Kong population was the unspoken, true fear of Chinese authorities and the police.



**Figure 6.** The axes of Hong Kong and the three protest sites within Hong Kong's geography, maps by author

Looking at the geography of the whole of urban Hong Kong, the occupation of Mong Kok shifted the scale of the protest from a relatively small focal point within Hong Kong Island to a three-pronged web encompassing Hong Kong's urban boundaries. The figurative center of Hong Kong may be perceived by global elites and Beijing authorities as somewhere within Hong Kong Island, but the third site of Mong Kok illustrated that to the Hong Kong people, the symbolic center of Hong Kong lies somewhere between Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula. These sites can never be divorced of their history, so the protesters flipped the meaning of spaces' divisive historical contexts so that they would represent unity. They utilized the assumption of their division along geographic and socio-economic lines to emphasize this

contemporary proclamation of unity. Only the geography of the city-state could provide this platform. As the protests took root at these three sites, the geography of Hong Kong became ensnared in their web of protest. Transportation was hindered because cars could not travel past three massive blockades on Hong Kong's two primary axes. But more importantly, no matter where you were within Hong Kong, you were not far from one of the three protest sites. The geographic implications of these three specific sites combined to produce a message unique to the city at this place in this time. The protesters' strategy encompassed the historical, cultural and geographic significances of the spaces under their unifying message of democracy and hope. Cumulatively, these spaces caught Hong Kong within the protesters' web, and suggested that perhaps their right to the city could not be escaped, either.

### 3.0 LOOK AT ME NOW: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUDIENCE AND SPACE

Shortly after the French Revolution, historian Jules Michelet said this about the protest spaces of Paris:

The Champ de Mars! (English: “Mars Field”) This is the only monument that the Revolution has left. The Empire has its Column, and engrosses almost exclusively the Arch of Triumph; royalty has its Louvre, its Hospital of Invalids; the feudal church of the twelfth century is still enthroned at Notre Dame: nay, the very Romans have their Imperial Ruins, the Thermae of the Caesars!

And the Revolution has for her monument: empty space.<sup>76</sup>

Hong Kong’s unique urban composition offers exceptionally limited public space, particularly that free from the inherently biased design of architecture. To cope with the growing demand for these spaces, urban designers developed a complicated vertical labyrinth of footbridges and walkways that has caused some to refer to Hong Kong as the “city without ground.”<sup>77</sup> However, protesters did not choose these elevated spaces to exercise their rights; instead, they occupied the ground. By appropriating the spaces in-between, they were laying claim to the land they felt a right to and reinventing the urban plan as what Henri Lefebvre termed “social space.”<sup>78</sup> The consequences of this transformation added pressure to the already strained public areas. These

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<sup>76</sup>Michelet, History of the French Revolution.

<sup>77</sup> Frampton, Solomon, and Wong, Cities Without Ground.

<sup>78</sup> Harvey, Rebel Cities.

limitations became the primary catalyst of the Umbrella Movement, mobilizing police into an offensive position. Thereupon, the spaces became a symbol of the citizens' oppression and a device that revealed the rights which were truly at stake. Looking at the protest spaces at the level of the district, it seems the spaces have been chosen because they each represent a specific, oppressive audience. The images created with these protests in these specific places used powerful imagery to establish a clear dichotomy of masses versus oppressors. The existing architecture of Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mong Kok provided a symbol for the latter and an audience for their proclamations. The spaces between became a stage upon which the citizens enacted their right to the city. Hence, reactions to their presence and the events upon this architectural stage became a drama substantiating the protesters' concerns.



**Figure 7.** View from the stage in Tamar Park, photo by author

### 3.1 ADMIRALTY'S AUDIENCE

In Admiralty, the protesters made their chosen audience abundantly clear when they stood on a small stage in Tamar Park under the arched, looming Central Government Complex building. Facing the Chief Executive's Office, the Legislative Council, and the Central Government's West Wing Offices, the architecture provided a portal to Beijing the protesters could speak to (see Figure 7). The buildings' sizes dwarfed the protesters, but the central location of Tamar Park provided spatial leverage. Protesters demanded attention from leaders in Beijing and their representatives within Hong Kong, and when they felt as though this target was not being reached, they followed their audience. A week after the initial gathering, protesters walked to CY Leung's home to address him there.<sup>79</sup> As discussed in the introduction, they returned to find the space taken over by a competing, pro-China rally. The first group of protesters moved to the Eastern side of the Central Government Complex, occupying Tim Mei Avenue. In thinking about their audience, this side has the primary entrance to the complex as well as the Civic Square. Without Tamar Park, there was no public gathering space for them to congregate. The Civic Square had been closed to protesters and the public for an extensive amount of time.<sup>80</sup> After breaking down the large fence between the road and the Square, they had their first true occupation space. The Civic Square is very near to the building's entrance, to provide a constant reminder of their devotion, and it has a roof to protect occupiers from the elements (see Figure 8). Their signs pleaded to the government, "we only want universal suffrage, we only want civil nomination; this is not a revolution" and "we all love HK, please don't hurt me." Others took a

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<sup>79</sup> Tse, Riots, Unrest, and the Umbrella Movement: Hong Kong Rising.

<sup>80</sup> Pasquier, Admiralty and the Umbrella Movement.

more threatening tone: “dear government, we are watching you.”<sup>81</sup> Long after the Umbrella Movement’s conclusion, this sidewalk to the East is the only space in Admiralty where tents and signs lingered for months more because it affronted the protest’s primary adversary, government officials, most directly.



**Figure 8.** The Civic Square under part of the Central Government Complex, photo by author

When the government worried that the protesters would spill into Hennessy Road, it resulted in the Movement’s first major altercation: on the 8th of December, 2014, 87 canisters of tear gas were released onto the protesters of Admiralty.<sup>82</sup> Almost immediately, the protests in Causeway Bay and Mong Kok erupted, and Admiralty’s occupation spread into the eight-lane highway, Hennessy Road. This allowed for many new viewpoints from which to witness the protest site, including two high-traffic footbridges connecting the Central Government Complex with Admiralty Center, a shopping mall and the financial district’s most significant transportation hubs across the highway. The protesters in this area closest to the center appealed to citizens taking the metro and buses by advocating peace and demonstrating a growing sense of community. The signs read “violence free”, “you’ll never walk alone” and asked “shall we

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<sup>81</sup> Parallel Lab, “Admiralty.”

<sup>82</sup> Tse, Hong Kong Silenced.

talk?”<sup>83</sup> Government officials and bank executives in the buildings around this protest site were forced to visually encounter these protesters and read their grievances, while citizens exiting the MTR were given a community with whom they could question their authorities and exercise their rights. This exemplifies some of Merrifield’s theories of urban space, which discuss the imperative relationship between space and encounter in allowing “affinity to take hold”.<sup>84</sup>

### 3.2 THE ROLE OF IMAGE

Image was critical to the protesters and they were fighting an uphill battle against the government’s influence in the media. Hong Kong has very little “small press” and larger media outlets were wary of covering stories of rebellious young people opposing the powerful Chinese Communist government.<sup>85</sup> Like Tahrir Square and the Occupy Movement before them, protesters relied on social media to spread their message, but they had to be very careful what message it was. They sought a careful balance between reaching two audiences: their oppressors, whom they wished to aggravate, and non-protesting citizens, whom they wished to welcome. In order to attract the latter and maintain a positive reputation in international media, they had to appear peaceful and in control, but also as victims of an unjust regime. The occupied space utilized a trope of visibility to emphasize the symbolism of their space and promote their cause. By occupying these spaces, they employed the same metaphor that Occupy Wall Street and the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Merrifield, *The Politics of the Encounter*. xvii.

<sup>85</sup> Anonymous, *The Umbrella Movement: Social Media and Public Space in Hong Kong*.

Arab Spring had before them, which suggested that these spaces had been preoccupied by their oppressors.<sup>86</sup> Using this pregnant environment as a backdrop for their created communities, they contrived the architectural antithesis of the districts' reputation. The neighborhoods of tents that emerged in late September stood in stark visual contrast with the looming, cold buildings of the Central Government Complex, the gargantuan vertical shopping malls of Causeway Bay and even the complicated infrastructure of Mong Kok. Their disarray and make-shift style alludes to a refugee encampment, comparing their struggle to a larger image of the world's disenfranchised.<sup>87</sup> However, the art and the vibrant life within these make-shift neighborhoods shifted their connotations to something positive. They ask viewers, are these monumental capitalist structures the representatives of economic freedom, or, instead, are these shabby, self-made communities the truest example of liberty and societal success? Protesters helped journalists document the protests, even protecting them during dangerous events while they uploaded their work online.<sup>88</sup> Many of the images documented the horrendous police brutality in response to the protesters' occupation, like journalist FX Pasquier's photos of protesters washing teargas from their eyes (see Figure 9). They knew these images worked in their favor, and that getting them to an international audience would put more pressure on the government and also attract more protesters.

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<sup>86</sup> Mitchell, "Occupy."

<sup>87</sup> Mitchell, "Occupy."

<sup>88</sup> Pasquier, Admiralty and the Umbrella Movement.



**Figure 9.** Protester and victim of the polices' teargas. Photo credit: FX Pasquier.

Beyond journalists and “small press”, livestream cameras documented and broadcast the protest in real-time, allowing an international audience to interpret the events and the space independently.<sup>89</sup> When police barricaded student leaders Alex Chow and Lester Shum, treating them in a way one protester described as “like dogs”, this was seen by Hongkongers and others across the world.<sup>90</sup> The virtual audience was not “unanchored in locality” as MacKenzie Wark described, but, I believe, a wholeheartedly local connection made possible by virtual geography.<sup>91</sup> Highly circulated photos of families making small donations to the protest sites, middle-aged citizens holding signs vowing to protect the younger generation, and students dripping in tear gas fostered a sympathetic image of the locals to reach the global audience. Some Hongkongers living internationally came back to join the movement, while others donated time and personal effort to translate social media into seventeen different languages.<sup>92</sup> To garner sympathy, the protesters needed to be understood, so they used Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook and

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<sup>89</sup> Anonymous, *The Umbrella Movement: Social Media and Public Space in Hong Kong*.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Wark, *Virtual Geography*.

<sup>92</sup> Anonymous.

other social media groups to spread their images and accompanying ideas. Realizing “a picture speaks a thousand words” and ability of images to be hyper-circulated, the signs throughout the site were in Mandarin, Cantonese, English, German and even Hindi.<sup>93</sup> Although these spaces were not the result of social media, this newfound tool enacted a multiplier-effect on the audience of these environments.

### 3.3 CAPITALISM AND CAUSEWAY BAY

Hong Kong’s smallest protest site, Causeway Bay, addressed a different architectural audience: the oligopolies derived from the limited supply and high demand of real estate. Causeway Bay is the most expensive retail rental space in Asia and second only to Upper Fifth Avenue in New York globally. In fact, three of the five most expensive retail districts in the world are on Hong Kong Island.<sup>94</sup> Between 2009 and 2011, Hong Kong’s property prices surged 76%, propelled mostly by very low interest rates and foreign demand.<sup>95</sup> It is important to remember that in Hong Kong’s economy the government holds the leases on all the land of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon.<sup>96</sup> This means that land value is captured and divided among only two groups: the government and developers. This is a singular example of Hong Kong’s renown for unbridled capitalism - it has led the world’s economic free-trade ranking for the past twenty-one years.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Anonymous, *The Umbrella Movement: Social Media and Public Space in Hong Kong*.

<sup>94</sup> Wahba, “Top 10 Highest-Rent Shopping Strips in the World.”

<sup>95</sup> Choy, “Hong Kong’s Economic Freedom and Income Inequality.”

<sup>96</sup> This is unlike countries like America, where speculative companies capture most land value.

<sup>97</sup> “Index of Economic Freedom.”

This makes the Hong Kong market extremely attractive to foreign investment. Meanwhile, the distribution gap in family income, referred to as Gini Index, sits at a staggering 53.7 -- the twelfth highest in the world and the highest among developed nations.<sup>98</sup> While the combined wealth of Hong Kong's ten richest people is over \$140 billion, nearly a fifth of Hong Kong's residents live below the poverty line.<sup>99</sup> It also ranks as the country where so-called crony-capitalists are most likely to succeed, with nearly 60% of GDP being accredited to billionaire wealth in crony sectors.<sup>100</sup> This is nearly triple that of the second worst-scoring country, Russia.<sup>101</sup> Hong Kong, it seems, has developed an oligopoly led by a small class of real-estate tycoons. The government is frequently accused of colluding with the financial elites while neglecting the needs of the masses, so these tycoons are viewed as an extension of Admiralty's government officials, just as the Causeway Bay protest is an extension of the events within the Admiralty district.

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<sup>98</sup> "Country Comparison: Distribution of Family Income - Gini Index."

<sup>99</sup> CNN, "Fifth of Hong Kong Residents Live below Poverty Line, New Index Shows - CNN.com."

<sup>100</sup> "Crony-capitalism" is a term describing economies and industries in which the the success of a business is highly correlated with close relationships between business and the government. Usually, this term is used negatively to suggest favoritism by the government.

<sup>101</sup> "Planet Plutocrat."



**Figure 10.** Times Square intersection in Causeway Bay, photo by author

Causeway Bay's outrageous rent, wealthy lessees and blurred status between public and private control offers a prime audience for the marginalized lower classes. It was expected that Hongkongers would engage with this space as consumers, which would intensify the gap between rich and poor. Instead, they inhabited them as residents, thereby asserting control of the land and its meaning. The space became accessible to all as a space of residence, rather than only those who can afford to patronize the expensive surrounding stores.

The protesters situated themselves in the most central space, the intersection of Hennessy Road, Jardine's Bazaar and E. Point Rd, called "Times Square" (see Figure 10). Perhaps the most iconic store there is SOGO, a Japanese department store currently owned by Hongkongers Joseph and Thomas Lau of Chinese Estates Holdings. Joseph Lau is fifth richest man in Hong Kong and was charged with bribery of government officials in 2012.<sup>102</sup> Adjacent to SOGO is Times Square, a shopping mall with a conspicuous allusion to the world's foremost financial capital, New York City, owned by Wharf Holding Limited and Peter Woo - Hong Kong's eighth

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<sup>102</sup> Reuters, "Hong Kong Businessman to Face Trial in Bribery Case."

richest citizen.<sup>103</sup> Wharf was accused of accepting \$36 million in bribes from building contractors in 2004.<sup>104</sup> The city's third richest citizen, Cheng Yu-tung, is chairman of Chow Tai Fook, a high-end jewelry retailer.<sup>105</sup> There are thirteen of his stores in the Causeway Bay area alone. In fact, seven of the ten richest Hongkongers made their fortunes in real estate and all ten can be connected to companies or land in Causeway Bay.<sup>106</sup> This protest site aimed to discredit these businessmen as representatives of the Hong Kong populace. By inserting themselves, their modest lifestyles and their hand-made architecture at the feet of these buildings, the protesters made the distinction between themselves and these elite few undeniable. They demonstrated that they were not asking for anything monetary, but simply for civil liberty.

There are fourteen shopping malls, most of them very high-end, within the thirty-one square miles of Hong Kong Island. Two of these malls, Hysan Place and Times Square, face the Causeway Bay intersection of the protest. This area is often considered a public gathering place, despite its small size and high velocity of traffic. If you wished to gather or rest, a better place would be within a shopping center. When Times Square was built by Wharf Holdings Limited, they signed a Deed of Dedication guaranteeing over 32,000 square feet for public access, pedestrian passage and passive recreation; however, a lease to the Starbucks corporation in 2005 and a controversy involving security guards evicting lingering pedestrians in 2008 have raised more questions on the legitimacy of Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS).<sup>107</sup> The increasing

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<sup>103</sup> "Hong Kong's 50 Richest People."

<sup>104</sup> Chow, "Wharf Manager in \$36m Bribe Case."

<sup>105</sup> "Hong Kong's 50 Richest People."

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Lee, "Democrats Enter Fray in Times Square Rent Row."

control of public land owned by corporations acted as a spatial example of the masses' lack of democratic rights, and therefore a spatial symbol for the cornucopia of consequential injustices.



**Figure 11.** Diagram depicting views of the Causeway Bay protest site from the surrounding skyscrapers.

Diagram by author. (See Image 7 from a view from point “A”.)

The height of the Causeway Bay buildings and their close proximity creates an almost claustrophobic atmosphere along the streets. Large, attention-grabbing signs cantilever over the space, overwhelming the protesters' homemade signs with their size, bright colors and legibility. However, the protesters utilized their position within the site- the middle of the street- to outdo the corporate displays. They were central, unexpected, intrusive and surrounded by the commotion of engaged protesters. If walking towards the protest site from the metro, the first

visible signs labeled their protest “The Umbrella Revolution” and “Occupy Hong Kong”, immediately expressing solidarity with the original Admiralty protest and employing the rhetoric of the international protests before it. These signs were at a scale legible to approaching citizens, corporate workers and consumers shopping in the surrounding skyscrapers. The monumental buildings created a vertical auditorium for protesters’ demonstration, filled with their target audience (See Figure 11). Large windows from SOGO and Times Square have an unobstructed view of the site, with little else distracting their vista due to other tall buildings adjacent to them (see Figure 12). At the most central space, between the entrances to SOGO and Times Square, the protesters situated their podium.<sup>108</sup> Speakers such as Chu Yiu-ming, a prominent social activist, spoke to followers, but also addressed the stores and those entering them directly with their words and focal position.<sup>109</sup> By using the space to commandeer the perspective of the powerful, they ensured that their message could not be ignored.



**Figure 12.** Point A on Figure 11. View of the former Causeway Bay protest site from a nearby shopping mall,  
photo by author.

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<sup>108</sup> Parallel Lab, “Causeway Bay.”

<sup>109</sup> Fong, *Umbrella Sketches*, 45.

Intermingled within the protest were many smaller signs in English, Mandarin and Cantonese commanding action from other citizens. From the perspective of the sidewalk, proximity made these larger than the banners and billboards above them. Some read “fight for justice” or “pray for democracy.”<sup>110</sup> Their audience was those walking by the protests, urging them to choose their fight as opposed to aiding their nemesis by contributing to their profits. The occupiers did not impede upon the sidewalks, permitting audience of non-protesting citizens that would ebb and flow with the day. It is also worth noting that the space, when not occupied, is primarily pedestrian. Gigantic crosswalks cover the intersection and yet people casually cross areas at other points of the street not meant for pedestrians. The occupiers had many breaks in the barriers around their site, allowing for these natural passageways to continue, just through their accommodated spaces.<sup>111</sup> If the communities lured someone in, the tents, artwork and information would dominate eye level, obstructing the buildings around them. For those not brave enough to enter the occupied sites, an unoccupied area of the protest site sat at the Eastern length of Hennessy road.<sup>112</sup> It was not open to traffic due to the protesters’ barricades with large signs labelling the space part of the “Umbrella Revolution”, but the space was wholly accessible to those walking along the sidewalk. The only structures in the space were a modest democracy classroom and accompanying library. They only used three small tents between SOGO and the most recently opened mall, Hysan Place, but they invited curious pedestrians a less intimidating opportunity to learn about the protesters’ cause. The other democracy classroom was

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Parallel Lab, “Causeway Bay.”

<sup>112</sup> Parallel Lab, “Causeway Bay.”

strategically situated nearest to the metro-station, along the axes between it and the attention-grabbing podium.

### 3.4 SPACE AS TESTAMENT

Stronger than the protesters' pragmatic use of the space, though, is the symbolic use. As the protests progressed, all three spaces escalated into battlegrounds between the protesters and their oppressors. Hong Kong has only approximately 1.5 meters of public space per citizen, less than almost any other city in the world, granting enormous weight to sidewalks and street corners.<sup>113</sup> To the capitalist juggernauts of Causeway Bay, these public spaces, when used by the public in an act of dissent, represent the limits of their power - a chink in their armor. Similarly in Admiralty, the government had hoped that by excluding protesters from Tamar Park, they would silence them. Violence came when the protesters occupied the sidewalks, streets and footbridges, effectively circumnavigating the supposed control of the government and the wealthy. The aggressive and violent backlash to their position became a testament of their injustice. As protesters steadily aggravated authority through spatial interventions, the resultant abuse became a subsequent catalyst for other citizens to join their fight. The police's intervention took the protesters' symbolic position and escalated into an even more symbolically significant battle. Losing this space became representative of losing hope of democracy. When the 87 canisters of tear gas were released upon the Admiralty protesters, they did not retreat or move to another space; instead, protesters repeatedly entered the zone, only leaving the space periodically to wash

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<sup>113</sup> Miao, *Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities*.

their eyes.<sup>114</sup> Losing that specific, charged space was admitting defeat, and they would rather be assaulted with tear gas and bludgeoned by police than relocate.

Months after the protest's conclusion, remnant demonstrations in Causeway Bay continue to occupy spaces between the sidewalk and the street. Their methods mimic those of the original protest. Large, doctored photos of a horned and fanged CY Leung send a clear message at a distance, taunting the tall buildings surrounding them, while smaller flyers attempt to educate passersby. To many, the names of these districts have now become synonymous with the ideologies of the protests. At the very least, these protests have created a clear connection between the Hong Kong citizens' injustices and the elite patrons of the surrounding buildings. The protests were an accusation and a powerful reaffirmation of the Hong Kong citizens' right to the city.

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114 Tse, *Riots, Unrest, and the Umbrella Movement: Hong Kong Rising*.

#### 4.0 AN ARCHITECTURAL BATTLEFRONT: STRATEGIES OF SPATIAL SUBVERSION

On any given day during the Umbrella Movement, the protesters' encampments in Admiralty, Causeway Bay or Mong Kok were pleasant and lively communities. Between their colorful shelters, the Hong Kong people had created a small community with art, classrooms, vegetable gardens, and even their own source of electrical power.<sup>115</sup> The protesters living there did not appear as enraged hoodlums, but as peaceful idealists. Occupation as a form of protest said more than any act of revolutionary violence could because it was a simple, powerful act of counter-occupation upon the very land the protesters felt a right to. In the first chapter, I discussed Langham Place as an architectural alien threatening the many delicate layers composing Mong Kok's urban vernacular. The protesters' initial occupation of Admiralty is inherently an act of reverse aggression. Like Newton's third law, the protests were an equal and opposite reaction to Beijing's political and economic invasion of Hong Kong. To counter the power of the capitalists, they garnered the power of the mass collective. This chapter looks at the protests at the scale of the street to analyze specific strategies of subversion upon the urban design and infrastructure of Hong Kong's urban space. The protesters were peaceful and respected private property; they did not inhabit the malls, the banks or the homes of their oppressors. Instead, they asserted their right

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<sup>115</sup> Parallel Lab, "Admiralty."

to the city upon public space, which they had the greatest, undeniable right to. When their presence prompted various forms of state-sponsored police brutality, it proved the necessity of their actions and upped the proverbial ante. From then on, every act within the space and upon its infrastructure, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, must be interpreted as a meaningful act of dissent.

Marxist geographers like David Harvey hinge their theories upon the social production of spaces and their ultimate role as a coliseum for revolution. Yet, to understand the Umbrella Movement, it is far more appropriate to perceive these as spaces of gentle, clever subversion. Karl Marx theorized that production determines consumption, promoting an economic system ultimately exploitative to the marginalized proletariat.<sup>116</sup> Marxist geographers took this a step further by applying theories of production directly to urban space through policy and infrastructure, espousing Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city". Hong Kong's profound limitation of land and unique government structure has exaggerated these circumstances because not only capitalists, but the government benefits from monopolistic rent.<sup>117</sup> This, combined with Abbas's description of Hong Kong as a "cultural desert" until the 1970's, created a sort of Catch-22 for the Hong Kong people in which any suggestion of cultural worth was easily exploited within an urban system.<sup>118</sup>

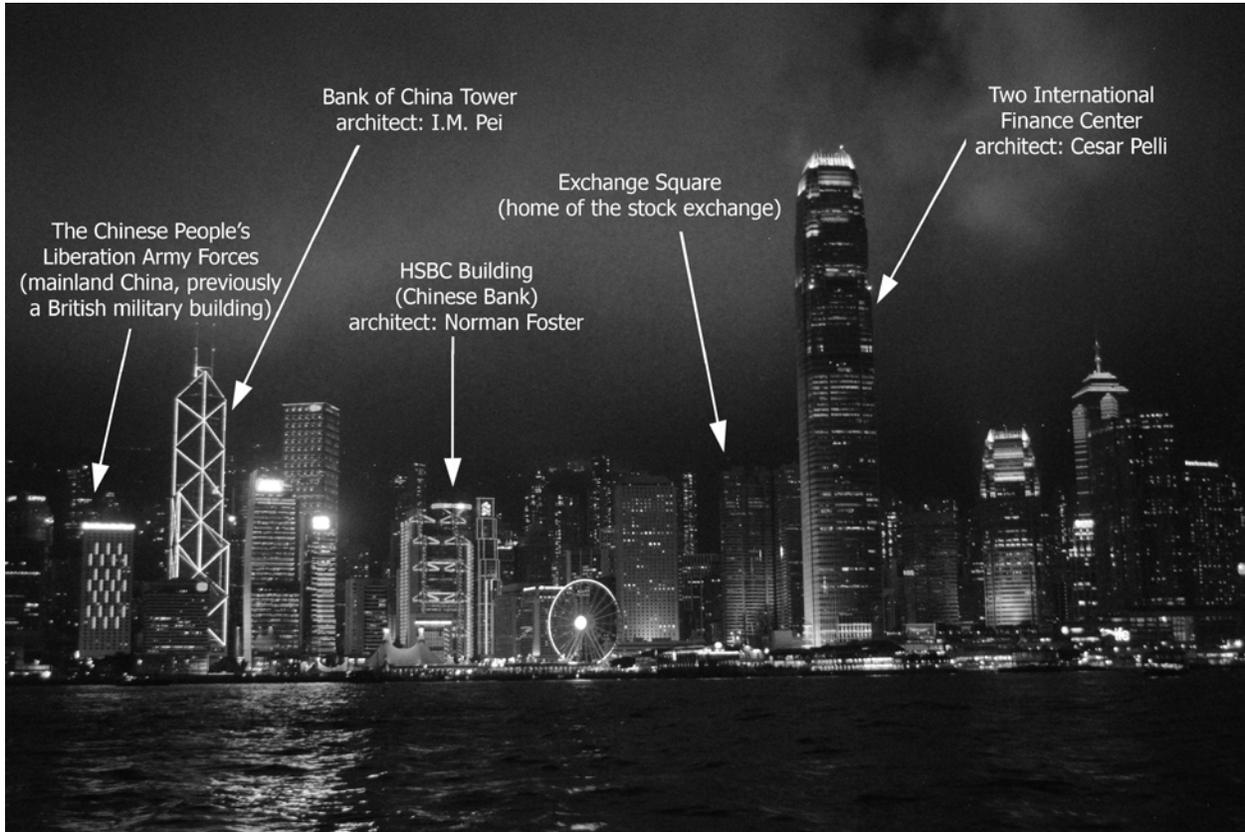
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<sup>116</sup> Marx and Engels, *Capital*.

<sup>117</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 102; Choy, "Hong Kong's Economic Freedom and Income Inequality."

<sup>118</sup> A prominent example being Lan Kwai Fong, described in Chapter 1.

## 4.1 THE PROTESTS AS A REACTION



**Figure 13.** Admiralty's iconic skyline, photo and diagram by author

The protesters' occupations were an assertion of Hong Kong's local identity as a reaction to two enormous, external threats: mainland China and global capitalists. Both influences are reflected in Hong Kong's urban branding, a concept derived by David Harvey. Urban branding describes the capitalist initiative to increase the economic value of urban space by increasing its appeal to a global audience. However, urban branding can be extremely destructive because it usually entails the manipulation of heritage, history and aesthetics.<sup>119</sup> This is most evident in the island's mega-

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<sup>119</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 104-109.

skyline of Chinese or internationally owned businesses residing in buildings designed by international architects (see Figure 13). The other, more recent force adding stress to Hong Kong's infant cultural identity is the cultural giant that is mainland China. An authoritative, communist government and overwhelming population size has created an assembly line of brand-new megacities. In 2013, the Chinese government announced plans to relocate 250 million rural residents into urban regions.<sup>120</sup> A new urban character, the 'ghost city', has emerged to describe urban centers built in anticipation of a population, so sit empty until the residents move in. The population of Hong Kong is David versus China's Goliath. When protesters express their concerns at becoming just another Chinese city, it is because they recognize their global identity and the ease with which it may be exploited. Upon the land that China gave to the British Empire in 1842 sits an entirely modern city with massive economic appeal. It is third on the ladder of international connectedness and has earned a reputation as the 'Gateway to the East.'<sup>121</sup> While a colony of Britain, Hong Kong may have lacked a strong sense of personal identity, but had a unique geography and therefore a unique role within the British Empire and considerable cultural independence. China's evolution towards a national culmination of monotonous urban centers threatens to absorb Hong Kong, exploiting its international prominence while simultaneously distorting many of the very characteristics that created it. China, therefore, is represented by more than just the Central Government Complex, but by urbanization as a whole. Most architecture in Hong Kong, like the previously mentioned Langham Place or HSBC Building, can somehow be interpreted as a symbol of oppression, so only a movement that does not rely on this architecture could adequately represent an opposition to China.

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<sup>120</sup> Johnson, "China's Great Uprooting."

<sup>121</sup> Shelton, Karakjewicz, and Kvan, *The Making of Hong Kong*. 1.

Even though Hong Kong is almost entirely composed of urban dwellers, the occupations of the Umbrella Movement allowed protesters to interpret this characteristic of their culture not as a reliance on tall buildings, but rather as an intimacy with one another and their urban environments. The small tents sat in close proximity to one another, while interstitial spaces became communal living areas or storage.<sup>122</sup> Like a city, their hand-crafted architecture dictated the movement of civilians around it and through it. However, their shelters and gardens were not permanent enough to protect them from the police, who wanted the sites to move. Then, it became a battle of infrastructure. Protesters designed barricades to protect their space on the streets. All three sites had these barriers, which were made of shipping containers, zip-ties, and other found materials. They were so dense and well-constructed that authorities had to use bulldozers when removing them.<sup>123</sup>

## 4.2 BARRIERS

The streets could no longer accommodate cars due to the occupation sites, but cars became part of the protesters' spatial strategies nonetheless. It is unclear whether these cars were driven to the spaces by protesters or abandoned by people trying to drive through, but the protesters used some idle cars under the footbridges of Admiralty to ensure that small area could be a stronger blockade. On the footbridges, they also made sure to crowd the space so that government employees had difficulty reaching the Central Government Complex.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, in Mong Kok, the protesters used empty cars to reinforce the borders

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<sup>122</sup> Parallel Lab, "Admiralty."

<sup>123</sup> Tse, Hong Kong Silenced.

<sup>124</sup> Parallel Lab, "Admiralty."

of their occupation. Seven buses and many privately-owned vehicles became engulfed by protesters during the initial protest and were deserted.<sup>125</sup> One of the abandoned busses was nicknamed Bus N689, a reference to the number of votes that put CY Leung into office.<sup>126</sup>

Barriers became a theme that permeated the Umbrella Movement at many scales. These barricades became its climax, but even the protest sites' earliest and most docile days paid special attention to built and perceived boundaries. On October 22, after being ignored for three weeks in Tamar Park, a group of the student protesters marched to CY Leung's home. Once there, they stood outside his estate's tall, metal fence.<sup>127</sup> Security watched them nervously and insisted they stay away from the fence, but the students calmly ignored the police as they tied yellow ribbons to its posts. In Hong Kong, yellow ribbons have historically symbolized women's suffrage, so protesters were symbolically enclosing CY Leung's home within ribbons of democracy. When the protesters returned to Admiralty, the space had become occupied by a pro-China rally, so the original protesters shifted their attention towards the Eastern edge and consequently, its boundaries. A tall fence blocked civilians from accessing the "Civic Square", so as the protest's first act of aggression, it was torn down.<sup>128</sup> As their anger escalated, the protesters ignored implied barriers, like the sidewalk's edge, as well. The protests spilled into the streets. Short cement walls bordering the Southern side of the highway were easily overcome with the help of the protest's tallest, strongest men and later with handmade stairs.<sup>129</sup> At one point, police attempted to corral protesters within temporary metal fencing, but in one of the

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<sup>125</sup> Wen, "The Hong Kong Bus Stops Here."

<sup>126</sup> Parallel Lab, "Mong Kok."

<sup>127</sup> Tse, Riots, Unrest, and the Umbrella Movement: Hong Kong Rising.

<sup>128</sup> Tse, Riots, Unrest, and the Umbrella Movement: Hong Kong Rising.

<sup>129</sup> Pasquier, Admiralty and the Umbrella Movement.

most clever examples of manipulation, the protesters brought zip-ties and reassembled the metal barricades to protect themselves from the police (see Figure 14).<sup>130</sup> The tents themselves acted as protective barriers, providing shelter and comfort in the midst of a combat zone. Actually, the symbol of the entire movement, the umbrella, became so when civilians used it as a protective barrier between themselves and the police's tear gas. The protesters' created barriers were powerful weapons, but their subversion of existing barriers advanced the metaphor that would mobilize Hong Kong by demonstrating to other citizens that they could exercise control over their public space, despite the government's intentions.



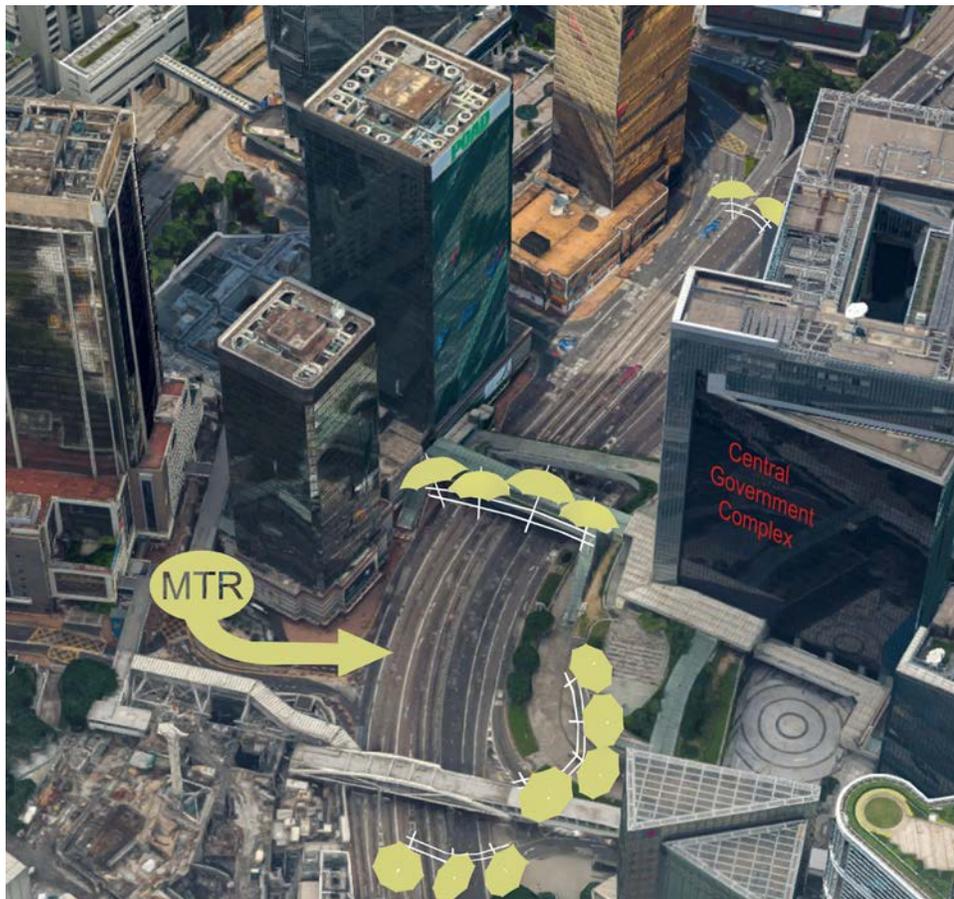
**Figure 14.** Protesters zip-tying temporary fencing together in Admiralty, 2014. Photo credit: FX Pasquier

The Admiralty protest site is the most dynamic example of the protesters' constructed barriers (see Figure 15). Protesters encircled their occupation site with their barricades, protecting themselves and blocking traffic. When authorities wanted to move protesters away from the Central Government Complex, these barriers ensured the demonstrators could stay in place. This is important because this part of Harcourt Road is very important for the protesters to reach their intended audience: the government officials. Also, the protest site was easily

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

accessible by the Admiralty MTR station on the Southern edge, so it was important they remain in front of it so that additional protesters could join as they please. As the movement expanded, the protesters did not move the existing barriers; they simply constructed more along various points of Harcourt Road.



**Figure 15.** Diagram of the Admiralty protest site emphasizing the barriers constructed by the protesters, diagram by author. (MTR indicates the metro station.)

### 4.3 SPATIAL TACTICS AND STRATEGIES

The problem with analyzing the Umbrella Movement from the Marxist geographer's perspective is that it focuses so much on the finality of revolution that it overlooks the powers of subversion. Hong Kong citizens' initial efforts were never asking for total independence from mainland China; they were simply asking for political autonomy in the form of promised democratic elections. Although the economy and urban structure of Hong Kong reflect many Marxist concerns, the protest's catalyst was call for political integrity and for citizen participation, not a revolution. Hongkongers are famously pragmatic, having been appeased through negotiation and compromise in the past.<sup>131</sup> However, Communist China proved to be a very different authority figure than the British Empire, with more to lose and a far more heavy-handed approach.<sup>132</sup> The police's reaction speaks volumes to the power of these new leaders, as the police were mostly composed of Hongkongers themselves who incited unprecedented brutality against their fellow citizens. As discussed in chapter two, these spaces were meant as a stage upon which the protesters could testify to injustices. The student demonstration in Tamar Park that began in September 2014 was peaceful and relatively small. Student leaders and professors such as Bruce Lui Ping Kuen urged mass mobilization at risk of potentially becoming "slaves forever", yet it was the government ignoring the protests entirely that finally persuaded larger groups to join.<sup>133</sup> The rest of the saga of the Umbrella Movement is a cyclical repetition of this pattern: an act that either insulted the protesters or physically harmed them, followed by the protesters invading a

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<sup>131</sup> The Economist, The Worst System, Including All the Others: Hong Kong's Election.

<sup>132</sup> Yue, "Inside China."

<sup>133</sup> Tse, Riots, Unrest, and the Umbrella Movement: Hong Kong Rising.

new space or subverting existing protest spaces in new ways, repeated again and again. The production of these spaces, while certainly relevant, tells us more about a small, elite group of Hong Kong capitalists and less about the character of the Hong Kong populace. However, the protesters' creative consumption of the space, which ultimately intensified into their counter-production of space in this time of protest, reveals much more about the Hong Kong majority.



**Figure 16.** Umbrella Movement leader giving a speech while using the footbridges of Admiralty as a mezzanine, 2014. Photo credit: FX Pasquier

Michel de Certeau's influential work *The Practice of Everyday Life* delineates a distinction between "strategies" and "tactics", the former being a tool of spatial production and the latter a manipulation conceived in spatial consumption. For example, the placement of sidewalks is a strategy of the powerful, yet where citizens ultimately walk is the tactic which tells us more about their society. Marxist geographers focus on the precursors of a revolution, so look primarily at strategies, but I believe the inherent power of tactics has the potential to outmaneuver them. The Umbrella Movement protesters controlled the sites by using the existing infrastructure in new ways to their benefit. For example, the two footbridges over Harcourt Road

connecting the transport hub to the Central Government Complex were walkways for government workers — spatial elements that benefit the powerful — but the protesters set up their encampments beneath them and used the bridges as platforms for their message. Early on, they became an auditorium for protesters to listen to speeches of the protest’s leaders from below (see Figure 16). They became covered in a collage of multi-lingual signs; the largest were proclamations aimed at government authorities, but also served to embolden the crowds (see Figure 17). Two famous ones read “Your Arrogance Keeps Us Here, Solidarity Will See Us Through” and “You May Say I’m A Dreamer, But I’m Not The Only One.”<sup>134</sup> These footbridges were blocked at points early in the protest when authorities were trying to prevent civilians from joining demonstrations on the other side of Harcourt Road. This, along with the tear gas, triggered the occupation of Harcourt Road, so these footbridges were seen, in many ways, as conquered land. Hong Kong’s verticality, discussed in chapter two, is a defining characteristic of the city, but many of these vertical labyrinths are private structures built as part of malls or office buildings.<sup>135</sup> There are nearly 700 footbridges in Hong Kong, but the Admiralty site was beneath three of the most significant.<sup>136</sup> Controlling these bridges meant controlling access to Tamar Park, so obstructing accessibility to the protest sites was an attack on the protesters freedom to space and access — fundamental urban resources. When the protesters took to the streets, they reclaimed control of access to the government complex. They never tried to destroy the footbridges, just translate their implications to a language that portrayed the masses. The protesters changed the basis of the footbridges’ power from accessibility to visibility. In chapter

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<sup>134</sup> Pasquier, Admiralty and the Umbrella Movement.

<sup>135</sup> Frampton, Solomon, and Wong, *Cities Without Ground*.

<sup>136</sup> Miquel, “Slow Hong Kong.”

two, I discussed the trope of visibility and the importance of highly-circulated images of the occupation. These bridges allowed a large, elevated platform for their voices, as well as a mezzanine from which to soak in the occupation's grandeur. By covering the infrastructure of their oppressors with messages of resilience and unity, they flipped the very meaning of this environment upside down.



**Figure 17.** Footbridges in Admiralty decorated in banners, 2014. Photo credit: Wing1990hk

As the protests continued, the significance of these spaces evolved further from symbolic geographic apparatus of democratic access towards conspicuous indicators of the protesters' omnipresence. As their purpose transformed, authority's response did too. Certeau's definition of the powerful's spatial strategies of control had been overcome, so the powerful's representatives, the police, had to resort to spatial tactics in hopes of regaining control of the architecture's context. The police tried to tear down the signs and maintain that the bridges remain free from

occupation, but that only made them a prime space for altercations, which was exaggerated when the confined spaces did not allow people to disperse easily.<sup>137</sup>

Nearer to the end of the protests, the police mimicked some of the protesters' strategies. For example, they used the footbridges as vocal platforms to taunt the protesters, shouting at them from above.<sup>138</sup> Once the protests had concluded, tactical approaches subsided and the government seems to have resorted to strategic methods to prevent future problems. In April 2015, a new footbridge was being constructed to connect an existing footbridge directly to an entrance of the Central Government Complex (see Figure 18). Above the final lingering tents on the sidewalk outside the Civic Square, this new construction ensures that any activities on Tim Mei Avenue, the site of the protest before it expanded into Harcourt Road, will not prevent government employees from accessing the complex's office buildings.



**Figure 18.** Recently constructed footbridge in Admiralty. Summer, 2015, photo by author.

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<sup>137</sup> Pasquier, Admiralty and the Umbrella Movement.

<sup>138</sup> Tse, Hong Kong Silenced.

So like the protest's occupation of these spaces caused the police to rely on spatial tactics, the control the occupations granted the protesters allowed them to evolve their spatial tactics into their own spatial strategies. Again, Certeau defines strategies as methods of production by the powerful.<sup>139</sup> Similarly, Marxist geographers look at urban space as a product of the bourgeoisie. The power of the occupations stems from a bold, new perspective of public space that recognizes it as an opportunity for the proletariat. The infrastructure and policies suggest these roads are meant for automobiles, which are only owned by less than five percent of Hong Kong civilians.<sup>140</sup> Therefore these restrictions, informal or formal, are infringements upon public space's responsibility to serve the whole. This public space had fallen victim to the office buildings bordering Harcourt Road and the classical British architecture before them; therefore, it had become another device bolstering the bourgeoisie. Without destruction and without violence, the protesters created their own infrastructure as the antithesis of the typical environmental cooperation with the bourgeoisie's agenda. The occupations were obviously not comfortable or pragmatic for the daily lives of Hong Kong's average civilian, but by subverting this agenda, not using it as a site of transit but as a site of inhabitation, they recreated this public space so that it could be used by *any* resident of Hong Kong. It's as David Harvey said, the right to the city needs to be created, not preserved.<sup>141</sup>

The public land brought Hongkongers together, creating a unifying platform for them to "demonstrate what cannot be dictated".<sup>142</sup> The motif of occupation demonstrates a space's

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<sup>139</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

<sup>140</sup> Cullinane, "Hong Kong's Low Car Dependence."

<sup>141</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 138.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

ability to “pre-date any modern connotation”.<sup>143</sup> Tamar Park turned out to only have a facade of true public space, and most “public” areas in Hong Kong are privately owned (POPS), so the protesters resorted to the streets for truly public refuge. Instead of adhering to the contemporary demands of the space as vehicular transportation, the protesters redefined the streets as true public squares and then, as neighborhoods. Social media allowed Hongkongers to weave themselves into a larger network of civil disobedience and a universal idea of modern, true democracy.<sup>144</sup> Like the urban branding of Hong Kong created by the capitalists, the Umbrella Movement used the blueprint laid out by Occupy and the Arab Spring to create its anti-brand. The images of the occupation revealed an uncensored, jarring view of the Hong Kong people juxtaposed by the sanitized, lustrous urban backdrop, completing the vision of the Umbrella Movement (see Figure 19).



**Figure 19.** Harcourt Road in Admiralty, 2014. Photo credit: Pasu Au Yeung

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<sup>143</sup> Mitchell, “Occupy”, 106.

<sup>144</sup> Castells, Networks of Outrage and Hope.

The protesters' mimicking of Occupy Wall Street exemplifies McKenzie Wark's concept of virtual geographies providing "theatrical promptings" for life to imitate. These were demonstrations at the nth degree because the self-organized, utopian communities provide an element of proof that they can function without, and despite, the government. They became more of a community because anyone could join them at any point in the day. The protests began on July 1st, Hong Kong's annual holiday celebrating, essentially, their ability to protest, so many assumed they would fizzle out once the work week resumed.<sup>145</sup> However, the occupations provided a home, a study-space and a place to relax for students and employees after-hours, so the contrived spaces themselves ensured the Movement lasted far longer than government officials had expected.

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<sup>145</sup> Moser and Kuo, Hong Kong Protests and Suicide.

#### 4.4 MONUMENTS OF DEMOCRACY



**Figure 20.** The Umbrella Man in Admiralty, 2015. Photo credit: Citobun

The virtual geographies of cyberspace encouraged highly visual spaces that could transcend language barriers. Visual allusions to other protests further nestled the movement within the universal dogma of civil liberty. The most startling was a ten foot tall statue of a man standing erect and holding out an umbrella, inviting Hongkongers to stand beneath it (see Figure 20).<sup>146</sup> It was made by an anonymous artist and seems a clear reference to the 10 meter tall statue created by Tiananmen Square protesters in the 1980's called the Goddess of Democracy. The atrocities of Tiananmen Square are not spoken of in Mainland China, where protests have since been outlawed. Vigils for the victims of Tiananmen have been pushed so far from Beijing that they are currently held annually in Victoria Park in Hong Kong, near Causeway Bay. The implications of the Umbrella Man threatened Beijing authorities because it reminded them that in Hong Kong,

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<sup>146</sup> Sheehan, "The Art of the Umbrella Movement."

they had not forgotten what happened at Tiananmen Square and were continuing their fight for democracy.

At the base of the Central Government Complex, the protesters covered a wall in colorful sticky notes and messages describing the significance of democracy to them. It is known as Admiralty's Lennon Wall, referencing famous activist musician John Lennon and a similar wall in the Czech Republic. The covered wall is no longer recognizable as the foundation of CY Leung's offices. Communally, the protesters hijacked the architecture of their oppressors to create a shrine of democracy.



**Figure 21.** Protesters using umbrellas as shields from the police and later, tear gas, 2014. Photo credit: FX Pasquier

The symbol of the umbrella became ubiquitous with the movement shortly after the first instance of tear gas and its use as a shield (see Figure 21). In Hong Kong, umbrellas are used daily by common people as protection from sporadic rain showers and the harsh sun of the tropical climate. They represent the proletariat because they are an everyday tool for those who walk outside and use public transit. In branding their movement, the umbrella was an essential icon of solidarity as the movement spread to the other sites (see Figure 22). They used them as a

medium to create large installations, including an interesting quilt of umbrellas hanging between two footbridges in Admiralty (see Figure 23). Months after the protest's conclusion, images of yellow umbrellas linger throughout the city in the form of stickers, apparel and signs. At a small student march in Causeway Bay the following May, I saw citizens join the group as they passed, expressing their solidarity by simply opening and raising their umbrellas over their head as they walked (see Figure 24). The appropriation of this every day, highly necessary object symbolized a universal need for democracy. Like the protest sites, the umbrella's cultural connotation is forever altered in Hong Kong.



**Figure 22.** Umbrella art in Causeway Bay, 2014. Photo credit: Pasu Au Yeung



Figure 23. Umbrella art in Admiralty, 2014. Photo credit: Pasu Au Yeung.



Figure 24. March in Causeway Bay, Summer 2015, photo by author.

In the capitalists' branding of the city, the skyscrapers of Hong Kong are monuments to progress. The skyline is an international representation of economic freedom and the global financial market, not the culture of Hong Kong's people. However, Certeau believed that the city needed to be interpreted by looking at the way people use it, not its monuments or even its architecture. The man walking through Causeway Bay on October 2014 was not looking at the tall buildings, but the commotion of the protesters' community at his eye level. John Quincy Adams once said "Democracy has no monuments. It strikes no medals; it bears the head of no man upon its coin; its very essence is iconoclastic."<sup>147</sup> The pieces of art intermingled within the protest sites, made by anonymous citizens or the community as a whole, undermine the capitalist monuments surrounding them, as do the tents, the classrooms and the vegetable gardens. The icons of democracy are not monuments at all, but the umbrella of the everyman.

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<sup>147</sup> Savage, Monument Wars.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION: REMNANTS

On November 25, 2014, just two days short of the movement's two month anniversary, the tents, barricades and artwork of the Mong Kok occupation were cleared. A handful of protesters were arrested and the site was emptied of all physical remnants. Three days later, protesters organized a march along Nathan Road through the emptied protest space fraught with its most recent memories. Thousands walked together chanting "gau-wu", dubbing the event their "shopping spree". As law-abiding citizens they crowded the sidewalks, paralyzed the commercial district, and stripped the innocence from the physical act of shopping. Primarily, it was a response to CY Leung's recent, tone-deaf request for Hongkongers to support their city-state by going shopping. Perpetuating notions that Hong Kong's culture revolves around its economy, he had insulted protesters by regarding them primarily as consumers, all while continuing to ignore their demands as citizens. Secondly, it was a reference to a TV interview with a woman marching at a pro-Beijing rally a few months before. When asked what she was marching for, she said "gau-wu", meaning "shopping", confirming many Hongkongers' suspicions that most pro-Beijing protesters were actors hired by the government. The most overt reference, though, was the protesters' simple chant. In Mandarin, the language of Beijing, "gau-wu" means "shopping", but in Cantonese, the language of Hong Kong, it means "cock".

The Arab Spring and Occupy provided a blueprint for negotiating dissent in urban spaces. Social media perpetuated a philosophy of activism, strengthening the ideology of protest and

offering international support against unjust social regimes. However, as many student protesters proclaimed, history is easily ignored without proper, fair education and social media networks are useless under government censorship—the case in mainland China. Urban space is the only truly imperative factor of successful social movements.

Geographically, Hong Kong's protesters used urban space to symbolically reinforce their borders by unifying three historically and socioeconomically diverse districts within an overarching motif of community. Mong Kok, in particular, provided an especially local environment to represent Hong Kong's most marginalized citizens. The efforts in Mong Kok added a component to the protesters' right to the city that may have prevented the entire Umbrella Movement from being dismissed as merely an effort of radicals appropriating the land of the elite. Instead, it made plain that this effort was about establishing the whole of Hong Kong as their political geography and within their rights.

At the scale of the district, urban space provided the voiceless with a podium. The protesters' strategies manipulated the infrastructure of the elite into an arena within which to amplify the messages of the masses. Causeway Bay is the most obvious example, with its abundance of towers owned by capitalists situated upon land owned by the state. It forced their oppressors to watch and listen, even when they pretended not to hear. This strategy was two-fold because the protesters' occupation of Causeway Bay's extremely limited public space surrounding the architecture of its capitalists also impeded these capitalists' power. The protest space created a boundary between the institutions of the capitalists, shopping malls, from their income, consumers' pocketbooks, and thus furthered a compelling Marxist paradigm.

Finally, at the street level, the specific spatial strategies of the protesters provided the most deliberate illustration of their perception of the city. They used urban space to create a

community and provide refuge for the marginalized. They built monuments to their ideas and neighborhoods that provided food, energy and education without reliance on the state. Then, the violent and merciless reaction of authorities to the citizens' presence confirmed the perverse relationship between the citizens and their government, to an extent that even startled the most vehement activists. Where the citizens' voices had been undermined by flawed elections, and pleas on social media had simply been ignored, it was Hong Kong's urban space which finally revealed the extent of the government's inhumanity.

Today, these spaces are black holes. Their gravity attracts an eternally dissatisfied, unrepresented majority. Democracy may be inherently iconoclastic, but the greatest monuments of the Umbrella Movement are the remnants of this empty space. Even when they seem free of the protesters themselves, the ideas of the Umbrella Movement fester. Admiralty especially has become synonymous with police brutality and government oppression, much like its ancestor, Tiananmen Square. The following summer, a small group of tents linger silently under the Central Government Complex. No one verbally proclaims a thing and the signs are far more modest than their predecessors, but a small library offers citizens a sanctuary from ignorance, and gardens offer food for supporters and the homeless. In Causeway Bay and Mong Kok, groups of three or four activists sit on the sidewalks' edges handing out pro-democracy literature and maintaining the images of the Umbrella Movement. Marches seem to occur weekly, usually departing from these charged sites, encouraging onlookers to raise their umbrellas and join. The lessons and ideas of spatial subversion have become integrated into Hong Kong's growing protest culture. A persistent and clever group of activists continue to evolve these methods into mechanisms like the "shopping spree" in Mong Kok and the progression of the Umbrella Movement's branding to include a new slogan "we'll be back" (see Figure 25).



**Figure 25.** A daunting farewell from some protesters in Admiralty, 2014. Photo credit: Melanie Ko

Some experts have suggested we might finally see these ideas reflected in policy when the massive youth generation ages.<sup>148</sup> Maybe, then, the Umbrella Movement is really just an early chapter in what Don Mitchell calls the “revolutionary urban process”.<sup>149</sup> Where the Umbrella Movement began as a demand for fair universal suffrage, it evolved to recognize this civic violation merely as a component of far greater implications, all of which stem from infringements on their right to the city.

Already in 2016, we have seen new protests picking up where the Umbrella Movement’s ideology left off. On the hallowed streets of Mong Kok, protests have emerged more specifically expressing anxiety towards mainland China’s cultural assimilation. In MONTH 2016, the

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<sup>148</sup> Lau, “Umbrella Movement Anniversary: What’s Changed in Hong Kong?”

<sup>149</sup> Mitchell, “Occupy”, 106.

Fishball Riots began as skirmishes between police and unlicensed street vendors, but quickly escalated into violent altercations involving large groups of citizens.<sup>150</sup> These, along with other smaller protests and inevitable future ones, act as an echo of protesters prior on Admiralty's streets asking "where has my dream city gone?"<sup>151</sup> The series of events between September and December 2014 steeped the younger generation with an awareness that living as they had before is actually a demonstration of compliance with an oppressive system. Only because of the implications of urban space has Hong Kong culture grasped the extent to which they must not trust their authority and recognized their paramount responsibility to fight for their rights to the city of Hong Kong.

As their umbrellas close, Hong Kong's citizens still carry them at their side everyday. Most days, it offers protection from the rain and sun. But on other days, it will remind them of a recent past where it instead protected them from the tear gas and batons of their own government. Like the city, the umbrella is a tool to be subverted for the benefit of its holder. Today, the umbrellas of Hong Kong are closed, but given the chance of rain, they may be opened tomorrow.

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<sup>150</sup> Louise, "'Fish Ball Revolution' Erupts in Violent Crackdown."

<sup>151</sup> Parallel Lab, "Admiralty."

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