

## Conference for Thinking about the Future of Japan's Design Cities vol. 3

### 「往来 | Correspondence」 Report

Name:	Conference for Thinking about the Future of Japan's Design Cities vol. 3 「往来   Correspondence」
Date:	18:30–20:30 Wednesday, September 3, 2025
Venue:	Design and Creative Center Kobe, KIITO Onohama-cho 1-4, Chuo-ku, Kobe, JAPAN
Program:	<u>Part 1: CREATIVE TALK</u> “Designing Regions for the Next 100 Years” Chiaki Hayashi, President & CEO, Q0 Inc. <u>Part 2: CROSS TALK</u> Kimiya Sato, Creative Director / Designer, WATARAI DESIGN PARTNERS Ryo Noguchi, Wood Utilization Coordinator / Founder, Rokko Mountain Creative Lab LLC Sho Asano, Design Researcher
Admission:	Free
Participants:	51 (excluding 18 management staff)
Organizer	UNESCO Cities of Design Conference, Japan [ Asahikawa   Kobe   Nagoya ] Under the auspices of Creative City Network of Japan (CCNJ), Japan Institute of Design Promotion (JDP)

The Correspondence conference, a joint initiative of the UNESCO Cities of Design —Asahikawa, Kobe, and Nagoya, — took place in Kobe on September 3, 2025.

Since its launch in 2023, the series has aimed to strengthen collaboration among Japan's Design Cities and explore how creative dialogue contributes to the future of local design ecosystems.

This year's program featured a keynote talk by Chiaki Hayashi, the CEO of Q0 Inc. and co-founder of Loftwork Inc., followed by a discussion among creative practitioners representing the three cities.



## **Creative Talk: Designing Regions for the Next 100 Years**



In her keynote address, Ms. Hayashi stated that Japan is entering a new phase in which each city must redefine its purpose as a place to live, work, and visit.

Ms. Hayashi argued that the concept of a creative city should expand beyond the narrow notion of "design" to include a broader form of social design that reimagines the relationships shaping society itself.

Using examples from her work in Yamanashi and Akita prefectures, Ms. Hayashi identified three shared goals of creative cities: revitalizing local industries, improving quality of life, and generating new social values.

She emphasized three perspectives:

1. Communities that continue to gather like families: Long-term collaboration and mutual care are the foundation of creativity.
2. The power of one passionate supporter: At Loftwork's early stage, most investors declined to help. However, support from Joichi "Joi" Ito, the former director of the MIT Media Lab, enabled the company to move forward. This experience later inspired the [100BANCH](#) system, in which one strong recommendation can bring a project to life.
3. Connecting Diversity and Technology

By linking local materials with engineering and digital tools, projects such as [Hidakuma](#) demonstrate how regional resources can create sustainable business models and creative value.

Ms. Hayashi concluded with a reminder: “Let’s start by enjoying it ourselves.”

She said that a creative city must communicate its ideas through experimentation and proposals, not explanations.

### **Cross-Talk: Design, People, and Local Vitality**

#### **Asahikawa: Designing with Nature and Community**



**Kimiya Sato** introduced the city’s approach to integrating design into everyday life.

Asahikawa, the second-largest city in Hokkaido, is surrounded by expansive natural landscapes where forests, mountains, and rivers coexist with urban life. Its long-standing reputation for furniture craftsmanship and product design has shaped the city’s identity as a creative manufacturing hub.

Through the “[Asahikawa Design Producer](#)” program, Mr. Sato and local partners nurture designers who can connect traditional industries with contemporary values. The 27 active producers include illustrators, architects, and artisans who collaborate with schools, local companies, and public institutions.

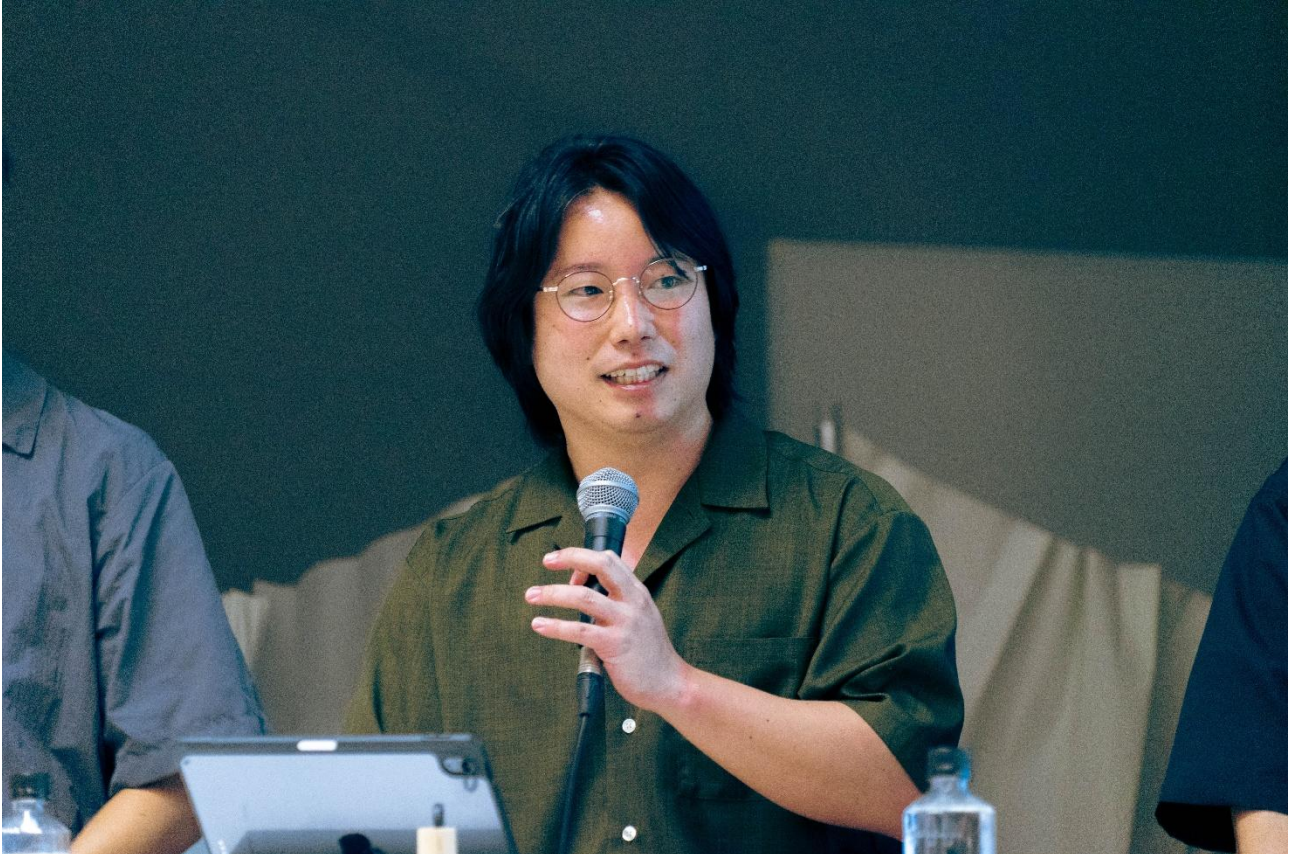
Mr. Sato presented projects developed with high school students and local artisans, including product branding and label design, to encourage young people to engage with their community’s future.

Mr. Sato also presented an initiative for the Osaka–Kansai Expo 2025, in which Asahikawa furniture producers



used wood by products to make objects with make sound like bird calls. These objects represent a new cycle of creativity, transforming local resources into symbolic connections between people and nature.

## Kobe: Connecting Forests, Makers, and the City



**Ryo Noguchi**, representing Kobe, discussed his work as a wood utilization coordinator and the founder of the Rokko Mountain Creative Lab: a community workshop established in 2025.

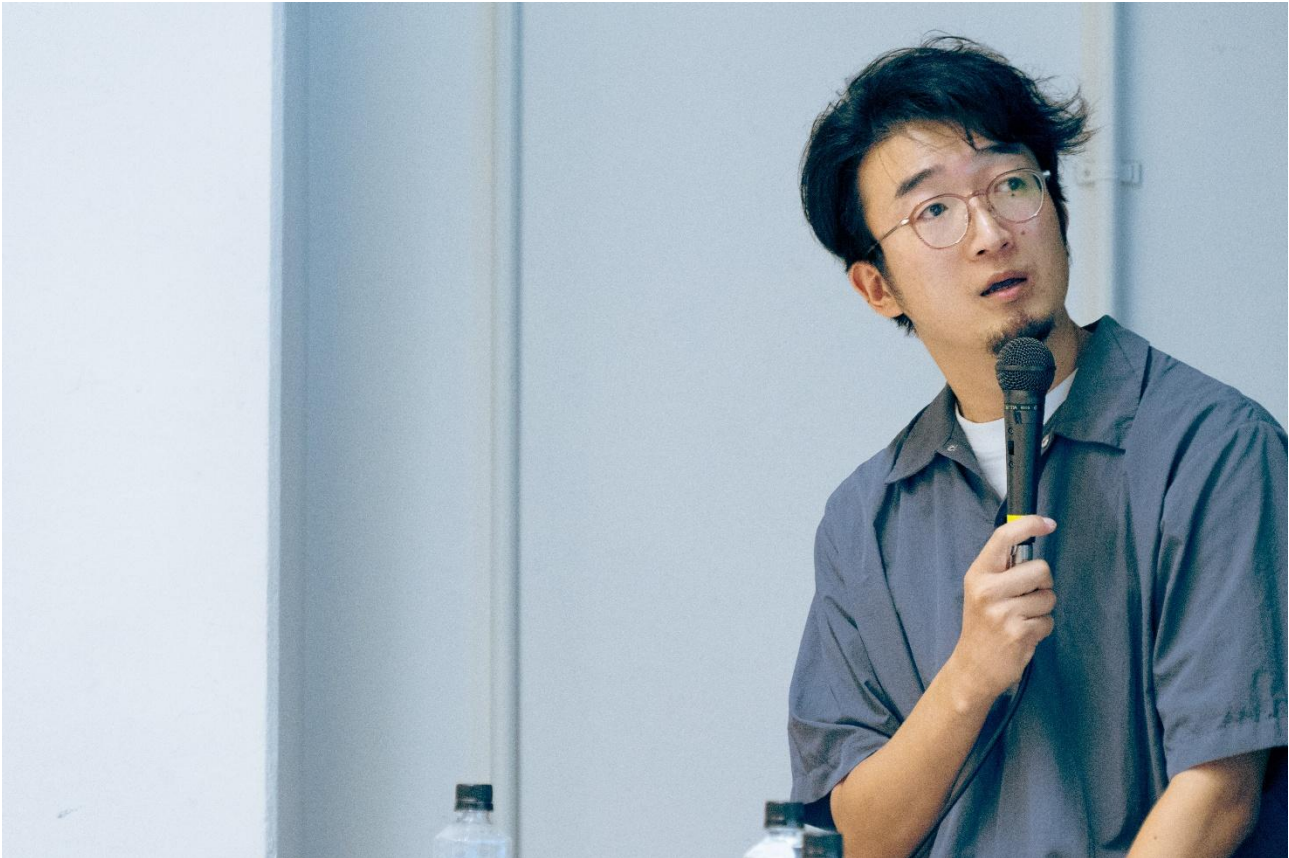
The lab promotes sustainable forestry and craftsmanship. It serves as a shared studio for local artisans, designers, and citizens interested in woodworking.

Mr. Noguchi emphasized how the initiative connects urban and mountain areas, inspiring citizens to recognize the value of local timber by personally hand-crafting items.

The lab also hosts workshops for families, seniors, and students, allowing diverse generations to engage in producing professional creations. Works range from furniture and interior items to participatory art installations, each reflecting Kobe's unique blend of nature and urban life.

Mr. Noguchi also described his collaboration with Kobe City's "[Forest Future Urban Strategy](#)," emphasizing how creative practices can support environmental sustainability and local industries. "It's not just about making things," Mr. Noguchi said, "but about rebuilding the connection between people, forests, and the city."

## Nagoya: Revitalizing Heritage Through Experimental Design



**Sho Asano**, a design researcher and service designer from Nagoya, presented ongoing projects in Arimatsu, a historic district renowned for its traditional shibori tie-dye technique.

Once a prosperous textile center, Arimatsu has experienced economic decline and an aging population. In response, Mr. Asano co-founded the [Arimatsu Yamori Company](#), an organization dedicated to community-led renovation and creative revitalization.

Through the adaptive reuse of traditional townhouses, the group has established multifunctional spaces, including a shared kitchen, garden, and community venue, which have hosted over 250 events in less than two years.

These gatherings blend daily life with creative experimentation, such as exploring the intersection of fermentation culture and future design or imagining "Arimatsu in 2050" with residents and local craftspeople.

Mr. Asano emphasized that design should reinterpret heritage through collaboration and imagination rather than merely preserve it. "By treating Arimatsu as an open field for experimentation," he said, "we begin to see how unresolved questions can lead to new forms of creativity."

Moderated by Ms. Hayashi, the discussion invited open dialogue.

In response to an audience question, "Is there any city you feel has been revitalized through design?" the panelists offered a shared insight: design alone cannot transform a city; it must work in tandem with people's intentions and energy.



The dialogue reinforced the idea that design is a creative and social process that empowers people to act, connect, and imagine collectively.



### **Reflections: Continuing Encounters and Collaboration**

In closing, Ms. Hayashi reminded participants that "people are essential to moving a region."

Design provides the tools, but people bring the true driving forces behind change: continuity, empathy, and curiosity.

The concept of "correspondence"— in other words, meeting, exchanging, and maintaining connections — reflects this idea. Cities, like people, evolve through dialogue.

Asahikawa, Kobe, and Nagoya reaffirmed their shared mission: to serve as ambassadors and coordinators, linking creative practices, civic engagement, and international exchange.

Through the UNESCO Cities of Design Conference, these cities will continue to nurture this platform of creative collaboration and expand the possibilities born from "correspondence."

## Guest Profiles

### Chiaki Hayashi

President & CEO, Q0 Inc.



Chiaki Hayashi is President and CEO of Q0 Inc..

She holds a Bachelor's degree from the School of Commerce at Waseda University and a Master's degree from the Graduate School of Journalism at Boston University.

After working at Kao Corporation, she founded Loftwork Inc. in 2000, serving as its CEO and later Chair until 2022.

Following her retirement from Loftwork, she established Q0 Inc. on September 9, 2022, with the mission of creating new relationships between rural regions and urban areas.

Based primarily in local communities in areas such as Hokkaido and Akita, Hayashi collaborates with local companies and creative leaders to design and implement projects aimed at fostering "regions that are sustained and passed on to future generations."

Her professional roles include serving as a jury member for the Good Design Award, a member of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry's Industrial Structure Council, and a participant in policy study groups on industrial competitiveness and design.

She also serves as Chair of the Board of Directors at Hidakuma Inc. (officially *Hida no Mori de Kuma wa Odoru*), a company dedicated to the creation of local industry through reforestation and manufacturing.

### Kimiya Sato

Creative Director / Designer, WATARAI DESIGN PARTNERS



Born in 1983 in Asahikawa, Hokkaido, Kimiya Sato is a creative director and designer at WATARAI DESIGN PARTNERS.

He works across a wide range of disciplines including graphic design, web design, video, photography, and print, and is known for his community-oriented design practice rooted in local contexts.

From both branding and marketing perspectives, Sato proposes creative solutions that enrich everyday life. He identifies issues through a designer's lens and transforms them into tangible outcomes through positive ideas and proactive action.

Valuing human connection above all, he enjoys inspirations born from conversation and encounters, and continues to pursue thoughtful design of both objects and experiences.

Based in his hometown of Asahikawa, he is actively involved in projects that leverage local resources and communicate the city's unique appeal.

## Ryo Noguchi

### Wood Utilization Coordinator, Founder, Rokko Mountain Creative Lab LLC



Ryo Noguchi graduated from Kobe Design University and began his career in wooden furniture manufacturing at a furniture company. He later worked as a store manager and instructor at a DIY specialty shop before serving as a university assistant supporting students' production work. In 2023, he completed postgraduate research on the utilization of locally sourced and naturally occurring timber.

In 2025, he founded the Rokko Mountain Creative Lab, a shared workshop located on Mt. Rokko, where he focuses on production using local resources and supporting emerging creators. Through hands-on creation and collaboration, Noguchi aims to reconnect people, materials, and place, fostering a sustainable relationship between local communities and natural resources.

## Sho Asano

### Design Researcher



Born in 1987 in Hyogo Prefecture and raised in Nagoya, Sho Asano completed a master's degree in design and management engineering at Kyoto Institute of Technology in 2014.

Since then, he has been working as a design researcher based in Nagoya.

Guided by the principle of "realizing social inclusion through design research," Asano engages in a wide range of projects—from research design and brand and product development to business and organizational strategy—providing consistent, research-driven design solutions. Advocating for "design research methods that open up unknown challenges and possibilities," he presents well-structured proposals based on deep contextual understanding and vision-building.

Since 2018, he has served as Co-Representative of the Arimatsu Yamori Company LLC, and in 2024, he began working as a Learning Coordinator for the International Art Festival Aichi 2025.



## PR tools:

Flyers (105 mm x 105 mm)

400 copies were printed and distributed within the host cities and at other relevant institutions.



## Official Website:

<https://www.creative-nagoya.jp/ourai2025/index.html>

## Other listings:

designcities.net (A platform for promoting the design activities of member cities of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network)

<https://www.designcities.net/conference/conference-for-thinking-about-the-future-of-japans-design-cities/>