Political Archipelago: Repoliticizing Post-Umbrella Revolution Hong Kong

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Political Archipelago
Repoliticizing Post-Umbrella Revolution Hong Kong

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Introduction
Background

From the Greek polis to the later Roman citivas, the problem of democratic political public realm lies in its negotiation with external forces. These external forces include but are not limited to urbs (physical foundation of the city) and nomos / lex (laws). Starting in the 19th century, industrialization began to rapidly corrode the democratic political realm. Capitalism and urbanization brought in insatiable production goals and endless expansion of the city. They then became the dominating forces shaping not only the political public sphere but also the entire city:

“...economy transcend the boundaries between public space and private space... as the principal mode of governance for the whole of urbanity. The essence of urbanization is therefore the destruction of any limit, boundary... [that is not] the infinite, compulsive repetition of its own...”

Nowadays, the democratic political public realm further degrades and dematerializes. Governments and corporations have depoliticalised and privatized public space; they are now just empty open space that feed on nostalgia of its past. The residues of the public realm has retreated inwards so much that it detaches itself away from the city. The public realm will eventually disconnect from the real and exist only in the virtual space of the Internet.


2. Ibid, Aureli.
This project aims to re-politicize the public sphere of post-Umbrella Revolution Hong Kong. Umbrella Revolution was one of the latest defining events of democratic struggles in Hong Kong. Like other protests, civil disobedience and revolutions, Umbrella Revolution was more than just “organized public dissents”; it was an experiment of an alternative democratic sphere for agonistic struggles. The occupation temporarily altered, reoriented, disoriented or debilitated the existing boundaries and thresholds in the city; it resisted the logic of the city to create a space of exception. However, these temporary alterations did not leave significant permanent imprints to the city. At the end, these temporary traces of an alternative democratic sphere are turned into the banal background of the everyday life. The city once again falls back into the orchestrated amnesia as part of their capitalist fantasy.

The Political Archipelago is a provocation of permanently temporal resistance to the city. This resistance anticipates its certain erasure, and evolves from its remnants.

The Political Archipelago consists of four “islands of exceptions” in Hong Kong. They were previous occupied sites during the Umbrella Revolution. Each island is a unique fragment of the previous alternative democratic sphere. This project proposes various operations of tracing to turn these intangible fragments into persistent tools for political change.

A Political History of China and Hong Kong

Hong Kong was colonized by British Empire under the Convention of Peking after China’s defeat in the Opium War in 1860. It has undergone drastic cultural, social and political changes under the rule of the British Empire for almost a century. Hong Kong became a separate entity from China; it is the fusion of the East and West.

Hong Kong, however, was not unaffected by the political turmoil in Mainland China. The Cultural Revolution (1966-67) and Tiananmen Massacre (1989) has thousands of refugees from Mainland to Hong Kong. The Tiananmen Massacre sparked one of the first democratic campaigns in Hong Kong that set the foundation for future democratic development.

Hong Kong was returned to China on 1st July 1997. The Chinese Central Government and United Kingdom signed the Sino-British Declaration, which promises the citizens of Hong Kong a high level of autonomy for 50 years. Under the One Country: Two Systems, Hong Kong and China are two separate jurisdictions. Hong Kong can inherit the former British governmental system with separation of powers: Executive, Legislative and Judiciary. The Executive includes the Chief Executive (5-year term) and the Executive Council. Legislative includes the 70-member Legislative Council. Judiciary includes the Court of Final Appeal and other lower courts. However, the Chief Executive has to be appointed by the Central Government, and the Hong Kong Garrison is still in charge by the Central Military Commission from the Chinese Central Government.

Nowadays, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong is not selected based on democratic procedures according to International standards. The Chief Executive is elected by a small group of voters, who are then elected by a selected group of professionals. This procedure is against Article 45 in Basic Law of Hong Kong, which was part of the agreement between United Kingdom and Chinese Central Government. According to Article 45 in Basic Law, “The ultimate aim is the selection of the Chief Executive by universal suffrage...in accordance with democratic procedures.” Universal suffrage, which is the right to vote of all citizens, has become one of the major demands from the Hong Kong citizens. The Central Government’s refrain from a democratic election has sparked public outcry from the society. The Hong Kong Government has also attempted to reinforce measures to restrict dissents from the society. One of the key events was the attempt to establish Article 23 of Basic Law in 2003, which could potentially give unlimited power and censorship to the government:

“shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, sedition, subversion against the Central Government,... to prohibit foreign political organization or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region,... establishing ties with foreign political organization or bodies.”

The attempt to legislate the Article 23 has sparked massive demonstration on 1st July that paralyzed the heart of the city. The political demonstration later evolved into an annual parade that hundreds and thousands participate.

At the end of the 50-year of high autonomy is looming, the Chinese Central Government tightens its grip on its subjects and Hong Kong Government. The major political events have projected possible assimilation of Hong Kong into “another Chinese city” in less than 50 years. The only way that Hong Kong citizens can safeguard their human rights is to have a government that is representative of their political interest. Umbrella Revolution in 2014 was the latest political event in Hong Kong in response to the denial of universal suffrage in 2017.

Timeline of major political events in the contemporary history of China and Hong Kong.
Umbrella Revolution
a case study
Leading up to the Umbrella Revolution

Umbrella Revolution is an act of civil disobedience that took place in Hong Kong in 2014. It was a 3-month occupation started outside of Central Government Complex, which is the Hong Kong Government headquarter. The occupation was a final act after a series of attempts to demand government for universal suffrage in 2017.

The movement started to take into shape on 16 January 2013. Dr. Benny Tai, one of the three leaders of Occupy Central with Love and Peace (OCLP), proposed civil disobedience as a new form of protest to pressure the government to introduce universal suffrage in Hong Kong. Dr. Benny Tai, Reverend Chu Yiu-ming and Chan Kin-man founded Occupy Central with Love Peace on 28 March 2013. The organization proposed to peacefully occupy the main financial districts in Hong Kong if the government does not conform the election procedures to democratic standards. OCLP organized many forums and rallies to promote their value to the public.

The critical moment of the movement was on 31 August 2014, the day when the Chinese Central Government denied universal suffrage of Chief Executive in 2017. The decision sparked outrage in the city. Student-led political organizations, which were independent of OCLP, started citywide student strike. They also started occupying the plaza outside of government headquarters on 26 September 2014. The police started violent crackdown with tear gas and rubber bullets on them. The police was even armed with AR15 rifles, which stirred up the horrific memories of the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989 of many. The police violence angered and motivated even more citizens to participate in the occupation. In view of the situation, OCLP announced to start the occupation early on 28th September. The movement was also named Umbrella Revolution when a photograph of a protester defending himself against tear gas with an umbrella was published on the cover of TIME Magazine.

The movement continued to spread from Admiralty, where the government headquarters is located, to other parts of the city. The other two locations are Mongkok and Causeway Bay. At the peak of occupation, there were more than 100,000 occupants. Umbrella Revolution pressured conversation between the government officials and the occupants, but with no success. The occupation lasted for months and the protestors felt fertile to sustain the occupation. It ends when the occupied site was cleaned and many were voluntarily and involuntarily arrested in mid December 2014. The streets once again returned to the daily hustle and bustle.
These previous occupied sites together confronted the city as its alternative democratic sphere. The occupied sites were spaces of exceptions in the city that resist and deviate from its general conditions.

Unbounded by the permanence of the city, these spaces of exceptions were where different actors and forces of the city could enter into the circle to negotiate their frictions into coexistence.

The Umbrella Revolution was a state of permanent temporality that refuses an absolute domination of the city.

From Space of Exception, Spring 2018, instructed by Lindsay Harkema.
This project started by looking into Umbrella Revolution as a case study. The occupation has altered many aspects of the city temporarily: crossings, traffic pattern, landmark, circulation, programs, and many more. These alternations are however temporary; they do not tend to leave permanent imprints onto the existing city. The government has cleared out all the remaining structures, posters or protestors that remained on site.

If the umbrella revolution cannot leave permanent impact onto the city, what can be the progressive tool for future force of urban resistance in the city?

The project further investigates the temporary protest structures and their significance in the movement. By documenting and cataloging these structures and components, the project reveals how they repurposed the infrastructure in public space.

These structures are also constantly assembled and disassembled, put together and taken apart. The reasons are simple: their user needs fluctuates by the number of occupants everyday, and police and other anti-occupation protestors constantly remove them. The act of construction is therefore significant for the occupants. It is an act of resisting the spatial logic of the city. It is an experiment of an alternative democratic society in the center of this endless urbanity created by the governmental and capitalist authority.
Components of protest structures: as-found, brought-in and repurposed.
Public Art: Umbrella Stand

Public Art: Hundred Umbrellas
3
Erasure Material Studies
To begin with, I conducted a series of material studies to build up a catalog of the materiality of traces. I operated on various materials, including copper, ceramic clay, plaster, ink, graphite and more, and experiment on how they change over time.

These photographs capture the perceivable material changes in each tracing process. Each process is at once construction and destruction of the object. Frame by frame, they also unroll the sequence of time in each process that can be uniquely metaphorical of the movement, events and symbolism on the sites. This board shows all results of the material studies and earlier studies of them on the sites. The findings from these tracing processes are then used as design reference in each island.
graphite + water + ink on wood + water
pulling inked clay
ink frottage
ink
hybrid, plaster, ink, foam and wood
3
Operations Tracing
The temporary act of resisting spatial logic of the city was eventually erased by the government and time. The tangible evidence of the alternative democratic sphere was removed and forgotten. To combat such amnesia of the political past, the project dived into exploring how to turn the temporary into permanent.

The project comes to understand traces as the incomplete, fragmented and partial of the subject. It is neither the absence nor the presence; it is neither tangible nor intangible. The traces are a result of simultaneous construction and destruction. It fluctuates between the solidity of existing and vacuum of non-existing.

Through analyzing and categorizing the following memorial objects, the project extracts possible operations on the traces, and hence ways to turn the trace of the democratic struggles into permanent progressive tools of change.

This project has distilled four operations upon the study: abstraction, absence suggests presence, defamiliarization and camouflage.

[Camouflage]
To dissolve the subject into the banal and ordinary contexts

[Defamiliarize]
To disorient and/or dissociate the subject from its perceivable meanings

[Subtraction]
To use the absence of the subject to suggest the presence of it

[Abstraction]
To reduce or simplify the subject into a figure
[Camouflage]

Jumping Castle War Memorial, Cockatoo Island

[Defamiliarization]

Casa della Memoria, Milan

Memorial to Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin
Tracing On Sites

This project proposes a political archipelago that confronts the tides of the governmental and capitalistic authority of the city. Through this continuous making/unmaking process upon the traces of political sites, these “islands” are the anchor points for future force of urban resistance to the city.
“The islands of the archipelago, on the other hand, confront the forces of urbanization by opposing to urbanization’s ubiquitous power their explicitness as forms, as punctual, circumscribed facts, as stoppages”.

Background

The Mongkok Occupy Zone was occupied from 28 September to 27 November for 61 days. Located across the Victoria Harbor from the other two sites, the Mongkok area was an old district with tenement housings (tanglau) intercepted by skyscraper trendy malls. For most part of the district, the ground level are shops and vendors while the uppers levels are homes of the lower to middle class. The streetscape is full of overhanging neon signs and billboards with no lack of traffic. With both local flea market and high-end malls, Mongkok attracts many shoppers of all age and backgrounds. The densely populated district is also home to many middle and high schools and many nightclubs, thus the populations of the pedestrians are leaning towards teenagers and young adults.

Mongkok was also infamous of its past as gang-infested grassroots area. The many pubs and nightclubs around the area built up a thriving nightlife that has historically attracted crimes and gang culture. Many movie and literature work also framed the image of Mongkok. The gang culture, however, still exists till today.

The crowded and narrow streets of Mongkok presented new challenges to the occupants. The occupants have occupied the wider portion of the district, the Nathan Road, which is the main artery of Mongkok and other neighboring districts. It is also the occupy zone with occupants that have more attitudes than the others. There are much more notorious confrontation between the occupants and the police, and many have suspected or blamed on gang involvement.
Site 1 is camouflaged into the crowded streets of Mongkok. Masked by its daily hustle and bustle, the commercial-residential local neighborhood has forgotten the mobile protests popped up in streets corner once in a while during the Umbrella Revolution.

Since the Umbrella Revolution, the government has been restrictive about display of anything anti-establishment. But THEY have always been there to remind the citizens of the past. As the Umbrella Revolution has become the new icon for democratic struggles in Hong Kong, THEY have hidden figures and symbols of the movement are imprinted onto walls in alleys. One will never notice that if you walk by quickly. Only when you pause you will see the silhouette of the protest happened in that particular place. Sometime THEY will even turn these remnants into postcards on the wall. If you start looking closely, you will see how these remnants have tucked into the everyday life of the people, hidden amongst the domestic objects at home to remind them of their democratic struggles.
Background

The Causeway Bay Occupy Zone was occupied from 28 September to 15 September for 79 days. The occupied zone is a wide road cutting across a middle to up-scale commercial district, intersected by the tramline. The site is surrounded by more than 10-story high commercial buildings. The facade of these buildings are all covered with enormous billboards, and the buildings cantilevered over the sidewalks. The occupants occupied on one way of the main road, but they had occupied the entire road at the peak of the occupation. The site is much smaller than Admiralty.

As the main road is one of the major routes for double-decked buses, the occupation have caused some disturbance to the traffic pattern and inconvenient to the locals and shoppers. The occupy zone is closed to the subway station and therefore attracts equal numbers of spectators and participants. The nearby commercial malls again were convenient for obtaining resources for the movement.
Site 2 was on the route of the annual July 1 Demonstration; it was also a primary occupied site during Umbrella Revolution. It is historically an integral place of the democratic development in Hong Kong. It is where the first July 1 Demonstration started in 2003 that continues to be reused every year for the annual demonstration. The 2-mile demonstration parade attracts hundreds and thousands of citizens yearly to protest on the street. It is almost like a festival.

In Site 2 is a busy 5-lane road with a circular pedestrian floats above all the traffic and the trams. Once every year during the demonstration, THEY will put the walls up to close off the main road for the demonstration. THEY will brush off the dust and dirt of the copper parade signage on the ground. THEY will roll up the copper barricades and inflate the balloon roadblocks. By doing so, they exaggerate and thicken the physical and visual barrier between the urban context and the protest site. The arrangement of these reflective walls reflects and deflects the image of the urban context to confuse and disorient. The patterns on the ground guide the protesters to organize movement, stations and tents as they move along on the route. After the demonstration, it goes back to normal. THEY settle all the walls back into the ground. If you get on a tram and ride by, you will only see the metallic patterns on the ground glimmering through the dirt and dust of the road.
Background

The Admiralty Occupy Zone was the first occupied among the three major occupied zones. It was first occupied on 26 September 2014 and was cleared by 11 December 2014. The total occupied period was 77 days.

The occupied zone is the two-way main roads right outside of the Hong Kong Government headquarter in Admiralty, the central financial district in Hong Kong. The high-traffic main road was the main artery of the district and the city, and the occupied movement has forced new traffic pattern around the site. The proximity of the occupation to the headquarter is symbolically significant. It is also a sarcastic statement as the original design of the headquarter is intend to show “the door of the government is always welcome to its citizens”.

The occupation zone has the greatest area among the three occupied zone. It requires many strategic defense tactics since the site is the most opened among the three. The occupants have experimented with different barricades and roadblocks for different sections of the road.

The occupation zone also has “The Grand Stage”, a platform for organizer to announce and broadcast important messages to the occupants. This feature distinguishes the occupied zone as the more organized among the three. The surrounding commercial buildings provide amenities such as restaurants, bathrooms and water that help with sustaining the movement. The many shop owners from around the occupied sites also helped with the occupants by providing resources to them. The organized and well-maintained public art attracts many visitors in the site, and the popularity helps with spreading and sustaining the occupants.
The annual demonstration ends outside of Government Headquarter. It is a harbor front skyscraper that was designed to formally symbolize the open-door policy of the government. The Government Headquarter is elevated over a Tamar Park that was designated for public use. Ironically, the Government Headquarter is everything but a welcoming authority. After 3-month of occupied movement on the highway outside of the headquarter, all the public areas are fenced up and guarded by security. They are now just empty lots of false promises.

The loss of a truly democratic space that could have enormous impacts on the government is monumental. The uproars from the public forced the government to construct a new ‘public space’ outside of Tamar. The new ‘public space’ continues from Tamar Park and slopes down from the government and glide into the Victoria Harbor. The third “island of exception” is sunken below the water as subtraction of Tamar Park. Using subtraction, its void suggests the absence of a truly democratic space and opens up for the public to fill its void. It is now the most heavily used protest site.

But the government has never stop restricting the space. Everyday the seawater washes down the walls to wash away protesters and their protest structures. The protesters stagger to keep all their belongings and protest structures in place, but some eventually are washed away. After each protest, the imprints of the protest structures are transformed by salt and copper into permanent patina on the site. The next protest are traced over the previous one.
The protest structures are all eventually removed and washed down into site 4. It is the final and only archive of all the democratic struggles in Post-Umbrella Revolution Hong Kong. All of the tangible evidence of protests are incinerated in site 4 and washed down the sea. Their ashes has combined with the sea water over time and slowly they seeps into the ground into an abstract figure of all the democratic struggles.
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