PUBLIC ART AND SPATIALITY – HOW PUBLIC ART SHAPES THE POLITICS OF SPACE IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT

It is easy to disregard the seemingly innocuous nature of consuming a piece of public art, but art installations have increasingly become a tool to perpetuate political reforms and ideas. For some installations, the politics of the piece may be explicit, but this is not always the case with e.g. government commissioned art or grass-root projects. Therefore, it is valuable to analyse the processes of the funding, installation and public engagement, as public art can be used to advocate for different political agendas (e.g. gentrification), and understand that politics dominate the conception and execution of many public art installations. This further suggests that public art has a place-making power in the urban fabric to create politically charged relationships between different social groups. This paper seeks to investigate these place-making and political processes in Hong Kong through the various forms of public artwork around the city. With the ongoing protests and discourses surrounding the role of public art in politics, analysing forms of public art provides insight on how they are socially and politically embedded in the fabric of the city.

INTRODUCTION

The emphasis of public art often lies on *art* and there is little consideration for the *public* aspect of it (Finkelpearl, 2001, p.5). As a broad definition, public art is art that is situated in the public realm and accessible to all members of the public to consume, whether privately or publicly commissioned. However, there are discussions about whether or not public art is truly valuable to the consumer if it does not relate to the environment, space or culture where it is situated (Dewolf, 2016). Therefore, the concept of "place-making" becomes essential in analysing the role and impact of public art. "Place-making" is a theory that states that urban places are not just physical, but also 'reiterated social practices' of community (Cresswell, 2004, p. 39), and that this social space is ever-changing and perpetually under construction (Massey, 2005). This continuous re-shaping and reinvention of social space implies that public art and these place-making processes are inherently linked as culture and community develops. It acknowledges the relationships between the social, political, and material processes by which people recreate the geographies that they live in (Pierce et al., 2010), and that place-making is a continuous re-shaping of culture and community (physical or not).

Public art as a cultural object is part of this place-making, as it holds the power to showcase social and cultural ideologies and can therefore become a tool by the artist to perpetuate political reforms and ideas. It also may act as a tool to push for specific agendas such as urban regeneration, where the installation of public art may act as a disguise for gentrification (Mathews, 2010). The artist can thus through this piece of art create a relationship with the beholder, whether or not the political agenda is intentional or not. As such, I would like to propose two distinct categories of public art that are going to be discussed in this article – larger-scale projects that have been commissioned by a governing body/larger organisation, or smaller grass-root art projects (such as street art and graffiti).

In the case of Hong Kong, both types of projects have been undertaken with various levels of place-making impact. As the city has become a hub for political conflicts this past year, due in large part to the anti-extradition bill proposition in 2019, the impacts of public imagery have been heightened and increasingly used to symbolise the political struggle. The Hong Kong-Mainland Chinese political disagreement has been an ongoing subject of dispute since the 1997 Hong Kong handover, and a decades-long competition for hegemony (Li, 2015). Furthermore, Hong Kong has had a history of its citizens wanting to individualise and create its own independent identity separated from that of the Mainland Chinese, and this quest for identity has increasingly taken on the forms of local visual art (Valjakka, 2013). However, as will be discussed, this has propelled fears of privatization and other socio-economic inequalities (such as gentrification). The case of Hong Kong shows that public art possesses the place-making power to mobilise tensions and political discourses of the urban environments, and in this way mobilises the relationships between different social groups.

Figure 1: Use of the umbrella symbol during the HK-Mainland Umbrella Movement conflict 2014

Therefore, this article will firstly focus on the past studies on the role of public art in urban gentrification, as well as the impact that it has on local communities and place-making. In Hong Kong, there is a considerable variety of both government-commissioned art and grass-root art projects, and this article will consider both types of funded public art. I will address the discourses surrounding street art projects (HKWalls) in more deprived areas of the city (such as Sham Shui Po) and the implications of gentrification following the installation of such public art, as well as the sense of belonging of the local community. In addition, I will analyse art installations directly relating to the Hong Kong-Mainland Chinese relationship, which will be discussed in relation to political spatiality.

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PUBLIC ART AS A GENTRIFICATION TOOL

There have been multiple cultural analyses evaluating the real intentions of the installation of public art, which have thus created a dichotomy between top-down, pro-growth development and more community-oriented initiations, or at least a complex polarisation between differing interests. Ruth Glass coined and defined the term of "gentrification" in 1964, to capture the class inequalities created by capitalist land markets and policies. It commonly occurs in urban areas that have potential for profitable redevelopment, and where businesses and policy elites will benefit at the expense of residents (typically low-income). Following the increase of service sector employees, gentrification also occurs where there has been an emergence of a new middle class who settle in inner-city areas (Slater, 2011 p, 572).

In the context of public art and gentrification, Ley (1996, p.191) suggests that urban public art, and thus the urban artist, works closely in the interest of the middle-class, even if it originated as a refuser of middle-class aestheticization, valorising working-class culture and its associated bohemian artistic lifestyles instead. Ley postulates that it is with the development of inner-city urbanisation that the urban artist then underwent a shift in favour of the 'new middle class' – low on economic capital but high on cultural capital – whose aesthetic sensibilities must be met in newer urban areas (ibid.). This meant that the urban artist would now act upon cultural and ideological values to appeal to a new audience and create art considering this change in taste. Expanding on this idea, Cameron & Coaffee (2006) suggested that gentrification acts as a systemic urban artist and therefore increasingly becomes a tool to recapture the city for the middle class which can be detrimental to lower-class urban residents. This can be observed in how art has become more prominently incorporated into public policy as a catalyst for economic development, public consumption, and capital investment (Mathews, 2010). The reason this is that art and creativity is an easily digestible form of reinvention and the hidden agendas of gentrification may be disguised by this pursuit of aestheticization and beautification.

An interesting case of public art installation by London Kaye in Bushwick, New York City (2015) exemplifies the belief that an artistic 'revival' of a neighbourhood is nothing but beneficial. This is a working-class, but also notoriously 'hip' neighbourhood in the city that attracts tourists and artists alike. (Turton, 2017). Kaye's crochet artwork depicting pop culture references such as the movies *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Shining* appealed to and attracted the typical consumer group of young white middle-class people, and was claimed by the artist to increase the property value in an otherwise run-down area due to tourism and more "attractive" aesthetics. However, Will Giron, a tenants' rights activist claimed that there was an influx of white-majority artists in the neighbourhood amplifying 'the voices (…) of upper middle-class people' over the neighbourhood's long-time residents, and claimed that these artists took part in a 'new form of colonization' (Moskowitz, 2017). This brings in ideas of gentrification as being middle-class aestheticization as well as a tool for economic development and capital accumulation. Kaye's endeavour to increase the property value of the neighbourhood showcases that urban art is entrenched in capitalistic ideas, and more artists seek to create a marketable profit whilst simultaneously hoping that the artwork catalyses community belonging and creativity. It is arguable whether or not urban artists (such as, but not limited to London Kaye) intend to or are aware of the contributions to gentrification when their personal background (often white or middle-class) might hinder an accurate analysis of the consequences. The very fact that it can easily be veiled under the guise of "art" and "creativity" might cloud the underpinning conflicts of interests.

Figure 2: London Kaye's public art installation that was met with backlash by local rights activists

PUBLIC ART AS IDEOLOGICAL PLACE-MAKING

This push for political agendas does however not only occur with individual and smaller artists, and not only for urban regeneration processes such as gentrification. The public setting of a government-commissioned artwork is an ideal way of reaching a larger audience and is cleverly utilised to subtly push for political ideologies. According to Deutsche (1992), policy makers often use public art as a vessel for democracy by employing the idea that 'public space is inextricably linked to democratic ideals' (p. 36). This means that they want the public art to encourage participation in a democratic society and to perpetuate its ideas and beliefs, especially if the public art depicts historically significant figures. As Lefebvre states (1991, p.143), public installations (such as statues, buildings or other creative art forms) have the ability to 'mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath signs and surfaces which claim to express collective will and collective thought'. This artwork then acts as a way to push for an ideology under the guise of collective benefits.

For example, a statue of Donald Dewar, father of Scottish devolution and long-standing Member of Parliament, was erected in the city centre of Glasgow but quickly vandalised and defiled. Although the vandalization of the statue was not necessarily an act of opposition to what the statue represents, it suggests that the place-making powers of this public artwork triggers a reactionary action (Sharp et al., 2005). As the statue's newfound place in the city became a target for attackers who found its presence jarring, it showcases how the "artist" and the "beholder" engage in a physically altering relationship. Although the statue has now blended into the everyday life of the inner-city bustle and largely decommemorated by casual by-passers, it exemplifies the role of public artwork in the political aestheticization of the urban. The implicit political undertones of the statue allow for public opinions to surface and therefore creates a relationship between different groups. It further implies themes of social inclusion, belonging and the push for bourgeois values in the development of the largest and most frequented city area. The role of public art therefore takes on multiple dimensions; not only can it facilitate and perpetuate gentrification, it can also instigate the public to engage with the socio-political characteristics of their surroundings.

PUBLIC STREET ART AND QUESTIONS OF GENTRIFICATION IN HONG KONG

Hong Kong is a city with major political disagreements between social groups. This is especially true in the context of the Hong Kong-Mainland Chinese independence disputes, but also between different socio-economic groups. These conflicts are thematically reflected in or made explicit by Hong Kong's public art projects. Public symbols of political struggles powerfully play a key role in the political movements and mass-mentality of the protesters in 2019. Considering the different impacts of these artworks (local or commissioned) provides insight on their place-making potential and how they impact

questions of gentrification, sense of belonging, and the spatiality of political conflicts.

The history of the Hong Kong street art scene is not as old as in other major cities such as New York or Los Angeles, but there has been considerable attention given to the HKwalls Initiative, a street art and mural non-profit arts organisation that aims to create opportunities for local street artists, and community bonding. In 2016, the organisation located one of their street art projects in Sham Shui Po, a generally poor area and a marginal neighbourhood in the city. The area is characterised by post-war buildings is home to a mix of groups only seemingly tethered by their shared low socio-economic status. It also hosts a variety of small business and marginal industrial activities that are stand in contrast to the financial hub of Hong Kong's more central areas. (Cheng, 2012). As with the case of community regeneration, it seems to be an ideal place to promote art as a creative outlet for marginalised groups.

Figure 3: HKWalls in the otherwise run-down area of Sham Shui Po (HKWalls website, 2020)

However, a similar discourse surrounding art as a gentrification tool emerged in Sham Shui Po as it did in Bushwick, New York. According to an article in *Zolima City Magazine* (DeWolf, 2016), the fear of gentrification struck local scholars who identified the urban development schemes underpinning the project that could accelerate demolition and redevelopment of older buildings. The fear was that this could potentially lead to the eviction or relocation of local residents, who would be replaced with wealthier tenants. A similar article in the *Hong Kong Free Press* (Cheung, 2016) underscored the 'branding' of the building facades which empowered not the community itself but the merchants seeking to make profits. However, local residents, mentioned in both articles, appeared to view the art more positively, referring to the area as 'less dreary and dead' as a result of its installation (Cheung, 2016). The artwork became a temporary "hot topic" and "Instagrammable", for locals and visitors alike. However, as suggested in Sharp et al.'s (2005) study on public art, there is a risk that the art could become part of the cityscape rather than a point of attraction such that constant exposure to the same art installations may dilute their artistic impact. Cheung's (2016) article showcases that 'people mostly come to take photos', rather than actively participating in the market activities and helping local businesses, therefore undermining the contribution of the public art to local communities.

Figure 4: Graffiti art on the front of a local Sham Shui Po shop door (HKWalls website, 2020)

The fear of gentrification was reasonably justified as a similar occurrence had already taken place in Kwun Tong Bypass, where the space underneath was transformed into "cultural sites" for graffiti artists to express their work. Whereas this operation was not conducted by the artists per se, the Kowloon East Office used art to exploit the land, transforming it from industrial sites to commercial. The site had also previously been used by local bands as a performance and practice area, and both cultural workers and local music followers boycotted the operation in 2013 (Wong, 2014).

Whilst HKwalls was justifiably been pointed out as the potential means for gentrification, the engagement of both local and international artists exemplified the multiculturalism of Hong Kong – an image of a global city that cannot be fully culturally homogeneous. Chen (2016), having considered with Cheung's article in the *Hong Kong Free Press,* acknowledged the comprehensive analysis of the area and the risk of gentrification but found that HKwalls was overwhelmingly positive. In an area where locals can mostly not afford to redo the building facades, the idea of refreshing it with vibrant art appealed to local, particularly as there was no cost to them. The purpose of HKwalls was to connect local communities with art without it bearing the idea that it is exclusive to higher class or high cultural capital groups. In this way, Chen criticises Cheung's and argues that the fear of gentrification by locals was rooted only in theory rather than the real-life consequences and implications of the art project.

Figure 5: HKWalls brightening up the otherwise monotonous facades of Sham Shui Po (HKWalls website, 2020)

Public art is multifaceted in that its effects on the public are not entirely predictable, and it is valuable to examine *how* it is used and what its intentions are. For example, HKwalls' primary goal was primarily to promote local artists and not necessarily to generate more revenue for businesses. Although in this case business revenue is a notable side-effect, critics should focus on the primary intention. Creating and spreading art can be detrimental to any group if executed poorly, however it is important to distinguish between bottom-up, grassroot organisation projects (such as HKwalls) and art projects

undertaken and commissioned by the state. The place-making and social impacts on the local community may differ hugely depending on the scale and agency of the project.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PUBLIC ART IN HONG KONG

Political tensions in Hong Kong tend to embed themselves in its physical environment, and this is especially apparent with the Hong Kong-Mainland Chinese relationship. Addressing these tensions comes with examining two pieces of art – the Golden Bauhinia and the Pillar of Shame, both relating to this relationship and the conflicts surrounding it. The two main differences in these artworks is how they were conceived; the Bauhinia was commissioned and gifted by the government, while the Pillar of Shame was created by an independent artist. This section will also analyse the political and cultural power of the newly created 'Lady Liberty' in association with the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests.

Henri Lefebvre's theories on spatiality are useful in this political context. The concept of considers space to have an effect on actions, interactions, and relationships between different social groups, as well as being a 'product of the political economic system' (Sheppard, 2004). Elden (2006) showcases that Lefebvre acknowledges not only the production of space by an event but also the "historicality" of the experience, and that its conditions are 'directly related to the historical conditions they were experienced within'. Space is a political stake as it is the medium through and in which political struggles and conflicts occur. Although Lefebvre originally framed this idea within class struggle and institutionalised divisions, the spatiality of political struggles can manifest itself by *how* an event shapes the space and place.

The Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984) stated that Hong Kong would become a Special Administrative Region under Chinese rule but operate under a "one country, two systems" policy and receive a degree of autonomy in terms of executive, legislative, and judicial power (Fong, 2017). This is known as the 1997 Handover. Since then, however, the Chinese government has shown multiple attempts at strategies to limit Hong Kong's political autonomy (e.g. bring Hong Kong under a heightened political supervision with the "new Hong Kong policy" in 2003). This has sparked independence movements such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014. The Golden Bauhinia was gifted from the central Chinese government to mark this handover and has since come to represent these Hong Kong-Mainland political struggles. Upon Chinese President Xi Jinping's arrival in Hong Kong in 2017, pro-democracy protestors covered the statue in black cloth to express discontent with the administration and the disingenuity of the "one country, two systems" policy. The activists occupied the site in protest, and the act was deemed a public disturbance by the police and caused major uproars and traction in the media following the political tensions (Tong, 2017; Cheung & Lo, 2017). This art installation has continued to act as a symbol of discontent of Hong Kong-Mainland relations and has further been defaced during 2019 protests with phrases such as "Liberate Hong Kong" (Kuo, 2019). The centrality of its position also plays a major role in its involvement, as the large marches primarily congregated around Central Wan Chai. In this instance, the political struggles do not only take on a symbolic dimension (the Golden Bauhinia being a symbol of Hong Kong-Mainland relations), but also a spatial one – it shapes how the act of vandalisation is perceived politically, and how the site takes on a larger-than-cultural dimension. The public aspect of the artwork amplifies the issue, epitomising otherwise intangible concepts of political struggles and tensions between groups. It also allows for hidden power relations to materialize as the Hong Kong-Mainland relationship is strongly emphasised in the "historicality" of the handover.

Figure 6a: The Golden Bauhinia

Figure 6b: The Golden Bauhinia covered in black cloth by protesters

Similarly, the Pillar of Shame underwent an interesting set of circumstances that further exemplifies these political tensions. The statue represents the victims of the Tiananmen massacre in Beijing 1989 and is currently situated on the campus of Hong Kong University where it has stood since its movement from Victoria Park in 1997. Symbolising the fight for human rights, activists pushed for the statue to be erected on campus which caused a division between the students and the university's external affairs office (Lo, 1999). The statue highlighting China's human rights violations represents the suppression of free speech and freedom, and the protestors' determination to protect these rights. It has increasingly played a role in the response to the 2020 ban of the Tiananmen protests vigil (June 4th) and epitomised the political and cultural fears of China breaching the "one country, two systems" policy. Created by a Danish artist in 1997, its intrinsic political statement shaped the rituals and commemoration of the massacre – the annual cleaning of the statue became a symbol of the political struggle of Hong Kong independence.

Furthermore, its location at the Hong Kong University campus contributes to and reflects younger people's often negative view and opposition to Mainland China, and it further showcases the difference in perception of the statue itself. As it was not government commissioned, it takes on the idea of being 'by the people, for the people.' It can also be considered a marker of international solidarity as its creator was not from Hong Kong. It therefore suggests that there is a difference in public reaction and interaction with the public artwork, which depends on the underlying histories of the artwork's creation. As with the Golden Bauhinia, the act of engaging with this art politically produces the space in which the event takes place, but rather than being vandalised becomes a subject of commemoration.

Figure 7a: The Pillar of Shame as exhibited on the HKU campus

Figure 7b: The Pillar of Shame as a symbol of commemoration to the victims of the massacre

A similar and more recent example of statue commemoration is the statue of Lady Liberty created for the anti-extradition bill protests in 2019. As it was 3D-printed by independent artists well-involved in the movement, it was a collaborative effort mirroring the mass-spirit of the protests and soon came to symbolise "the pursuit of local democracy" (Lady Liberty Hong Kong website). Hong Kong has had a history of wanting to separate their creative and cultural identity from the of the Mainland Chinese and this quest for identity has increasingly taken on the forms of local visual art (Valjakka, 2013). Lady Liberty thus acts like a symbol of this quest. Its movement across Hong Kong to several university campuses and protest sites and finally to its resting place at Lion Rock (C.C., 2020) embodies perhaps more literally the place-making aspect of public art.

As it is moved through the space of the city, the social movement seeks to reclaim and define their place both physically and symbolically – the statue thus gains transformative qualities of social space and collective identity (Daphi, 2017). Lady Liberty acts as an 'occupier' of space, much like the protest marches themselves, and the relational flows of space, place and politics become increasingly saturated as the struggle takes on a physical form. Political tensions can in this way be observed, experienced, and felt by on-lookers and involved agents, and space is the medium in which these social productions occur. Public art, namely, public statues of a

symbolic and historical nature are themselves easy targets to further political agendas, as doing so takes on symbolic dimensions.

Figure 8: The Statue of Lady Liberty at 5th anniversary of the Umbrella Movement

CONCLUSION

The research surrounding the spatiality of politics in Hong Kong showcases the need for a nuanced and multifaceted approach to analysing the impact of public artwork. It is important to acknowledge that public art is not always apolitical nor innocuous in the way it can be utilised by certain groups for certain intentions, such as the push for gentrification or various political agendas. In the case of Hong Kong, the transformative qualities of public art may differ depending on the scale, intentions and historicality of the artwork. Whereas public art can act as a tool to perpetuate socio-economic differences and inequalities, it may also regenerate and revive deprived areas. Similarly, overtly political artwork may take on a symbolic dimension in that it transforms the experience of space and place, and the different undertones of its conception determines how it will be related to and received. In the case of Hong Kong and the recent political tensions, such symbols are amplified in importance and become key aspects of the movement, actions, and mentality of the mass-protests. The large political rift between Hong Kong and Mainland is facilitated through imagery and physical objects, and further strengthens the collective identity of Hong Kong independence.

Therefore, the engagement and interaction with public art can impact how people view others, themselves, the physicality, and the physical surroundings. Researching the relationship between public art and place-making processes may facilitate the analysis of the cultural impact of their installation. As they are embedded in both the urban and social fabric of the city, it is easy to find within different trends of power inequalities, oppression, and political agendas. The acknowledgment of its cultural and place-making impacts may contribute to the reformation of urban space by and for its residents.

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