



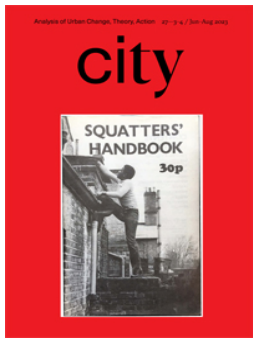
## Take back our city: reclaiming shopping malls in Hong Kong

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# Take back our city: reclaiming shopping malls in Hong Kong

Elton Chan 

*Shopping malls have replaced traditional public spaces and become an integral part of urban life in many cities. This paper seeks to explore the role of shopping malls as protest sites in Hong Kong during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protest movement in 2019. As the protests decentralised and filtered throughout the city, shopping malls became sites of protest and battlegrounds between riot police and protesters. In addition to singing and chanting, organising sit-ins, and exhibiting protest art inside shopping malls, protesters also confronted mall employees as well as disrupted businesses. Based on information gathered through media reports, planning and policy documents, as well as ethnographic observations, this paper aims to examine the role of shopping malls in the urban development of Hong Kong, their function as public spaces during the protest movement, and how the politicisation of shopping malls shaped and sustained the protest movement. This paper contends that the protesters' appropriation of shopping malls not only represented an important first step of reclaiming the right to the city, but also exemplified how such struggle and resistance can be extended beyond traditional protest sites and into different everyday spaces.*

**Keywords** public space, protest, right to the city, shopping mall, Hong Kong,

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## Introduction

Even though commodification has taken multiple distinct forms across the urban fabric, not many built environments are more representative of the domination of exchange values in urban development than shopping malls. Despite being privately owned and managed, commercialised, and highly secured, shopping malls have in many cities replaced traditional public spaces as the main sites of recreation and social interactions. The proliferation and use of shopping malls as public spaces are especially prevalent in East Asian urban centres such as Hong Kong, where shopping malls have long been an integral part of the urban life (Lui 2001). However, many scholars argue that since shopping malls are owned and managed by private interests seeking to maximise profits, they can never function as a truly democratic and inclusive public space (Staeheli and Mitchell 2006). It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to explore the role of shopping malls as protest sites in Hong Kong during the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) protest movement in 2019. As the protests became decentralised and filtered throughout the city, shopping malls not only functioned as places for gathering and temporary refuge from clashes on the streets, but often themselves became sites of protest as well as battlegrounds between riot police and protesters. In addition to singing and chanting, organising sit-ins, and exhibiting protest art inside shopping malls, protesters also confronted mall employees and disrupted businesses with ties to China. In doing so, the protesters and their supporters transformed the shopping malls of Hong Kong from ultimate symbols of consumerism and consumption into spaces for political and civic activities.

Based on information gathered through media reports, planning and policy documents, as well as on-site and digital ethnographic observations, this paper aims to examine the role of shopping malls in the urban development of Hong Kong, their function as public spaces during the protest movement, and how the appropriation and politicisation of shopping malls may represent the first step of people taking back control of a city where public spaces are often developed and managed as commodities. I will first unpack previous research and discussions on shopping malls, focusing on how shopping malls have assumed the role of public space in both Western and non-Western contexts. I will also chart the development of shopping malls in Hong Kong and illustrate how the unique trajectory of urban planning and development in Hong Kong has shaped the role of shopping malls as de facto public spaces. I will then discuss the methods used in this study, before tracing the development of the Anti-ELAB protest movement and exploring the role of shopping malls by analysing various incidents that took place in three different shopping malls. The paper will conclude by discussing the findings and examining the potential, as well as limitations, of not only exercising the right to the city in shopping malls, but also making spaces 'public' beyond traditional public spaces.

## Shopping malls as public spaces?

Shopping malls (or shopping centres) as we know today were first popularised in North America in the 1950s as a result of the development of suburbs and

proliferation of automobiles (Crawford 1992). The enclosed shopping mall, usually anchored by large department stores and equipped with a wide-range of amenities, became the one-stop alternative to the streets of downtown for families and teenagers. Hanging out at the mall, as Crawford (1992, 15) suggests, 'has replaced cruising the strip'. In addition to being a place for consumption and commodity exchange, shopping malls today often contain various social and recreation facilities such as cinemas, bowling alleys, skating rinks, and arcade game centres. Furthermore, shopping malls are no longer only found in the suburbs, as many shopping malls have replaced traditional town squares and functioned as *de facto* centres of towns and cities (Staeheli and Mitchell 2006). As more and more urban life and the social interactions that it entails are incorporated within the mall, discussions on shopping malls are increasingly centred on not only ownership and access, but also what rights and freedoms one has in them (Atkinson 2003; Lees 1994; Low 2017; Staeheli and Mitchell 2006). As illustrated by a plethora of legal cases throughout the years—including the Lloyd Centre and Pruneyard Shopping Centre cases (Maniscalco 2015), the boundary between public and private in shopping malls is often ambiguous, blurred, and porous.

Critics and scholars have described shopping malls as pseudo-public spaces (Banerjee 2001; Mitchell 1995). Unlike other public spaces such as town squares and city parks, shopping malls are private properties where 'access to and use of the space is only a privilege, not a right' (Banerjee 2001, 12). More importantly, whereas traditional town squares allow for both commercial as well as political and civic activities, shopping malls are solely built and designed for commodity exchange and consumption (Chiodelli and Moroni 2015; Lees 1994; Mitchell 2017; Voyce 2006). Shopping malls are what Mitchell (1995, 119) refers to as 'a highly commodified spectacle designed to sell' where political and civic activities are restricted in the name of 'comfort, safety, and profit'. Despite being integral to the mall experience, the social and recreational functions of shopping malls remain secondary to the primary goal of profit-making (Staeheli and Mitchell 2006). In fact, the commercial success of shopping malls is largely dependent on what Crawford (1992) calls 'indirect commodification', a process in which non-saleable activities, items, and images are used to drive commodity exchange and consumption. As such, many critics have suggested that the proliferation and use of shopping malls as public spaces have contributed to the privatisation and commodification of urban space (Harvey 2006; Lloyd and Auld 2003; Low and Iveson 2016; Staeheli and Mitchell 2006).

Beyond the North American and Western perspective, the development of shopping malls, as well as the debates that surround it, have taken on a rather different trajectory. Whereas shopping malls in North American cities have experienced a significant decline in recent years (Abaza 2001), malls in the Global South and Global East are not only growing and expanding, but they have also assumed a greater importance in the midst of rapid transformations of social and urban life (Abaza 2001; Erkip 2003; Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo 2009; Jewell 2015). In addition to shaping lifestyles and consumption needs, shopping malls also provide important arenas for social interactions and leisure activities, especially in cities where public spaces are inadequate or deficient. As Abaza suggests, new shopping malls in Egypt are primarily spaces

'for youth to socialise and mix in groups' (Abaza 2001, 101). In some cases, shopping malls are even seen as spaces that are symbolic of democratisation and modernisation processes. For instance, Erkip (2003, 1079) contends that shopping malls in Turkey serve as 'an extended milieu with spatial and social characteristics matching the new identity requirements of Turkish citizens'. Instead of encroaching on individual freedoms and contributing to the decline of public spaces, private ownership, heightened security, and the more controlled environment of shopping malls are viewed by many as enhancing factors for the flourishing of both personal identity-building as well as societal development (Abaza 2001; Erkip 2003; Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo 2009).

All in all, shopping malls have taken on a unique and, at times, contradictory role in not only the planning and development of cities but also the advancement of societies around the world. On the one hand, the proliferation of shopping malls can be seen as detrimental to the flourishing of public discourse as they are not only centred on commodity exchange and consumption, but are also some of the most privatised and highly regulated urban spaces. On the other hand, shopping malls in many cities represent 'a sense of possibility and opportunity' (Vanderbeck, James, and Johnson 2000, 19), as well as a refuge from the harsh and hostile environment of the streets (Miles 2002). For some marginalised groups such as young people, shopping malls are 'the only places' where they can hang out and socialise (Vanderbeck, James, and Johnson 2000). In many ways, the manner in which young people use and appropriate shopping malls is illustrative of the ambiguous and complex nature of shopping mall's function as public space (Miles 2002). While the behaviours of young people in shopping malls are often shaped by the security measures and regulations of the mall, Tani (2015) suggests that just by being together and not taking part in commercial activities, the presence of young people is a form of resistance that challenges the spatial and social order of the shopping malls. Furthermore, despite being highly regulated and secured, shopping malls have often been used for different collective actions such as flash mobs and packs and swarms (Routledge 2017). As Routledge (2017) argues, places of consumption such as shopping malls are increasingly important sites of intervention in different social movements. The Black Lives Matter movement, for instance, famously protested in the Mall of America in Minneapolis in 2015. It is against this backdrop that this paper will examine the changing role of shopping malls and how they became sites of civic and political activities during the 2019 protests in Hong Kong.

The first shopping mall in Hong Kong was built in the 1960s as a tourist destination in the city centre for mostly Western visitors who wanted to avoid the messy and often hectic local markets. However, as the city continued to grow and expand, shopping malls became increasingly central to the urban planning and development of Hong Kong (Ho 2018; Lui 2001). Providing linkages to residences, public transportation and other public amenities, shopping malls were particularly important to various new town developments. Furthermore, as many residential towers can only be entered through shopping malls, the mall experience constitutes an essential part of many Hong Kongers' everyday life regardless of their intention or need to shop (Jewell 2015; Lui 2001; Ng 2009). Unlike Western and North American cities, the development of shopping malls

in Hong Kong was not associated with suburbanisation and the proliferation of automobiles (Lui 2001). Instead, shopping malls in Hong Kong have always been an integral part of the urban fabric and are distinctly urban in nature.

More importantly, since Hong Kong operates on a leasehold land system, the government owns virtually all the land of Hong Kong. Land parcels are only leased to private entities and developers for a definite period of time and only in the form of development rights (Ho 2018). As a result, the government retains relatively more control over semi-public spaces such as shopping malls than most governments do in other cities. Despite being ‘privately owned’, public access in shopping malls of Hong Kong is often dictated and guaranteed in the terms and conditions of land leases. Even though it is not uncommon for some mall managements and developers to circumvent these terms and conditions for additional profits—for instance by leasing out ‘public corridors’ as temporary commercial or event spaces—access to shopping malls has generally not been a major point of contention in Hong Kong (HKPSI 2018). While public spaces in Hong Kong have become increasingly commodified (Chan 2023), shopping malls continue to flourish and constitute an important part of everyday life of Hong Kongers. The contestations of shopping malls during the Anti-ELAB protest movement are, this paper contends, indicative of the centrality of shopping malls to Hong Kong and its people.

## Studying shopping malls as protest sites

This study is centred on three different shopping malls: New Town Plaza, a major shopping and leisure destination in Shatin that draws visitors from all over Hong Kong as well as tourists from mainland China; Pacific Place in Admiralty, an upscale and luxury mall located in the political and commercial heart of Hong Kong; and MOSTown, a shopping centre that mostly caters to the everyday needs of the local residents in Ma On Shan. The three shopping malls were chosen because of not only the significance of the events that took place in them, but also their contrasting location, clientele, as well as management style. The empirical data draws from both first-hand and secondary materials that had been collected and analysed since the beginning of the Anti-ELAB protest movement. The first-hand data I obtained include participant observations over a two-month period at the end of 2019 and a 6-week period in the autumn of 2021, as well as off-the-record conversations with participants (participation in varying capacity) of the protests and former employees of shopping malls and developers. I was particularly interested in not only how the different activities were shaped by the spatial organisation of the shopping malls, but also the social interactions between protesters, mall employees and shopkeepers. Furthermore, I reviewed various public statements and financial reports of developers, land leases and conditions of different shopping malls, as well as government planning documents and guidelines for public spaces in private properties. In addition, I also utilised a number of digital and remote ethnographic methods (Hine 2017; 2015; Postill 2017), which included reviewing live stream recordings and surveying different online forums and social media platforms. In total, I reviewed over 30 h of live stream recordings that took place in various shopping malls during the protests.



Unlike regular news reports, these pieces of live footage were unedited and often filmed very close to the action, providing valuable uninterrupted accounts of the protests. I took fieldnotes as if I were at the scene—I was particularly interested in not only how the space was used, but also the interactions among protesters, mall employees and the police. Despite being unedited and uninterrupted, what these live recordings could capture was still relatively limited and was largely determined by the person behind the camera. It was therefore important to not only review footage from different sources, but also corroborate them using other data such as different media reports as well as public statements from mall management and authorities for a better understanding of what was happening. Another valuable source of data was LIHKG, the Reddit-like online forum that functioned as the command centre of the protest movement where protesters and their supporters planned, debated, and reviewed various actions during the protests (Erni and Zhang 2022; Lee et al. 2021; Liang and Lee 2021). Various threads on LIHKG provided insights of not only the general organisation and development of the protest movement, but also commentary on specific events and incidents. As Gray (2016) argues, digital and remote ethnography is more effective when complemented with embodied knowledge of the sites and contexts. The combination of both on-site participant observations and digital ethnographic data was particularly important to this study because of the multi-sited and sensitive nature of the protests. When I reviewed and analysed video footages and discussion threads, I was able to follow the events and discussions by not only locating exactly where different things were happening, but also visualising those specific sites and their surroundings.

### ‘Be water’: a formless and shapeless protest

The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protest movement was a series of protests and demonstrations in Hong Kong that began in 2019 when the Hong Kong Government announced its plan to amend the extradition law in relation to both mainland China and Taiwan (Dapiran 2020; Zuraidah and Lam 2020). The Extradition Law Amendment Bill drew wide-spread opposition in Hong Kong as critics of the bill argued that extraditing criminals to mainland China, which operates on a very different (and arguably less transparent) legal system, would threaten the rule of law in Hong Kong. Particularly, human rights groups feared that dissidents of the Chinese Communist Party regime in Hong Kong would be persecuted and exposed to torture and inhumane treatment in China as a result of the bill. More significantly, though, there were also concerns in the business community, which has historically sided with the government in most political issues (Chan and Pun 2020). Many prominent members of the business community expressed their fears that the bill would destroy the rights and freedoms businesses and individuals have long enjoyed in Hong Kong, and thus threatened the status of Hong Kong as a global city and a haven for international corporations and businesses. Since the announcement of the bill in February 2019, protests and demonstrations had taken place regularly as opposition against the bill continued to grow. In June 2019, two million Hong Kongers took to the streets in the largest demonstration in the history of



Hong Kong. However, despite such clear opposition against the proposed bill, the government refused to back down. The protests soon escalated and became more violent as clashes between protesters and the police began to break out across the city. What followed in Hong Kong was months of political and social unrests that eventually led to the establishment and enactment of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020, which virtually banned any form of protests and dissent against the government. Instead of focusing on the political implications and socio-economic impacts of the Anti-ELAB protests (Dapiran 2020), this paper aims to highlight the unique role of shopping malls as protest sites.

Due to the lack of public town squares and civic spaces, most political and civic activities in Hong Kong have historically taken place on either the streets or in one of the larger city parks like the Victoria Park in Causeway Bay (Ng 2009). It is also for this reason that protesters of the Umbrella Movement in 2014 had to literally create their own town square on a highway in the middle of the city (Martínez 2019; Tai 2018). Despite occupying the highway for more than two and a half months, the Umbrella Movement was largely characterised by the lack of political impact and concrete concessions from the government. However, it could be argued that the collective experience gained from the Umbrella Movement had shaped subsequent political movements and protests in Hong Kong, including the Anti-ELAB protests. As Ting (2020) contends, the protesters had learned from the Umbrella Movement that a guerrilla-style protest was not only more effective in evading the police, but could also have a greater impact by causing more disruptions across the city. Instead of occupying a fixed location, multiple protests and demonstrations were held in different neighbourhoods almost every weekend at the height of the Anti-ELAB movement in 2019 (Dapiran 2020; Li and Whitworth 2021).

One of the main reasons behind the diffused nature of the Anti-ELAB protests was that the government and police increasingly weaponised public transportation to prevent protesters from going to Hong Kong Island, the political heart of the city where most protests and demonstrations had traditionally taken place. The government majority-owned subway system MTR at times closed certain stations and even stopped operation on specific lines to prevent protesters from getting to organised marches and demonstrations. More importantly, such closures also made it very difficult for protesters to leave after the protests, and easier for the police to apprehend them. Moreover, over the course of the Anti-ELAB protest movement, various protests and demonstrations were held against issues and problems specific to different local neighbourhoods. For instance, several protests targeting parallel traders were held in Sheung Shui, an area close to the Chinese border that was inundated with shops catering to visitors from mainland China. Another example was the demonstration in Tuen Mun against the so-called 'mainland dancing aunties' who took over a local park in the neighbourhood with their dancing and loud music. As the movement continued to grow and the government began to suppress large-scale demonstrations and marches, it became increasingly common for protesters and their supporters to have ad-hoc assemblies and demonstrations close to where they live or work.

Instead of targeting the political centre of the city, protests and demonstrations were held in different everyday spaces in local residential neighbourhoods

across Hong Kong, which as Cheng et al. (2022, 649) suggest, 'offered alternative spaces and new opportunities with which to rally new constituencies'. The increasingly diffused nature of protests during the Anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong was also a reflection of the ways in which the movement was organised and mobilised. Relying on a 'decentralised yet connected network' and utilising different digital media platforms, protesters were able to mobilise different local communities very quickly and efficiently (Cheng et al. 2022). For example, just hours after the government announced the enactment of the 'anti-mask' law under the Emergency Regulations Ordinance on 4 October 2019, ad hoc rallies broke out in many neighbourhoods across the city. While these rallies and gatherings did not have the same level of attendance as those centrally organised mass demonstrations, they became particularly important spatial interventions as they created group solidarity across a wider spectrum of participants and maintained the momentum of the movement as opportunities for mass demonstrations were increasingly limited in Hong Kong. As a result, everyday spaces such as the shopping malls represented some of the most crucial political spaces for many Hong Kongers during the Anti-ELAB protest movement.

## New Town Plaza and beyond

One everyday space that became the centre of contention over the course of the Anti-ELAB movement was New Town Plaza, a shopping mall located in Sha Tin, New Territories. With a population of over 600,000, Sha Tin district is the most populous district of Hong Kong. At the centre of the district lies New Town Plaza, a shopping mall that is connected to Sha Tin train station, multiple bus terminals with bus links to all over Hong Kong, several smaller shopping centres, and a number of residential complexes. Moreover, New Town Plaza is also close to the town hall, a public library, and a wet market, making it the most important social and commercial centre of the neighbourhood. Built in the 1980s when Sha Tin was first developed as a new town, New Town Plaza was conceived by both the government and the developer as not only a commercial complex, but also a community centre that served to bring the residents of Sha Tin together (Chu 2016). As Chu (2016, 86) argues, New Town Plaza became a 'special place to which [many Sha Tin residents] have developed strong attachments'. However, that sentiment began to change in 2005, when the shopping mall underwent a series of renovations and upgrades that aimed to attract mainland Chinese tourists after the implementation of the Individual Visa Scheme in 2003 (Chu 2016). In addition to removing iconic features such as the popular musical fountain, local, independent retail shops and eateries were replaced by more upscale boutiques and restaurant chains. More importantly, the influx of mainland tourists and shoppers also threatened the sense of community among Sha Tin residents that was once so intrinsic to New Town Plaza (Chu 2016). In many ways, despite its inherent commercial nature as a shopping mall, New Town Plaza was transformed from what was largely a community space for local residents, to a highly commodified space that increasingly catered towards tourists. As Chu (2016, 88) suggests, the transformation of New Town Plaza was

‘the exemplar of Hong Kong’s consumerist culture and a cherished symbol of “community development”’.

On 14 July 2019, more than 10,000 people took to the streets in Sha Tin during a weekend that also saw protests taking place in Sheung Shui the day before. After a largely peaceful demonstration, thousands of protesters stayed behind and occupied streets around New Town Plaza. As riot police advanced on the protesters, hundreds of protesters retreated into New Town Plaza as well as other interconnected shopping centres. Instead of withdrawing after the protesters had dispersed into the shopping mall and surrounding buildings, the police followed suit and stormed into New Town Plaza at around 10:00pm, when many patrons and visitors had just finished dinner. Chaotic scenes ensued in the main atrium of the mall as protesters were chased, beaten, and arrested by riot police, while panicking patrons tried to get out of the way. Video footage showed umbrellas and other random objects being thrown from the upper levels by onlookers as protesters were apprehended on the floor. According to a local news report, 22 people were hospitalised and over 40 people were arrested that night (Chan and Creery 2019). Significantly, the incident in New Town Plaza marked the first time that protesters and the police had clashed inside a shopping mall during the Anti-ELAB protests. The images of police officers with full anti-riot gear charging on protesters inside a shopping mall were particularly shocking to many Hong Kongers, as shopping malls in Hong Kong were generally considered to be very safe and secured.

The clash in New Town Plaza also put the developer and mall management in a difficult position as they faced backlash from the public for the way they handled the situation. The protesters and their supporters not only questioned the legitimacy and legality of the police entry and operation without any warrant, but also criticised the management of New Town Plaza for letting it happen. Sun Hung Kai Properties (SHKP), the company managing New Town Plaza released a statement the next day denying allegations that the management had called the police or had any ‘prior knowledge’ of the police operation that had taken place inside the shopping malls (SHKP 2019a). The statement by SHKP, however, did not ease the anger of the public as hundreds of people protested in New Town Plaza the following days. Protesters surrounded the customer service desk and security control room of the shopping mall as they tried to seek explanations and answers from the management. The protesters and their supporters continued to express their anger and disdain towards the New Town Plaza management throughout the rest of the week by organising sit-ins, setting up ad-hoc Lennon Walls, and confronting employees of the mall. Many shops and restaurants had to remain shut during that time as protesters took over the mall. The management released another statement on July 17, reiterating the fact that ‘the police did not notify the mall before entering it’ (SHKP 2019b). SHKP also responded to a viral video clip that allegedly showed a New Town Plaza employee guiding a group of riot police through the mall, saying that the employee was merely escorting the police away from the mall. Not satisfied with the management’s response, some protesters organised another protest inside New Town Plaza in the following weekend, during which they gathered inside the mall without participating in any shopping or commercial activities. The presence of protesters and their supporters continued to cause disruptions

to the normal operation of the mall as they targeted shops that were pro-government or had close ties to China. In addition to disrupting their businesses by blocking the entrances and taking all the queueing tickets, some shopfronts were also vandalised and damaged. As a result, a lot of the businesses in New Town Plaza had to remain shut over the weekend.

Although not necessarily to the same extent in New Town Plaza, similar clashes took place in various shopping malls across Hong Kong. While New Town Plaza itself also became the target of protests, other shopping malls managed to maintain a better reputation among the protesters and their supporters. For instance, despite being a flashpoint many times during the Anti-ELAB protests, Pacific Place in Admiralty repeatedly received praise from protesters and the public for the way they operated during the protests. Managed by Swire Properties, a British backed company, Pacific Place is a high-end shopping mall located at the heart of Hong Kong Island where a lot of the early marches and clashes took place. It was also from one of the Pacific Place buildings where a protester fell to the ground and died. Subsequent memorial services were held outside the mall, and an ad hoc shrine was erected by the protesters next to one of its entrances. Despite the logistical and commercial disruptions caused by the protests, the management at Pacific Place were generally accommodating to the needs of the protesters: leaving the air-conditioning and lights on after opening hours, assisting in the evacuation of protesters, and helping those who were injured during clashes, etc. The protesters' positive view towards Pacific Place was evident in various online forums and social media, including a thread on LIHKG that has received more than 18,000 'upvotes', in which protesters thanked Pacific Place and its employees after a protest in June 2019. Furthermore, a group of protesters gifted 80 pieces of mooncake, a local delicacy for the Mid-Autumn Festival, to the employees of Pacific Place by way of expressing their gratitude. In the accompanying Letter of Thanks, the protesters said the management handled the protests with 'professionalism and humanitarian spirit' and described Pacific Place as a 'role model of the Hong Kong business community'.

Besides Pacific Place, the staff of MOSTown in Ma On Shan, New Territories were also lauded by the protesters after an incident that took place on 7 October 2019. Protesters had gathered inside the mall chanting and singing that evening when riot police, citing reported acts of vandalism, attempted to enter the mall. However, the riot police were stopped at the entrance of the mall by security guards and employees who not only kept the doors shut, but also used their bodies to block the entrances and prevent the police from entering. Eventually the staff were overpowered by the police, who managed to enter the shopping mall and advanced towards the protesters. Live footages of the incident showed that a mall employee, dressed in his uniform suit, had his arms stretched in an attempt to block and slow down onrushing riot police. Four security guards and one customer service officer of MOSTown were later arrested for obstructing the police. As videos of the clashes inside MOSTown began to circulate, there was an outpour of support for the mall employees. An online petition thanking the arrested MOSTown employees was set up by the Facebook group 'Shatin Commons' after the incident and received more than 37,000 signatures in just two days. In addition, a number of rallies in support of the arrested mall employees were held in both the mall and outside the police station where they

were detained in the following days. More significantly, as a result of what happened in MOSTown, protesters had called for fellow protesters to stop vandalising and disrupting other shopping malls owned by the same developer on various online platforms.

As clashes inside shopping malls became increasingly common, mall managements and developers had taken different actions and preventive measures against protests inside their shopping malls. Some malls had, for instance, put up notices saying ‘police are not welcome unless there is criminal activity’; others closed the entire mall when protests were expected in the mall or in its vicinity. Despite the varied actions of mall managements, it was clear that political and civic activities were to a certain extent tolerated in most shopping malls. Rallies, concerts, exhibitions of protest art, Lennon Walls continued to be a common sight in different shopping malls across Hong Kong throughout the Anti-ELAB protests. For many Hong Kongers, shopping malls became the de facto protest sites where commercial exchange and political activities often occurred simultaneously. It was only when Beijing intensified its pressure on businesses and developers later in the movement that ‘the mall operators were forced to fall into line’ and took on a harsher stance towards the protesters (Dapiran 2020, 119). While smaller scale rallies continued to take place in different shopping malls, the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 and the enactment of the National Security Law later that year had virtually put an end to all political activities in Hong Kong.

## Making sense the role of shopping malls in protests

This paper contends that what took place in New Town Plaza and other shopping malls in Hong Kong were not only significant to the development of the Anti-ELAB protests, but they also shed light on the role of shopping malls as pseudo-public spaces in Hong Kong. While privately-owned shopping malls can never replace traditional public spaces such as town squares and city parks, this paper argues that it is nonetheless important to establish and understand why different civic and political activities continued to take place inside shopping malls throughout the Anti-ELAB protest movement. As discussed earlier, it was partly due to the increasingly diffused nature of the protests. While a number of city parks functioned as default sites for large assemblies and protests, not many local neighbourhoods have parks with large open spaces that can facilitate such activities (Ng 2009). As protests began to filter throughout the city, shopping malls became the natural gathering place for protesters. The proliferation of protests in shopping malls could also be attributed to the level of comfort offered to the protesters. The air-conditioned and sheltered environment of shopping malls was particularly valuable during the hot and rainy summer season of Hong Kong. There were other practical reasons. The vertical nature of atrium spaces of shopping malls, for example, was not only good for acoustic, but also made it easier for more protesters to see and be seen. The convenient location of shopping mall, as well as its connectivity, was also crucial for protesters and the public to take part in protests in different times of the day and the week. While most demonstrations and marches in Hong Kong were historically

held in the weekends, a lot of the assemblies and rallies during the Anti-ELAB protests took place throughout the week, including during lunch and afterwork hours, when office workers participated in ad-hoc assemblies and rallies in various shopping malls across Hong Kong (Li and Whitworth 2021; Zuraidah and Lam 2020). These spontaneous gatherings were often shorter in duration than traditional demonstrations and marches on the streets, as people gathered and dispersed before the intervention of mall management or the police. Space, as Nicholls, Miller, and Beaumont (2013, 8) argue, 'plays a constituting role' in social movements and has crucial implications on their 'structures, strategies, dynamics, and power'. The geography and spatiality of the shopping malls similarly played an important role in shaping the protests in Hong Kong. Not only did the central location and connectivity of the malls allow people to gather and encounter each other in a swift, and often impromptu, manner, the social and spatial organisation of shopping malls also made the protests more inclusive and accessible as anyone could easily join or leave the rallies as they felt appropriate.

However, it could be argued that the main reason why protests in shopping malls became such a commonplace during the Anti-ELAB protests was the public perception of relative safety in shopping malls. Even though shopping malls were not a police-free zone, they were still considered to be safer environments, both in terms of physical safety as well as legal risks, than other outdoor public spaces. Not only was it less likely for the police to shoot or deploy tear gas indoors, protesters also felt less vulnerable to police arrest when protesting in shopping malls. By the end of the summer of 2019, the government and police virtually banned all organised marches and demonstrations in public spaces, and any form of protest in 'public places' would be deemed as unlawful assembly (Davis 2020). Although the law does not make any distinction between indoor or outdoor 'public places', it was more difficult for the police to enforce such laws inside shopping malls, especially when there was no violence or other criminality involved. In addition, it was also easier for the protesters to blend into the crowd inside shopping malls, and when necessary, to filter in and out through the multiple entrances of shopping malls. As a result, shopping malls were generally perceived to be a safer place for assemblies and protests. Furthermore, the private nature of shopping malls was also thought to be advantageous to the protesters. The protesters and their supporters emphasised their role as patrons and how they should be looked after by the mall managements. In the aftermath of the clash in New Town Plaza, a local resident was quoted as saying 'whenever I'm shopping here, or just passing by, [the mall management] has a responsibility to protect our safety' (Chan and Creery 2019). Although such responsibilities were taken more seriously in some shopping malls than in others, mall employees were generally expected to help and serve all patrons. As evident in the cases of Pacific Place and MOSTown, mall employees not only acted as a buffer and mediation between the protesters and the police, but also provided essential support and assistance during the clashes. In many ways, it was this additional layer of protection and perceived safety that had driven a lot of the protests inside shopping malls.

In addition to establishing why protesters chose shopping malls as sites of protests, it is also important to understand how shopping malls facilitated



different forms of civic and political activities. While previous research has shown that political activities and freedoms of expression are often highly restricted in shopping malls (Mitchell 2013), this paper suggests it is not as straightforward or clearcut in cities where democratic rights and freedoms are not necessarily guaranteed. As the different cases illustrate above, despite the very different management styles among different developers, civic and political activities were, to a varied extent, tolerated by shopping malls in Hong Kong throughout the Anti-ELAB protests. Even though most developers eventually were pressured into backing the government's attempt to suppress all protests, the initial responses of some shopping malls exemplified the complexity of dealing with protests and rallies inside shopping malls. While some shopping mall managements took a tougher stance, others were willing to appease the protesters and their supporters. However, it must be said that even the more tolerant approach that some malls had adopted could also be predicated on commercial interests. As illustrated by the massive demonstration turnouts and District Council election results, the majority of Hong Kongers was, to a certain extent, sympathetic towards the movement. More importantly, support for the movement did not come from a certain class or age group (Lee et al. 2019), but was wide-ranging and included those who were regular patrons of these shopping malls. As a result, many developers and shopping mall managements were hesitant to put their foot down and alienate any potential patrons.

As we discussed in the New Town Plaza case, protests in shopping malls could be very disruptive. In addition to the physical damage done to the mall and certain shops, many businesses had to stay shut for an extended period of time and were affected by the drop in footfall as many people avoided the shopping mall during the protests. According to an SHKP report (SHKP 2020), the continued Anti-ELAB protests had led to a decline in both retail leasing as well as the financial performance of its shopping malls. The developer also had to provide financial relief 'to tenants in the affected malls in light of unforeseen closure' (SHKP 2020, 4). Even though it was very difficult to sustain such disruptions in the long run, the short-term impact of the protests had to be managed by the developers quickly to avoid any substantial damages. Other developers instead tried to avoid such scenarios altogether by closing the malls or discouraging the police from entering. However, it must also be noted that there is in fact no legal framework for shopping mall managements to stop the police from entering the shopping malls. According to the conditions stated in the land leases of all three malls discussed above, police access needs to be guaranteed 'when they are on active duty'. The arrest of the MOSTown staff was also representative of the lack of control mall management had over police access. More importantly, most developers eventually sided with the government as it had too much sway on the profitability and financial growth of developers in Hong Kong. It could therefore be argued that while some forms of civic and political activities were tolerated in some shopping malls, such freedoms were granted based on the protesters' role as patrons and were solely at the mercy of the mall management and developers.

Nevertheless, by utilising their roles as consumers and patrons, protesters in Hong Kong were able to transform different shopping malls into protest sites where they could express themselves. As Dikeç and Swyngedouw suggest,



such 'spaces of the political' are pertinent to any social movement as they not only placed and localised a political idea, but also 'disturb the socio-spatial ordering by rearranging it with those who stand in for "the people" or the community' (Dikeç and Swyngedouw 2017, 10). Despite its temporary nature, the politicisation of shopping malls was key to sustaining the Anti-ELAB movement, especially when freedoms of expression became increasingly limited in other public spaces in Hong Kong. Significantly, the protests and contestations in shopping malls also resulted in lasting transformations in the everyday life of Hong Kongers. As a result of the temporary disruptions of their everyday practices in shopping malls, many Hong Kongers became more aware of their agency as consumers and patrons and how they could use it to their advantage in the corporate and capital driven city. As their political freedoms continued to diminish, the protesters' ability and freedom to consume became an increasingly important means to challenge the existing politico-economic order. Not only did they change their views towards different businesses, developers, and private corporations during these protests, many Hong Kongers also began to adopt various forms of consumer activism by boycotting businesses that either sided with the government or had ties with China and supporting ones that backed the protest movement. How one consumes in Hong Kong, as Chan and Pun argue, became a 'new form of political participation that aims to vent consumers' political values and strives for political change' (Chan and Pun 2020, 38).

## Conclusion

As illustrated in this paper, shopping malls became some of the most contested sites during the Anti-ELAB protests in Hong Kong, a city that is well known for being a 'shoppers' paradise' (Al 2016; Lui 2001). By collectively taking part in different civic and political activities inside shopping malls, the protesters staked their claim to the right to the city in some of the most commodified spaces of Hong Kong. The shopping malls, which are traditionally associated with commodity exchange and consumption, became not only a place for protests and assemblies, but also sites of emancipation. The proliferation of Lennon Walls, exhibitions of protest art, rallies, and concerts in shopping malls could be seen as not only a form of de-commodification or resistance against the dominant capitalist spatial order, but also a politicisation of space whereby protesters created important sites of public discourse through their roles as consumers and patrons. The protesters transformed the shopping malls, albeit temporarily, from a highly commodified pseudo-public space to a democratic and civic space where freedoms of expression and public debates were exercised. However, it must also be noted that shopping malls and developers were not targeted by protesters, at least initially, for their contribution to the privatisation and commodification of urban space. Instead, the protests inside shopping malls were largely born out of necessity as other public spaces became increasingly restricted. Nonetheless, shopping malls were integral in providing the necessary arena for new forms of civic and political activities, and subsequently led to the protesters' use of consumer activism as a means of protest when physical rallies and demonstrations were no longer feasible. While making public space

'public' has often been a struggle (Mitchell 2017), the protesters in Hong Kong demonstrated through collective action and appropriation of space that such resistance could take place even in some of the most privatised, commercialised, and secured spaces in the city. As Harvey (2008, 23) contends, the right to the city is 'a right to change ourselves by changing the city'. This paper argues that the protesters' politicisation of shopping malls during the Anti-ELAB protest movement, despite its brevity, represented an important first step of reclaiming the right to the city for the people of Hong Kong. More importantly, it also exemplified how struggles over the formation of public need to be extended to different everyday spaces as freedoms of speech and expression in traditional public spaces are increasingly suppressed in Hong Kong.

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