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[The Kids Arts Festival of Tennessee: Honoring Play, Experiments and Collaborative Experiences in Art – Meaghan Brady Nelson](#)

Community Efforts of the Umbrella Festival

[Benny Lim](#)

Introduction

Hong Kong, a special administrative zone of China, experienced an unprecedented 79 days of civil disobedience between September and December 2014. Several streets were occupied by protestors who had one common aim – universal suffrage for Hong Kong in the next Chief Executive (CE) election in 2017 and onwards. The protest was triggered by the announcement of the CE electoral frameworks by the Chinese government in Beijing. These new electoral frameworks require potential candidates to be first screened and approved by a committee of 1200 members from different societal sectors, before they are eligible to stand for election.

This occupation movement also saw cases involving violence, particularly from the police, using tear gas, pepper spray, and batons. Out of defense, the protestors made use of umbrellas to protect themselves from the police. Umbrellas, therefore, became such important icons in this movement that some called this the *Umbrella Movement*.

Between May 17-31, 2015, the Cultural Studies Division of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) presented the Umbrella Festival. The festival was meant to be a platform for the Hong Kong population, including artists, to reflect and respond to the Umbrella Movement from an arts and cultural perspective six months after the movement. During the two-week festival, a total of 28 events were showcased, comprising of 13 exhibitions, five different performing arts events, as well as film screenings, talks, a cultural walk, performance arts, and workshops. All the events during the festival period were held in Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre (JCCAC).

Organizing an arts festival has clear advantages over a single arts event or a series of events by a single artist. An arts festival allows critical responses and reactions by different artists on a given set of programming philosophy. This contrasts the idea of a single performing or visual art event, where there is usually just one voice by the director or curator. Moreover, a festival looks into the co-relationship between three key elements – place, residents and visitors (Yeoman et al., 2004).



Poster Image of the Umbrella Festival
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Programming Philosophy: Voice to the Hong Kong Community

The inclusion of the Hong Kong community, residents and visitors, in the consideration of the programming philosophy was crucial. The Umbrella Movement is, after all, a reaction of the Hong Kong people. The festival also considered that some Hong Kong people, regardless of their political affiliation, did not get a chance to visit the occupied sites during the Umbrella Movement because they feared direct confrontation or violence. The festival was, therefore, a suitable and peaceful platform where participants could have the space and time to critically think about the messages they receive. The concept of the events reflected the Umbrella Movement adequately. The exhibitions were almost directly relevant, including the photographs taken and comics displayed during the movement, as well as the reproduction of the Lennon Wall. Lennonism played a major part in the Umbrella Movement. John Lennon's song, *Imagine*, was one of the songs adopted and sang by the crowd during the movement. The lyrics from the song, "*You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.*", were reproduced on a banner, which was hung on a bridge. Just next to bridge was the location of the Lennon Wall, borrowed from the concept of Lennon Wall in Prague, where participants of the movement wrote handwritten messages on post-it notes and stuck them on the wall.

The performing arts events also adhered closely to the programming philosophy, and highlighted a range of different issues relevant to the movement such as the police actions, conflicts between movement supports and their parents, and so forth. Although one of the plays, *Immigration Lottery*, did not discuss the Umbrella Movement directly, the performance explored the identity of the Hong Kong people which was very relevant during the movement. Films included in the festival were all documentaries made during the Umbrella Movement. During the festival, there was an umbrella-folding workshop, where participants learned to make yellow origami umbrella. It was not exactly known why yellow was chosen as the

symbolic color of the Umbrella Movement. After all, yellow was associated to a number of democracy and freedom movements in the past, particularly the Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan, which happened just six months before the Umbrella Movement.



Continuation of the Lennon Wall during the Umbrella Festival
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Umbrella-folding workshop
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Promoting to the Community

The festival implemented a series of marketing activities, including print, online, and media releases. To generate more awareness of the festival to the local community, two outreach activities were organized before the actual festival. An umbrella painting session was held in April 2015 outside the train station of the University. Members of the public (including students and staff of the University) were invited to draw or write something on an umbrella to share their feelings and thoughts about the Umbrella Movement. The umbrellas were later displayed prominently during the festival's opening ceremony on May 17, 2015. The second outreach activity was carried out a week before the festival. Short dance pieces were performed in Tsim

Sha Tsui and Causeway Bay. The dance pieces were excerpts of an actual full-length dance performance that would later be staged during the festival. These two locations were selected not on the basis that they are crowded shopping areas in Hong Kong, but they were the first two occupied locations during the Umbrella Movement to be cleared out by the police.



Excerpts of a dance performance in Tsim Sha Tsui ©2014
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Place and Community

In consuming arts events, experience is key (Bathurst & Stein, 2010; Dewey, 2005). Such experiences are usually intangible, similar to that of a service; hence, the extended marketing mix can also be applied to the arts. Physical evidence, as a strategy, can sometimes refer to the comfort of the venue (Rentschler, 1999). Yet, in the Umbrella Festival, the challenge is not so much about making the venues comfortable. Rather, it is about the festival's capability to create a collective experience (Lim, 2015; Lee, Meyer, & Smith, 2012 Kapoor, Paul, & Halder, 2011) even when the events were scattered over seven floors within JCCAC. JCCAC is revitalized from an old industrial building, and has several conventional exhibition and experimental performance spaces. However, the festival team made a logical decision to put the events in non-conventional spaces (small studios and classrooms) as well as public spaces (wall spaces and the Green Space) within JCCAC compound with intentions to reach more visitors. To walk into a formal exhibition space or a theatre could be alienating for many.

JCCAC is located in the Shek Kip Mei/ Sham Shui Po area, which is considered one of the most central places in Hong Kong (Dawson, Zanotti, & Vaccaro, 2014; Cheung, Marchetti, & Tan, 2010) This location is representative of the Hong



Festival map indicating the various locations in JCCAC where

Kong people and its culture. Despite being located in a more mature residential area with a higher population of senior residents, JCCAC often features works of young artists and has always attracted youth audiences.

events took place
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Opening Ceremony of the Umbrella Festival in JCCAC ©2014
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Residents and Visitors

To collect information about the festival, a survey form was given to randomly selected visitors from 14 different events. The survey form was designed in both English and Chinese and consisted of ten questions, five of which were directly relevant to the marketing of the festival. A total of 247 survey forms were collected. A filtering process was put in place to ensure that there were no repeated participants in the same survey. In the end, 53 forms were filtered out and the analysis were based on survey forms from 194 unique individuals. The process included the verification of the participants' email addresses to ensure that there were no repetitions. From the survey results, 90 percent of the attendees were local residents of Hong Kong, which suggests that the festival has attained considerable success in reaching out to the Hong Kong population. However, there were interesting observations on the age distribution. The majority of the audiences (74.3%) was between the age of 18 and 39, the festival's targeted group. Yet, there was an interesting phenomenon of a sizeable group (one-sixth of the total visitors) aged 50 and above. One suspicion was that the majority of these senior visitors could be parents of the participating artists and crew. Another explanation could be that these senior visitors lived nearby JCCAC. However, on further analysis, both conjectures were invalid, as the survey data showed that the majority of the senior visitors received the festival's information from online and printed media, not word-of-mouth from family or friends. Furthermore, over 60% of these senior visitors have undergraduate or higher qualifications which was not aligned to the demographics of the senior citizens living in Shek Kip Mei/ Sham Shui Po area. It was likely that these educated seniors had prior knowledge in accessing information from online sources, and was therefore aware of the festival.

Conclusion

In terms of its community efforts, the Umbrella Festival had a number of hits and misses that could serve as recommendations to current community arts workers. First, it was essential the festival had a strong and clear programming philosophy, with aim to cater to Hong Kong audiences, regardless of their political inclinations, a range of relevant arts events that revisited Umbrella Movement the in a non-confrontational environment. The philosophy helped repel criticisms that the festival failed to provide two sides of the narrative, which was not the intention. Secondly, as much as the festival hoped to reach out to the entire Hong Kong population, the limited resources only allowed the festival to focus on the 18 to 39-year old segment. Without this clear segmentation, the festival might go into an overdrive in trying to reach out to everyone. While the sizeable senior audiences came as a surprise, it also proved that there is potential of reaching other segments while focusing on one. Finally, locations played an important role in realizing the festival's philosophy and reaching out the targeted audience. The organizers should have considered that JCCAC, as an arts centre, might be alienating for the local community. There might be resistance from the community to walk into JCCAC. The Umbrella Movement is known for the occupation of various public areas in Hong Kong. To enhance the impact of the place strategy and its relation to the programming philosophy, the festival could have programmed more events in public spaces within the same location, Shek Kip Mei/ Sham Shui Po, instead of housing all the events in JCCAC.

Aftermath

On the 18th June 2015, just two weeks after the closing of the festival, the Hong Kong Legislative Council voted against the electoral frameworks by Beijing. This meant that the CE election in 2017 would be the same as the previous elections, where a 1200-member committee would vote for the next CE. In March 2017, Carrie Lam won the CE elections with 777 votes. In August 2017, three student leaders of the Umbrella Movement were given jailed sentences, after the Hong Kong's Department of Justice successfully overturned an earlier sentence of community service for the trio.

Author Note

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