

The Politicization of a Private Infrastructure: Hong Kong's Pedestrian Bridge Network

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The 2014 “Umbrella Protest” and 2011-12 Occupy Central demonstrations in Hong Kong were sited along and under segments of the city’s well-known pedestrian bridge infrastructure. The walkways are often cited by critics as examples of a public realm compromised by private management and surveillance. But these recent events compel a reexamination of the bridge network, and whether these privatized connectors, through their appropriation as spaces of informal and unsanctioned activity, have evolved into a supporting armature for dissent and a kind of ‘infrastructure of inclusion’.¹

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong Central’s multi-level pedestrian bridge infrastructure connects several shopping malls, office towers, cross-border transportation infrastructure, and a major international stock exchange. The extensive network stretches for three kilometers² from East to West along the city’s waterfront and intersects with the outdoor Mid-level Escalators, that operate north and south up the city’s steep topography from the harbor. It is largely comprised of publically-owned privately-managed connectors. The network is the product of a combination of commercially driven interests, government planning for efficiency and reliance on the private sector to provide and manage “public” spaces. This paper argues that this highly privatized infrastructure has become increasingly a space characterized by the political.

This happens in several ways:

First, through the history of already complicit public-private ownership and management arrangements between the government and private developers, where “the government has increasingly given singular benefits to finance and development capital in order to recoup some space for public use which it does not want to fund itself.”³

Second, through the appropriation of space for unintended, informal or unregulated uses, which include vendors, and small demonstrations and marches. On Sundays, Hong Kong’s domestic worker population gathers to socialize along large segments of the network.

Third, the bridge network and related buildings have become both the subject and the site of social and political activism regarding the redevelopment of historic buildings and evolving notions of Hong Kong heritage and identity. Two significant nodes on the network include the Central Star Ferry Pier (now demolished) where the series of bridges extended to the waterfront, and the Central Market building, which lies at the junction of the lateral bridge infrastructure and the vertical sequence of outdoor escalators. Both are or were public buildings that are valued for their architectural heritage. The Central Market and the Central Star Ferry Pier are literal and discursive links between the pedestrian bridge network and the debate on heritage and post-colonial identity.

More recently, the bridge network has served as a new ground for protests and demonstrations including the Occupy movement, protests against the introduction of a national education curriculum, and calls for universal suffrage.

THE MALLING OF HONG KONG: PRIVATIZED INFRASTRUCTURE

For a long time, Hong Kong was described as a “Laissez-Faire City” where “commercial considerations have been the prime driving force in the shaping of Central.”⁴ The pedestrian bridge network was the result of a combination of government desire for circulatory efficiency and private developers’ desire to “connect their collection of scattered properties into an integrated complex.”⁵ Hong Kong Land, one of the territory’s oldest land developers was granted permission to build the first elevated pedestrian bridges between their (numerous) properties in Central in 1972.⁶ The Town Planning Ordinance of 1963 “recommended the clear separation of pedestrians and vehicles, especially on the reclaimed waterfront strip of the Central Area.”⁷ Furthermore, “new zoning regulations granted a “premium for building extra floors went to any developer who made over part of the footprint of his lot to spaces open to the public.”⁸ Critics noted that however praiseworthy the initiative may have been, it shifted the accent away from the public value of urban space, which was in fact absorbed and privatized.”⁹ While the publically accessible spaces have to remain open 24 hours a day, they are managed by the private owner, and “for all practical purposes it returns to private ownership.”¹⁰ From its inception, the pedestrian bridges in Hong Kong were created from a complicit relationship between private and public interests, raising questions about whether private ownership would



Figure 1: Intersection of four bridges, a very small segment of the Hong Kong pedestrian bridge infrastructure. (Image by author.)

compromise the public right to access them, and the kinds of activities that would be permitted.

The concern at the time was that of a powerful private sector. Writing shortly before the handover in 1997,¹¹ Alexander Cuthbert observed the blurring of boundaries between the public and private, specifically with regard to the ownership, management and policing of “what is perceived as public space”¹² in Hong Kong. Cuthbert further warns of “the implications for social justice and social space of the right to the city, given a growing trend towards control over, and surveillance of social space by the private sector in Hong Kong”.¹³ Cuthbert describes the emergence of these spaces as “‘ambiguous spaces’...since they increasingly involve a perceived public realm, yet are frequently under the ownership, control or surveillance of the private sector...”¹⁴

As it grew from the seventies to the nineties, the network exploded with a rapid urbanism built on imported profit-making mechanisms described twenty years ago in “Mall Space” by Margaret Crawford.¹⁵ Those mechanisms lead to the domination of the public realm by spaces of consumption. In “The Malling of Hong Kong” Tai-Lok Lui details the increasing importation of foreign models of shopping with the building of the first western model shopping center, Ocean Terminal in Tsim Sha Tsui in 1966. However, unlike in North America, the growth of the shopping mall culture did not accompany growing affluence, car ownership or suburbanization – but was built to meet the demands of the tourist industry.¹⁶ It was some time before growing affluence made them accessible to the local population. The privatized nature of the bridges network connected spaces of the global that excluded the local.

However, it can be argued that an unexpected mutation occurs in the imported model. The shopping mall in Hong Kong was appropriated for social and political use. “The modern and Western outlook of Ocean Terminal facilitated the attribution of multiple meanings to the place... Its modern atmosphere was found liberating – it was a rendezvous for

the young white-collar and factory workers...and also a salon for young intellectuals look for philosophical and political inspiration in coffee-shop debates...these sites of consumption constituted places where they could explore the freedom of consuming within the emerging youth culture as well as finding a public domain in the search for alternative ideologies and lifestyles...”¹⁷ The network of footbridges undergoes a similar appropriation.

More recently, *Cities Without Ground*¹⁷ maps these “mall spaces” as three-dimensional urban complexes. Author Jonathan Solomon examines again the notion of the shopping mall as public space at the twin developments of the International Finance Center in Central which is connected to the bridge network, and the Union Square development, on the other side of the harbor in Kowloon. He characterizes the former as a “glo-cal bypass,” or an “infrastructure designed to allow the empowered international business class to bypass the local context”¹⁹ and the latter as a “global village” per Marshall McLuhan’s definition: “a space of discontinuity and division developed out of increased connectivity...a contested space, a fractious and messy community in which inequality is not so much eliminated as confronted.”²⁰ Solomon concludes, “In the context of the postcolonial, global city of Hong Kong, it is no surprise that links between local and global networks should exist. What warrants interest is that it is the shopping mall, an iconic space of globalization, that should accomplish this function in the city.”²¹

From its earliest days, the Hong Kong pedestrian bridge infrastructure facilitated an urban growth that was driven by private property owners, and the importation of foreign models and mechanisms of development and consumer activity. As the bridge network grew, the concerns at the time were the ambiguous nature of these spaces, and the influence of the private sector on their management and surveillance. However as with many imports, much is lost, or inverted, in translation. Perhaps because the public realm in Hong Kong has always been accompanied by mercantile activity, the imported models like the shopping mall and the private bridges that connect them arguably serve as plausible public spaces, or at least spaces of encounter.

THE APPROPRIATION OF THE NETWORK BY THE INFORMAL

The combination of a thoroughfare and small-scale mercantile activity is the foundation of Hong Kong's street markets. For that reason, perhaps it is not surprising to find that members of the informal economy such as unregistered vendors or "hawkers" operating with low amounts of capital are easily found intermittently throughout the bridge network.

The expansion of the pedestrian bridge infrastructure also coincided with the influx and growth of Hong Kong's domestic worker population. One of the well-known weekly urban events in Hong Kong is the gathering of the city's foreign domestic workers, mainly women from Southeast Asia, to meet and socialize along the bridges on their day off on Sundays. Several roads in Central are closed on Sundays, and a bridge-crossing overhead often also demarcates a meeting place. The bridges become places for cooking and eating, playing games and music, dancing, napping and religious activities. A 2010 study of this social and urban phenomenon discovers many of the social groups have regular meeting spots, and the most actively appropriated spaces are in fact the publically owned and privately managed bridges, and not the fully public bridges.²³ This may be due more to differences in bridge management, location or design, but in any case it reveals that even privately-managed spaces are appropriated – temporally - for activities that are not strictly sanctioned, and that in a dense city even structures that were primarily designed as passageways can act as gathering spaces.

Like in many other arenas of social life in Hong Kong, the domestic worker community has also become increasingly political. In 2011 and 2015, these Sunday social gatherings have also been the sites of protests and demonstrations for improved working conditions and the right to Hong Kong citizenship. The pedestrian bridge infrastructure increasingly serve as a platform for social protest.



Figure 2: Sunday gathering of domestic workers on bridge to Hong Kong Central Station.²² (Copyright: Etta Shon.)

HERITAGE PRESERVATION AND PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

As mentioned in the introduction, two important public buildings are, or were, a part of the pedestrian bridge infrastructure, the now demolished Central Star Ferry Pier and the Central Market. When the market building ceased operations, the bridge network was left in place and

penetrates the modern ruin. The examination of the walkways should be set in the wider context of rising public interest in architectural conservation, heritage and identity. Distefano and Lee of the University of Hong Kong write:

"The year 2007 will probably go down in history as the year when the people of Hong Kong collectively woke up to the call for protecting their built heritage, particularly in the urban context. Since the demolition of the Star Ferry Pier and Clock Tower, issues of urban conservation have been widely discussed and debated not only with academic and professional circles but also in the mass media."²⁴

An unprecedented public outcry arose in the wake of the abrupt demolition of the Central Star Ferry Pier. Following those events the city saw "wave upon wave of social protest in relation to issues such as environmental protection, heritage preservation and urban planning."²⁵

Following the crisis caused by the demolition of the Central Ferry Pier, in contrast, the redevelopment of the Central Market the catalyst for new conservation policies. Hong Kong's policies concerning heritage preservation have been written largely in response to these protests: "In his Policy Address of 2009-10, the Chief Executive proposed a new initiative called "Conserving Central," which was aimed at achieving a balance between development and conservation."²⁶ The result was the announcement by the Hong Kong Redevelopment Authority of the redevelopment of the Central Market and the earmarking of \$500 million for the effort. Significant redevelopment projects revealed the limitations of the existing structure for eliciting public opinion and resulted in an expanded civic engagement process.²⁷ Through the city wide discussion of what to do with the Central Market the pedestrian bridge infrastructure is connected to this expanded process. While the network itself has been examined by many architects and urban planners, almost all of these studies have neglected the Central Market, which links two conversations: the first on the appropriation of the elevated pedestrian network for unplanned or informal uses, and the second on architectural heritage and social protest and greater public participation.

SUPPORTING ARMATURE FOR DISSENT

Since the "collective awakening" in 2007, there have been a number of social uprisings that are distinct from issues of architectural and urban heritage but nonetheless relate to evolving definitions of Hong Kong identity, and the right to public space. Like many other cities in the world, Hong Kong saw demonstrations and sit-ins in 2010-2011, and since then, the domestic worker demonstrations mentioned above, national education protests in 2012, and the pro-democracy Umbrella Protests in 2014. The pedestrian bridge infrastructure has increasingly become a supporting armature for these social demonstrations.

The Hong Kong Occupy Central sit-in was one of the longest running occupy settlements. While the protest was not on the bridge network proper, it was sited in the open plaza at the base of the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank, which like the pedestrian infrastructure is publically accessible private land. In 2012, students boycotted class in protest against the attempted introduction of a "moral and national education"

curriculum by the government. The protesters set up camp outside of the new Chinese government headquarters. As the protest grew, it spilled over onto surrounding walkways. The footbridge network was used for the most public of activities: public protest.³⁰ The government headquarters were again the site of pro-democracy demonstrations in 2014. The “Umbrella Protests” called for universal suffrage. The main protest site outside of the government building blocked the streets for months. During that time, the pedestrian infrastructure provided access to the protest site and were strewn with banners or impromptu displays. While not continuously used, at times the bridges were also deliberately blocked and occupied by demonstrators. As the political climate in Hong Kong intensifies, the pedestrian bridge network has been increasingly occupied by demonstrations and protests. The privatized network has evolved into a support structure for social activism and dissent.



Figure 3: The Central Star Ferry Pier shortly before demolition.²⁸ (Copyright: Thai World View.)^x

CONCLUSION

Since the first bridge was built forty years ago to connect the properties of one private developer, the extensive additions to Hong Kong Central’s pedestrian bridge network over time have made it an urban phenomenon unto itself. From their inception the connectors were created by the partnership of private property owners and the government. The elevated walkways connected imported models of development and the quasi-public thoroughfares were dominated by spaces of consumption.

Architects and urban planners have long been fascinated by the extensiveness of Hong Kong’s elevated pedestrian network. While some were critical of the “ambiguity” of these seemingly public spaces, others observed its potential to allow for both global and local parties to share space in sort of a “global village”. The bridge network becomes an infrastructure of inclusion of diverse voices through its appropriation by unregulated or unsanctioned users and uses. Like the city’s street markets, the bridges often host small vendors, and once a week they are transformed into gathering places, and even protest spaces by the city’s domestic worker population.

The bridge network connects several buildings that have become valued for their architectural heritage. Specifically, the bridges pass through



Figure 4: 2014 Umbrella protests, Government Headquarters at Admiralty, Hong Kong.²⁹

the urban ruin of the Central Market building, becoming one and the same within the boundaries of that site. The Central Market building literally links the bridge network to the city’s public debate on heritage and identity. In the years leading up to the handover in 1997, cultural critic Ackbar Abbas describes a “culture of disappearance” in Hong Kong, where that which was previously unseen suddenly becomes visible because of its imminent demise.³¹ Since 2007, what was once elegiac has become political:

“Heritage sites and the intangible ‘collective community’ of the Hong Kong people have become a highly contentious issue between the post-colonial government and society as a consequence of competing visions on the city’s development model, the protection of public space and citizen rights, and the legitimacy of the political system.”³²

Writing in the 1990s, Michael Sorkin equates “a return to a more authentic urbanity, a city based on physical proximity and free movement and a sense that the city is our best expression of a desire for collectivity...” with “the struggle of democracy itself.”³³ The concern in Hong Kong at the time may have been over the influence of the private ownership, management or domination of public spaces. But the ‘struggle for democracy itself’ has become even more pressing for Hong Kong since then. With it the “mall space” of the pedestrian bridge infrastructure has evolved into a supporting armature for social protest, activism, demonstrations and dissent.

Richard Sennett describes an “open system” in his discussion of an “Open City”:

“The contrast to the closed system lies in a different kind of social system, not in brute private enterprise – a system which is open socially to different voices who attend to one another rather who each do their own thing in isolation.”³⁴

Hong Kong’s pedestrian bridge network is still highly privatized. But over time it has become increasingly accessible to public activity, especially the political. It is no longer (or has never been) entirely dominated by the global or by private consumption. Nor is it a public space in the

traditional sense of a defined gathering place that represents the power of the collective or of the state. Instead, the politicization and appropriation of the pedestrian bridge infrastructure by the informal, the unsanctioned and the contentious transforms the network into an “open system” and an infrastructure of inclusion.

ENDNOTES

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