

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

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the image of Japan's urban public space by focusing on sites underneath the ground, such as subway lines, subterranean transportation hubs, and underground passages. I examine these sites as spaces assigned with collective meanings which reflect not only particular attitudes towards the underground prevailing in Japan, but also shared social aspirations, anxieties, and fantasies. The underground is interpreted as part of the city's "emotional geography" through which claims are made in respect to public security, collective memory, and social utopia.

This exploration sheds light on the changing nature of the Japanese city and the broader transformation of the urban public space. In contemporary cities, the underground sites fulfill a vital role of linking between places; however, they have also become destinations in their own right by providing a venue for meaningful activities and expressions of authority. Moreover, frequently appropriated by homeless people and at times associated with criminal and terror action, the underground can be regarded as a site of social conflict.

I trace the meanings attached to this space by discussing both the images of the underground and the circulation of various images at the underground sites. I discuss, basing on examples from contemporary literature, how the underground is imagined and interpreted as a meaningful urban site, and how it provides a public setting for displaying social and cultural imageries.

The paper is organized along the following lines. First, I briefly outline the change undergone by the city and the role that the underground plays in it. Then, I discuss the images of the underground space, analyzing them through the dichotomy of security versus anxiety. The third section explores the range of images circulated at the underground sites. The last part reflects on the nature of the city the way it emerges from the images associated with the underground.

## 1. The city and the change

There is a wide consensus that in the last decades the nature of the public space has been undergoing a major change in the traditional concepts of place and community, individual and group identity, local versus global interests, the nature of daily life and social relations. Cities play a central role in this process, due to the phenomena of metropolitanization, globalization of production, distribution, and consumption, labor mobility, and the rapid development of the information and communication technologies which tie cities into wider transnational networks. These transformations have evoked major concerns as to the erosion of urban public space (Mitchell 1995), a loss of inclusive public areas of debate and exchange to the commodifying drive of capitalism, when the "closest thing you will find to a public space—where just about anybody can go—is the parking lot" (Garreau 1991, quoted in MacLeod & Ward 2002, 157). In contemporary cities, the "traditional" public sphere is increasingly seen as comprised of "dead public spaces" (Sennett 1992), of barren plazas and sanitized heritage. Shopping malls, corporatized public spaces, and gated communities, creating what Flusty (2001) has termed "interdictory spaces", have become such commonplace as to be considered a naturalized component of the post-industrial city.

The analysis of the change undergone by the urban fabric points to three major dimensions: privatization, surveillance and control, and disconnection from local history and geography (Cybriwsky 1999). These trends determine the changing relations between the private and public, space and place, and allow mapping out broader discourses on public security, collective memory, and cultural identity. The underground space - subterranean transportation hubs, shopping centers, passages, multi-purpose areas - can be regarded as an embodiment of privatization, surveillance and disconnection. One visible example of the recent urban transformation in Japan is the disappearance of the above-ground *shotengai* (local shopping arcades) in favor of underground shopping malls, disconnected from the landmarks of local geography and lacking distinct markers of time and climate.

Since the post-war period, Japan has been the leading force in the development of underground spaces for multi-purpose human activity. Japan's interest in the

utilization of urban underground space has been determined by its high population density and traffic congestion, escalating land prices, and environmental hazards, all accompanied by the fast advent of technology. Most of Japan's underground space is designed to enable two major urban functions of transportation and consumption. Underground shopping centers emerged as a by-product of the need to connect subway stations and nodes in the underground pedestrian network (Golany & Ojima 1996, 55). Since the 1930s, when the urban transportation system was partially moved underground in the form of subway, large concentration of people in terminal spaces was viewed as an excellent opportunity to entice commuters into consuming products and services. This led to the rapid commercialization of the underground areas. From the 1960s onwards, large-scale subterranean shopping districts began cropping up throughout metropolitan Japan, mostly in the vicinity of transportation hubs. The 1970s witnessed a boom in subterranean construction aimed at easing traffic congestion and air pollution; in the 1980s and 1990s, the escalating land prices determined the growing need to reclaim land for urban needs.

The evolution of the underground can be regarded as a shift from a supplementary element of urban planning providing a mere space for transition, to a new urban dimension that became a destination in its own right by providing a venue for meaningful urban activities of transportation and consumption. Today, this new urban fabric is comprised of vast underground commercial areas connecting to subterranean transportation terminals and office and residential buildings at the basement level. Due to the multi-functional nature of the underground space, it came to resemble the "genuine" above-ground urban environment, with its own new landmarks and emotional geographies.

My attempt to comprehend this space is by looking at the "emotional geography" of the city – that is, at stories, narratives, and images attached to places and inscribing them with meanings and connotations. From this perspective, the city emerges as a character, a backdrop for stories, memories, and voices. The relatively new urban fabric of the underground therefore represents a valuable case for exploring the manner in which representations of urban space in public imagination reflect Japan's ongoing transformations.

## **2. Security versus anxiety: the underground as a panacea for and a symptom of Japan's social maladies**

The urban fabric can be regarded as a manifestation not only of major changes inflicted by globalization; it also reveals local particularities of memory, anxiety, and hope. The meanings attached to the underground space range from utopist visions of subterranean social paradise to an intimidating and dangerous underworld.

Since the post-war period, the underground was increasingly viewed by entrepreneurs, urban planners and the state as a promising direction for urban expansion and a remedy for the side effects of Japan's economic miracle - the growing population density, pollution, and sky-rocketing land prices. This attitude has propagated utopist visions of the underground as an artificial social paradise; a number of developmental projects were introduced, employing the underground space as a new vector in sustainable urban development and refurbishment of the city fabric.

One of such projects is the "Alice City Project" initiated by Taisei Corporation, and defined by its designers as the "Underland Wonderland of the Bright Future". The Taisei Corporation envisions underground as "a bright, sunny future of Tokyo". The self-contained "Alice City" (a reference to Lewis Carroll's famous tale) is conceived as an underground metropolis designed for the 24-hour-a-day 21st century. Its major goal is defined in terms of efficiency, economizing, and preservation of environment. The exploitation of previously unused underground space would release more valuable space above the ground; due to its isolation, sound insulation and earthquake resistance, the subterranean space is viewed as ideal not merely for an elaborate urban infrastructure (e.g. power stations, warehouses, railway yards and specialized manufacturing facilities) but also as a commercial and residential space.<sup>1</sup>

Another example is the "Urban Geo-Grid Plan" by Shimizu Corporation, which describes its vision as a "Systematic coexistence of above-ground and underground areas to create efficient, orderly urban spaces". The Plan claims to stimulate the systematic development of city functions in underground spaces to resolve problems associated with congestion in above-ground areas. It combines various elements,

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on the project, see <http://www.dr tomorrow.com/lessons/lessons7/20.html>

including grid points, grid stations, underwater grid stations, and an underground network connecting these points and stations. The space within each underground point and station will be brightly lit by a solar lighting system that channels natural light.<sup>2</sup>

While not carried out in reality, such corporate projects both reflect and reinforce the vision of the underground as a highly technological, functional, safe, sanitized and controlled space. Beyond its functionality, this space is supposed to provide a solution for the urban maladies of overcrowding, social disintegration, and crime. This overly positive vision, however, is often contrasted with the murky images of the underground as a chaotic maze-like ghetto symptomatic of the contemporary maladies. The new Shibuya station, one of the most recent sites of subterranean construction in central Tokyo, provides one such example. Located on the fifth level beneath the ground in order to enable smooth transfer between multiple subway lines, the new station evoked sharp public criticisms as to its confusing layout which complicates access and creates a sense of chaos and claustrophobia.

Recent studies on the psychological aspects of underground work environment in several countries also reveal the prevailing negative attitudes towards the underground space. Japanese employees interviewed at their subterranean work sites repeatedly reported high levels of anxiety over their isolation from the outside. Often, however, the negative attitudes appear to be based on images and associations rather than on direct experience (Goel *et al.*, 2013, 26).

In Japan, this anxiety is informed by two painful events of the same year – the Great Hanshin (Kobe) earthquake of January 1995 and the sarin gas attack in Tokyo subway by Aum Shinrikyo in March 1995. Although during the Kobe earthquake many underground sites escaped major damage, the deep-rooted association between underground and destruction continues to feed the collective imagination. In Tokyo, the subway was turned into a site of injury and death of about 6,000 people, and became one of the most significant spaces of the nation's traumatic memory. In the aftermath of the gas attack, a novelist Murakami Haruki conducted a series of interviews with the victims, attempting to capture the aspects of the disaster which the

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, see <http://www.shimz.co.jp/english/theme/dream/underground.html>

Japanese mass media had overlooked. His documentary book "Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche", published in 1997, depicted the way the incident had affected average citizens, their lives, their perceptions of themselves and of the society.

The text reveals not only the victims' memory of individual suffering, but also the effect this memory had on their perception of the city: the Tokyo underground is viewed as a murky metaphor for the hidden maladies of the Japanese society. The themes arising from the interviews are social isolation and disconnection, disillusionment with the society and the sensationalistic media, and the inefficiency of the state responses in dealing with the attack. In an essay accompanying the victims' stories, Murakami describes the incident using two powerful metaphors of a mirror and the underground:

*"[The perpetrators] are the mirror of us! Now of course a mirror image is always darker and distorted. Convex and concave swap places, falsehood wins out over reality, light and shadow play tricks. But take away these dark flaws and the two images are uncannily similar; some details almost seem to conspire together. Which is why we avoid looking directly at the image, why, consciously or not, we keep eliminating these dark elements from the face we want to see. These subconscious shadows are an 'underground' that we carry around within us, and the bitter aftertaste that continues to plague us long after the Tokyo gas attack comes seeping out from below." (Murakami 2001, 229)*

Another Murakami's story focusing on the underground world is "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo", published in 1999. The story depicts a fatal battle of a bank clerk and Frog against a destructive Worm who lives beneath the ground and is about to cause a major damage to the city of Tokyo. Here, Murakami draws a parallel between the Worm and another traumatic event – the Kobe earthquake. Frog claims that it was the earthquake that pushed Worm's patience over the limit. Even though he has a frightful appearance and is prone to violence, Worm is as morally neutral as an actual earthquake. In fact, Frog's description of Worm's awakening seems to place some of the blame on human beings, because it is the clamor and tumult of Tokyo that produce Worm's rage. The underground creature therefore symbolizes not only the destructive powers of nature, but also the social decay of the city. The final battlefield takes place

in the realm of the hero's imagination; this is also the realm in which the image of the underground space is being charged with shared meanings and memories.

While in literature the traumatic events of the past can take grotesque and fantastic shapes, in reality coping with traumatic memories often requires their actual enactment. In 2005, Recovery Support Center (*Rikabarii Sapoto Senta*), a group of victims of the sarin gas incident, staged a commemorative event titled "The Memorial Walking Care", aimed to re-engage with underground sites of traumatic memory by walking the underground route along the streets above them. In walking together above the deathly underground and descending at times to its depths, the participants supported each other and staked a public claim to memory. According to the accounts of the group, the Memorial Walking Care played a significant therapeutic role in drawing out individual pain and allowing it to be shared (Pendleton 2011).

These images of the underground as a source of suffering and danger contrast sharply not only with the utopist visions of the subterranean space as the city-space of the future, but also with the general sensation of safety prevailing in Japan. The dichotomy between security and anxiety persisting in the collective perception of the underground is further framed by various images found inside the underground spaces. The following section deals with these images, focusing mainly on expressions of state authority and the discourse on protection.

### **3. Negotiating the public space: manners, dangers, and protection**

Tracing the images circulating inside the underground space permits to map out not only the role of the underground in the life of the city, but also the ongoing discourses on public safety and social behavior. I focus here on signs, posters, and other visual means of communication found in the underground sites, mainly at subway stations and underground passages. For the most part, these messages concern the relationship between the individual and society and are framed by the narrative of danger and protection and by prescriptions of normative behavior.

Every day millions of people pass through Shinjuku Station, Tokyo's massive transport hub, transferring between public and private railways, subways and bus lines. In the underground passageway near the Western exit is a ten-meter-wide

acrylic sculpture set into the wall and known as "Shinjuku Eye". It was installed in 1969 and has inspired various interpretations. One Japanese critic paralleled the underground passageway to a womb, and presented the disturbing image of the "pupil of the eye inside the womb". The "Eye" was featured in a 1970s manga *"Yume miru kikai"* as a portal to another world. The "Eye" is also viewed as a potent symbol of surveillance carried out in public urban places like Shinjuku (Mackie 2011).

In the 1960s, Shinjuku underground plaza served as a site for gathering of activists, anti-Vietnam war singers and student protestors who sang protest songs, debated politics and agitated against the capitalist order. As protestors sought to engage the commuters and railway staff in discussions about their ideological causes, anti-protest groups staged confrontations with the leftist activists and the police eventually closed the protests down. In the recent years Shinjuku Station has been the site of conflict over the use of public space. For decades, homeless people sought shelter in its underground passages. The Tokyo metropolitan government has made repeated attempts to expel the homeless from the station, fencing open spaces and setting barriers and obstructions to prevent the homeless from settling there. In campaigns against the Tokyo government's anti-homeless policies, the "Eye" has also served as an assembly point for demonstrators.

During the anti-nuclear demonstrations in summer 2012, underground space was mentioned in the media as one of the sites of protest. Bloggers and news websites reported online on police shutdowns:

“Police shut down the street in front of official residence. Because police keep people at subway station, protest has started underground space.” (Energy News, July 6, 2012)

“Organizer stopped protest, police shut down the exits of subway. People are shut up in subway station” (Fukushima Diary blog, July 6, 2012).

"Shock: 'Outside is too full' — Tokyo police blockade subway exits preventing protesters from reaching streets" (Energy News, July 6, 2012).

"An unknown but likely huge number of Japanese citizens [...] have been prevented by police from reaching to the Prime Minister's palace. The police corps



forced the citizens to remain in the sidewalk in a thin line and closed the subway exits, so most people is trapped underground, with potential risk for their lives."

(For What We Are... They Will Be blog, July 6, 2012)

The underground provides a site of negotiations over the use of public space and therefore has to be understood in terms of control and dissent, accessibility and displacement, inclusion and exclusion. Additional manifestations of such negotiations revolve around the issues of sexual harassment and appropriate social behavior.

In the last two decades, sexual harassment (*sekuhara*) has become a buzzword for the Japanese media and a major concern for companies operating subway lines in large Japanese cities, mainly Tokyo and Osaka. The issue was brought to public attention when growing numbers of female commuters began complaining that they were subjected to public groping while riding the train. In 2010 on the Midosuji line, a subway line that runs through Osaka, more than 100 groping incidents were reported. This has resulted in several measures implemented by the railway companies and the police, such as the distribution of warning posters aimed at drawing attention to the danger of sexual offenders (*chikan*), the installation of security cameras, and the introduction of women-only train cars. Whether or not these measures have actually helped to curb the problem remains an open question; however, turning the underground into a gendered space has evoked protests from male commuters who claim that women-only cars promote gender discrimination. Members of such oppositional groups protest by riding women-only cars, proclaiming their views with a loudspeaker in front of big stations, and lobbying railway companies to demand the abolition of the special trains.

The women-only trains, *chikan* warning signs, the close surveillance, all these create a public landscape framed by the narrative of danger and protection, in which each individual is a potential intruder or a victim. The messages conveyed to the public, however, appear to encompass a much wider range of anti-social behaviors than homelessness and sexual offence. The last section of this inquiry focuses on the execution of control in the form of prescribing normative behavior via the so-called "manner" posters. The posters serve as vehicles for the establishment to communicate with the public through persuasion and instruction (Eberhardinger 2013).

Manner posters in Japan officially became public in Tokyo railways in the 1970s, as means to combat potential "bad" behavior on the trains. By late 1980s, manner posters were disseminated throughout other Japanese cities. The first series, released in 1970s-80s, was created by the artist Hideya Kawakita. The posters are based on potent historical and cultural references as means to communicate the ways to be mindful while riding public transportation. Powerful images such as those of Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Virgin Mary, a Buddhist nun, and a famous Kabuki actress are employed to instruct the viewer on the proper behavior. For example, the poster titled "The Seat Monopolizer" (1976) borrows the rather disturbing image of Hitler from the Charlie Chaplin movie "The Great Dictator" (1940) to remind passengers of how claiming sitting space can be an everyday source of public conflict. "Mary is Tired" (1977) displays a woman holding a baby; the two photographed models signify a holy pair of Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. The title and the indirect implication to the exhausting effect of child-rearing suggest that legitimately tired women are to be offered seats by other passengers (Eberhardinger 2013).

The more recent series, which appeared in Tokyo subway in 2008-2010, were designed by a graphic designer Bunpei Yorifuji and titled "Please Do It at Home" and "Please Do It Again". The designs proved to be highly popular and were repeatedly replicated and parodied across the internet. The posters graphically build the framework of "good" versus "bad" behavior through simple situations, in which either the correct (as in the case of "Do It Again" sequence) or the incorrect (as in "Do It at Home") actions are displayed. Here, too, socially applicable stereotyped images of various wrongdoers (from a mindlessly loud youth to a drunken "salary man") are employed to convey the message.

Both series make use of shared signifiers of cultural values to inculcate the viewer with the social norms of everyday contact. Beyond this immediate purpose, the appeals to values serve as a means to generate a sense of shared social agenda and foster the social relevance of the underground space. While not enforced or sanctioned in any formal way, the "manner" messages create a landscape of authority underlining the discourse on danger and protection.

While the underground space is increasingly characterized by surveillance and law

enforcement, it also provides a place for antisocial behavior challenging the public safety (as in the case of sexual offenders) and public morals (as in the case of homeless and bad mannered behavior). As a public space essential for passage in the city, the underground implies inclusive accessibility; however, by exercising control and prescribing behavior it functions as an interdictory space informed by politics of inclusion and exclusion.

### **Conclusions: Reflections on the City**

What are the implications of these particularities for the changing nature of urban public space? Is the underground space to be regarded as a new dimension of the city, or a mere supplementary space employed for transportation and other infrastructures?

In the opening of Murakami's "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo", Frog ponders on the outcomes of the disaster awaiting Tokyo. Beyond the physical destruction of the city fabric, there would be a sheer psychological damage caused when the residents fully realize the menace inherent in the underground space:

*"People will be made to realize what a fragile condition the intensive collectivity known as 'city' really is"* (Murakami 2003, 95)

Murakami's pessimistic view stands in rather sharp contrast with the more optimistic visions of Junichiro Tanizaki, a novelist belonging to the earlier generation of Japanese writers. Upon hearing on the Kanto earthquake of 1923, Tanizaki reflected on the future of the city:

*"I imagined the grandeur of the new metropolis, and all the changes that would come in customs and manners as well. An orderly pattern of streets, their bright new pavements gleaming. A flood of automobiles. The geometric beauty of block towering upon block, and elevated lines and subways and trolleys weaving among them, and the stir of a nightless city, and pleasure facilities to rival those of Paris and New York . . . Fragments of the new Tokyo passed before my eyes, numberless, like flashes in a movie* (quoted in Seidensticker 1991, 15).

Tanizaki's new orderly Tokyo, Murakami's dark mirror of Japan's social maladies, the sustainable wonder-worlds of contemporary urban designers, and the controlled space

infused with messages aimed to regulate human conduct – all these comprise the complex image of the underground which has evolved in Japan since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The harsh realities of the post-war period, the booming economy, the consequent recession, and the recent discourse on the transformations of the Japanese society have had a major role in producing the images which range from murky nightmares to utopist fantasies. These images serve as a lens through which it is possible to trace the emotions and connotations which are attached to specific urban sites and which comprise the "emotional map" of the city.

Underground represents an artificial environment disconnected from the history and geography of a "place". In the era when local landmarks disappear in favor of standardized sites of consumption, when the propagation of secured and controlled public zones fosters the loss of genuine inclusive public space, the underground space acquires its relevance as a new segment of urban fabric. As a site found "in between" places, this new form of public space can be regarded as a "non-place", a mere liminal site of transition. However, similarly to any other urban public space defined against home, on the one hand, and workplace, on the other, the underground invites investigation of the questions of collective memory, social contact, and politics of exclusion and inclusion.

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