Remaking places and fashioning an opposition discourse: struggle over the Star Ferry pier and the Queen’s pier in Hong Kong

Agnes Shuk-mei Ku
Division of Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Clear Water Bay, Hong Kong, China; e-mail: soagnes@ust.hk
Received 8 December 2009; in revised form 30 March 2011

Abstract. The paper integrates spatial analysis with dynamic discourse analysis to look at the interplay among discourse, agency, and spatial practices in the social production of space. It examines the dual process of place making and discursive formation with regard to the campaigns over the Star Ferry pier and the Queen’s pier in Hong Kong in 2006–07. Drawing on and extending Lefebvre’s theory, which asserts the priority of space over language, I argue that social movement presents a case of reappropriation of space that is intended to be read and lived interactively. The two case studies show that the events became vehicles for oppositional ideas and practices that gradually crystallised into a counterdiscourse of people’s space in the process of remaking places from below. The dynamic discourse analysis focuses on the contestatory process of multivocal claims and interpretations among the activists, the media, and the government regarding memory, history, living space, and agency. The spatial analysis sheds light on the material embodiment of meanings in places as well as the activists’ tactics and actions. The interplay between discourse and spatiality is registered in how one informed or prefigured the other’s development, how action-guiding narratives were recounted in spatial terms, and how the activists enacted the agency of the narratives in and through the places. I conclude that the struggle underscores the rise of a new social movement in society.

Keywords: opposition discourse, spatial practices, place making, social movement, people’s space

Introduction
In Hong Kong an ideology of developmentalism has long underpinned the government’s strategy toward actualising a modern global city. Upon entering the 21st century, a new wave of preservation movements has given rise to new values that are grounded more in history, culture, and space. Amongst others, the campaigns against the demolition of the Star Ferry pier and the Queen’s pier in 2006 and 2007, respectively, deserve special attention. These events bespeak deep-seated conflict between two divergent approaches to urban space by the government and the emerging preservation advocates. The former increasingly promotes capital accumulation and urban entrepreneurialism at the expense of local cultures and histories (Harvey, 1996; Jessop, 2002; Ku, 2010; Ku and Tsui, 2008; Lefebvre, 1991; Urry, 1995). In opposition, local residents and activists resisted by defending local places as lived spaces. The significance of these places, rather than already predetermined, often entails a process of social construction of meanings (Harvey, 1996). In the case of the two piers a multitude of actors were involved seeking to restore meaning to places through divergent and changing appeals and practices. In the process the events became a vehicle for oppositional ideas and practices that gradually crystallised into a counterdiscourse of people’s space vis-à-vis the dominant ideology.

The events unfolded not only a process of place making from below but also the formation of an opposition discourse. Lefebvre’s theory of the social production of space, especially with regard to the ideas of lived space and appropriation, is useful in orienting our analysis in such a direction. Yet, while it presents a strong argument regarding space under a Marxist framework, it tends to underscore space over discourse and power over resistance. It therefore stops short of explaining the interactive
role of discourse and spatiality in social activism. From the perspective of social movement, a spatial analysis of contentious politics could shed light on the contested use of space (Tilly, 2000; Wilton and Cranford, 2002; Zajko and Beland, 2008), whereas a discursive analysis could bring to light the cultural dynamics in meaning construction (Bakhtin, 1981; Spillman, 1995; Steinberg, 1998; 1999). Much of the current discussion, nonetheless, deals with spatial and discursive issues separately rather than looking at their interplay in the production of and contestation over space. This paper examines the two campaigns in Hong Kong with regard to the interactive process of spatial reappropriation and discursive reformation. My discussion integrates spatial analysis with dynamic discourse analysis to illuminate the interplay among discourse, agency, and spatial practices in the process of opposition.

City as abstract space: capital, entrepreneurialism, and state bureaucracy

Following Lefebvre, scholars consider the power-geometry of spatial relations in the context of capitalist development (Harvey, 1989; Massey, 1993; Soja, 1989; Stillerman, 2006). The capitalist state today increasingly extends abstract conceived space in the interest of competitive global capital. In Hong Kong this process has been particularly acute. The British colonial rule turned Hong Kong virtually into an economic city, and the legacy endures. The city may be characterised as a land regime, under which the government derives its revenue mainly from land sales as well as taxation from land development. The distinctive urban political economy of Hong Kong, according to Cuthbert, lies in that “the monopoly ownership of all land by the State combined with the principle of sale by auction to the highest bidder set the context for super-profits on land both by the Government and finance capital generally” (1984, page 154). Without instituting a democratic political structure, the government has minimised statutory processes regarding macrolevel planning while maximising its own discretionary power. To boost the public coffers, the governments, past and present, have primarily pursued a reclamation-led urban development strategy for land supply (Ng and Cook, 1997). In particular, with the vision of a global city, the focus has been on expanding the central business district in Central. A first Territorial Development Strategy was formulated in 1984, then reviewed and updated in 1989, which laid the foundation for subsequent developments to improve transport infrastructure facilities and enhance the role of Hong Kong as a regional financial centre. The idea has translated into a set of spatial practices that include massive reclamation, land being rezoned for commercial use, the constant building and rebuilding of super-high-rise commercial buildings, and the expansion of roads and transportation. Within a hypercapitalist mode of production, moreover, heritage preservation is often considered an undesirable interference in the operation of the land market. Culturally and politically, preservation of old (colonial) buildings could become an emotionally charged issue under the rubric of nationalism (Cuthbert, 1984). This is reinforced under a bureaucratic system that privileges efficiency over participation and technocratic standards over cultural vision. With such a state of affairs, the cityscape displays a culture of disappearance—that is, the city shows few place-specific characteristics and is left with few critical memories of the past (Abbas, 1997).

To many Hong Kong people, Victoria Harbour is at the heart of the city’s identity both locally and globally. The name Hong Kong literally means ‘fragrant harbour’. By the mid-1990s, however, more than half of the harbour’s original 6500 hectares were already lost through reclamation, and the distance between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula was reduced from 2300 to 920 metres. By 2006 the first two phases of the reclamation project that was started in 1999 were complete, and the third phase that covered the area inclusive of the two pier was about to start. Star Ferry pier and
Queen’s pier were to make way for a massive shopping centre and a road linking Sheung Wan and Wan Chai, respectively. Prior to 2006 some preservation groups had already initiated action to try to protect the harbour. The Conservancy Association, for instance, had been an advocate of minimum harbour reclamation since 1989. The mid-1990s saw the further formation of a citywide campaign by the newly formed Society for the Protection of the Harbour, which bore fruit with the legislation of the Harbour Protection Ordinance. The society expeditiously took the case to court under the jurisdiction of the new ordinance. The government publicly pledged that it would undertake no future reclamation, apart from projects already under way in Central, Wanchai, and southeast Kowloon. The society’s legal bid ended in partial success only—success over Wanchai but not over Central. In the court proceedings the government based their case on an overriding public need on the ground to relieve traffic congestion (without mentioning the massive property development or other projects). This put an end to the struggle against reclamation through litigation in 2004. However, in July 2006 the struggle was resurrected by some new actors through noninstitutional means.

Despite opposition, the government made a steadfast decision to demolish the Star Ferry pier (while mimicking it in a nearby location) and to relocate the Queen’s pier. It bespeaks of a bureaucratic—economistic mode of governance that takes land as mere abstract space for the maximisation of economic and administrative interests with little regard for cultural or social concerns. This can be demonstrated in a number of ways. Firstly, the government adhered to a dated perception of heritage that had not changed for over three decades, which considered only the archaeological and historical attributes of individual buildings. Secondly, the government considered preservation secondary to economic development. As the Chief Executive Donald Tsang said in a radio programme in January 2007, “[w]e cannot afford heritage preservation if we do not preserve our economic sustainability”, and “continued economic prosperity depends on new buildings being built and old ones replaced.” He put development and conservation concerns in conflicting terms and subordinated the latter to the former. This reflects an ideology of developmentalism as the predominant train of thought. In the same vein, the government also made a claim of cost-effectiveness (that is, to delay demolition work would incur huge costs). Thirdly, the government reiterated that the reclamation plan had undergone years of consultation and proper legislative procedures, and despite changes in public opinion, it would not entertain digressing from the decision on the grounds of proceduralism.

Urban activism: interplay between discourse and spatiality, between memory and present struggle

The history of urban struggle in Hong Kong has run parallel with economic development in different phases (Chiu and Lui, 2000; England and Rear, 1975; Ku and Pun, 2004; Lam, 2004). Workers’ strikes, tinged with nationalism, prevailed in the first half of the 20th century. The subsequent decades witnessed changes from such class-cum-nationalistic conflicts to a greater concern about local issues among the local-born population. In particular, the late 1960s and 1970s were a period of

(1) According to Chu Hoi Dick, a citizen reporter and activist, the government would build the People’s Liberation Army a berth in the new waterfront based on a defence agreement signed between Britain and China in 1994. Together with this, the future Central waterfront would be composed of four symbolic landmarks: the International Financial Centre, a 400-metre ground scraper shopping mall, the new government headquarters, and the People’s Liberation Army berth. Chu published an article in a newspaper (Ming Pao, 29 April 2007), but the issue was not raised in the news as the government did not release any detailed plan.
burgeoning student and urban activism around housing and other livelihood issues. In this period the goals of the movements were mostly material, class based, and short-term, while preservation remained largely a nonissue except for a few disparate campaigns (Lee, 2002). During the political transition in the 1980s and 1990s capitalism continued to reign, and an ideology of developmentalism gained further sway. However, towards the late 1990s the intensified process of global urban development began to backfire. The launch of massive redevelopment and reclamation plans in Central and Wanchai provided the backdrop for the rise of a new breed of urban activism among a small bunch of architects, urban planners, community workers, and preservation groups. This new breed of urban activism raised a host of new claims regarding living space, community, history, and local identity that challenged the values embodied in the dominant ideology of developmentalism, which were quite different from the specific, materialistic claims of social movements in the past. Western scholars coined the term “new social movements” to characterise such culture-based or identity-based actions, differentiated from the conventional class-based and economically oriented protests (Melucci, 1985; Offe, 1985; Touraine, 1985).

How to explain the new movements in the context of Hong Kong? Some scholars attribute them to the half-reformed electoral political system that alienates civil society from mainstream politics (Kuah-Pearce and Guiheux, 2009). While this explanation carries a grain of truth, it does not account for the rise of the preservation movement in particular. In the cases under study the movement gave rise to an opposition discourse of people’s space that outgrew its initial claims. As my analysis shows, the movement resulted in part from a dynamic interplay between discourse and spatiality with regard to new claims and new issues, and in part from the participants’ conscious efforts to revive a tradition of local activism in changing contexts, which also entailed discursive and spatial practices.

Discursively, new values and ideas guided collective action while they were themselves subject to changing and contested articulations in the process of action. The spatiality of the struggle also played a critical role in shaping the process. Much of the new urban activism was place bound, and each campaign was distinctive in regards to the specific qualities of the places being reconstructed. As for the two piers, their sociocultural significance was largely untapped before the two campaigns in 2006 and 2007. The actions prior to 2006 were framed more generally in terms of anti-reclamation and protection of the harbour on a macropolicy level. The harbour was considered a natural asset to the city as well as a badge of collective identity, but little was known of the unique history and value of the two piers or the space around them. The renewed struggle in 2006 and 2007 was as much about forging a new understanding of urban space in general and commemorating and protecting the piers as particular places of value.

According to Lefebvre, diversion or reappropriation of space opens up the possibility of the production of new spaces (1991, page 167). He cites the case of Les Halles Centrales in Paris, a former wholesale produce market that had outlived its original purpose by 1969–71, which was then transformed into a gathering place and a setting for permanent festivities. However, Lefebvre does not discuss how such reappropriation informed or was informed by a new code, language, or discourse that contributed to the rise of a new spatial code in a particular context. Regarding the relations between space and language, Lefebvre asserts the irreducibility of space as well as its priority over language. That is, although space may to some extent be read as signs from a semiotic perspective, nonverbal signs such as gestures and performance embrace a spatiality that is irreducible to language. In all cases spaces are over-inscribed in that they are produced and lived in by people before they are read, except
those in which space is produced especially to be read, as is the case for monumental buildings (page 143).

From the case studies I nonetheless ascertain that social movement presents a case of reappropriation of space that is intended to be read and lived simultaneously. That is, the principles of discourse and space articulate interactively with each other to produce a new spatial code that shapes and is shaped by numerous practices relating to the use of space. Regarding the two piers, the movement participants demanded preservation-in-situ from beginning to end. At stake was whether or not sacrosanct meanings were embodied in the places as well as the artefacts. Different participants depicted an array of meanings from varied cultural resources from within society to represent the piers as places of significance. As is shown, a folk spirit associated with the Star Ferry pier emerged in the first campaign, with a full-fledged discourse about people's space later developing as a continuation and extension. In particular, in the second campaign, as the activists found themselves having to confront the colonial and statist history associated with the Queen's pier, they reconstructed the meaning of the place from the perspective of the people in the dual sense of common folks and citizens. This development was made possible through the articulation of two sets of codes: namely, the code of living space and the code of activism. The former was a relatively new construction whereas the latter was informed by the history of social conflict. New agendas intersected with memories of past struggle in the current conflicts. From a dynamic discourse perspective, the disparate ideas that emerged from the struggle gradually amalgamated into the opposition discourse of people's space through a critical and contestatory engagement with the claims to memory, history, space, and agency. At the same time, from a spatial perspective, the ways the movement participants enacted and performed their bodily presence expressed, defined, and redefined the lived potentials of the place (Houston and Pulido, 2002; Sewell, 2001; Wilton and Cranford, 2002). Spatiality and verbal claims lent force to and prefigured each other interactively to remake places and shape new discourses simultaneously.

From a folk spirit in space to a popular discourse about the place
At the earliest stage of the campaign a folk perspective stressing the people's relations with the pier in their everyday life context was arising. A coherent set of ideas or codes was yet to come into shape, and it would appear that the space was first lived before it was read. From a discursive perspective, however, the mass media served as an agent of a popular discourse associated with the folk perspective, which created tension and ironically resulted in a new twist in the development of the opposition discourse.

The campaign over the Star Ferry pier in 2006 was kicked off by a few cultural workers around some disparate ideas like heritage, affection, and memory. In particular, the Star Ferry clock tower caught public imagination as a focal icon—a landmark—endearing to the Hong Kong people. In July 2006 a magazine, SEE Network, revealed a heritage value of the Star Ferry clock tower that was hitherto unknown to the public. The magazine, under Patsy Cheng, declared that the clock tower, which was a gift from Jardine Matheson in 1957, as the city's sole remaining antique mechanical clock, could be considered Hong Kong's version of the Big Ben of London. Its signature Westminster chimes reverberated throughout the surrounding area every quarter-hour. It represented the state-of-the-art in the design of mechanical timepieces before the onset of the digital revolution. As such, it was a working piece of art, and because of it, more people learned to appreciate the art and craft that went into making it a valuable clock. Following these early initiatives, Cheng organised an online campaign and held several workshops, which drew more people to the cause. From mid-August a loose group of artists and art students began to gather at the square adjacent to the pier every Sunday,
using participatory arts as a means to bring attention to the cause. They turned the place into a space of gathering, creativity, and performance for and by the people. Preservation groups such as the Conservancy Association, Society for Protection of the Harbour, and the Action Group on Protection of the Harbour later organised coastal walks, harbour cruises, and a carnival. These parallel activities drew crowds of people to the site.

A folk spirit was lived out on the pier, which via public appeal and visibility simultaneously turned the place into a spectacle to be read. The reading was subject to different interpretations by the agents of public discourse. Specifically, the mass media quickly picked up on the growing affective mood and propagated a discourse of collective memory with a sentimentalised appeal to nostalgia. Under the idea, the act of remembering took the forms of both an aggregation of individual memories and a recollection of the social history of the place (Olick, 1999). In particular, people’s fond memories associated with the clock tower were willingly shared by many. News reportage was filled with accounts of individuals’ intimate memories and feelings: “Fifty-year-old retiree Mrs Cheung tried hard to hold back her tears as she recalled the many romantic trips she took there with her late husband” (Chow, 2006). Apart from personal experience, people also recalled with pride the social history of the place as a special icon witnessing the development of the city from various aspects, including public transportation, movies, and literature.

As a verbal code, however, the idea of collective memory is like an empty signifier capable of holding different meanings. It could draw sympathy from those who supported the Save the Star Ferry pier cause and those who felt a sense of reminiscence about its sealed fate. As such, it became a two-edged sword. On the one side, many people lamented the loss of a place through such memorial events as farewell boat rides. On the other side, the movement participants continued with their campaign to save the pier. On the last day of the ferry service, more than fifteen thousand people attended a candle-lit vigil organised by SEE Network to maintain their resistance. As it developed, it was due to the tensions among the disparate appeals that some movement participants began to configure a discursive shift from a nostalgic, past-oriented framework about a place to a present-oriented perspective regarding living space.

**Tensions and shifts: contesting collective memory and reclaiming spatiality**

What is collective memory? This notion has gained increasing popularity in recent years. From a discursive perspective it became a ready rhetorical ploy by people with divergent views, which carried different spatial implications. In the case of the Star Ferry pier, the Secretary for Housing, Planning, and Lands Michael Suen reasoned that it was impossible to preserve the clock tower where it was but could blend it into the future design of the Central waterfront because “the most valuable part of the clock tower is the collective memory” while the developers did not have high regard for its architecture (Lai, 2006a). In other words, Suen appropriated the notion of collective memory to suggest that the tower was just a symbol of memory with little architectural value, while the symbol of memory itself could be relocated, recreated, or even replicated. In this way, the government appropriated the notion with a despatialised and dematerialised twist. As it happens, the new pier, built on some reclaimed land nearby, mimicked the old-fashioned style with a new clock emanating electronic chimes. In terms of style, it presented a simulation of past traditions and childhood fantasies, just as one would find in a Disney-like theme park (Featherstone, 1993).

---

(2) As a theoretical concept, scholars have used it to underline an intricate process of narrating the past of a community (Casey, 1987; Gillis, 1994; Halbwachs, 1980 [1950]; Olick and Levy, 1997).
This was another good illustration of disappearance in Abbas’s sense. The question at the heart of the debate was, is there not anything in and about the place—with its original artefact—that could become a valuable collective memory for our future generations?

The multivocality of the idea of collective memory gave rise to new interpretations by various actors, which helped push the movement in some new directions. On the one hand, it served to buttress the claim that the clock tower, as well as the pier, should be preserved at its original site. The idea was that the collective memory should be inscribed in a form of spatiality that honoured history and respected people’s living environment. In this regard, spatiality was being reclaimed through a discourse that stressed historical and living connection. The agenda of architecture, history, and space, as different from the earlier appeals of heritage, memory, and affection, began to get greater prominence. For example, architects rebuked the government by saying that the clock tower showed the unique architectural style and simple geometry of the English Edwardian period at the height of modernism. Cultural critics asserted that the pier together with the clock tower exemplified the characteristics of an era and should be preserved for future generations. Preservationists added that the people’s memory was place bound—that is, tied in with the entire building of the pier rather than just the clock tower (Betty Ho of the Conservancy Association; cited by Lai, 2006a). In the same vein, cultural workers stressed the landmark value of the pier for the people:

“The pier building is our landmark, it served ordinary Hong Kong people; it is one of the best representations of local culture” (Ho Loy; cited by Lai, 2006b).

Beyond the pier itself, more and more people began to perceive the entire area as integral to the spatial history, structure, and experience of the society as well as its people, with the Star Ferry pier, the Queen’s pier, and the City Hall forming a trinity making an open area—the Edinburgh Place. In spite of the colonial character of the architecture, public discourse focused on its local, everyday relationships with the city as well as the people:

“It is a historical product of the cumulative wisdom of our predecessors who made the natural and human environment into one integrated whole; it embodies the story of the city of Hong Kong being Hong Kong; and it is also a site where the Hong Kong people have accumulated life experiences through bits and pieces. It bears the footprints of individuals having lived in this city and of an epoch” (Ming Pao 2 December 2006, author’s translation).

Apparently, the issue was not just about memory but also about space, culture, and identity embodied in the idea of a landmark. As the movement participants demanded, the historical and social values of the place should be preserved in situ.

On the other hand, it was in the midst of contestation that a discursive shift took place in the movement. The activists kept a critical distance from the popular notion of collective memory and yet retained a folk perspective in interpreting the relations between the past and the present. A banner read: “Our Hong Kong story landmark is vanishing; we don’t want a clock in a museum, we just want living history.” The idea of living history marked a departure from the better known understanding of collective memory and its popular usage. It underlined the importance of grounding the symbol of memory in everyday life and, in this case, in a place that was part of the people’s everyday life.

At the same time, as public discourse continued to dig into the past, the threads of historical memories appeared to look pluralistic rather than singular. Irwin-Zarecka (1989) distinguishes among three conceptual approaches to “memory work”—namely, the nostalgic mode, the critical approach, and the instrumental mode. Among the three, the critical approach involves a reflexive understanding of the past as well as its
relations with the present, as different from pure sentimentalism or instrumentalism. In the campaign over the Star Ferry pier the idea of collective memory unwittingly opened up a discursive space for looking to the past for more stories, which provided cultural resources for a more critical mode of remembering. One past incident in particular was recalled, associated with the mass riot in 1966. On 4 April 1966 a twenty-five-year-old man So Sau-chong staged a hunger strike outside the Star Ferry concourse in protest against a fare increase of 5 cents to use the ferry. He was arrested the next day, prompting thousands of young people to take to the streets in a mass riot. This event provoked the first mass protests involving many young people confronting a local issue, which subsequently led to a host of social reforms by the colonial government. One popular newspaper described the Star Ferry pier as having once been the “seedbed of social activism” (Apple Daily 11 November 2006).

Was the Star Ferry pier a place of social affection, a seedbed of social activism, or nothing but a pier? While histories were embedded in the place, it was the acts of reading, remembering, and interpreting that defined and redefined its meaning in the present context. That is, the same space could be read and remembered differently. The 1966 riot was an almost forgotten event in popular memory, but as we shall see in the second campaign over the Queen’s pier, it was summoned up again by the movement participants to define the place as being tied to a tradition of activism in local history. The mode of remembering was more critical than nostalgic (or arguably both critical and nostalgic). This reading in turn gave rise to different spatial practices. In analytical terms, such changes were mediated through the rise of a new form of political agency that constituted a different articulation of discourse and spatiality.

The rise of a new political agency: improvising in space and prefiguring a new discourse

In mid-December 2006 the movement accidentally took a radical turn. It was in part a product of the activists responding to the government’s imperious measures and in part because of new actors joining the scene and taking up more active roles. In early December the government suddenly took action to barricade the pier and surround it with scaffolding. The imperious measures led to a standoff. Within civil society the government’s moves provoked a united opposition on varied fronts among conservation and environmental groups, academics, the cultural sectors, and some legislators. A new form of political agency emerged in the process of action that began to turn the place from a mere icon of affection and memory to a site of citizenship and resistance. This accidental breed of activism, which entailed such spatial forms as encroachment and transgression, prefigured some changes in the discursive-cum-spatial strategy in the next campaign.

In early December a few activists had entered the barricaded site and staged a marathon sit-in protest. They climbed the clock tower and rang the clock bell. It was the first gesture of spatial encroachment. Tensions accelerated after SEE Network disclosed in a press conference on 11 December that the government covered up some internal discussions within the Antiquities Advisory Board(4) which put into serious doubt the credibility of the government’s decision. Both sides were racing

(3) His actions drew sympathy from some members of the public, and eleven young people joined the hunger strike. Riots broke out after Mr So was arrested for the protest on 5 April. About 430 people were detained, and Mr So was charged with causing obstruction and disturbance. But the protest was effective because the Star Ferry later limited the fare rise to the first-class section and exempted children under sixteen and students.

(4) The board received a government environmental impact assessment report in 2001 that affirmed the value of the piers and alerted the board of potential social discontent should the government demolish them, but the assessment was never made known to the public.
against time, and the different spatial strategies used by the two parties reflected a power differential. On 12 December the government dismantled the iconic symbol by sending in a construction crew to remove the clock face from the tower. This was a manifestation of state power by means of coercive force. On the opposite side several dozen people came to the scene bare handed and improvised on the spot, using their bodies to form a human chain at the entrance to stop the construction machine from entering the site. Some ten to twenty protesters further broke through a cordon of policemen and construction crew and occupied the construction site. More police arrived to cordon off the protesters and the latter were trapped inside until the police removed them the next day. A demolition crew worked through the night to tear down the clock tower, which was smashed to pieces and then trashed in a landfill area. Confrontation escalated, and the movement underwent radicalisation in the process, which gave birth to a loose alliance among the participants subsequently called Local Action. This new alliance of activists was to take the lead in the ensuing struggle over the Queen’s pier.

Spatiality spurred action, networking, and mobilisation since much of the action by the protesters was unplanned. Some of them in fact did not participate in the earlier events at all, but once they were drawn into it, almost by accident, they took over the centre stage of the movement and steered the struggle towards more resistance and confrontation. The new actors were mobilised into the movement at different stages through an organic, flexible network via the Internet and cellular phones. As the event took a new turn in December, InMedia, which ran a website for independent and participatory journalism, provided an online platform that engaged discussion on the issues. The conflicts in mid-December broke out when circumstances teamed up with simmering discontent.

While spatiality accounted for the spontaneous formation of the new alliance, this alone could not explain the subsequent strategies, both spatial and discursive, of the movement. In fact, new ideas were nurtured and explored through the participants’ prior and continued engagements. Local Action consisted mostly of youngsters in their late twenties or early thirties, many of whom were affiliated with minor NGOs or were variously involved in the prodemocracy and other social movements. Through reflexive engagement in these movements, they sought to explore new agendas and experiment with new action repertoires in niches left open by conventional organisations and institutional politics. They also sought to engage in a direct, participatory form of action (Ip, 2007). In this light, it stands to reason that either ideas guided their spatial practices or that the interplay between ideas and spatiality shaped their subsequent movement strategies.

With regard to ideas and discourses, the meaning of people’s space—the everyday life space of ordinary people—remained at the heart of the movement’s agenda. This idea gained more ground in the latter stages of the Star Ferry pier campaign and drew further sustenance from the new group of actors. The new actors had previously nurtured and advocated similar ideas in prior campaigns over urban redevelopment issues. The struggle over Lee Tung Street (dubbed Wedding Card Street) in Wan Chai a few years before is a case in point. It involved a three-year effort by residents, shop owners, architects, town planners, social workers, and cultural critics who tried to save the street from destruction by the Urban Renewal Authority. Although it ended in defeat, an impetus for urban activism was fostered among the participants—one that aimed at halting the relentless demolition of the city’s open spaces. As activist Chan Kin-fai put it, the everyday space of the ordinary people was at stake:
“I wouldn't be at the Star Ferry pier if it hadn't been for Wedding Card Street. It gave me a solid foundation. My participation in the Star Ferry movement is a continuation of my concern for Hong Kong's cultural development and the problems caused by the development model. Both issues are about the life styles of ordinary people and the conservation of public space” (Lai, 2007a).

Likewise Chu Hoi-dick, an InMedia citizen reporter, had reported extensively about the Wedding Card Street case and other redevelopment projects in Sham Shui Po and Kwun Tong from the perspective of living space. In the process, as members of Local Action kept digging up information about the history of urban development in the city, they found that the whole design of the new waterfront was overlaid with intricate considerations of government interest, state power, and economic capital at the expense of living space. It was through these new actors that an opposition discourse/strategy was reconfigured with a deeper political meaning in the ensuing struggle over the Queen's pier.

**Fashioning and enacting a counterdiscourse of people's space**

The campaign over the Queen's pier presents the reappropriation of space by Local Action that was intended to be read and lived/performed simultaneously. Through their political agency, verbal claims and spatiality articulated with each other interactively to produce a new spatial code that contributed to the formation of an opposition discourse. As with the Star Ferry pier, the goal of Local Action was to preserve the Queen's pier in situ. Unlike the previous campaign, however, the struggle over the latter had to grapple with ways of negotiating the colonial history, as certain royal and political significance associated with the ex-colonial state were attached to the site. Drawing on and yet extending the ideas carried over from their previous experiences, the new group of movement participants redefined the meaning of the Queen's pier from the perspective of the people. Through varied symbolic, verbal, and spatial practices, they articulated and enacted a discourse of people's space in the dual sense of common folk and autonomous citizens. The latter underpinned a new form of political subjectivity rooted in civil society.

Discourse on its own is insufficient to demonstrate the diverse uses of space in the campaign, which ranged from protests to ceremonial and quasi-theatrical performances. Spatiality alone also cannot explain the added perspective of civil society that defined the people as citizens. In the following, I demonstrate how discourse and spatiality interacted through certain mechanisms in the production of the opposition code of people's space in the process. These mechanisms included, for instance, reconstructing meanings about the place from a society-centred perspective; grounding the role of the specific place in a larger social narrative that addressed the people as the subject; and acting or performing in the site in a capacity that (re)defined the subject or agent of the narrative. In short, narrative, place, subject and spatial practice were interwoven to produce new meanings, new textures, and new actions.

**Shifting from a state-centred to a society-centred perspective**

The final questions over Queen's pier concerned whether it was to be relocated or preserved in situ, while the underlying conflicts were different constructions of the significance (or insignificance) of the site. In March 2007 the government decided to disassemble the pier and rebuild it on a new site even before hearing from the Antiquities Advisory Board.(5) With support from the progovernment camp, it won (5) The government later appointed a number of younger members to the Antiquities Advisory Board who were more receptive to new ideas. The board affirmed the heritage value of the site in granting it a Grade I historical building status (albeit not defining it a declared monument). This new status made room for continued contestation.
enough votes at the Legislative Council panel meeting to seek initial funding for the action. The pier was officially closed on 26 April 2007. Using the conventional definition of heritage, the Secretary for Home Affairs reiterated that the pier did not possess the requisite historical, archaeological, or palaeontological significance to be declared a monument, and hence could be relocated.

The movement participants contested the government’s decision by engaging in a politics of meaning reconstruction about the site. This involved not only spatial reappropriation but also discursive choices regarding what perspective to adopt. The history of a place could be seen as embodying divergent meanings depending on the perspective taken. Under a statist framework, the pier merited a heritage status as the symbolic landing place for six former colonial governors after their arrival at the airport and also the first port of call for a host of British royals, including the Queen, over the past half century. Reporters and politicians defined the historical value of the pier from this perspective. Under a nationalistic framework, however, this could cause some embarrassment for the preservationist cause, as pro-Beijing forces ridiculed the pier as a remnant of colonialism. Resorting neither to a statist nor to a nationalistic framework, Local Action rendered a new interpretation of the site by shifting to the perspective of the society. From this perspective the users of the place were not so much state officials but the people as common folk and citizens. Apparently, Local Action was seeking to reclaim the site from the state to the people. To buttress this perspective, they drew on a preexisting narrative of Hong Kong’s identity and yet rearticulated its meanings pertinent to the spatial context of the new struggle. Then they further enacted specific spatial practices to reclaim the people’s right to the site.

**Reconstructing a place-specific narrative of Hong Kong identity**

In establishing a society-centred perspective pertaining to the Queen’s pier, Local Action constructed a narrative of the place—the entire area in general and the pier in particular—that was tied in with a larger narrative about Hong Kong’s development. That is, the history of a local place was encapsulated in the history of the city. In this way, the activists were at the same time reconstructing a place-specific, as well as time-specific, narrative about Hong Kong’s identity. They began the narrative from the 1960s and the 1970s. The development in this period marked the birth of local consciousness among a new generation of people who were born in Hong Kong (as opposed to the earlier migrant generations), who took the city to be their home and who grew up witnessing a fast growing economy that placed the city amongst the Four Little Asian Dragons. While the narrative of local identity was preexisting rather than being newly fabricated, the movement participants nonetheless added a spatial element to the narrative to highlight the significance of the place. For instance, it was reinstated that the City Hall, which was opened in the early 1960s with a modernist architectural style and alleged civilising role, was considered to be an icon of the birth of modern Hong Kong.(6)

From the perspective of civil society this period also saw the rise of local activism and citizenship claims (Ku and Pun, 2004; Lam, 2004). In other words, the Hong Kong identity began to come of age not only in terms of a modern economy but also as a modern citizenry. Within this narrative, the event in 1966 was being recalled with renewed significance, amidst other protest events. Immediately after the campaign over the Star Ferry pier, Local Action held a hunger strike reminiscent of the one staged by So Sau-chung at the pier back in 1966, which had been recounted as a symbol of the birth of local activism. They presented a “Declaration of Hunger Strike”, which read:

(6) The iconic reference to City Hall was not original. See Turner and Ngan (1995).
“On April 4, 1966, a young man So Sau-chung launched a hunger strike ... [W]hen the clock tower that stood behind him decades ago is going to be torn apart today, we also start a hunger strike .... It is such an irony. So protested against a foreign and colonial government. Now we protest against a special region administration that proclaims to be a government based on being ‘ruled by the Hong Kong people’.”

The activists recalled the historical episode in the colonial era and cast themselves in an ironic light by lodging a protest against a postcolonial government that was failing to listen to local voices. In this connection, they also recalled that the Queen's pier was historically a popular site for protests in the late 1960s and during the 1970s. These included, amongst others, the rallies against tax increases, rent increases and price inflation, the campaign to make Chinese an official language, and the campaign to protect Diaoyu Island. In the words of a Local Action member, the place had been a historical scene for the development of a “self-strengthening civic personality” among the Hong Kong people since the 1950s (Chow, 2007). To drum up public concern and galvanise activism, Local Action organised a series of seminars and forums at the Queen's Pier to ponder the history of local social movements. They also invited veteran activists to the sites to share their stories and experiences. It was along the intersecting narrative lines of modernity and citizenship that the movement participants brought into view the entire spatial complex, inclusive of the two piers, the City Hall, and the Edinburgh Place, and reinterpreted the site as the cradle of modern Hong Kong identity (Ip, 2007). Apparently, such remembering and reinterpretation of identity as being grounded in specific spatial and historical terms were associated not only with the city per se but more specifically with its civil society.

The activists connected the present with a specific past through memories that selected certain episodes whilst leaving others out. According to Ip (2007), who was also a member of Local Action, they skipped over and forgot, consciously or unconsciously, the recent two decades of prodemocracy movements and associated instead with the earlier decades of social conflict:

“The social and historical distance from the veterans of the 1960s and 1970s, when party politics were not relevant, empowered the insurgents to defy existing party politics and their action model. From the early local activism, they gained confidence in their ‘direct action’ and found themselves the inheritors of a ‘buried’ heritage.”

From their perspective, the prodemocracy movement originally aiming to achieve institutional or representative democracy ended up chipping away at participatory politics and giving way to compromises. The activists were keeping a critical distance from institutional politics and were seeking to revive a radical tradition through autonomous and confrontational actions. This formed the basis for a more politicised meaning of people's space.

**Enacting the subject of the narrative through spatial practices**

Following the narrative of identity, the movement participants further expressed a renewed relationship with the place as the subject of the narrative—the people—through an assortment of discourses, actions, and performances. They claimed that the place belonged to the people. On one level, it meant the place was a free space filled with everyday meanings by the people, including familiar leisurely activities and fresh experiences newly explored. As a university student and activist reflected on his experience with the place:
“I came to experiment with how to use public space and give new meaning to this place. Participation is crucial when we want to protect public spaces. I also see it as a learning process: learning how to observe, feel and use the space” (Lai, 2007c). The idea of free space was prominent in the account. Indeed, when the place was designed, it was intended for free use by the people. According to the original architect, Ron Phillips, the whole design—including the Queen's pier and the public open space around it—was unified in providing a setting for the arrival of visiting dignitaries as well as open space and public access to City Hall for pedestrians. Referring to the open space, he said,

“[T]he Memorial Garden and the piazza in the front of City Hall, were to be natural extensions, at ground level, to promote freedom of movement and a sense of unlimited space; a public facility which was in very short supply in the city centre, even in the 1950s” (Heron, 2007).

In this light Local Action was not so much subverting as restoring the intended meaning of the place as conceived by the architect. Apart from seminars and forums, they also organised cultural performances and musical events to convey the idea of free use of the space. This was place making through the creation of ‘affordances’, that is, the perception of values and meanings as activated through people’s sensory experiences with their everyday environment (Urry, 2000).

On another level, the claim also meant that people could be agents of participation in a more proactive sense. Local Action performed certain symbolic practices to act out such meaning. On 20 January 2007, they staged a ceremony to symbolise public landing at the pier by the people, which registered a shift from a framework of history and memory to the here and now, and from state power to citizenship:

“Colonial rulers used to land in Hong Kong from the Queen's pier. Now that the colonial power has gone, the public will take over. The landing symbolises the history of the civic awareness campaign in Hong Kong and that the public should be allowed to have more say in policymaking” (Ho Loy; cited by Lai, 2007a).

About 100 people participated in the public landing, originating from a broad spectrum, including residents affected by redevelopment, preservation groups, legislators, workers, migrant workers, right-of-abode seekers, students, InMedia, Local Action, artists, academics and architects, and so on. As described in the newspaper, “[t]his is no longer collective memory, but collective action” (Economic Journal 20 January 2007).

In a more theatrical way, since the closure of the pier on 26 April 2007, Local Action had begun to occupy the site day and night, setting up tents, building up a home base, and sleeping there. This was to assert through spatiality that the place belonged to the people and that therefore they would take it as their home. The activists turned the place into an open stage to perform the meanings of home through such props as hanging beds, pyjamas, sleepers, and cooking utensils. The physical occupation of the site was also an act of civil disobedience against the government's plan for demolition. The dual role of the people as common folk and resilient citizens intersected in the same drama. The protesters stayed at the pier for more than three months—some on hunger strike in the final days—until the police evicted them from the site on 1 August 2007.

A meta-discourse on identity and agency
A meta-discourse further took shape that lifted the significance of the campaign beyond the event itself. Sympathetic critics viewed the movement as turning the place into a “new symbol of a civic movement” (Albert Kwong-tak Lai of the People's Council for Sustainable Development; cited by Lai, 2007b). The ongoing civic movement was in
part a new struggle over preservation issues and in part a conscious effort to reenact a
tradition of local activism inherited from the past. On 29 July this vision was most
clearly articulated by Chu Hoi-dick in a public forum attended also by the Secretary for
Development, Carrie Lam. In reinstating the agenda of preserving the place, Chu
harped on its importance as a spatial anchor for a critical consciousness:
“If the Queen’s pier is to be quietly demolished/relocated, and then quietly replaced
by a new Liberation Army pier (a new spatial politics), our next generation will
lose an important spatial anchor whereby to understand and unfetter the culture
of colonial governance (as well as question the ideology of developmentalism
that incessantly turns public resources into private hands)” (Chu, 2007, author’s
translation).
The critical consciousness was part of a resilient tradition, but it also addressed new
conflicts in the changing contexts. Echoing the protesters, the press also saw the
movement as rearticulating a local identity in relation to democracy and everyday
space:
“their latest movement is a crusade to safeguard the principle of public space; to
stop the government privatising common areas that have helped form Hong Kong
people’s identity. They have also called for city planning to be more democratic”
(Lai, 2007c).
Identity was not just embedded in the culture in a general sense; it was also grounded in
the specifics of spatiality—whether as heritage or history-laden sites or as public space.
Public critics furthered the significance of the event by placing it in the larger
context of the people seeking a cultural identity in posthandover Hong Kong. A
meta-discourse that linked the movement to a process of identity research in the
context of unrelenting development in the city was emerging. Apparently, the move-
ment was broadening its significance from a struggle over history, memory, and space
to a struggle over local identity and political agency.

Concluding remarks
Victoria Harbour has long been considered a natural asset to the city as well as a
badge of collective identity; however, little was known of the unique history and value
of the two piers as well as the space around them. The renewed struggle in 2006 and
2007 registered a shift from a general claim of protecting the harbour or being
antireclamation to defending and commemorating the piers as specific places. In the
process, the events became a vehicle for an opposition discourse about people’s space.
The idea of people’s space was significant in at least two ways. First, it formed the crux
of an emergent counterdiscourse as a challenge against the dominant ideology of
developmentalism. Second, it provided a symbolic resource whereby the Queen’s
pier—which was previously the official landing place for governors and royal dignita-
ries visiting from Britain—was redefined as a place for the people. The discourse,
which took shape through changing and competing claims, was simultaneously
informed and buttressed by certain spatial practices that produced a liminoid period
of place remaking from below (de Certeau, 1984). This paper has examined the dual
process of place making and discursive formation with reference to the two cases
through an integrated discursive – spatial analysis.

Lefebvre asserts the priority of space over language in the social production
of places. Without disputing the centrality of spatiality, I nonetheless argue that social
movement presents a case of reappropriation of space that is intended to be read and
lived simultaneously and interactively. In this regard, the dynamic discourse analysis
approach is useful in sensitising us to the ways a specific discourse evolves and
changes through a contestatory process of multivocal interpretations among the
movement’s participants, the mass media, and the government. In the case study, I have demonstrated that the folk appeal that defined the spirit of the place in the early stages remained a cornerstone throughout the struggle, and the full-fledged discourse on people’s space in the later stages was both a continuation and an extension of that. In the process, several changes steered the development. For instance, the multivocality of the idea of collective memory associated with people’s fond sentiments gave rise to conflicting and new interpretations by various actors. On the one hand, it diluted the demand for preservation in situ via a nostalgic discourse promoted by the media. Following suit, the government suggested that a symbol of collective memory might be replicated and despatialized. On the other hand, it pushed the movement into new directions. The question at the heart of the controversy then became whether there was anything in and about the place—with its original artefact—that could become valuable collective memory for future generations. Architects and preservationists rebuked the government’s claim and shifted the earlier appeals of heritage, memory, and affection to issues relating to architecture, living history, space, and identity, as embodied in the idea of landmark. This served to buttress the claim that the artefact be preserved at its original site.

At the same time, the idea of collective memory unwittingly opened up a discursive space for looking to the past for a more critical mode of remembering. This shifted the memory framework from affection to activism from the perspective of civil society. Such changes took place in tandem with the rise of a new political agency that subsequently evolved into Local Action. When it came to the campaign over the Queen’s pier, which had to grapple with ways of negotiating colonial history, Local Action articulated and enacted a more radical discourse about people’s space. This shift in discursive construction was mediated through the articulation of two sets of codes, namely the code of living space and the code of activism. The former began to emerge through a series of recent struggles whereas the latter was informed by memories of past struggles.

Apart from discourse, spatial analysis is useful in shedding light on the material embodiment of meanings in places as well as the activists’ physical tactics and place-bound actions. At the outset, artists turned the Star Ferry pier into a space to gather, for creativity and performance by and for the people. An affective mood was created, which reinforced the appeal to folk sentiments and memories. A first dramatic change took shape towards the end of the first campaign when a group of new actors turned the place into a site of resistance through spatial encroachment and transgression. Spatiality spurred mobilisation. This accidental breed of activism prefigured a change in the discursive-cum-spatial strategy in the later struggle. Apart from spatial practices, I have also demonstrated that an integrated discursive–spatial analysis that attends to the movement participants’ narrativising of the place could shed light on the social production of lived space in a fuller sense. As in the campaign over the Queen’s pier, shifting from a state-centred to a society-centred perspective, the movement participants not only produced a new narrative of the particular place but also a place-specific (and time-specific) narrative of the society more generally. The reconstructed narrative provided a cognitive framework to guide and justify their further actions in the dual capacity as common folk and resilient citizens. Through such actions as landing ceremonies, sit-ins, concerts, assemblies, forums, and protests, the discourse of people’s space was given lived significance beyond mere claims.

In a nutshell, a new narrative of place was in the making as Local Action shifted their interpretive framework from state to civil society, from elite to common people, and from global interests to everyday life. In the process, the movement participants simultaneously implicated a subdiscourse of decolonisation that overturned
the statist connotations associated with colonial architecture. Beyond a confrontational framework, the places were also more broadly reinterpreted as spatially engraving the histories and memories of the rise of a Hong Kong identity in the postwar years. All in all, the movement participants sought to articulate a sense of local identity that was grounded within an autonomous civil society rather than attached to the economy, the government, the colonial past, or the nation.

Finally, in the context of Hong Kong, what does ‘local’ mean as a concept relating to living, remembering, and belonging? The way the movement emerged and unfolded is instructive. Among other things, it saw the rise of a new wave of social activism in the younger generation. For more than two decades since the 1980s democracy has become the major rallying agenda that has amalgamated an alliance of opposition leaders and organised movements and political parties under one banner. Such a political movement provides a broad platform for mobilisation across varied political and grassroots groups, but it also delimits the range of political agendas within a singular framework of institutional democracy. Outside this orbit, as massive urban redevelopment projects proceed, some young activists are becoming involved in community activism and advocacy with a new set of values. The struggle is neither past oriented nor antidevelopment but encapsulates broader and deeper issues regarding what Melucci (1988) calls the “rights of everyday life”: culture versus economism, life space versus developmentalism, and citizen participation versus state/corporate power. The ‘local’ as such embodies a new vision in contrast to the economistic discourse of the global. The newly emerged network of young activists has the potential of being the carrier of a new social movement in civil society.

Acknowledgement. I would like to thank the Research Grants Council in Hong Kong for funding support for the project (project # HKUST6404/06H).

References
Abbas A, 1997 Culture and Politics of Disappearance (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN)
Bakhtin M M, 1981 The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays Ed. M Holquist, translated by C Emerson, M Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin, TX)
Casey E, 1987 Remembering: A Phenomenological Study (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN)
Chiu S, Lui T (Eds), 2000 The Dynamics of Social Movement in Hong Kong (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong)
Chow S C, 2007, “The ultimate meaning of liberating the history of the Queen's Pier” (author’s translation) Ming Pao 22 August, century page
Chow V, 2006, “Hundreds seek a sentimental ride on last Star Ferry from Central pier” SCMP 29 October, page EDT5
Chu H D, 2007, “Searching for Hong Kong people’s lost autonomy in the Queen’s Pier” (author’s translation) Ming Pao 29 April, century page 16 – 17
Cuthbert A R, 1984, “Conservation and capital accumulation in Hong Kong” Third World Planning Review 6 95 – 115
de Certeau M, 1984 The Practice of Everyday Life translated by S Rendall (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA)
England J, Rear J, 1975 Chinese Labour under British Rule (Oxford University Press, Hong Kong)
Harvey D, 1989 The Condition of Postmodernity (Blackwell, Oxford)
Remaking places and fashioning an opposition discourse


Heron L, 2007, “‘Save Queen’s Pier’, says architect of City Hall complex” SCMP 13 May, page EDT4


Ku A, Pun N (Eds), 2004 Remaking Citizenship in Hong Kong: Community, Nation and the Global City (RoutledgeCurzon, London)


Kuah-Pearce K E, Guixeux G (Eds), 2009 Social Movements in China and Hong Kong: The Expansion of Protest Space (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam)

Lai C, 2006a, “Star Ferry Clock Tower may live again” SCMP 15 November, page city4

Lai C, 2006b, “Protests to continue while there’s a pier” SCMP 17 November, page city5

Lai C, 2007a, “Bid to save Wedding Card Street a crucible for new civic activism” SCMP 8 January, page city1

Lai C, 2007b, “Taxi driver lone dissenting voice as conservationists plead for pier” SCMP 10 May, page city1

Lai C, 2007c, “Last resistance—a disparate band of conservationists are doing their bit to protect the city’s disappearing history” SCMP 12 June, page EDT12

Lee C, 2002, “In-between tourism and heritage preservation: the construction of cultural identity under colonialism and orientalism”, MPhil thesis, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Lefebvre H, 1991 The Production of Space translated by D Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell, Oxford)


Ming Pao 2006, “How much cultural heritage left for the generations to come? The demolition of the Star Ferry Pier and the tower should be stopped at once” (author’s translation), 2 December, page A20

Ng M K, Cook A, 1997, “Reclamation: an urban development strategy under fire” Land Use Policy XIV 5 – 23


Soja E W, 1989 Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory (Verso, London)


Steinberg M W, 1999, “Tilting the frame: considerations on collective action framing from a discursive turn” Theory and Society 27 845 – 872
Stillerman J, 2006, “The politics of space and culture in Santiago: Chile’s street markets” Qualitative Sociology 29 507 – 530
Tilly C, 2000, “Spaces of contention” Mobilizations 5 135 – 159
Turner M, Ngan I (Eds), 1995 Hong Kong Sixties: Designing Identity Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong
Urry J, 1995 Consuming Places (Routledge, London)
Urry J, 2000 Sociology beyond Societies (Routledge, London)
Wu H, 2007, “Pier activist denies damage, weapon charges” SCMP 18 January, page city4