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«I was 19 when being part of it. I was astonished, first, by the violence breaking out in front of me, but later surprised at how sophisticated the protest occupations were, despite their spontaneous nature.»

REIMAGINING HONG KONG'S SPATIAL FUTURE: UMBRELLA MOVEMENT FOUR YEARS ON

Wilson Fung

Wilson Fung, born 1995, is an MSc candidate at Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio. In 2018 his research on the Hong Kong housing typology, *«Vertical Heimat»*, was exhibited in the Hong Kong Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. He worked in several offices in Hong Kong and was the co-editor of *«Hong Kong Institute of Architects Journal»*. In parallel to his interest in architecture, in 2014 he co-founded the protest art platform *«Umbrella Creation»*, to explore the relationship between art, politics and space.

In 2014, after the police had cracked down on a group of around 100 young demonstrators protesting for true universal suffrage for Hong Kong, students organised a protest at Tamar Park in front of the Government Headquarters complex to support the demonstration. As permission to protest was not granted by the government but instead given to an unattended pro-Beijing rally, hundreds of students moved on to reclaim Civic Square, a square near the Government Headquarter complex intended to open to the public but ironically fenced off. Students were arrested later, which drew an even larger crowd of citizens blocking the main avenues and demanding their release. At around 5 pm on 28 September, the police began firing tear gas, 87 rounds in total, and gave out the government's first outright warning to the supporting citizens: *«disperse or we fire»*. The crowd eventually remained and supply stations were established to support the stay, leading to a 79-day protest camp occupation. Together with other camps of the city, the occupation was identified as the Umbrella Movement, the largest social movement in Hong Kong for several decades.

One could say that the Umbrella Movement is a movement of the younger generation. A survey between 20 and 26 October at the occupation sites suggested that more than half of the participants were aged 29 or below. I was 19 when being part of it. I was astonished, first, by the violence breaking out in front of me, but later surprised at how sophisticated the protest occupations were, despite their spontaneous nature. As the movement developed, the same sections of the road that citizens had occupied were crowded with tents, stations and supporting slogans written on memos and hanging banners. Wooden steps were built to allow people to cross the concrete highway dividers. Mobile libraries and study stations were created, complete with desk lamps and WiFi. Mobile phone charging stations are powered by wind turbines. Some started farming. Certain occupied junctions of road even got their new names such as Nathan Village and Harcourt Village. As you meandered through the villages, you would hear villagers hosting different small debates and lectures sharing their thoughts on the movement. The occupied spaces provided together with the new generation the much-needed Petri dishes in realising their visions and desires, particularly seen in the way they reorganised and mobilised space.

I

Public spaces in Hong Kong are typically organised and managed from a top-down perspective in the form of spatial ordering. Social groups are kept in their *«proper places»* through measures such as access controls, legislation, surveillance or house rules. Government-managed public spaces, for instance, tend to be very programmed and regulated for *«security reasons»*. Public areas are divided into different sections with a long list of restricted activities such as ball games, bicycling and pet walking. Public furniture is designed to be slightly uncomfortable through tilting and adding slats etc. to prevent skateboarding but more importantly, to prevent people, especially the homeless, from staying for a long period of time. To further regulate the

spaces through design, high planters or fences were set up to limit access. The extreme case is, of course, the previously mentioned Civic Square which is designed to be a public square but fenced off since its completion. It is because of such a bureaucratic mentality that government-managed public spaces in Hong Kong are never truly public.

Public spaces in Hong Kong managed by private institutions, such as property developers, are identified as *«Privately Owned Public Spaces»* (POPS). Developers are encouraged by the government to open up certain areas of their properties in exchange for floor area exemption. However, owing to the lack of regulation, most of these public spaces are at risk of being taken over for the sectors' own use. POPS are usually appropriated as they are deliberately planned in locations difficult for the public to locate or simply disconnected from the streets. For those within the general public's reach, security guards are sent in for surveillance so that the public would mistake the space as part of the private property. There was a case of a POPS in front of a shopping mall which was appropriated for lease but remained unknown to the public for many years. Some POPS, on the other hand, are designed with the minimal budget possible just for floor area exemption and therefore not up for public usage.

While people can only enjoy limited activities in common public spaces, the protesters have fully engaged and utilised the occupied sites. The democratic, bottom-up logic was employed at the beginning of the movement, when the protesters discussed the strategic spots they were planning to occupy, such as major traffic junctions.. The next step was to set up barricades in defence against the police force, and later stations to support the occupation. In the latter two cases, occupiers often came up with simple but creative ways to appropriate the resources and space they were to occupy, so that everyone with basic skills could participate in the construction and maintenance process. The construction material of barricades, for example, ranged from bamboo sticks, rubbish bins and concrete slabs used to cover the drainage gutters. Decoration pieces such as broken umbrellas were sometimes added. The occupation sites grew in complexity as time passed by. Constructed with the same bottom-up principle using low-cost or found materials, the sites transformed into these *«villages»* described earlier on.

II

Despite the utopian start, the ideal of creating free and democratic occupation sites was challenged as the public were tempted to partition the spaces and establish a spatial hierarchy. The partitioning process was both driven by programmatic requirements and conflicting philosophies. The establishment of medical stations in the beginning, for instance, was of course necessary but it started marking certain nodes within the space. Later, installation arts, study stations, libraries etc. marked important nodes of the network, as they function as landmarks and gathering points of the *«village»*. Service and logistic spaces such as recycling and waste stations or toilets, on the



Umbrella Square
on 29 September 2014



Protesters built a barrier with bamboo scaffolding in the
Admiralty Occupation Site



Times Square, a 'POPS' in Hong Kong. People's use of the space is under surveillance of security guards and can be evicted if failing to comply with the house rules

other hand, were soon forgotten for their peripheral locations, but they were crucial in sustaining the living condition of the occupation site. In general, occupiers involved in the making and management of important *landmarks* were more represented than those involved in the logistics and supports.

Partitioning as a result of conflicting philosophies could be understood as the tension between those who preferred an organised occupation, and those who believed in no authorities. In the occupation site next to the Government Headquarter complex, for instance, some organisations jointly set up the *main stage* as they felt the need for a directed movement so that confusion could be avoided. Elevated from the public, brightly lit and equipped with loudspeakers, the stage soon turned into the major node of the spatial network, which sparked controversy. Participants believed that the movement was spontaneous in nature and an organisational core was not needed. Individual stages in pallets were set up across the space as a response. Such tension was also marked at the Mongkok occupation site, where a left-right split followed the central divide on Nathan Road. Groups and liberal organisations preferring a *controlled* protest mostly occupy the western carriageway, while others urging to escalate the movement sited themselves on the eastern side of the road closer to the police force.

The occupation sites also faced the increasing need for regulations. Owing to security reasons, the external logic of top-down organisation strategy was gradually internalised through mundane material practices and the spontaneity of participants was hindered. A team of 50 marshals was put in place by the Occupy Central group, one of the involved organisations of the protests, to secure the sites. Set up to protect the occupiers against police, triads and other opponents of the street blockades, the marshals were also involved in keeping an eye on in-camp participants, clearing tents blocking ambulances and emergency exits, and removing what they consider to be dangerous structures. Many challenged the authority of the marshals, especially for their right to remove barricades and their attempts to stop the occupation from escalating.

III

According to geographer Don Mitchell, public space and democracy are inherently linked: *Public spaces are absolutely essential to the functioning of democratic politics.* Public, the subject of democracy, shall be understood as *the people*, not as *the collection of members in a community* but as the *power of the one more, the power of anyone*. A public space shall be conceived and reshaped for and by the individuals to allow for free and respected expression of opinions and ideas. In this regard, the movement challenges the common belief of space as a field externally shaping human activity, as conceived by government officials and private sectors alike, and proposes an alternative view to space as a *simultaneously social and spatial construction*. Occupiers believed space to be the agent for intersecting and interrupting moments of social organisation. With that in mind, they embed-

ded their political ideals in their spatial reorganisation strategy, employing a bottom-up, democratic and inclusive approach to create what they believe to be truly public spaces.

The rise and fall of the movement reveal the fragility of such spaces. In the partitioning process, different parcels of space closed each other off from interaction and consent-building, worsening the fragmentation of views among participants. Meanwhile, groups claiming the major nodes, especially those stages of *mediation* flooded with journalists and photographers, gained the right to re-appropriate the space and the rhetoric of the movement to serve their own agenda. The regulatory process, on the other hand, hindered the role of occupiers as active participants shaping the movement. In such processes, the participants experienced an imbalanced power relationship and came to consider their views not fully respected and represented. The frustration and disillusionment caused by this experience finally marked the dissolution of the occupation movement.

Four years on, the *«villages»* return to their hustle and bustle. After so many had fought so hard and for so long, camping out on the streets for 79 days, being teargassed, peppersprayed, beaten and arrested by police, the freedom of Hong Kong only continues to deteriorate. Despite its failure to exert their influence on the political level, the movement did accomplish something significant. It provided us with a vision of what other, better place, Hong Kong could be—more egalitarian, communitarian, vibrant, generous, creative, and of course, democratic. Accounting for the dissolution of the movement, it was simply our lack of confidence in the power of the individuals that forced us into the trap of needing guidance and security. In *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm wrote, *«modern man still is anxious and tempted to surrender his freedom to dictators of all kinds... We forget that, although each of the liberties which have been won must be defended with utmost vigour, the problem of freedom is not only a quantitative one, but a qualitative one; that we not only have to preserve and increase the traditional freedom, but that we have to gain a new kind of freedom, one which enables us to realise our own individual self; to have faith in this self and in life»*. In this regard, we shall have faith in ourselves and in each other. We must ensure the equal representation of each individual to formulate the basis of trust and collaboration, as we continue to strive for the future of Hong Kong, the public space where we all belong.