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### ***Cubicle shelter: public space for private use?***

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the intersection of new urban spaces and new modalities of 'homelessness' in Japanese cities. We argue that the recent social phenomenon of "net café refugees" (*netto kafe nanmin* – people who substitute 'manga cafes' for their domestic residence) is conditioned by new forms of leisure, information technology, social manners, and the long-term contraction of the Japanese domestic economy. The utility of leisure spaces in Tokyo has shifted in parallel with changes in the work habits and professional expectations among the Japanese poor and lower middle class. White-collar workers substitute karaoke's and saunas for living rooms, and they use capsule hotels in place of regular bedrooms. Many students and the chronic unemployed spend virtually all their time in gaming cafes and 24-hour convenience stores. This study investigates the co-evolution of the "hidden homeless" and Tokyo Internet and comic book spaces called "manga cafés." Why are more Japanese people 'living' in manga net café's? What can this tell us about changes in the Japanese urban fabric and social landscape?

This work will try to investigate assumptions about distinction between public and private, what the role of "hidden homeless" in the process of changes of public space for private use and the dynamic of changes certain space under social changes.

#### **Keywords**

manga café, public space, private space, Internet, Tokyo, temporary homeless, *nanmin*

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Research field for Bachelor project was Chinese culturology and philosophy, thesis project was about concept of fate based on the ancient Chinese fortune-telling practice. During Master program in Lund University Elena's research was focus on concepts of public place in Japan and its interaction with social and cultural anthropology. Her strong interest in future research is visual anthropology and

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## **Introduction**

For a long time urban scientists assumed physical and social dynamics of public space play a central role in the development of public culture. City streets, parks, squares, and other spaces were seen as symbols of collective prosperity and possibility, expressions of progress and endeavor by municipal guidance, sites of public exchange and culture, and spaces of political deliberation and reform. Increased urbanization and the new social challenges have modified the role of public space. Generally speaking, since the end of nineteenth century under the influence of essential economic, political and cultural changes the city became a basis for a new stage of modernization where urban population grows, internal migration within the city rises, and new forms of social and cultural interaction between space and people emerge. The notion of public space is recognized as a place that is not private, offering public access to its facilities, without commercial basis; a place where people meet each other without regard to their social status or role in society. In the Japanese context in particular the binary of public and private is transgressed or blurred from so called “outside” and “inside” viewpoints. “Inside” viewpoint means individuals use public space (or so-called public space) for private needs. And “outside” viewpoint includes state interference in so-called private spaces, in terms of organization or domestic activities.

Though there are continuous changes and transformations how public and private places are categorized, as values which they possess, depending on their contexts, the distinction of public/personal space can hardly be recognized because one space can become a part of another. The value of a public place can lie outside of its physical borders and there can be an emotional value of space that connects status of the space with its inhabitants. Thus, people influence the position of the space; in terms of Japanese manga café, “new host service” (people living there) leads to a discussion of whether that space should be labeled as public or private.

If we look at Japan few decades ago, the existence of new public places as spaces of social and cultural interaction has explained process of self-identification. People associated themselves with the place and forms of social relations were transformed. In such circumstances the traditional understanding of the dichotomy between public and private is getting blurred. The new waves of public renewal and the bubble economy brought with them different phenomena specific to Japanese society. Thinking in terms of public and private can provide insight into contemporary Japanese life. The Japanese view of public and [private spheres](#) is bound with ideas about historical developments, cultural and social attitudes toward the place of the individual in society. *Omote* (面 refers to public) and *ura* (裏 - to individual) are double concepts to which variety of aspects of Japan or life in Japan belong (Dunn, 1999:108). *Omote* addresses to the image which the person, the company or any establishment wants to present to strangers or the public in general. As with any image, *omote* it is made of a mix of reality and myth (ibid: 108). *Ura* has opposite significance compare with concept of *omote*. It is reality behind omote image with

the myth and is the removed image (Hendry, 1998). Etiquette - area where the concept *omote* and *ura* can be applied to advantage. The etiquette or manners, is *omote*: the public person who is nominated by the person. For Japanese it is important to be able to behave according to society expectations.

Also to define the difference between public and private in Japanese society it is important to mention ideas of *tatemaie* (建前 refers to so-called feelings on public and *honne* (本音 - true feelings) (Hammond, 2011). *Honne* can contradict to what expected society expects according to situation and circumstances and these feelings often remain hidden. *Tatemaie* – follows expectations of society and all manners what Japanese public requires (Takeo, 1973). This binary of Japanese culture can explain some patterns of *nanmin* in manga café as the phenomenon of being hidden and invisible from society and publicity.

Understanding how people start to live in manga cafes raises the question of the features of manga net café as social place. Should it be assigned as public space with private use or as pseudo-public or as a private new Internet oasis for abandoned citizens? The introduction of concepts of public and private in Japan within the problem of temporary homeless brings attention to the question of processes of utility and usage of urban public spaces as conditions of a social reality of daily life.

### **Japanese manga café: background**

The history of manga café as the place of mini library of manga comics is long, but phenomenon of *nanmin* (people who live in manga café) has emerged quite recently. The most popular brands of manga café in Tokyo are “GeraGera”, “Manboo” café, “Grand Cyber” café and etc.

According to the owner of one of the manga net café (*manga-kissa* in Japanese) in Nerima area of Tokyo city since the Japanese economics had started to go down there was a class of people who stayed in cafes longer than one week. Starting with the status of new technology leisure service places (reading manga comics mostly, Internet or gaming) and temporary spaces to spend time and get quick access to Internet manga net café became shelters for Japanese temporary homeless. So-called “new host service” which started to allow people live there has given another role to those places – ordinary Japanese manga café is transforming into unintended zones to settle (“Homeless workers in Japan”, documentary, 2009). That is why the English version of name *nanmin* had obtained the version of the word *refugee*. According to one of the first reports made in 2007 by Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare the amount of customers uses manga café only for enjoying manga comics or cheap Internet service is rapidly decreasing as opposed to those customers for whom cubicle spaces is first of all a “home roof”. Within this social and economic pressure on the society, poverty, housing difficulties in big Japanese cities manga café serves as public or semipublic place and has implied new features-public privacy for those who begin to settle in net cafés. Can it be called public, quasi-public or private place? This tendency of imbalance of private and public can be observed in whole Asia

like McDonalds in China and Hong Kong where people who stay per night in McDonalds very often are called *McRefugees* (Mizushima, 2007).



### **Organization of manga café (locations of Tokyo)**

In order to draw the image and status of Japanese manga Internet café (漫画喫茶 *manga-kissa*) where recently people can choose to live in, it is important to give a description with interpretation how that place organizes and what services it offers. Typical manga café can be divided on to two zones: area with public access and area with net rooms. Usually *manga-kissa* is located upstairs of multi-storied buildings and normally has title of the café written in Japanese. During the search of different locations it was hard to find some cafes because of absence of proper English abbreviations.



Picture 1. (public zone of net rooms)

The entering zone includes reception desk and separate table for filling out the application to stay in a café. People have to pay for staying (or living) in manga café with Internet access. Public space in café consists of library of manga comics, reading area with tables and chairs and several PC. According to researcher's observation vending machine with free beverages and food snacks are located close to reading area. Food menu normally consist of Japanese snacks and instant meal (noodles or rice); prices vary from 200yen to 500yen. For guests beverages are free and unlimited to refill. Those zones are located close to reception desk.



Picture 2. (Customer)

The image shows a general view of the manga café in Nerima area which is divided on several sections. It contains net rooms 2m by 2m or so called cabins. These net rooms are put into a row and do not have spaces between each. Each cabin has a number.

If manga café is considered to be called a public place the presence of these sites demonstrates that there is a public access to it with availability of some services. Service and facilities are also the evidence of the quality and status of the place. Free beverages, internet, manga books, magazines and newspapers, board games are available to a customer, when he already paid for staying in manga café. Thus, business orientation constructs new type of the place which was being changed also with phenomenon of “hidden homeless”.





Picture 3. (Public area with manga shelves)

This image demonstrates so called public zone at manga library café where guest can use PC, Internet or read manga. There are usually 4-5 seats in main area at the manga library because people prefer stay near the shelves or in net cabins. The reading seat is minimally organized : small desk with walls, personal computer with microphone and headphones and chair.

There is another zone of manga café which suggests to define Japanese manga-kissa as “quasi-public” place. As Carr describes quasi-public places are characterized by sets of rules and certain order in that place despite of technically open access for public (ibid, 1992). Depending on the size of certain manga café there are 30 to 50 net rooms or so called “squashed cubicle space”.



Picture 4. (Net booth)

Cafes have several types of these net booths: single rooms and double rooms. Inside of them there are PC, TV and *zashiki* ([tatami](#) matted) or reclining seat- all of that equipment fits in 1mx2m size of room. Cubicles are arranged as dark spots in tight smoky corridors of café which gives the atmosphere of privacy from personal observation. The physical dimension of that room gives an impression of a certain personal place (even though it is not allowed to lock when guest leaves).

The occurrence of such areas in café which can be considered as public place also suggests the idea of manga café as “third place” (Oldenburg, 1997). Third place which is not workplace, neither home, but it is a space for recreation, leisure or simple networking and interaction. The owner of several manga café answered in the interview: “Has your manga café changed when people start to live there?”- “it has been changed, the whole atmosphere and sort of status of the place. When people start to live here after a while they find other guests with the same situation, it united them and makes them interact closely...”





Picture 5. (Entrance to a cubicle)



Picture 6. (Hall with net rooms)



Picture 7. Reception and food/drink menu



Picture 8. Lockers



Picture 9. Front desk



Picture 10. Public and private zones of manga café

To sum up the general look of typical Japanese manga café it is important to emphasize that such places have some specifics of public and private space at the same time. Following the observation of different manga cafés in Tokyo and interview with members and staff of cafes it is presented as quite ordinary public place where customer can have privacy in net cabins for internet or reading comics. But having the extra function of host service which *nanmin* use as an opportunity to settle down there allows researcher to think about turning this place into private location where public features (access, control, norms of behavior and etc.) are same price as for private. So the idea of binary of public and private defines Japanese manga café and social phenomenon of net café refugee elaborates the status and position of those spaces.

### **Guest Category in manga café**

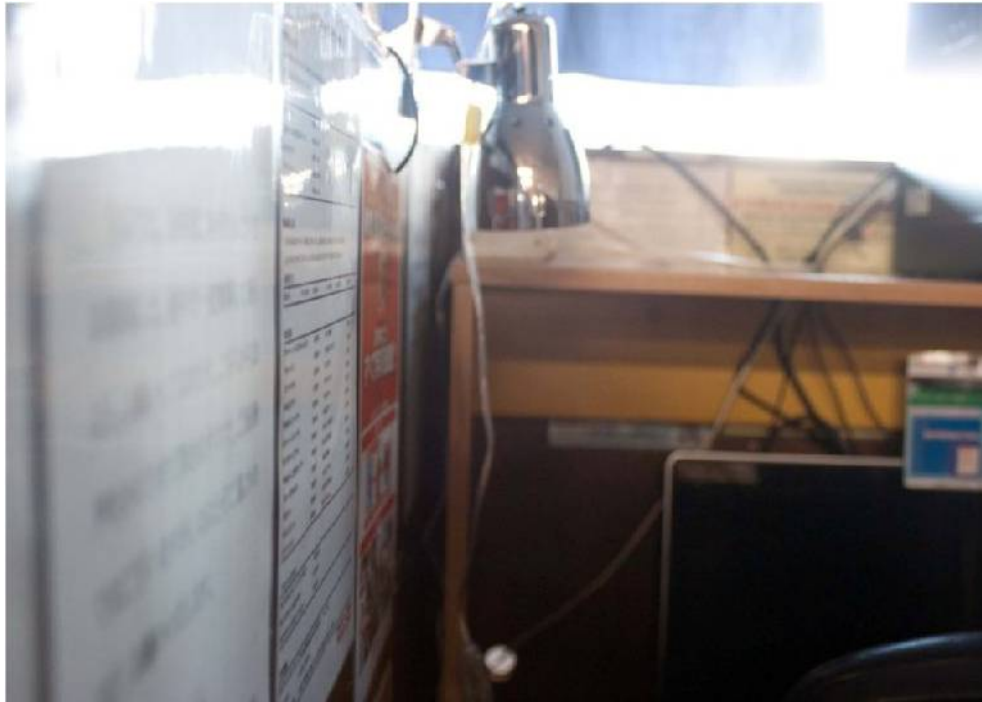
Based on the owners' and café staff interviews it can be suggested to divide guests on several approximate categories:

- Tourists/travelers/backpackers;
- missing the last train and overnight (one night usually) salarimen whose job is far away from home so they prefer to stay at the Internet café, mostly in the central areas where their work is
- hidden (temporary) homeless people, who live there for a while (from 1 month up to 2-3 years).

The manager of manga café “GeraGera” says in the interview:

“Usually there are 25-30% of people who are occasional customers: tourists, travelers, some foreign backpackers. They stay at manga café per night or 2-3 nights because of low rent

price. Also we have many benefits for them: free internet, drinks, and comics and available place all over 24 hours”.



Picture 11. Net booth

At the same time another manager of manga café in Ueno area noted that “there are two types of customers: 12 hours guests and 24hours guests. 12hours guests are those who stay short time including tourists, missing last train men, salarimen and 24hour guests are so called homeless”. One of the current social activists representing non-profit organization “Moyai”, Makoto Yuasa underlines that sometimes Japanese men who choose to stay overnight in manga café (often in karaoke or sauna) can turn into group of “invisible homeless” if they lose their jobs or are under family pressure (Yuasa, 2007). Also he mentions that Japanese clerks were the first to find manga net cafes as budget option to capsule hotels funded by suffered from economic crisis companies. According to interviewers among manga café staff, people who stay for one night or just use café services are usually young; the group of net café refugee varies on age, but 90% of café dwellers are males.



Picture 12. The hall- “public zone”

Alisa Freedman draws attention to the “homeless student” phenomena more as individual experience in Japanese society rather than larger social problem (Freedman, 2011:392). She places in quotes the current determination of "homelessness" in Japan as a way to look for a place in inexpensive places of public using, such as an Internet cafe or manga cafe. According to her observations the most dominant type of "average" homeless in these places is male and over 35-50 years old, many with a long history of insecure housing, and inability to afford rent in even the cheapest apartment, which is more than the cost per month to rent an internet booth daily (ibid, 2011:395). Describing the problem of net café refugee Yuasa highlights that it not only the problem of poverty and crisis of Japanese economy but also question of self-responsibility (Yuasa, interview, 2007). However, another Japanese author Hiroaki Mizushima in his book “Net café refugee and Nippon poverty” argues that one of the crucial reasons of appearing in manga café “nanmin” (net cafe refugee) is governmental ineffective policies with attempts to create a competitive society (Mizushima, 2007). He asserts that if people in Japanese society lose their connections to family, friends, environment or work they do not have chance to be back to such places. They prefer to be “hidden” escaping from homeless on the streets to internet shelters in manga café (ibid: 15).



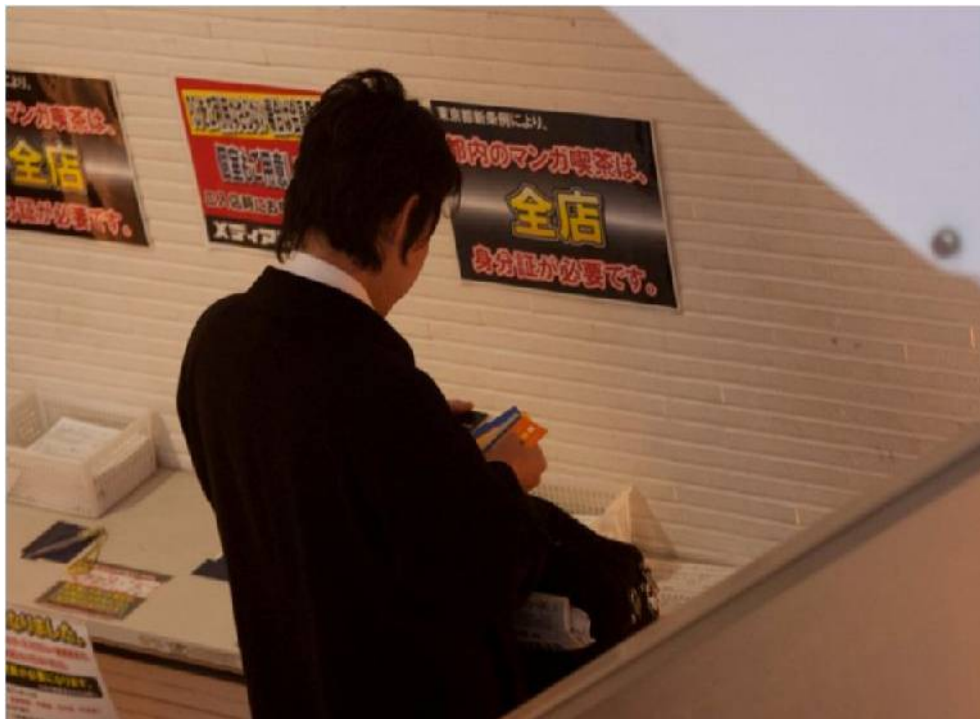


Picture 13. One of the sleeping place in net room

Nevertheless all guests affect the status of manga net café, which means the reputation from outside and inside views. Certainly, the influence on the role of those places is not equal. Ordinary guests and tourists still present the majority of the contingent of manga cafes while net café homeless' population adds different meaning for the place. As Japanese media says it is not "permanent home" but still a shelter (Japan times, 2007, August 29). Depending on current demands with economic challenges socio-public role of "new oasis" is covered by its constrained response.

### **Net café refugee (nanmin): Phenomenon of “hidden homeless”**

After the emergence of hidden homeless phenomenon the main question about Japanese manga café and its definition around public-private discussion has appeared. Rose believes that a place can be considered as the dominant element of self-definition and notes a sense of belonging in the world (Rose, 1995:56). Thus it is important through analysis of this phenomenon to try to investigate what impact has the presence of these kind people in Japanese manga-kissa and how it modified the status of the space. The question does not aim to depict the reasons of this Japanese social phenomenon of “hidden homeless” but to track the change of the status of the place and its functions.



Picture 14. Customer

According to Japanese media and interviews with manga café owners the term of “net café refugee” has emerged in 2007 and used by Shohei Kawasaki in his material “Shinsho Gentosha”. First Japanese began to stay more than three weeks in café (Kawasaki, 2007). However, the title “hidden homeless” or “invisible homeless” that has occurred in media, non-profit organizations, and documentaries about this situation reflects the socio-anthropological tendency in Japanese society: people do not have fixed addresses, mainly unemployed and unmarried who occasionally have chosen manga café as the place to live. Net café refugees do not call themselves homeless.

After interviews review with some of living guests more than half of all participants did not recognize themselves as homeless. Here are some answers to the question about their status in Japanese society and manga café:

“I don’t perceive myself as homeless. I live here 3 months and look for a job. It’s my temporary place”, - 25years old guest of manga café in Ikebukuro;

“It is cheap to sleep here and all is included. I feel all right. I’m not homeless because I don’t live on the street”, - 34years old man in manga café in Nerima;

“You can call me freeter, like Japanese free worker. Rent in Tokyo is too expensive so I cannot afford it. But it doesn’t mean I’m homeless. I have a roof, food, shower, Internet and some friends”, 28years customer of net café in Shinjuku;

“This net café is like my home. But I believe it’s not on main base. I will find job later and move to my own place. Manga café is like a hostel but cheaper and you get more privacy”, 37years old guest in manga café in Ueno.

Based on the last interviewer there are some people for whom privacy of manga café is the same as would be in their home. They compare manga café with hostels which shows relative similarity to manga café because of presence of privacy. The condition that they can have the net cabin only for themselves (without public sharing) is enough to call it something personal as temporary home. But if manga café can be compared with hostel there are some differences in status, access and conditions of being there. For example, those cubicles in manga café cannot be locked; half of net cabins do not have rooms and initially, as was mentioned above, manga café was not supposed to be a place to settle down.



Picture 15. The user

Yuasa and some representatives of Moyai Independent Life Support Center (non-profit organization working with homeless) emphasize that nanmin homeless has a big influence on changing the role of those manga café in Tokyo. “These people are basically homeless, even though they are not sleeping rough. If you surveyed everyone with no permanent home, the figure would run into the tens of thousands.” (Yuasa, 2007). However Freedman argues in her article about young Japanese generation who is not willing to return home. Often net café refugees do not fit the definition of the homeless- people who live on the streets (Freedman, 2011:390). There is one dimensional view point and acknowledge it as a socioeconomic issue caused not only by the long recession but also the direct result of structural reform implemented by the government since the Hashimoto administration in the late 90's that created so many working poor in Japan including the “hidden homeless” (ibid: 2011). The subject has been reported in NNN document series by Nihon TV in 2007, sparking national debate and sensation which lead to the subject being raised and debated in Japanese parliament by several ministries (NNN series documentary, 28 January, 2007). The manager of manga café in Shinjuku area said: “The phenomenon is generally seen in the same scope as the growing problem of working poor in Japan”. According to MHLW survey from 2007 more than 6000 people who prefer to choose manga net café to live lost their jobs and have housing insecurity (report by MHLW, June 2007).

In addition, the age distribution was divided on two main groups: 50s (25%) and 30s (29%). Tsuyoshi Ihaba, a representative of Moyai Independent Life Support Center said in interview to Japanese media that earlier homeless people including the percentage of “hidden” homeless in manga café were day laborers, construction workers; nowadays situation became complicated because among them more young people with different kind of jobs background (Read, 2004).

One of the interview questions with manga café staff was who are these people who live there? The owner of net café in Nerima area answered: “ 45% of guests who live in our café more than 6 months are males aged 30-55 years old without stable jobs or incomes, and half of those people have mental disorders. So they barely interact with each other”. the manager of manga café in Shibuya district replied to the same question: “Normally young males live one year or more. They are approximately 25-40 years old with some one-day jobs or freelancers. Some of them just gamble and surf internet 24 hours. Young people after while create a networking and communicate with each other because they have similar problems and situation”. So referring to interviews and researcher’s observation net café citizens’ age and status depends mostly on the location of café. Central and close to center zones such as Shibuya, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro have young unemployed people or who have part-time jobs (mainly service jobs) and further areas such as Ueno, Nerima include older people between 40-55 years old men (some of them have some mental disorders, constant depressions, distress, phobias). Mentioned concepts of *bonne* and *toteme* distinguishing Japanese society as “real feelings” and behavior in public can be seen as sort of explanation of late Japanese problem of the new generation growing up unable to deal with the complexities of public-private and pressure of an increasingly capitalist society.



Picture 16. At the front desk

Mizushima argues that people who settle in net booths are mostly introverts and want to be isolated and they give “dim, silent and depressive” image to the space (Mizushima, 2007). Certainly, the owners and staff of manga cafes argue with the negative ideas about their places considering more positive changes for the space referring to growing level of high technology (use of wireless internet). Traditional Japanese interest of manga, and fairly cheap business orientation- overall makes it available for mass of potential customers. Apart from it one more change regarding manga-kissa situation and its customers has occurred: from 2008 it is allowed to register manga café as your home address by Municipal of the city (TV Asahi, August 2008). Residential registration, as Yuasa considers, became the logical consequence that manga café is accepted even by government as alternative (temporary) places to live (Yuasa, 2009).

Based on interviews taken for this research all customers of manga café in different areas said that they don't consider manga net café as the public place, it is more “sort of a short-term home”. Net café refugee feel safe and convenient indoors of manga café which corroborates the argument that “hidden homeless” phenomenon has emerged as a new element or “extra” feature which describes differently the role of café. If earlier it was the place for surfing Internet and read manga comics, currently it obtained traces of housing as well.

“Manga café was established as the chain of cafes approximately 10-12 years ago. It's the place where customers can rest, surf Internet and read comics. Later people with different



problems start to stay longer than one week. So basically they can live here”, said the general manager of manga café in Ueno.

Based on this response pre-existing aim of café is always to host guests with different needs and it was always commercialized. When people began to live in cafes owners allowed doing it and added more services to it (such as setting showers, putting diverse food menu). As for commercial side, new lifestyle of café dwellers make manga cafe incomes grow and now owners do not want to lose that percentage of clients.

“It is good if we can help those people without home. Some of them have mental problems and really lost. But as long as they pay regularly for staying it is safe to have them in our cafes”, - the owner of manga café in Ikebukuro has said. The situation with net café refugee is also profitable for cafes and its ownership which means that it plays steady role as new commodity for those places. Thus, it may be seen that hidden homeless may not be major but some percentage of being among constant residents of manga café. The observed space presents a type of mixed place functioning as a new shelter for city homeless.

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