

Future Publics: Politics and Space in East Asia's Cities

Gregory Bracken and Jonathan D. Solomon

Historian Joel Kotkin sees urban areas as having performed three basic functions from their very earliest origins: the creation of sacred space, the provision of security, and the siting of marketplaces. It is interesting, therefore, that the Chinese term for a city is *cheng shi*, *cheng* meaning wall and *shi* marketplace.

The *cheng*, or city wall, was what separated the city from its rural hinterland. It differentiated the urban from the rural. The *shi*, or marketplace, was considered something of a necessary evil in Confucian society, which had a particular disdain for any kind of trade. Markets, along with temples, also low on the Confucian hierarchy, tended to be placed on a city's periphery. Older Chinese cities were simply referred to by the term *cheng*, as in *Beijing cheng*, which while old-fashioned does not sound alien to the Chinese ear. The Chinese, it seems, made little or no distinction between the terms 'wall' and 'city', using them as if they were interchangeable, one denoting the other. With the disappearance of city walls from Chinese cities in the twentieth century, the term *cheng* seems to have fallen out of use; it is now more common to refer to cities as *shi*, as in *Shanghai shi*, or *Beijing shi*. The city, once a bulwark of traditional values, has become an institution for trade and exchange.

In the Western tradition, the city has long been a place for abandoning traditional social hierarchies. *Statsluft macht Frei* – 'city air makes you free' was the medieval German shorthand for the law

allowing freedom for serfs who lived a year and a day in the city, or off the fields. The mercantile city offers such a promise today in rising Asian economies, where migrant workers flock to urban centres in search of liberation from rural toil. Yet all are not free after a year and a day: significant legal and cultural hurdles, such as China's *hukou* system, which convey unequal rights on rural and urban residents, and resist integration for newcomers to Asia's growing cities.

In 2010, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden, the Delft School of Design (DSD), and the University of Hong Kong convened a workshop to share new forms of public space in Asia. The goal of this workshop was to explore new uses of traditional spaces or entirely new forms of public space; make comparisons that engage the historical processes in the development of urban form; compare new political or cultural frameworks for the development and use of space; and identify future opportunities for and threats to public space in Asian cities.

The common challenge faced by the region's otherwise diverse cultures, economies, and geographies is rapid growth. Asia is growing in population, and its economies are among the fastest growing in the world. Growth in cities occurs when migrants move in and when sprawling cities expand outwards. Bangkok added 2.5 million residents between 1990 and 2010 as rural residents moved to the city to find work. In 1997, Chongqing expanded its

municipal boundaries, ballooning from a megacity of 15 million residents to a mega-region of 30 million. Asia's urban growth in the past two decades has, in contrast to the United States' post-war dispersion, been accompanied by strong desires to be in the centre. Centralization, while it has the benefit of encouraging density, poses severe challenges to mobility and health. This has been the case in emerging economies like China and Thailand where rural to urban migration holds out the promise of a better life, and in advanced economies in stasis such as Korea and Japan, where an ageing and depopulating countryside stands in stark contrast to ever-growing cities.

Beijing has nearly doubled its population in two decades, adding 9 million residents between 1990 and 2010. To accommodate this growth the city extended a historically centralized urban plan. Beijing built a series of four ring roads outside the Forbidden City and the former city wall (considered the first and second rings), sprawling into its suburban hinterlands. The centralized model has maintained the prominence of Tiananmen Square and the political and cultural heart of the city and nation, but at the cost of extraordinary strain on the city's mobility. During heavy rains in June 2011, when portions of the network were blocked and subways were closed by floods, traffic around the city became so unmanageable residents were unable to return home to the periphery from their workplaces in the centre.

Space and politics are inexorably entangled in societies strained by growth, whether directly or indirectly. The case of Hong Kong is exemplary and instructive. Now looking back on 15 years of Chinese rule characterized by economic prosperity but increasing strain on the environment and quality of life, the city is struggling with its identity as a space of freedom and exchange. Having grown historically from a military outpost to a post-war metropolis through an influx of refugees fleeing

upheaval in China in the 1950s and 1960s, The city faced an entirely new influx of Chinese residents after 1997; empowered both financially and politically, this population influx is setting off a politics of *shi* and *cheng* increasingly played out in the occupation of the city's existing public spaces and the planning of new ones.

Public space has become both the territory and the subject of Hong Kong's contemporary urban politics. In 2006, protesters, largely youths of the so-called Post-80s generation, had to be forcibly removed from the site of the Central Star Ferry Pier, a landmark that was eventually demolished for a new roadway. Though not successful at saving the Pier, the protests dramatically changed the relationship between the Hong Kong Government and the public in discussions on development, public space, and cultural identity. The government plans to erect an escalator on Pound Lane, a hillside street passing the city's first public park, have met with organized neighbourhood opposition. Advocates in the Pound Lane Concern Group organize picnics and art exhibitions on the street, contributing political activity to the rich range of informal uses they seek to preserve in the district. In different ways the Star Ferry protests and the Pound Lane Concern Group are both examples of resistance to the *shi*, or market forces driving development, but both embrace the *shi* of free exchange in ideas. Both seek to establish a *cheng*, or defence of the city's social space for the breathing of 'free air'.

The Conflict between *Cheng* and *Shi* in Hong Kong

On 10 September 2012, police-court officers evicted a group of anti-capitalism protesters calling themselves Occupy Hong from the plaza below the HSBC Headquarters in Central Hong Kong, bringing a 306-day encampment to an end. The action went all but unnoticed, as it coincided with the culmination of a week of protests throughout the city. Focused on the new Hong Kong Legislative

Council (LegCo) headquarters complex on the shores of Victoria Harbour, crowds estimated by the organizers at 100,000 (and 27,000 by the police) gathered on roads, footbridges and on the grounds of the complex itself to protest against the forced implementation of a new curriculum for Hong Kong schoolchildren extolling the achievements of the Chinese Communist Party. The protests, which largely dispersed when the city's Chief Executive C.Y. Leung relented on some aspects of the plan, were, like the Occupy movement, an expression of the struggle between the social contract implicit in the Confucian *cheng* and the freedom of exchange embodied by the capitalist *shi*. Occupy protesters demonstrated against the dominance of the *shi*, or global market, and deterioration of the *cheng*, of social contract. Anti-National Education protesters demonstrate for *shi*, free exchange of ideas, and against the imposition of a dominant and to many still foreign *cheng*, or dominant ideology.

The LegCo protests were all the more meaningful because they centred on a spatial product of the city's political development after the handover. Referred to as the Tamar Complex, after a British Naval Vessel that used to dock in the berth reclaimed from the harbour for its construction, opened in 2011. The former council chambers had been located in the old High Court building, facing Statue Square, a remnant of the colonial era, perpendicular to an axis running north from Government House, under the atrium of the HSBC Headquarters to the Central Star Ferry Piers and by extension to London and the seat of colonial authority. With its colonnade and dome, and relationship to the square, the High Court site established known relationships between the public and the city's major government and financial institutions. The Tamar site in contrast is inaccessible by the public save for a few elevated footbridges. In place of a square, a sloping lawn passes through the complex's main architectural feature: a gate formed by two office blocks topped by a sky bridge. Designed by local architect Rocco

Yim, the Tamar site makes use of glass façades and asymmetrical forms more commonly associated with an office park than a seat of government. With the destruction of the Star Ferry Piers and relocation of LegCo, a new axis is developed through the gate of the Tamar site, over the sloping lawn and across Victoria Harbour to the new terminus of the Express Rail lines to China, with 350-kph service to Beijing set to open in 2015.

Transport and trade aggravate the conflict between *shi* and *cheng* in Hong Kong. On 15 September 2012, local residents of Sheung Shui, near Hong Kong's border with the Chinese city Shenzhen, protested at the village train station against mainland Chinese smugglers, or 'parallel goods traders', who cross the border several times daily to buy and transport goods to the north. Focusing on luxury goods available without the mainland's high import taxes and food products perceived as safer than those available on the mainland, such as powdered infant formula and the Hong-Kong manufactured Japanese yogurt drink Yakult, this cross border trade is both illegal and inconvenient for local residents who have taken to referring to the mainland interlopers as 'locusts' – a pestilence. The protests at Sheung Shui included bitter exchanges between Hong Kong and mainland residents, including a group of Hong Kongers waving the territory's colonial flag in a clear jibe to Beijing. The parallel goods traders are also an expression of the tension between *shi* and *cheng*: mainland Chinese seek the freedom of Hong Kong's *shi*, or markets; while Hong Kong protesters struggle to defend their rights to define the city's *cheng*, or identity and social codes.

Assertions of rights to *shi* and *cheng* in Hong Kong are linked to growth and to the movement of populations and how this effects space in different ways. In 2010, 45 per cent of babies born in Hong Kong were to mainland women, many of whom are 'birth tourists': they come to the city to give birth and bestow coveted Hong Kong residency

on their children. Even shortly before taking office in 2012, Chief Executive Leung announced that mainland women would not be permitted to give birth in Hong Kong unless they were married to a legal permanent resident or held a valid work visa. The city also capped births by non-local women in public hospitals. While mainland mums fill the city's hospital beds, mainland money has driven a speculative real-estate market that is out-pricing local residents. On 30 August 2012, Leung announced that his administration would begin drafting laws to restrict the sale of housing to foreigners. At the same time, to accommodate growing numbers of mainland residents and joint business ventures, the Leung administration is pursuing plans for a New Town in the city's northwest New Territories, close to the Chinese border. Critics have objected to these plans on the basis that they are being developed for the needs of mainlanders and not for local residents. Hong Kongers seek to protect their rights to the physical space of the city, to erect a *cheng* against the forces of Chinese investment, an intrusive *shi*. All issues that are relevant to Hong Kong, to China, and to the wider Asian context in which they find themselves.

Future Publics: The Papers

We now turn to the papers in this special issue of *Footprint*, beginning with David Grahame Shane's 'Asian Public Space Since 1945: From Mao to the Mall and Beyond', which tracks the retreat of the European imperial space systems as Asian nations gained independence and the multicentre, global corporate system of public space began to emerge between 1990 and 2008. Fitting seamlessly into his distinguished oeuvre, Shane's survey tracks the specifically Asian rural-urban space-making system of urban villages that has emerged from the long cultural continuity in and around Asian cities. His paper examines four models of urban space: the Metropolis, the Megalopolis, the Fragmented Metropolis, and the Megacity/Metacity, and posits how different actors hybridize and mix models at

different times and in different places, something that can be seen in the Asian city with its spatial heterogeneity and also its great resilience and varied capacity for innovation at multiple scales.

Paper two, '(Recovering) China's Urban Rivers as Public Space', by Kelly Shannon and Chen Yiyong, deals with something that is not normally thought of as public space: the river. Beginning with a brief overview of some of the canonical geography classics, including a summary of Wittfogel's 'hydraulic civilisation', this fascinating paper highlights the revered role rivers once held in China. Important for transport, defence, and livelihoods, they also demanded respect, as they represented profits, power, and danger. Four historical cases testify to the fact that China's great cities were settled on riverbanks and developed in tandem with floodplain dynamics. With industrialization and technological development there was a growing disconnect between waterways and these settlements. Canalization fundamentally altered the nature of rivers, often becoming physical, cultural, and economic dividers, sometimes even simply open sewers. There has been a rediscovery of Chinese riverscapes in recent years and this paper illustrates three recent interventions by design firm Turenscape where the cities of Ningbo, Kunming and Qian'an have begun to recover the urban, scenic, cultural, and functional nature of their rivers.

Gregory Bracken's 'The Shanghai Alleyway House: A Threatened Typology' is another paper that sees dereliction turning into revitalization, and the hope that that might bring for the future of what he calls the 'Shanghai alleyway house'. This house type, unique to Shanghai, was a rich and vibrant generator of street life. Occupying the ambiguous space between the traditional Chinese courtyard house and the street, its system of 'graduated privacy' (a term coined by Nelson I. Wu) ensured a safe and neighbourly place to live. Due to rapid redevelopment in recent decades in this city, this

once ubiquitous typology is under threat. This paper takes a look at the history of the typology as well as at three recent redevelopments of it in the city: Xintiandi, Jian Ye Li, and Tianzifang, and asks what future there can be for a typology that seems to have outlived its usefulness.

Xing Ruan's elegantly argued piece, 'The Temperament of a City: A Postscript to Post-Olympic Beijing', posits two kinds of amazement in art and architecture: one, which relies on the ingenuity of artifice to arouse feelings of enchantment; and the other, which causes awe-inspiring ecstasy through the shock of the new. Beijing, especially with recent spectacles such as the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, falls into this latter category, but does this prove that the city has been reinvented? Dwelling on these two kinds of amazement this paper examines two pairs of showcase buildings recently built in the city: Terminal 3 of the Beijing International Airport and the Olympic Tennis Centre, versus the Olympic Stadium and the CCTV Tower. What do these buildings say about Beijing and its temperament, if it has one? Which leads the author to an even more provocative question: Is it actually possible to reinvent a city once its temperament has been formed?

The fifth paper is Jason Carlow's '[Re]Forming Public Space: A Critique of Hong Kong's Park Governance through Architectural Intervention', which critiques the Hong Kong government's somewhat too rigid approach to regulating public space, such as parks. It offers four designs as an antidote, interventions for Tuen Mun Park by architecture students from the University of Hong Kong.

'War, Trade, and Desire: Urban Design and the Counter Public Spheres of Bangkok', by Brian McGrath, examines what the author calls an 'emergent public sphere' in Bangkok in an effort to reveal the gap between the ideals of public space, as a representation of power, nationhood, and

modernity, versus its social production in everyday political struggles. It looks at the location of the city's recent political demonstrations, which shifted in 2010 from the more usual Ratchadamnoen Avenue to the Ratchaprasong intersection, the heart of Bangkok's upmarket shopping district. This provocative and thought-provoking paper argues that Bangkok's historical cycles of blood and massacre in its streets could lead to the possibility of finding new forms of urban design and, as a result, a public sphere that has not yet been imagined by the West.

The final paper in this volume is Tang Lian and Ding Wowo's 'A Tentative Approach to Mapping Street Space: A Case Study of Chinese Central Urban Districts'. This is part of an ongoing PhD research into something that is often overlooked in discussions of public space: namely signage. Focussing on an exploration of a quantitative approach to mapping street space, which the authors regard as the most common type of urban public space, they claim that the characteristics of street space can hardly be described and explained using only a description and analysis of traditional architectural forms, especially in modern cities. They see a difficulty arising because of the lack of relevance between these forms and people's activities in them, which presents a challenge to traditional mapping methods. Therefore, they suggest that an expansion of mapping elements could be a viable path to follow. But this presents the researcher with the problem of deciding which element would be the most effective, and how it should be measured and mapped. Bearing in mind the characteristics of Chinese cities, the authors have chosen to use interface signs as their experimental element in this paper. They selected a large area in central Nanjing and analysed the distribution and physical characteristics of interface signs and pedestrian flows to produce a database and statistical analysis of these. This is a rigorously scientific approach to measuring something that is usually considered ineffable and hard to define, namely what public

space constitutes. The research's point of departure is theoretical, but its scientific approach is showing some promising results. Whether these signs are actually the cause or the effect of certain streets' dynamism still has to be shown, but we invite you, the reader, to keep an open mind as you explore this, and indeed all the issues presented here.

Notes

First of all we would like to thank all the participants in the Shanghai seminar in 2011. We would also like to say a special thank you to Xing Ruan, whose idea this publication was, and we owe a special debt of gratitude to Gerhard Bruyns, Patrick Healy, Manon Osseweijer, Lara Schrijver, and Andy Fuller.

Biographies

Dr Gregory Bracken is a lecturer and studio master at the Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology, and a founding member of the *Footprint* editorial board. He is also a research fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden, where he co-founded (with Dr Manon Osseweijer) the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA). He has recently set up the Asia Research Cluster (ARC) at the TU Delft with the aim of facilitating the study of Asia's architecture and urban environment.

Jonathan D. Solomon is Associate Dean at the School of Architecture at Syracuse University. His work explores public space and the contemporary city, through design projects such as Ooi Botos Gallery, a shop-house in a Hong Kong street market converted into a gallery for contemporary Chinese photographic art; research projects such as his 2004 book *13 Projects for the Sheridan Expressway*, the 26th volume in the Pamphlet Architecture series; curatorial projects such as 2010's Workshopping in the US Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale; and publication projects through 306090 books, where he has served as a founding editor since 2001. Solomon has taught design at the City College of New York and, as a Banham Fellow, at the University at Buffalo, as well as the University of Hong Kong, where he led the Department of Architecture as Acting Head from 2009 to 2012. He is a licensed architect in the State of Illinois and Member of the American Institute of Architects.