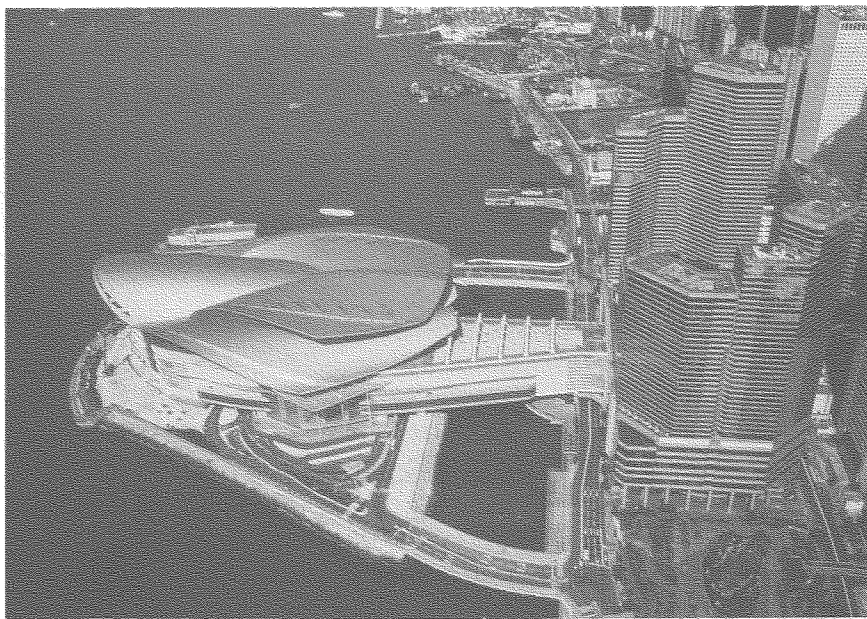


Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre



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## The Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre Extension

David Clarke

Tiananmen Square in Beijing is a site saturated with historical associations. A carefully constructed theatre of socialist memory has become problematic because less manageable, more subversive historical associations have come to overlay those inscribed by the state. Responding to this problem the state has tried to deemphasize history there, using “soft” monuments (as Wu Hung has described in a recent issue of *Public Culture*), and the Hong Kong clock.<sup>1</sup> Visitors to the square are now encouraged to look forward to a nationalist future rather than back on a socialist past.

A similar attempt to erase the historical can be found in the case of the Extension to the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the site of the 1997

1. Wu Hung, “The Hong Kong Clock—Public Time-Telling and Political Time/Space,” *Public Culture* 23 (1997), 329–54. Also on Tiananmen Square, see David Clarke, “Reframing Mao: Aspects of Recent Chinese Art, Popular Culture and Politics” in *Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 236–49, and “A Place for our Memories,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), 24 July 1997, 19.

handover ceremony, and thus a crucial locus for Chinese nationalist discourse. The ceremony had to take place in a structure (and on a site) totally untainted by colonial associations, or any memories of the past which could disrupt the carefully choreographed symbolism of "the resumption of exercise of sovereignty." The ceremony had to take place in Hong Kong, but Chinese national ideology had no place in the territory (other than, say, the office of the New China News Agency, which Hong Kong people know best as a site of demonstrations aimed against the Chinese Communist government). Consequently the ceremony occurred in this newly-constructed building (completed only just in time for the handover and thus in a "virgin" state), which was built on land reclaimed from the harbour for the purpose. Symbolism of a new beginning was possible in this site without memory, and the architectural structure (most notably the wing-like roof forms) makes this meaning explicit. The building is described as resembling a bird taking off over water, and since the Extension juts out into the harbour the implied movement is (significantly) northwards, as well as upwards. The building is a monument pointing to an upbeat nationalist future.

Since the handover ceremony, the nationalist associations of the Extension have been further underlined and extended. A site has been created for Chinese national meanings which (as yet) have no easy place elsewhere in Hong Kong. A freestanding flagpole in an open place in front of the Extension flies the Chinese national flag: It is regularly visited by busloads of mainland tourists, and on Chinese National Day it provides the ceremonial focus for a celebratory gathering. Anson Chan (head of the civil service and deputy to Hong Kong's Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa) claimed in a much publicized statement to have experienced a rediscovery of her Chinese identity whilst watching the first of these National Day flag raisings. In this space free from colonial memories even someone as closely associated with the previous colonial government as she could experience existential rebirth, apparently.

The widespread use of glass in the walls of the Extension helps create associations of openness. One might however choose to read this architectural monument against its grain and see it as a disguised fortress. It is separated from the Convention and Exhibition Centre itself by a water-filled moat, and can be reached only by two road entrances (at either side) or by a footbridge to the main building (a sort of drawbridge which one could treat as symbolizing the disconnectedness of this place of national meanings from the rest of Hong Kong). Although a site for patriotic gatherings has been created at the end of the Extension, the lessons of Tiananmen Square have been learnt, and this is a public space

for carefully controlled crowds only. When an event of political import takes place in the building or around the flagpole the roads to the extension are sealed off, and demonstrators who might otherwise take disruptive possession of the space are left to protest behind police barriers on the other side of the protective moat. History, so rigorously excluded from the Extension, tends to figure prominently in their theatre of protest, and Tiananmen Square, with its problematic weight of memories, is continually being recalled.