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## EDITORIAL

### #UmbrellaMovement: Some reflections from Hong Kong

I spent the last five months on sabbatical in Hong Kong. With both extreme human densities and breathtaking natural landscapes, Hong Kong is an overwhelming city. This much I knew, and this alone would have made the stay a unique experience. Nothing, however, had prepared me for the massive social movement and occupation of key public spaces that was born, grew beyond all expectations, and reached a provisional end while I was there: Occupy Central, also known as the Umbrella Movement, also known as #UmbrellaMovement.

At the end of September, following a call for civil disobedience by democratic leaders and sparked by student rallies, protesters took to the streets and occupied key traffic arteries in the financial district and later in the two main shopping districts of Causeway Bay and Mong Kok. They had one basic request: that the candidates for the elections of the Hong Kong Chief Executive to be held in 2017 – the first ever by popular vote – be openly and freely nominated instead of being pre-selected by a government committee directly controlled by the sitting political and business elites, and indirectly by the Chinese central government. Protesters saw this as an essential precondition for addressing urgent issues in Hong Kong, such as the increasing income gap and a loss of economic opportunities and social security, which is affecting a growing number of citizens, especially the young. The occupation came to an end (perhaps temporarily) in mid December, and was of a size and scope unprecedented in the city's history.

The Hong Kong government adopted a two-pronged tactic to deal with the protests: it did not intervene, but did not concede either, on *anything* (a tactic allegedly learned from Western governments and the way they deal with their own “occupy” movements). The government just waited for the protesters and the public to tire. Only at that point – after more than two and a half months – did it order the police to clear up the occupied sites, with little resistance from worn-out protesters, and large support from a public by then wishing an end to the disruption. There was, however, at least one moment when events felt as if they could have gone in a different direction. On 21 October 2014, the government gave in to the mounting pressure and participated in a televised TV debate with representatives of the student organizations backing the occupation. It was an intensely public moment. At the time I was visiting a fishing village in an outlying island, and was taking a walk around the streets in the evening, just as I had done the evening before. TV screens were flickering from inside the houses. However, this time, instead of scenes from soap operas or popular shows, all screens were tuned to the broadcast of the debate between the students and top government officials, with the eyes of the people inside their homes fixed on this unprecedented event. Little progress, if any, was made during the evening, but it was a debate amongst equals, with everybody being able to express their views. If the engagement between the two sides had continued, perhaps things could have taken a different and, to me, what would have felt like a much more hopeful course. But tragically – and I am still puzzling as to why – this remained the one and only instance of true dialogue. The government went back to its “wait and tire” tactics, and the students were not able to find a way of breaking through.

As well as following the developments daily in the media, and discussing them with locals of diverging views and backgrounds, I visited the occupied sites several times in person. These site visits especially made a profound impression on me, and fuelled thoughts that stretched beyond the event and reached into the significance of social movements for cities and their development, and

the role of planning in all of this. As it is now my turn to write the Editorial for this issue of *Planning Theory and Practice* I would like to share these thoughts with you: thoughts that are still evolving, and are anything but consolidated, but that I feel are so central to our discipline and its evolution that they must be shared.

Let me start with the contrast between Hong Kong before and during the Umbrella Movement, as seen from within the occupied sites. The contrast could hardly have been greater. Hong Kong is a city with a chronic shortage of public space. In part this shortage is a quantitative matter, because the extreme land value mean that space – for whatever it is used – is a scarce resource with multiple claims on it. However, the shortage of public space in Hong Kong is also a qualitative matter, because of how public spaces are designed and planned: highly functional as movement channels for through motorized traffic and pedestrian access to indoor facilities, but highly dysfunctional as places to meet, contemplate, or express oneself. What the occupied sites brought was exactly the opposite: instead of space to pass through, they brought space to walk along, stop, look, think, talk and act. Those experiencing the occupied sites in person rather than via the media (and unfortunately there were not enough of them), saw, above all, this: places previously filled with traffic, noise, air pollution, and human frenzy were now full of people quietly doing things or interacting with each other and passers-by.

To me, nothing is more at odds with the spirit of the Umbrella Movement than the images of violent confrontations that the media sent around the world. These were incredibly rare moments which did not equate to anything I ever experienced. Violent confrontation occurred a handful of times, and each time involving very few people, during more than two and a half months of occupation. No, the true images are those of encampments with tents and common facilities, both basic (food and drink supplies, First Aid, sanitary, or pedestrian overpasses) and more refined (coffee shops, study corners, public libraries, debate podia, places of worship – see for example [Figure 1](#)). Above all, the true images are the innumerable displays of ideas (banners, posters, post-its, artworks small and big, anything), and people discussing these ideas or materially making these displays. This



Figure 1. A pop-up public library in an occupied site in Hong Kong during the fall of 2014, one out of many defining images of the Umbrella Movement that the media did not report. Source: the author.

overwhelming outpouring of critical thinking and creativity was perhaps the most impressive in its contrast with pre-occupy Hong Kong. It was as if the city was just waiting for this opportunity – or *any* opportunity – to let loose a prodigious wealth of expression, which was there, but could not find places to manifest itself. Once a “place” was found, this outpouring became caught in a process of self-reinforcement and re-generation, by incessant exchanges, combinations and modifications. It was all there to be witnessed by anybody passing by. What a contrast to the city I saw prior to the occupation, whose only purpose had seemed to be money making and money spending!

This is perhaps the greatest tragedy of the present outlook: this seeming waste of the immense output of expression, the lack of response and the absence of dialogue – not only between the protesters and the Government, but also between the protesters and the broader public. Indeed, it needs to be said that at no moment did the movement seem representative of the whole population. The protesters in the streets were overwhelmingly young and well-educated, and I do not see how they could hope to bring their transformative project on further without engaging with their older or less educated fellow citizens. But they are not the only party to need to make wider connections. The government and the public need the fresh ideas and energy of the protesters, and desperately so.

In many ways Hong Kong has been incredibly successful in the past. Its successes were never equally shared, but did give hope of a better life to many. However, the city is now facing daunting challenges. It presently earns its wealth from being the financial and logistical gateway to China. This status is, however, being eroded from both the outside and the inside, and much faster than many had anticipated, or wished. From the outside, the business hub function is moving to where it sooner or later – and logically – will end: mainland China itself. It is increasingly showing that the oft repeated mantra that China “needs” Hong Kong to fuel its dynamism and fulfil its ambitions is an illusion – at least in the long term. From the inside, Hong Kong is already one of the most unequal societies in the developed world, and the opportunity gap between a minority of ultra-rich tycoons and the rest, including the middle class, is growing. The hope of better times ensured social stability in the past. Its absence is undermining it now, and there is no change in sight. In the face of these enormous challenges the very least one might wish for is a debate, and yet, any questioning of the present order is met with astonishing rigidity.

In this respect, the dramatic trajectory of the Umbrella Movement seems revelatory of a deeper fear of change of the establishment in Hong Kong. Of course, I cannot even claim to have scratched the surface of the complexities of the city in such a short time, and I must therefore ask those in Hong Kong and readers elsewhere to excuse me for any misunderstanding. I had, however, some areas of privileged observation, such as those related to my own expertise – urban transportation planning. And here I felt the same fear of change, and a knee-jerk distrust of anything more than just marginally different to the status quo, even in the face of clear issues with maintaining the status quo. For example, many refused to see a problem in the blatant contradiction between a city where everybody but the very rich is walking the streets, and streets where pedestrians have to perilously navigate their way amidst all-dominating and uncaring cars and buses (for some fine visualizations see: <http://www.missinglinks.hk/>). It is evident that the pursuit of any safe, liveable, attractive, or just Hong Kong (choose any of the attributes above) cannot escape a fundamental re-think of the use of street space. And yet, the sense of urgency seems only present among activists and a few unorthodox professionals and academics. The latter are not only critical of the present situation, but also have highly refined ideas on how to improve it. However, they struggle to be taken seriously by the establishment. Here, as in other areas, Hong Kong is a city that desperately needs to reinvent itself, but it is showing that it simply cannot. The Umbrella Movement is just a macroscopic example of this. The fear on the part of the establishment, of any change that the population are asking for seems deeply ingrained.

And here is where my reflections bring me out of Hong Kong., because this city is not unique. *All* cities have their daunting challenges, and in all cities these are being compounded by increasing

uncertainty about their place in a rapidly changing world. All cities, and the people in them, will succeed or fail depending on the ways they find for coping with their ever evolving challenges. And all cities can only gather the imagination and commonality that is required to achieve this by mobilizing and bringing together the greatest variety of views and subjects. As planners it is our core task to keep searching for ways of supporting this process. We need to be creative and as critical of ourselves as we demand others to be. In most, if not all cases, keeping to the ways that have worked in the past, or seem to work now, will not be of much help in the future. I was never more convinced of this than after my unique Hong Kong experience which deepened my insight and for which I wish to thank the Umbrella Movement and all those people imaginatively and communally struggling for their way in this overwhelming city.

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