IN ENGLISH, THE NOUN UMBRELLA comes from the Latin umbella, meaning flat-topped flower, and from umbo, meaning shade: a flower that protects. In written Chinese, however, the character used for umbrella is not a noun, but a verb, ‘to block’ (遮). While these roots share a common idea – of defence and safety – they also allude to divergent meanings. One is static and organic, the other mobile and proactive. Both represent something important about the protests.

While some – particularly international – reports have depicted the Umbrella Movement as being relatively homosexual and cohesive, the protests have in fact been extremely heterogenous. As the contributions to this issue demonstrate, participants have been focused on action rather than reaction; on the desire to resist rather than a unifying narrative. Indeed, Cantonese-speaking friends tell me that few people actually used the terms ‘umbrella’ or ‘movement’ in everyday discussions. Conversations are more grounded in action.

Since the Handover of Sovereignty in 1997, social conflict and popular mobilization have been challenging the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSSAR) Government. This culminated in the Umbrella Movement: the calls for universal suffrage lie people’s grievances about the government’s incapability in alleviating socioeconomic inequalities and the attendant problems. I will argue that such incompetence is rooted in the ‘built-in’ weaknesses of Hong Kong’s political structure.

Problem on the surface: inequalities in the global city

Since the 1990s, Hong Kong has developed into what Saskia Sassen calls a global city that witnesses a polarizing occupational structure and widening income inequality, the manifestations of which are multi-faceted. For instance, housing becomes increasingly unaffordable for the average household; hence the ever-lengthening waiting list for public housing, and the ‘popularity’ of sub-divided units, i.e., partitioned rooms in flats often located in poorly maintained old residential buildings, as an option of accommodation. This is not helped by skyrocketing property prices, but the government’s commitment to restructuring the housing market and land supply, which is vital for curtailing speculative activities, is also conspicuously absent. The dismay of the public is visualized in the Umbrella Movement: protesters label their tents with the names of luxury residences, so as to mock the government’s failure to provide people shelter.

Housing policy exemplifies the government’s departure from a redistributive agenda. With the ascendency of the neoliberal doctrine in public policy-making since the late colonial era, emphasis has been placed on minimising public expenditure, purportedly geared towards making public management more efficient and raising the competitiveness of the local economy in the global market. This explains the gradual withdrawal of the role of the government from housing provision, and in relation to the urban planning, as in the case of the provision of education and medicine. The government thus becomes less and less accountable to the needs and interests of the public, as evidenced in increasing housing unaffordability.

Structural weakness of governance: a look at the legislature

According to the Basic Law, the Legislative Council (Legco) should be made up of an equal number of members representing the local and functional constituencies. Written into, hallmarks of Hong Kong’s colonial rule and were considered essential to the main-tenance of the city’s capitalist way of life after the handover in 1997. Written into, and guaranteed in, the Basic Law is the skewed power distribution in favour of pro-business, pro-Beijing functional interests in the political institutional set-up. According to the Basic Law, the Legislative Council (Legco) should be made up of an identical number of seats returned from the directly-elected geographic constituencies.