

Right to Consume: Human Rights, Protest, and Commodities in the Built Environment

Harvard Mellon Urban Initiative - Grant Report

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Overview

The year 2020 was defined by urban protests that increased awareness of human rights violations and the need for democratic representation. Academic commentators often focused on how these protests were products of the rising inequalities and democratic backsliding. However, these political analyses overlooked the urban spaces, often in retail corridors rather than at government institutions, where these demonstrations took place. From public protests in malls to the burning of retail corridors, contemporary demonstrations and urban consumption are increasingly revealing a complex relationship with each other. While there are acknowledgments of the protests in unassuming spaces, there lacks a thorough investigation into how urban spaces create, influence, and reflect core issues protested at the demonstrations. This research project investigates how demonstrations across world cities reveal a complex narrative about urban citizenship and consumption.

Thanks to the support from the Harvard Mellon Urban Initiative, I have initiated the first phase of investigation into the intersection of democratic resilience and consumption of commodities across two global cities, Hong Kong and Bangkok. This grant report illustrates the initial lines of inquiry into the subject. First, I highlight how contemporary urbanists have examined urban consumption. Second, I illustrate how the relationship amongst governance, planning, and spaces have become more apparent during the 2020 global protests. Third, I share highlights from two case studies, Hong Kong and Bangkok. Lastly, I conclude with a brief outlook on how the research can continue with examining future studies within the domestic contexts.

Investigating Urban Planning, Consumption, and Protest

While cities are generally accepted as “centres of conflict, change and transformation,” urban space itself is often treated by planners as programmable if addressed at the correct unit of analysis. With urban consumption, most urbanists have focused on the commodification of neighborhoods by market forces and its catering to different socio-economic classes through economic investments. For example, Sharon Zukin’s work traces the transformation of the Soho neighborhood in New York and highlights how the real estate market shapes the consumer culture through gentrification. However, there is limited research on the complex relationship of urban space formation for consumption and its relationship to subsequent socio-political demonstrations.

This research project proposes an examination of how spaces for consumption are designed. First, I recommend examining the land use and planning tools that allowed the creation of spaces related to consumption. For example, the creation of privately-owned public spaces (POPS) is a product of market-led, urban development. In the Hong Kong case study, I argue that the subsequent labor and political demonstrations protest in POPS is a reaction against the very policies and conditions that created these spaces.

Second, the use of consumption as an act of protest has become increasingly popular amongst social movements. In the Bangkok case study, the current protests on democracy and state corruption have occupied the capital’s retail hub, Siam. Although demonstrations continue to be at key public sites, the more disruptive and eye-catching demonstrations are those that choke the retail corridors.

Lastly, the project calls for a reimagination of the relationship between human rights and urban consumption. While human rights have often situated themselves in the democratic canon at the international level, the universality of human rights needs through access to consumption and its spaces in cities around the world. This analysis is still on going.

Case Study Highlights:

Hong Kong – the Rise of Privately-Owned Public Space and Demonstrations

On 19 July 2019, the Hong Kong protests over the controversial extradition bill reached new heights between the Hong Kong Police and protesters. In particular, the media's attention was focused on the peaceful protest that turned violent at the New Town Plaza, a shopping center in Sha Tin in the New Territories. From this incident, questions about the legal jurisdiction of protest and police intervention in these privately-owned public spaces (POPS) emerged and were debated.

To understand the relationship between protests and POPS, it is necessary to examine the political and land use conditions that created these spaces. An initial space analysis highlights the dramatic impact of the key stakeholders from the 1997 Hong Kong handover. Due to a lack of clear decision-making power between the Hong Kong managerial government and the Chinese Community Party, the Hong Kong people shifted their reliance from the public to the private sector. To quell economic uncertainty from the CCP handover, the Hong Kong government incentivized private developers to build privately-owned public spaces for more buildable square footage. POPS became more popular, but also became the site of legal ambiguity for the courts and private business owners when protests occurred.

Bangkok, Thailand – Democratic Protests and Digital Consumption

In early 2020, Thai citizens reignited demonstrations against Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, the leader of the country's *junta*, after the dissolution of an opposing political party and unchecked alterations to the Thai Constitution. Predominately led by Thai youth, the protests called for dissolving parliament and redrafting the Constitution. However, while the grievances with the government remained similar to previous revolutions, the protests now occupy new strategic spaces. One of the more striking protest locations is Siam, the retail center of Bangkok. Protestors there have blocked traffic and choked the retail hub to demand a response from the government. In addition, protestors have also used social media to digitally protest specific brands that were vocal against the democratic protests. Like Hong Kong, it is necessary to examine the stakeholders and socio-economic conditions that have allowed the creation of hubs, such as Siam, and how these spaces became both targets and representative of constituent discontent.

Conclusion

Planners, policymakers, and academics need to question how urban spaces are shaped for consumption, and whether the processes involved are the same inequities that people are protesting at these sites. The project's future research will focus on the domestic United States context, specifically in Philadelphia, its retail corridors, and the impact of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. With land use and zoning rising to the national discourse, planners have a responsibility to re-examine the very tools they use to create vibrant urban spaces as the ones that manifest consumption inequality. With this research, I aim to contribute to broader conversations around urban protests, the spaces they occupy, and their relationship to consumption. With this new framing, I hope the research can foster reimagination of consumption and urban citizenship to create more equitable cities.

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