

DEMOCRATIC EXPRESSION: ARCHITECTURE HIJACKS SPECTACLE

KENNETH IP

In Hong Kong, the rate at which demonstrations have grown in recent years suggests the city houses a society in constant political turmoil. One of the most fiercely-debated issues is Hong Kong's sovereignty to China—particularly the tension between its increasingly dependent relationship with the nation and the latter's handling of human rights. This political polemic has given rise to a unique culture of demonstration, an exercise in freedom of speech that distances Hong Kong from China and targets two main parties: the Hong Kong and the Chinese governments.

Housed on the historic Government Hill until 2011, the headquarters of the Hong Kong government is the terminus for a number of demonstrations.¹ The building itself is mundane amongst the spectacular banking headquarters of Central, a neighborhood so named because of its central location as well as its function as the economic, political and religious center of Hong Kong. Despite fading beside these exuberant neighbors, Government Hill is charged with historical connotations that make it a captivating object of study.² Selected by the British for its privileged position on a knoll overlooking the harbor, the site soon became a conglomeration of governmental buildings including the Court of Final Appeal, the headquarters of the Government Offices, and Government House, the official residence for the Governors of Hong Kong.³ As the historic political center of Hong Kong, Government Hill remains politically charged based solely on its programmatic use.

In contrast to the central location of the Hong Kong government, China chose a site in Sai Wan for the Central Liaison Office (CLO), just outside the main economic and political cluster of Central. Officially an organ of the Central People's Government, the CLO is responsible for the liaisons between Hong Kong and China, and was created to foster cultural, economic and social exchange. Formerly the Xinhua News Agency during the colonial era, the organization has been traditionally regarded as representative of the Communist Party in China. Thus, the CLO offices receive a fair share of demonstrations whenever protestors turn their demands and dismay towards the Chinese government.

One of the watershed moments in the post-colonial history of Hong Kong occurred on July 1st 2003—the sixth anniversary of the handover. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to demonstrate their concern over the government's con-

troversial proposal of Article 23, which would have authorized the government the right to target freedom of speech within mass media.⁴ Considered a milestone in the democratic development and a turning point in the political culture of the city, the demonstration against Article 23 sparked an annual protest and became a medium through which residents voiced their discontent over the governance of Hong Kong. Demonstrations and protests have since been perceived as a method and means of democracy, a right of expression for the people, and a way to openly and publicly exercise the right to freedom of speech. Hong Kong has involuntarily become one of the few places whereby the Chinese government is forced to openly confront the public expression of opinion.

Protestors in Hong Kong have developed a culture whereby their actions result in maximum exposure to media reports through the creation of spectacle, transforming the streets into a medium of expression with tactics that recall those of Paris during May 1968.⁵ They are quick to exploit the tools of the media to carry their political message, knowing full well that eye-catching banners, whimsical acts, and confrontations with the police result in good television and more exposure. Thus, demonstrators have developed a habitual mannerism with an increasing focus on media and spectacle.⁶ From ritualistic dances symbolizing the death of democracy to the blocking of traffic that grinds Hong Kong to a standstill, every act of protest has been specifically designed to be conveyed conveniently and spectacularly through the media to create a lasting impact.⁷

Demonstrations in Hong Kong have become a fairly systematic affair. Protestors gather in a public space such as Victoria Park in Causeway Bay, a neighborhood located a forty-minute walk from Central, and march towards the office of the party of whom the request is being demanded. Once on site, the demonstrators hand their request in a large envelope to government officials. In reality, the message is already publicly expressed as reporters and passersby broadcast the procession through various social media. Slogans, signboards and other acts of expression are captured by traditional media outlets, as well as smartphones and digital cameras; instantaneously shared with the global public via images and videos uploaded to the Internet. These acts are deliberately brief to suit the attention span of the image-prone media, packaging and presenting the demonstration akin to an advertisement.⁸

This transformation in demonstration culture as a response to media has been notable in recent political protests in cities such as Cairo or Damascus, where the populist approach to representation has challenged the act of elitist suppression by the government. Twitter and Facebook have become the medium for rally cries, calling people to join demonstrations, while Flickr and Youtube transmit the message of the demonstrations to the world. These social platforms transcend traditional borders and bring reports from the public in the streets to computers and cell phones around the world.⁹ This shift in the medium of demonstrations creates a new,

Figure 1 Kenneth Ip, Multi-Function Room at the CLO, Hong Kong, 2010, perspective and section showing relationship between media, government and demonstrators.



All images by author.

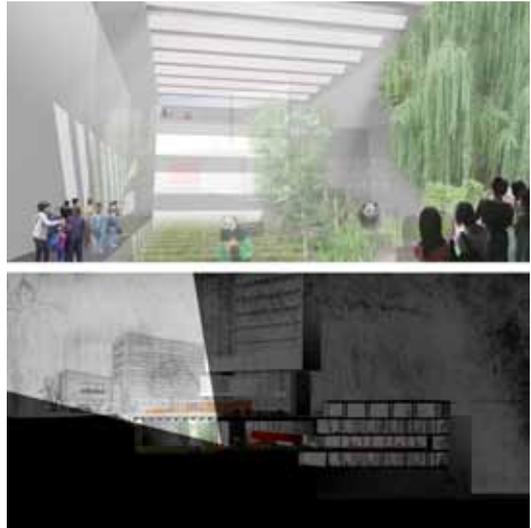
Figure 2 Kenneth Ip, CLO from Queen's Road Central, Hong Kong, 2010, perspective showing demonstration in progress.



Figure 3 Kenneth Ip, Programmatic Diagram, showing pivotal function of the design.



Figure 4 Kenneth Ip, Panda House, Hong Kong, 2010, perspective and section from inside the building.



contemporary spectacle, coinciding with cultural theorist Hal Niedzvieck's concept of "peep culture."¹⁰ Niedzvieck's term describes how the development of technological means is transforming society to enjoy watching ourselves rather than celebrities. Spectacle, therefore, can be created by just about anyone.

Against this backdrop of a changing society brought about by technological advances in political demonstration, Hong Kong sits at a crossroads of neutrality and political polemic between the populist demands of the people and the elitist repression of the government. What if this division was disturbed by an architectural intervention with a political agenda? Following the recent relocation of the Hong Kong Government Offices to the new Tamar site in Admiralty, in what follows I analyze the implications and opportunities of relocating the offices of the CLO from its current location in Sai Wan, to the politically charged Government Hill. If architecture is inherently political, how does it extend beyond the boundary of the building into the realm of politics? More fundamentally, how can architecture respond to this new form of spectacle and arrogate a political position?

By shifting the destination of the demonstrations from Sai Wan to Government Hill, Central gains a new political charge through the symbolic placement of the Chinese government onto the historic seat of government in Hong Kong. The design for the new CLO reopens a public square at the top of Government Hill to the public—an action that was hindered post-1997 due to the Hong Kong Government's concern over security. This gesture already portrays the Chinese government in a more welcoming light than the previous occupants of the site. Although the demonstration route remains public, the final destination of the public square lies in the jurisdiction of the CLO. It could be reserved by the CLO for furtive cultural use to coincide with the demonstrations, thus denying demonstrators the right to use the space by overlapping events and complicating the strong, homogenous presence of the demonstration. In essence, the message becomes clear: demonstrations are welcome, but only with the blessing of the CLO (Figure 1).

Suspended above this public square and below the office tower of the new CLO building is a multi-function room which hosts banquets and meetings for high ranking officials. Its hierarchal position is intentional: the room exerts spatial superiority over the demonstration space and imposes a sense of power over the protestors. The interior is likewise vigilantly designed to control the perception of the Chinese government and unfolding events in a dogmatic and prejudiced perspective. When filming the events in the multi-function room, reporters are only able to capture images of the political leaders with the banking headquarters—representative of the economy of Hong Kong—as a backdrop. Images of the protestors are hidden from view by the carefully staged architecture to project only that which is deemed politically acceptable in a deceiving *mise-en-scène*.

Figure 5 Kenneth Ip, Panda House, Hong Kong, 2010, perspective and section from outside the building.

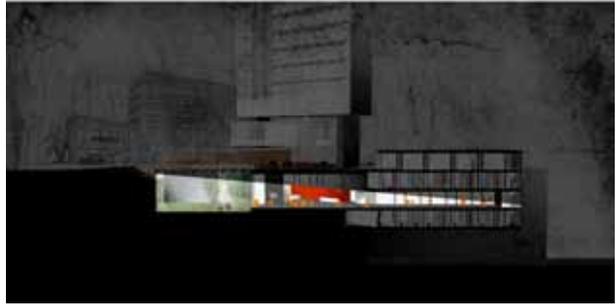


Figure 6 Kenneth Ip, Main Staircase at the CLO, Hong Kong, 2010, perspective and section showing demonstration in progress with authoritative surveillance and the panda house closed on the left.



Figure 7 Kenneth Ip, Central Axis in CLO, Hong Kong, 2010, perspective and section showing demonstration in progress.



In considering the context of the new CLO building, the significance stretches beyond the physical site to the realm of historical connotations. Aside from the obvious symbolic gesture of allowing the public back onto Government Hill in a fallacious display of democracy, the axis of the building now aligns with Queen's Road Central, a street that alludes to the colonial era of Hong Kong. A large screen embedded into the façade of the building is designed to project images down Queen's Road, allowing the CLO to use media as a means to influence the perception of events. During a demonstration, as people march through the building and onto Government Hill, contrasting images are shown on the screen of the building. As photos of protestors demanding democratic reforms are posted onto Flickr and Facebook, images of natural disasters such as the Qinghai Earthquake appear in the background of each photograph. The contrasting imagery causes one to question both the priorities of the government and the requests of the demonstrators. This is intentional, as to create a disparity between the unfolding events and the official government position—an attempt on the part of the government to influence the sympathy of the public (Figure 2).

The design for the CLO relies heavily on its programmatic arrangement, transforming the building into a political instrument. To further exemplify the Chinese government's generosity towards Hong Kong, the building contains a panda house, allowing the public the opportunity to view this icon of Chinese culture. A long-standing practice by the Chinese government since the Tang Dynasty, pandas have been given as gifts to other nations as a sign of friendship, an act known as *panda diplomacy*.¹¹ The panda is therefore not merely an animal, but a political tool that symbolizes the goodwill and friendship of the Chinese government.¹² By including a panda house within the building and allowing public access, the architecture of the building becomes synonymous with the intentions of *panda diplomacy*. The building is transformed from its forbidding representation to a symbol of the government's benevolence (Figure 3).

The programmatic distribution of the building is balanced on two axes that intersect around the panda house. By balancing the program of the building on a central pivotal point, the building becomes programmatically fragile, thereby allowing people to hijack its spaces. During demonstrations, entry to the panda house is closed off to the general public, thus transforming the panda into a tool of frustration against the demonstrators. This singular programmatic decision formally interprets, for the public, the intent of the protestor as selfish and the government as sympathetic. Public perception of the panda and its associated meaning of friendliness from China is hinged upon the act of demonstration through representation in mass media (Figures 4, 5).

The panda is both a political instrument to win public perception through media as well as a device that reveals the political standpoint of the viewer. To appreciate the

panda in its most ideal environment, the visitor must enter the building and look at the panda from within the walls of the government building. Once inside, the panda and the visitor are positioned on the same level, allowing the visitor to see and appreciate the panda in its bright and airy environment. In contrast, the view of the panda from the outside is fully compromised as the viewer is only allowed to observe the panda from the upper viewing platform, separated by a height of eight meters, glare, and reflection. The axial arrangement of the panda house also creates an unobstructed view to the exhibition space, which could be used to show propaganda and forms a subconscious, persuasive backdrop for the observer from the outside (Figure 6).

An atmosphere of surveillance is immediately sensed through the building as one enters through Queen's Road Central. This symbolic gesture of allowing access to Government Hill is compromised by the panoptic effect created by the programmatic arrangement of the CLO's media and security department. Housed in a box that overhangs the main staircase, the media department of the CLO watches over the demonstration route through narrow slit windows. As the demonstrators pass through the building and up the staircase onto Government Hill, they are under the impression of being watched by the government. This effect is further enhanced by the location of the security department of the CLO, located off the main axis of the staircase and also featuring deep slit windows that face the demonstration route. The CLO complex is designed to intimidate the demonstrators and enhance the sense of discomfort in the space, creating the impression of constant surveillance (Figure 7).

The influence of media in the design for the CLO stretches beyond that of mere perception to that of intimidation and control. As demonstrators adapt and utilize mass media to create a new form of demonstration culture in Hong Kong, so too does architecture respond to this new challenge of political expression. The delicate axial arrangement of the CLO is programmatically fragile and subject to media representation, employing sympathy as a political tool through the manipulation of views and visual connections. Space can no longer be neutral within the architecture of the CLO, as it aggressively provokes the two opposing sides in the struggle for the freedom of speech. The spectacle of the project is found not in its architectonic form but in the interaction between various programs as appropriated by the different parties; relying on the representation of the event in the media to create a spectacle that suppresses the demonstrators themselves. Architecture becomes a politically charged entity through its influence on the perception of mass media, transforming the tool of the populist masses into one of elitist oppression.

1 The Hong Kong Government has since moved to a new complex constructed on prime real estate on the waterfront of Admiralty, just to the east of Central. Built in an International style that continues the architectural language of conjuring no colonial or Chinese sentiments as did the building on Government Hill. The complex design was driven by "Door Always Open", an architectural metaphor implying an open and accessible government.

2 Purcell Miller Tritton LLP, "Central Government Offices, Historical and Architectural Appraisal" (September 2009), accessed 25 February 2011, http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/Monument/textmode/en/research_cgo_20091015.php, 3

3 Kate Mattock, *This is Hong Kong: The Story of Government House* (Hong Kong: Studio Publications, 1994).

4 The controversial bill was successfully shelved following the mass protests which erupted following its introduction, but since 2003, *1 July Marches* have been an annual event

which rallies the people of Hong Kong to protest and demonstrate for various political concerns. The annual occurrence of the event speaks towards the political unrest within the city.

5 Michael Hirsch, "The Space of Community: Between Culture and Politics," *Did Someone Say Participate*, Markus Miessen and Shumon Basar eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 291.

6 David Rockwell and Bruce Mau, *Spectacle* (London: Phaidon, 2006).

7 Kevin Drew, "Tensions Remain After Hong Kong Election," *The New York Times*, 25 March 2012.

8 See Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) and Luis Fernandez-Galiano, "Spectacle and its Discontents; or, The Elusive Joys of Architainment," *Commodification and Spectacle in Architecture*, William S. Saunders ed., *Harvard Design Magazine Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

9 Peter Beaumont, "The truth about Twitter, Facebook and the uprisings

in the Arab World," *The Guardian*, accessed 25 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/25/twitter-facebook-uprisings-arab-libya>.

10 Hal Neidviecki, *The Peep Diaries: How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbours* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2009).

11 Mark Magnier, "Attack of the Pandas: Will Taiwan's wary, pro-independence government succumb to a pair of China's most adorable ambassadors? History says yes," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 2006.

12 This is evident in the recent visit of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to China, where he was rewarded with two pairs of pandas for the Calgary and Toronto zoo. The visit was touted by the Canadian media to be "...a clear sign Sino-Canadian relations have moved to a different level, as Harper had claimed the night before." *The Toronto Star*, 9 February 2012.