

**Islands and Territories:  
Urban Contact Zones in Taiwan and Greater New York**

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The three authors of this post represent three generations in architectural research, brought together through zoom during the pandemic academic year of 2020-2021.

Cheng-Luen Hsueh, Associate Professor of Architecture at National Cheng Kung University in Tainan, Taiwan, was my student in the M.S. Architecture and Urban Design Program at Columbia University in 1996. I had just returned from my third trip to Taiwan that year, having visited Taipei during the island's first democratic elections. From this experience we began a 25-year discussion on architecture, urbanism, digital technology and cultural transnationalism. Arjun Appadurai had just published *Modernity at Large* that year, and during the Clinton administration there was much optimism about global digitalization and cultural transnationalism.

Also contributing was Tommy Yang, a 2020 graduate of the Parsons M. Arch program, and 2021-2022 Visiting Professor at Carnegie Mellon University. Tommy was my student, Research Assistant, and Teaching Assistant for a traveling studio in Chiang Mai, Thailand for Parsons and Chulalongkorn University undergraduate students in January, 2020, at the same moment as the first confirmed case of COVID-19 outside of China was detected in Thailand. We all returned safely to New York, only to be confronted by the pandemic three months later as it arrived from Europe.

Our multi-generational team sought to understand the differences between Taiwan and New York City's response to COVID-19 through our own personal experiences. My parents have long passed away, so I did not have to endure seeing them suffer like so many early elderly victims of the disease. My own family has been separated during this time between New York and Thailand.

In the essay that follows, Hsueh discusses the experience of his daughter returning to Taiwan from college in New York and the experience of Taiwan as a pandemic bubble. In the conclusion, Tommy reflects from the perspective of a generation which finished its university education over Zoom in relation to his own family history as Hmong refugees. Together we are grateful to the India China Institute for giving us this opportunity to find solidarity across the world at this time.

## **Taiwan: The pandemic world of an island democracy**

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Since January 2021, our urban diaries have been co-written through bi-weekly meetings to reflect how our world has changed due to the COVID19 pandemic. From East New York and Putnam Valley in New York to Tainan in Taiwan, our lives and stories were connected through the portals of our screen. Zoom—our digital multigenerational home—allows us to reflect. Two islands, a 12 hours time difference, 8,000 miles apart, woven by a thread of hour-long meetings on the cloud. We integrated digital methods and reflection to help capture fleeting microhistories from Taiwan. This nurtured the historical and physical tracing of Taiwan's own island contacts and fortification, framing the current geo-political struggle and weaving personal daily lives to larger global histories.

### **Island as Contact Zone**

The concept of “Contact Zone” was introduced by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other’ in the context of Spanish territorial colonialism” (Pratt, 1991). On the other hand, “Island Studies” calls for a re-centering of focus away from the discourse of the conquest of mainlanders, giving voice and platform for the expression of island narratives (Baldachino, 2008). Taiwanese “islanders” growing up through multiple colonial regimes in history, the “contact zone” stands for specific zones of entry into island spaces and narratives. Contrary to the Andes in Latin America, or to Silk Road's continuity and expansion without fixed boundaries, the oxymoron characteristics of the isolation but linking natures of Taiwan was related to its “island-ness” in the center of the first chain of archipelagos outside the East Asian mainland. This contact zone has multiple scales and layers of relationship embedded in its original spatial and temporal context with exchanges, conflicts, and connections to the past colonization and modern globalization.

This essay is structured as a short personal diary of Taiwan's collective response to the Covid pandemic as both an island narrative and a contact zone, framing the present crisis within geopolitical and personal histories and actions. The first part, “Island as Geopolitical Contact Zone,” contains historical background on Taiwan and myself. The second part, “Island Community as Pandemic Narrative,” summarizes the critical events and personal actions in the past year since the pandemic started, including the recent breakout and containment. The third part, “Island Design as Social Network,” is about two bottom-up design-build projects and virtual alliances under the status-quo in the new Taiwan-US-China relations.

In the current post-pandemic world, Taiwan faces elevated local distancing and global trade at the same time under increasing tension with China and in-between rocky US-China relations, studying the island with island studies and contact zone concepts inspires new viewpoints to understand how social experiences and actions on this particular kind of contact zone (island) can be responsive to the question of “art of the contactless zone” raised by Brian McGrath (McGrath, 2021).

## Island as Geopolitical Contact Zone

Historically, the geopolitical significance of Taiwan lies in its strategic location and its in-between on-and-off relationship with global trade and war. The separation from mainland China made Taiwan an important island as trading port and military post in transition and connection to China, Japan, and Korea. During the age of discovery, it was an important node for the Portuguese and the Dutch Routes. From 17th to 20th centuries, Taiwan was under the rule of the Dutch (1624-62), the Spanish (1626-42, in northern Taiwan), the Zheng, Cheng-Kung (1662-83) in Ming Dynasty, the Qing Dynasty (1683-1895), the Japanese (1895-1945), and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT, 1945-96) before the democratic consolidation (1996-present). Also, following the surrender of Japan, Taiwan was once under US aid following the US Mutual Security Acts (1951-65) for military and economic development against the Communist China and the Korean War.

These frequent transfers of colonial and imperial powers that separate the island from the previous regime, connected to the new status quo with China, has been accompanied by many conflicts, cultural clashes, and wars between political regimes, as well as layers of erasures and traces embedded in the physical environment.

My ancestors were the first generation of Mainland Chinese who emigrated from Southern China during the Ming Dynasty in the late 17th century. The Hsueh Family's clan house was constructed near the military post in Zuoying, Kaohsiung, around 350 years ago, and gradually became a multi-family enclave inhabited by the growing new families, and at the same time, maintaining the traditional residential building form as in Southern Fujian, China, with layers of inward-oriented buildings embracing and protecting the fixed, centered, hierarchical spatial and social structure against encounters, conflicts, and spatial transformations of surroundings among pirates, ethnic groups (Aborigines, Holo, Hakka, Mainlanders...), military, and governments through time. (Fig. 1)

The three consecutive courtyards and central halls which now are only used for major ceremonial events (including my wedding ceremony) are displaying portraits and memorial tablets of several key ancestors. A big family tree diagram on the wall has my name even written long before I was born. (my parents said they almost chose the other name now belongs to my cousin.) It has been a kind of ancestral contact zone for my two daughters after we moved back from the US and first paid visit. Both of them were born in New York where I studied and worked for ten years from 1996 to 2006. Their names appeared at the bottom among very few female names that only started appearing in my generation which was not allowed before. Taiwan now has a first female president elected in 2016, after 20 years since the first democratic presidential election and started the democracy transformation in Taiwan when I moved to NY in 1996 for advanced study in Urban Design at Columbia University.

Through my daughters, identifying relatives' names, tracing back and forth history of families' heritages and origins, the family tree as a contact zone correlates to the transformations of the island and my growing up. Shifting scales and layers of the genealogical relationships help to explore my experiences and transnational identity migrating in-between two islands-- Taiwan and Manhattan, in-between family-bounded hierarchical order and nuclear American dream in Douglaston Queens, and in-between

mopeds and dispersed commute between suburban and Manhattan. And eventually my elder daughter went 'back' to New York for her College education in 2019.

### **Island Community as Pandemic Narrative**

Last year Bloomberg columnist Tim Culpan wrote that life has been 'ridiculously normal' in Taiwan amid the pandemic. (Culpan, 2020). He used the term "happy little bubble" to describe the spatial and temporal separation of the island of Taiwan reinforced with a 14-day quarantine requirement for entering from abroad. This created an effective barrier from the virus. People resumed normal life without the need for a lockdown or social distancing,

Taiwanese had learned from the experience of SARS in 2003. Taiwan is excluded from the World Health Organization due to the complex relation with China. But with help from the U.S. C.D.C. directly, Taiwan responded immediately with anti-epidemic measures and related guidelines. Besides cutting flights from China and banning the export of medical masks, the Government took control of mask production and distribution early in January 2020.

Taiwan's early response followed the first alert on social media of possible new SARS in Wuhan in late December 2019, New digital tools were introduced, such as instant mapping for mask distribution through local pharmacies, Taiwan Social Distancing Apps, and vaccination pre-registration platform, coordinated by Audrey Tang, Digital Minister of Taiwan, were implemented with crowdsourced civil data with government's administrative powers, and has benefited more collective, open, and transparent participations. Tang has expressed her idea of digital democracy saying that "tech can build trust, tame misinformation, and strengthen democracy" to "support a larger digital literacy of civic engagement" (Leonard, 2020). Also, in an interview at the time scale of the crisis, Tang explained the coronavirus has shortened the sense of urgency compared to the climate crisis, from two or three generations for Taiwan island (four generations for larger continental territory) into a week-to-week gap. (Claudel, 2020).

While tension and fear were high in Taiwan, day-to-day my family was updating remotely with my daughter in the still calm Upstate New York and helping her prepare and plan for 'evacuation' (avoiding public transportation and New York City dense area). Immediately after the outbreak and school lockdown in the U.S., she came back to Taiwan and continued with on-line courses in March, 2020. She was considered a highly contagious risk for us. Not only was she required the 14-days quarantine following CDC's guideline, with plastic sheets we also DIY a quarantine 'bubble' to create a contactless zone in the car and within our apartment. (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3)

Although she spent her childhood in the U.S. she became a young adult in Taiwan when social interactions of a new generation shifted to digital space. The "Sunflower Student Movement" in 2014, the "Umbrella Movement" in Hong Kong, and now the student protest in Thailand have raised more awareness of her generation with more democratic, participatory, decentralized, mobile and adaptable capabilities known as the "Milk Tea Alliance".. She had no lag (nor jet-lag) shifting to digital space in her little bubble constructed in our apartment in Tainan, which actually was operated in the NY time zone for the online classes in the U.S. Later she even enrolled in the local University in Taiwan to

have physical and normal social life, make friends, and eat lunch together. The little bubble in the apartment is an extraterritorial island and contact zone wired between two colleges with 12 hours temporal differences inside and outside.

In the past year, Taiwan island, the “happy bubble” burst with several small outbreaks through contact zones, such as airports, airport hotels, and dormitories for foreign migrant workers. There were also breakthroughs from “back-doors” of the quarantine barrier, such as navy sailors offboard without proper quarantine, and airline pilots or others who violated the quarantine guidelines. Those small outbreaks were contained immediately.

Unfortunately, in late April 2021, a community outbreak from the adult entertainment district in Taipei with complex “direct contact” footprints between elderly people burst the bubble. “Sexy Tea, the Lion King and Taiwan's Lost Innocence” (Culpan, 2021), reflects a new sarcasm by the same journalist who wrote that Taiwan was a happy bubble, and connected Taiwan to the global epidemic reality. We only recently started to experience what the rest of the world had been through for 18 months with a steep rise of infected and fatality numbers.

After nearly four months in late August, 2021. The new daily infectious case has dropped from 723 at the highest to single digit or even 0 once again. (Fig. 4) National or regional measures of elevating quarantine restriction, broadening COVID testing, identifying hot-spot areas, adopting more rigorous contact tracing, and quarantining possible contacted infectious patient were accompanied by various local responses with imposing the social distancing and limiting group gathering, prohibiting indoor dining and activities, working from home, controlling flows in the public space, and separating space into quadrants by temporary dividers... etc.

Geography Professors Andrew Cliff and Peter Haggett suggested “epidemics are patterns in time and space” and can best be studied in an isolated population. (Cliff & Haggett, 1984) Island configuration can be the model or case study for the top-down measures in epidemic management, as well as the narrative for local and bottom-up anti-epidemic approaches. Community’s self-discipline to wear masks, maintain contactless, record footprints, be aware of surface contact with the use of disinfectants, and so on, rather than a total lockdown proved to be effective.

With a population of 25 million, Taiwan has placed orders for more than 70 million vaccine doses directly through Manufacturers and COVAX platform, but only about 12 million were shipped (significantly less than needed after the breakout in April with only 5 million shipped in the late June). In addition, China interrupted the contract to distribute BNT vaccine to Taiwan, and offered free vaccines to assert the One-China policy and sovereignty over Taiwan through agitation and propaganda. The shortage of vaccine and low vaccination rate in the breakout became a political crisis for the government Democratic Party attacked by the opposition party who sought alliance with China to gain a political advantage.

Vaccine Politics is not only tied to the global inequality of wealth and power, for Taiwan it is also about siding with an international military and economic alliance against China’s oppression of the status quo of Taiwan. Using automotive chips to bargain with Germany, two international tech companies Foxconn and TSMC successfully struck a deal to buy 10 million doses of BNT donated to the government. Besides, US, Japan, and other east

European countries also started to donate vaccines to Taiwan, with 2.5 million from US, 3.37 million from Japan, 20,000 from Lithuania, 30,000 from Czech Republic, and 400,000 from Poland. The Slovak Republic are also planning to donate vaccines in return for the favor from Taiwan's donation of masks last year.

### **Island design as Social Network**

I am full-time teaching and currently appointed as Associate Vice-President for the General Affairs Office at National Cheng Kung University (NCKU). Taiwan resumed a safe environment for normal life in the island bubble. Outside the bubble amid the global pandemic crisis, we started to mobilize resources among the University, the University Hospital, professors and students at the Architecture Department, and collaborated with local architects, consultants and contractors to develop and construct two projects "QurE" and "m.Cov-tainer".

Working together with Bio-architecture Formosana (BAF), the QurE (Quarantine Units for Recovery, Emergency, and Ecology) is an open sourced project. (<https://qure.gs.ncku.edu.tw/>) The construction was done in 3-days in April 2020 using circular, re-assemblable, local, modular, and light-weight steel construction systems. BIM model, air flow control, technical specifications, and manual are all shared for free online in hope to help those in need for emergent construction of negative pressure wards in time for the collapsed healthcare system. (Fig. 5)

m.Cov-tainer is another real project co-created among various disciplines at the University, architectural department, and University Hospital to experiment and demonstrate how to construct and create prophylactic architecture modular units that can be quickly deployed during or post- pandemic crisis, and combine modules into different architectures to enhance the anti-epidemic capability of existing buildings and other places in need. The "m.Cov-tainer" is a modified 20-foot container integrated with the facilities required for diagnostic testing with X-ray examination capability. It is a micro-positive-pressurized "bubble" and operated through its three airtight window/counter units that can be closed to create a physical barrier, coupled with modularized fans and sterilization equipment. After Covid-testing the specimens are encapsulated in a toy-like "gashapon ball", rolling through the tube and collected for lab testing. The whole process deliberately becomes a fun game to reduce the psychological stress caused by the procedure. The enclosed testing room is applicable for chest X-ray examination linked to the AI imagery system to identify possible infectious cases in minutes. This unit is also experimenting with "Photodynamic" sterilization killing viruses with diffused dyed mist and high-power light source. (Fig. 6)

## Conclusion

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*The Pandemic World of An Island Democracy* traced a personal diary painting a historical, social, and physical transformation of the island of Taiwan as what Mary Louise Pratt calls a contact zone. In Pratt's exploration of Peru and Spanish colonialism, she identifies these zones as zones of social contact and cultural exchange. These exchanges cultivate cycles of social adaptations, "transculturation," where communities transform by integrating new wisdoms and rituals from the dominant cultures (Pratt, 1991).

Through collaborative telling and writing as participatory history in the making between New York and Taiwan co-authored between three generations of architects, the contact zone is challenged as it frames Taiwan's relations of flows revealing temporal landscapes, scalar shifts, and "imagined communities" nurturing an embodied island resilience (Anderson 2006). (Fig.7) The framework of the meta-city, introduced by Brian McGrath and Steward Pickett, is adapted as a concept linking Pratt's social zones of contact to a multi-scalar multi-sited matrix of ecological zones, histories, people, flows of information, and architecture across boundaries (McGrath & Pickett, 2011). Perceived within the lenses of shifting political territories, architecture, urban planning, and a global pandemic, this framework of an island as contact reveals how island micro-narratives and embodied acts continue to be woven into larger global incongruent histories. Known historically as the intermediary grounds of trading routes, Taiwan webbed its history into the rapid globalization of the world. Genealogical family structures transcends the footsteps of the traditional houses. Large-scale quarantine and bubbles mandates physically distanced local social scenes, yet nurtured global publics with digital technologies. The island and territorial urban form are related to the architecture of contact zones that can adapt to waves of vulnerabilities - a multi-systemic relationship from the human body to planetary movements that are responsive to social and ecological transformations. Therefore this theoretical framing of the meta-city and contact zone cultivates a methodology to explore and understand architecture and urbanism as an engagement between deep public history, lived experiences, media, digital technologies, and the sciences.

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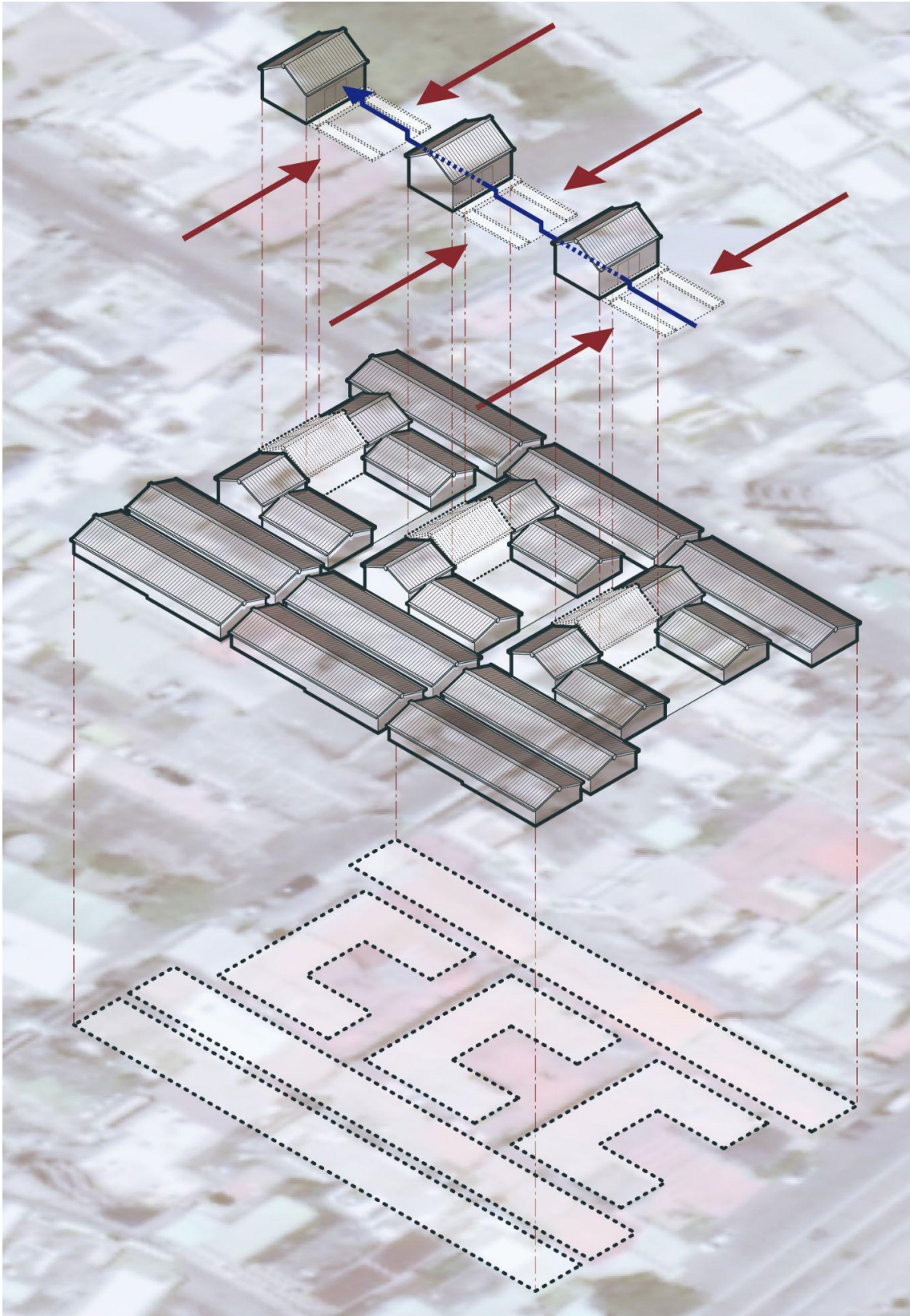


Fig. 1 Hsueh Families' Compound

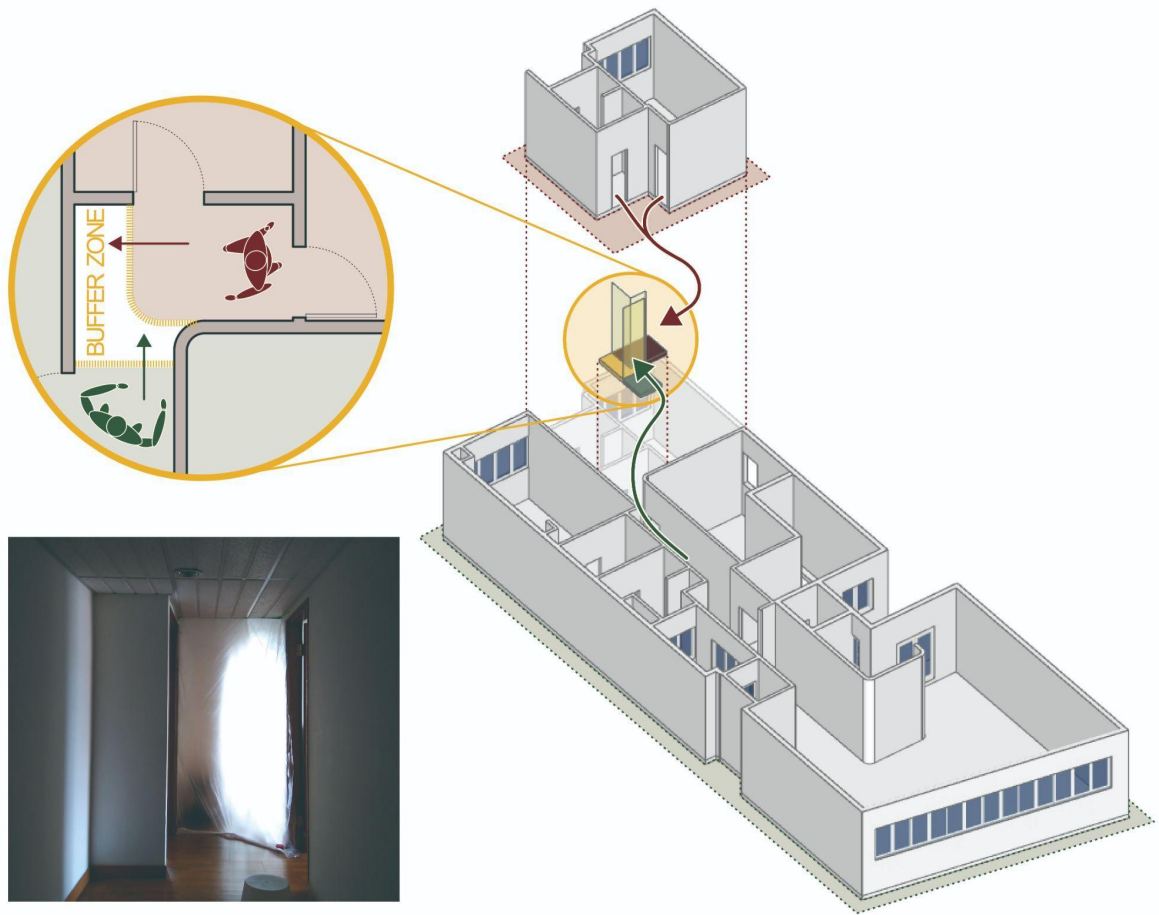


Fig. 2 DIY Bubble in Hsueh's Apartment



Fig.3 DIY Bubble in Hsueh's Car

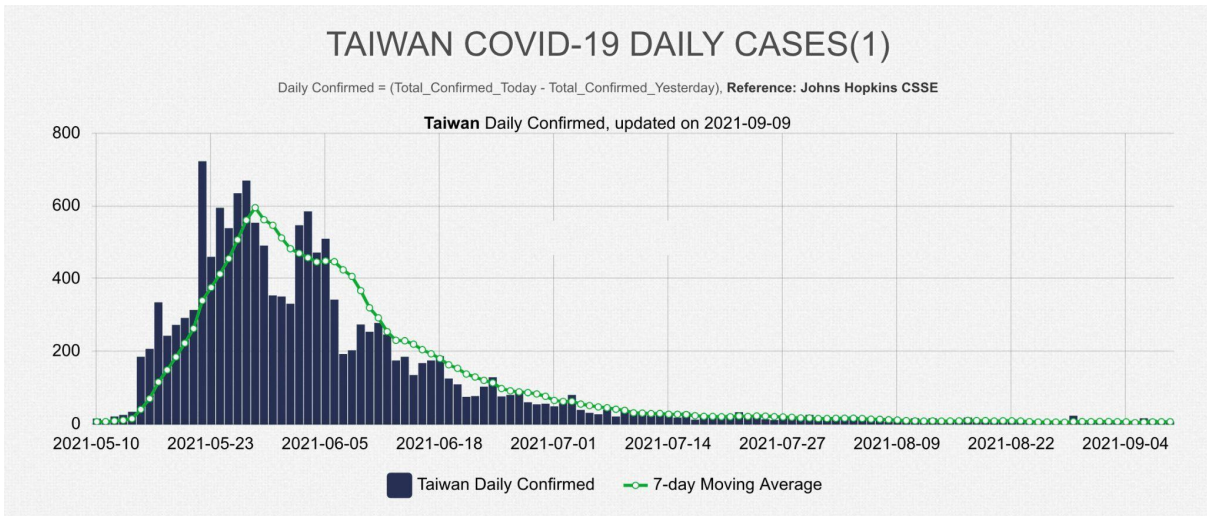


Fig. 4 Taiwan Daily Cases (Chart by National Center for High-performance Computing, <https://covid-19.nchc.org.tw/>)

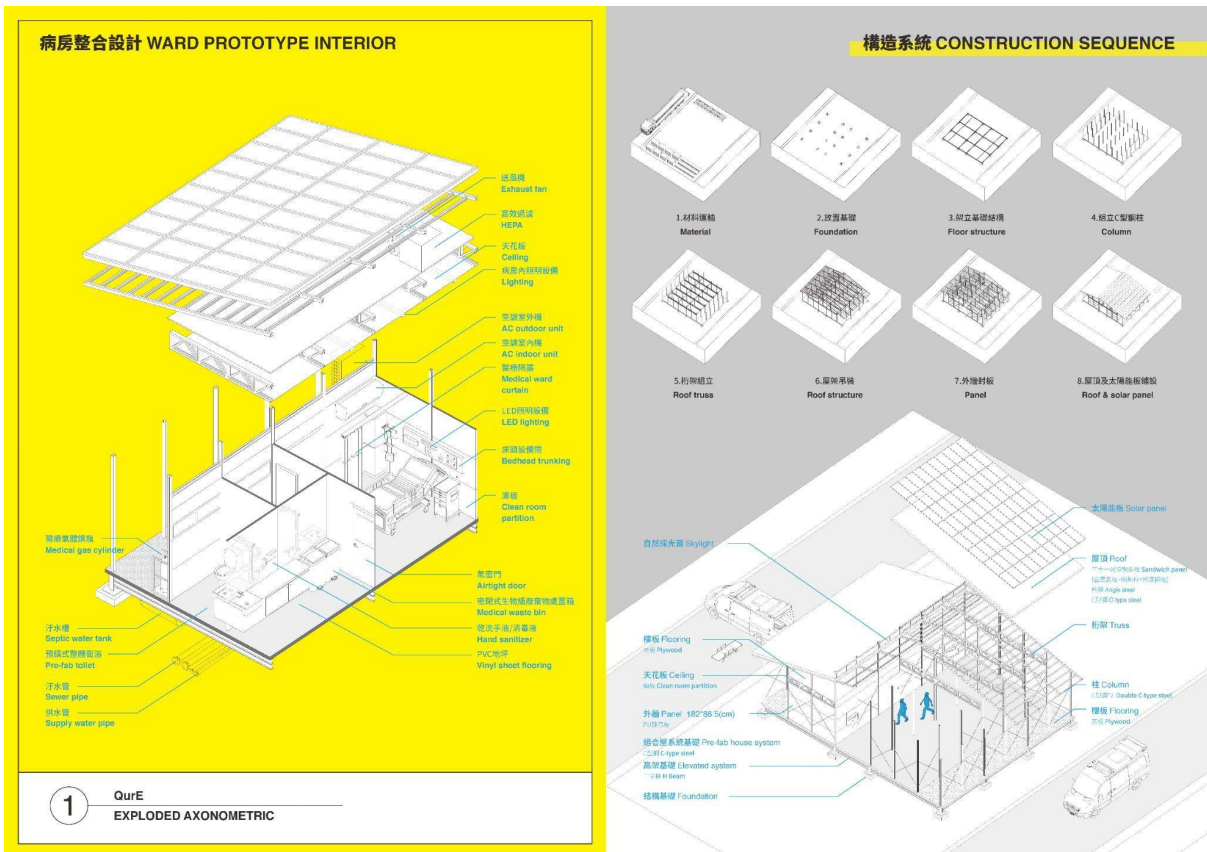


Fig. 5 Design Manual for Quarantine Hospital by Qure Team (<https://qure.gs.ncku.edu.tw/>)

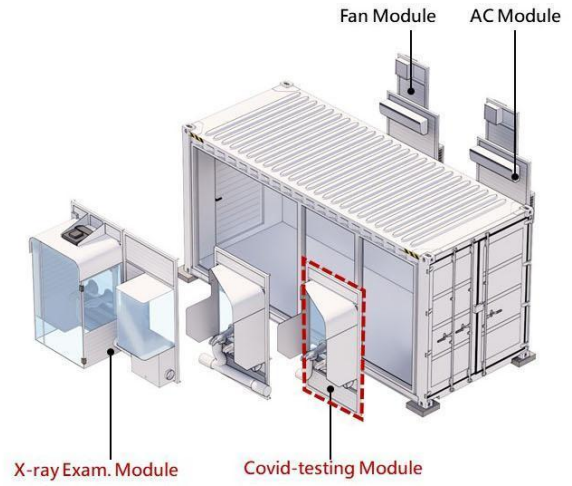


Fig. 6 m.Cov-tainer Testing Station at NCKU Hospital

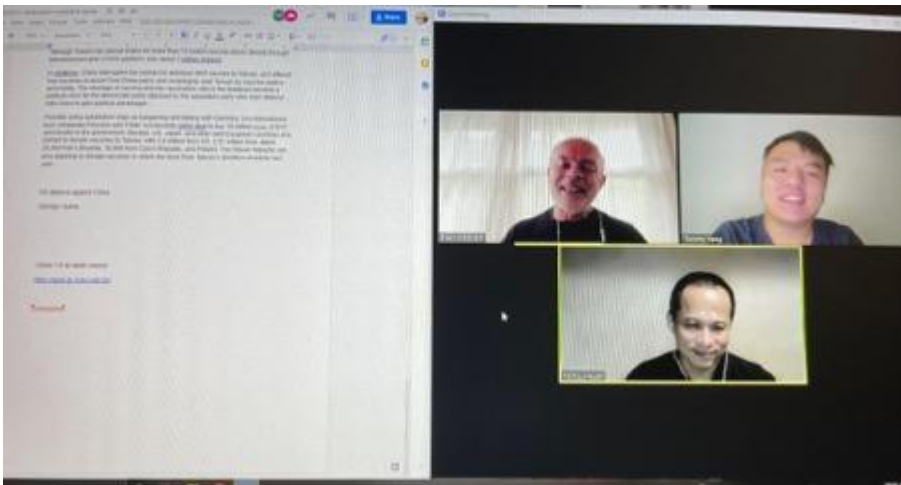


Fig. 7 Biweekly Zoom Meeting