

ABSTRACT

Space of Security, Space of Anxiety: Exploring Japan's underground sites

Helena Grinshpun, The Hebrew University

This paper explores the circulation of social and cultural images in Japan's urban public spaces, focusing on sites underneath the ground - subway lines, subterranean transportation hubs, and underground passages. These sites fulfill the function of linking between places; however, they have also become a destination in their own right by providing a venue for consumption and for expressions of social activity and state authority. Moreover, frequently appropriated by homeless people and associated with criminal and terror activity (e.g. the sarin gas attack of 1995 and the issue of sexual harassment), this space can be regarded as a site of social conflict.

I will first briefly outline, basing mainly on examples from literature, how the underground sites are imagined and interpreted as meaningful urban sites. I will then discuss how they provide a public setting for displaying social and cultural images. The cultural images are employed primarily in advertising, offering representations of commodities, services, and sites and shedding light on the ongoing discourse on cultural identity. The social messages concern the relationship between the individual and society, framed by the narrative of danger and protection and by the discourse on normative behavior. While the underground space is increasingly characterized by surveillance and law enforcement, it also provides a place for social activity, occasionally challenging the state authority.

As spaces found "in between" places, the urban subway, transportation hubs, and underground passages can be regarded as "non-places", mere liminal sites of transition. However, similarly to any other urban public space defined against home, on the one hand, and workplace, on the other, the underground sites invite investigation of the questions of social contact and politics of exclusion

and inclusion aimed at groups as diverse as commuters, consumers, and the homeless.