

UNESCO Cities of Design Subnetwork Annual Meeting

ASAHIKAWA, JAPAN

21-25 October
2024

REPORT



The UNESCO Design Subnetwork Meeting held in Asahikawa from October 21 to 25 welcomed 48 delegates from 23 Cities of Design across 21 countries, hosting engaging discussions on design's role in building creative cities of the future. While closed to the public, this was an important platform for delegates to gather in-person and online to share first-hand experiences, strengthen collaborative relationships, as well as experience Asahikawa's rich nature, industries, and culture through hands-on activities. Another key objective for the city was to foster civic pride by creating opportunities for delegates to interact with the youth and helping locals better understand Asahikawa's design initiatives.

With climate change and social challenges accelerating globally, it was crucial that this gathering of representatives from diverse cultures facilitated the sharing of innovative ideas and designs, as well as the discussion of topics such as circular economies and sustainable development. For many delegates, this was their first time in Japan, so experiences in nature, cuisine, Japanese and indigenous (Ainu) culture, and local industries were included to deepen their understanding.

City of Design Asahikawa

Asahikawa has actively engaged in design since the 1950s, hosting numerous events such as the first Asahikawa Design Symposium in 1976 and the triennial International Furniture Design Competition Asahikawa (IFDA) since 1990. The Asahikawa City Design Vision, which set forth the city's outlook for design, was announced in 1997. Asahikawa Design Week has also been held yearly since 2015.

In October 2019, in recognition of its history of design, Asahikawa officially became a member of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) in the field of Design. Launched in 2004, the UCCN fosters regional industry and sustainable urban growth via international collaboration.

Currently, 350 cities worldwide, including 11 in Japan, are part of this network spanning seven fields – Literature, Film, Music, Crafts & Folk Art, Design, Media Arts, and Gastronomy. Asahikawa became the third Japanese City of Design after Nagoya and Kobe, joining many other major cities in fostering international exchange and regional development.



Cities of Design Meetings

The main objective of the meetings was to reinforce collaboration by improving mutual understanding of each city's initiatives and challenges. The first session began with an opening address by Asahikawa Mayor Hirotsugu Imazu, followed by a message from UNESCO Culture Sector's Chief of Communications, Denise Bax. Afterwards, each city shared its projects and achievements.

In one of the sessions, delegates split into four working groups (Business, Education, Policy, Social) for discussion. In the final session, the Design Cities Asahikawa Manifesto was adopted, affirming the goal of realizing a sustainable future through design and coexistence with nature.



Ms. Cindy Lee Ms. Annie Marrs
UNESCO Cities of Design Coordinators



We live in challenging times, inundated by complex problems with no simple solutions. Many of these problems are products of humanity's pursuit of prosperity. Design, which has continually spurred the creation of things that afford us convenience, is partly responsible for these issues. Therefore, we believe that design should also play a role in solving these problems. In the future, an essential function of design will be to promote harmony between nature and society. To do this, we must start by understanding that nature has much to teach us about designing a society that values flexibility and diversity over speed and power. We believe that the power of design can be used to create a sustainable, bright, and happy future.

- 1. The purpose of design is to enhance happiness.**
We reaffirm that design is beneficial and contributes to happiness. Utilizing design's capacity to discover and solve problems, we aim to build a world that brings happiness to everyone.
- 2. Achieve harmony between nature and society with the power of design.**
Our existence as part of an ecosystem precedes our existence as social beings. It is essential to awaken our five senses, take heed of nature's words, and work to achieve a favorable harmony between nature and society.
- 3. Design serves as a catalyst that bridges societal elements.**
We will harness the transformative potential of design as a catalyst to strengthen the organic relationships between politics, government, education, culture, and industry. Furthermore, we will utilize design's communicative power to build a sustainable society.
- 4. Raise the design literacy of citizens.**
We will focus our efforts on raising the design literacy of all citizens. At the same time, we will also strengthen the network by learning about the diverse cultures that exist in each city of design.
- 5. Take responsibility for a sustainable future.**
As cities of design, we have a responsibility towards the future. While each city retains its unique culture, we work to deepen mutual understanding and support one another in realizing our goals.

The Design Cities Asahikawa Manifesto was officially recognized at the final meeting on October 24. Emphasizing the role of design in facilitating coexistence with nature and nurturing the younger generation, it places people at the heart of the initiative while laying the foundation for international collaboration and regional development. It was announced at the farewell party, where participants pledged to create a sustainable and prosperous society through design.

Strengthening Relationships with Participating Delegates

Orientation

On October 21, the orientation at the Design Gallery began with a calligraphy performance of “縁” (En) by Soufu Honda. Given design's role in bringing people together, “En”, which symbolizes human connections, was a fitting start for this gathering. Vice Chairman Naoyuki Watanabe then outlined the meeting's purpose.



Networking Events

On the 21st, delegates enjoyed traditional Japanese cuisine at Kagetsu Kaikan with live performances of the koto and shakuhachi. On the 22nd, a welcome party where delegates interacted with local businesspeople was held at OMO7. On the 24th, a farewell party was held at Art Hotel, featuring a traditional Ainu dance by the Asahikawa Cikappuni Ainu Culture Preservation Society. Towards the end, delegates joined in, experiencing the charm of Ainu culture first-hand.



UNESCO Association 3 Cities Conference

On October 23, representatives from the National Federation of UNESCO Associations in Japan, local UNESCO Associations, and Japanese Cities of Design Kobe, Nagoya, and Asahikawa shared initiatives and built new relationships by exchanging perspectives on UNESCO's ideals. Held at OMO7 in hybrid form, 59 attendees shared best practices in the first half and discussed the significance of UNESCO activities in the second. Given that UNESCO Associations and clubs run numerous programs focused on youth development, local and international collaboration, as well as dialogue, further collaboration with the UCCN is expected.



Asahikawa's Forests, Crafts, and Japanese Culture

Planting Oak Tree Saplings

On October 21, the delegates planted 300 oak tree saplings in the forests of Etanbetsu, connecting with nature through all five senses by donning rubber boots and digging into the firm mountain soil – an unexpectedly challenging task. Though it will take a century for the saplings to mature, everyone left with bright smiles.



Design Center and Spoon-making

On October 22, the delegates visited the Asahikawa Design Center, participated in a spoon-making workshop using wind-felled wood from Chitose City, and toured the furniture exhibits. The experience highlighted how Asahikawa furniture, made from local resources, promotes sustainable design and industrial development.



Breakfast at Kamikawa Shrine

On October 23, the delegates enjoyed a halal-friendly breakfast prepared by Chef Nobu Shimokuni at Kamikawa Shrine. Centered on reducing food waste, the well-received meal featured sides made from simmered vegetable and meat leftovers. Chief Priest Kakuta explained the phrases "itadakimasu" and "gochisousama", and gave a lecture after breakfast.

Finally, the shrine maidens performed an elegant dance.



The Natural Resources of the Taisetsu Area

On October 24, delegates explored northern Hokkaido through the Higashikawa Course, Biei Course, or Downtown Asahikawa Course. The downtown course took delegates to Kondo Dye Factory to learn about traditional textile dyeing, followed by a tour of the Otokoyama Sake Brewery Museum, giving them a taste of local heritage.



Interacting with the Younger Generation

From Kitasaito Garden to City Hall

On October 23, 10 student volunteer interpreters led the delegates on a walk from Kitasaito Garden to Asahikawa Station, where 19 high school students took over to lead them through the Shopping Street towards City Hall. The delegates were impressed by the students' enthusiastic explanations, and it was a valuable experience for the students as well.



Mini Machinaka Campus

On October 24, a Mini Machinaka Campus organised by 110 people, including 70 students, was held at Art Hotel. It re-created the youth-oriented Machinaka Campus that has been held annually during Asahikawa Design Week ever since the city officially joined the UCCN. With the usual themes of "Design", "Creative City", and "SDGs", this small-scale version with 15 booths was set up just for the Subnetwork Meeting. The delegates eagerly listened to the student-led English presentations and actively asked questions. The students' earnest responses demonstrated their enthusiasm for this Creative City project, which many felt was deeply moving. At the end, the students visited each other's booths to exchange views.



Calligraphy and Tea Ceremony

In line with the theme of exploring Japanese culture and connecting with youth, 77 students from 12 high schools helped put together calligraphy and tea ceremony cultural experiences for the delegates from October 21 to 24.

On first two days, 24 high schoolers and their advisors put together a five-hour calligraphy cultural event at OMO7, drawing long lines for personalized kanji and katakana cards. The "コレクトレイク" card will go to Kortrijk's mayor, while the "Design City Kobe" card will be displayed at a gallery. The delegates also observed three styles of brush calligraphy writing.



On the 23rd, 14 students and their instructors held an Urasenke tea ceremony at OMO7. The delegates enjoyed chestnut sweets and matcha in a sandalwood-scented venue.

On the 24th, 15 high school students and their instructors hosted a tea ceremony with dried confectionary and matcha at Art Hotel. The beautiful lines of calligraphy and the unforgettable stillness of the tea ceremonies left a lasting impression on the guests.



Participating Schools for Cultural Exchange

● **Volunteer Interpreters**
(Guides from Kitasaito Garden to Shopping Park)
Asahikawa Tosei High School,
Asahikawa Meisei High School,
Asahikawa Nishi High School,
Asahikawa City University

● **Mini Machinaka Campus**
Asahikawa Kita High School,
Asahikawa Agricultural High School,
Asahikawa Meisei High School,
National Institute of Technology Asahikawa College,
Asahikawa City University,
Asahikawa City University Junior College,
Asahikawa Medical University

● **Message-card Making**
Asahikawa Meisei High School,
Asahikawa Nishi High School

● **Calligraphy**
Asahikawa Ryukoku High School,
Asahikawa Tosei High School,
Asahikawa Eiryou High School,
Asahikawa Minami High School,
Asahikawa Nishi High School,
Asahikawa Kotoshien School

● **Tea Ceremony (Urasenke)**
Asahikawa Tosei High School,
Asahikawa Eiryou High School,
Asahikawa Agricultural High School,
Asahikawa Commercial High School,
Asahikawa Nishi High School

● **Tea Ceremony (Omotesenke)**
Asahikawa Technical High School,
Asahikawa Meisei High School,
Asahikawa Higashi High School,
Asahikawa Kita High School,
Asahikawa Minami High School

Exploring Asahikawa's Manufacturing and Cultural Sites

Visit to CondeHouse

On October 22, the delegates visited CondeHouse to observe the manufacturing process of wooden furniture, the use of Hokkaido-sourced lumber, and forest resource management efforts. The incorporation of local timber reflects a commitment to sustainability, and participants admired the fusion of wood and design.



Asahikawa City Museum

The delegates' visit to the museum on October 22 began with an overview from Director Yahagi. Then, Mr. Yoshiyuki Honma, a researcher from Asahikawa Ryukoku High School, explained Ainu culture. The delegates expressed great interest in ancient and Ainu dwellings and lifestyles as they explored the exhibits.



Visit to Asahikawa Museum of Art and Fe

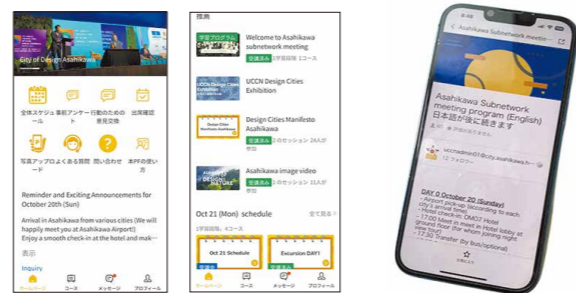
On October 25, the delegates visited the Asahikawa Museum of Art, where *The World of FUJITO Takeki* exhibition showcased sculptures depicting Ainu traditions and coexistence with nature. The visit provided further insight into how the depth and uniqueness of Ainu nature and culture are artistically expressed. The delegates then visited Fe System Works, where they learned about vegetable washing machines, advanced environmental technologies, and local industries' efforts towards a sustainable future. These visits highlighted Asahikawa's cultural and industrial potential while demonstrating the city's commitment to sustainability.



Information Sharing via Digital Tools

Digital Tool: UMU

As this was many participants' first time in Japan, having quick access to accurate information was crucial for navigating the language and culture. To address this challenge, the UMU platform was introduced, enabling easy access to meeting schedules, event details, sightseeing spots, and dining options via smartphone.



Comments from Delegates of Overseas Cities of Design

Cindy Lee Wuhan, China

As a coordinator for the Cities of Design, I sincerely thank Asahikawa City for hosting this meaningful annual meeting with the largest number of participants we've ever had. Not only was this a platform for sharing knowledge, but it also felt like an open classroom where each participant could further their understanding of why Asahikawa is a UNESCO City of Design. It reinforced the importance of connecting design with nature, and design's role in shaping a city that resonates with the next generation. In particular, the Design Cities Asahikawa Manifesto left an impression. The key takeaway is the idea that design is born from and guided by nature, and is itself natural. That captures the entirety of this inspiring experience.

Inhye Bae Seoul, South Korea

The hospitality, interaction with the younger generation, and beautiful nature made this trip to Asahikawa special. I was deeply moved by the way city hall employees, local businesses, and high school students worked together to welcome us. I am grateful to have met many people who felt like true ambassadors of the city. Programs like the Mini Machinaka Campus are great examples of learning about the SDGs alongside students. The visits to Asahikawa Design Center and CondeHouse also provided valuable opportunities to see beautiful furniture design inspired by nature and learn about the manufacturing process.

Enes Talha Balyemez Doha, Qatar

From the moment I arrived at the Airport, I could tell this meeting was impeccably organized. The program prepared by Team Asahikawa surprised us at every turn, incorporating interactions with nature and students in truly remarkable ways. It was so meaningful to learn about both Japan and Asahikawa's culture. Team Asahikawa was kind, professional, and took great care to ensure things ran smoothly. I learned so much from their hospitality. They have my heartfelt respect and gratitude for the memories and friendships I made in Asahikawa.

Bonnie Fahoome Detroit, United States of America

I sincerely thank Team Asahikawa for their hospitality, thoughtfulness, and warmth. It was truly special to interact with the youth, and I was surprised and moved by all the people whose support made the event possible. I cannot say which cultural experience was the most meaningful. The tree-planting, visit to CondeHouse, spoon-making, chair exhibition, and Design Cities Asahikawa Manifesto all provided opportunities to reflect on the coexistence of nature, design, and production. The warm welcome, the delicious and beautifully presented breakfast, and special prayer at the shrine will stay with me forever.

Participating Cities



Asahikawa (Japan), Baku (Azerbaijan), Bandung (Indonesia), Berlin (Germany), Cebu (Philippines), Chiang Rai (Thailand), Chongqing (China), Detroit (United States), Doha (Qatar), Dubai (United Arab Emirates), Dundee (Scotland), Geelong (Australia), Graz (Austria), Hanoi (Vietnam), Kaunas (Lithuania), Kobe (Japan), Kolding (Denmark), Kortrijk (Belgium), Muharraq (Bahrain), Nagoya (Japan), Seoul (South Korea), Singapore (Singapore), Valencia (Spain), Wuhan (China).

Enjoying Design through Public Events

Design Cities Panel Exhibition

A “Design Cities Panel Exhibition” was held in front of the Asahikawa City Hall Main Building from October 18 to 27, showcasing unique characteristics and design-driven regional development initiatives from 28 Cities of Design. Visitors commented that the exhibition helped them recognize the power of design to transform communities and inspired them to view their own city from a new perspective.



Talk Session

On October 22, a talk session featuring renowned Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto and esteemed Italian architect Michele De Lucchi was held in collaboration with the Doshin Asahikawa Political, Economic, and Cultural Forum. Under the theme “The Future and Potential of Asahikawa from a Global Perspective”, the architects discussed Asahikawa’s nature, culture, and sustainable future, inspiring many participants to reassess the region’s appeal.

On October 23, a talk show featuring Shunsuke Ishikawa, Chief Design Producer of Asahikawa City, and Seiichi Saito, Chair of the Good Design Award jury, explored the theme, “The Role of Design in Shaping the Future”. The event highlighted Asahikawa’s vision as a design-driven city, helping participants appreciate design’s potential for social impact.



Sou Fujimoto Michele De Lucchi Shunsuke Ishikawa Seiichi Saito

Sou Fujimoto × Michele De Lucchi Installation

A special edition of works first unveiled in Milan in April 2024, Sou Fujimoto’s “ASAHIKAWA FOREST” and Michele De Lucchi’s “LEAVE IT BE” were exhibited at the Asahikawa Station concourse from October 16 to 27. The installation symbolized the fusion of nature’s strength and design’s beauty under the theme of the forest, receiving praise from visitors on social media.



IFDA Exhibition

From September 30, five award-winning works from IFDA 2024 were exhibited at the Asahikawa Design Center. Selected from 655 submissions across 38 countries and regions, the exhibition highlighted Asahikawa’s role in connecting furniture and design. From October 10 to 27, 11 gold award-winning works from past IFDAs were displayed at Asahikawa Station, showcasing the world-class innovation and beauty that have shaped Asahikawa’s design scene for over 30 years.



Designers from A to Z

Featuring iconic pieces from chair researcher Noritsugu Oda’s collection, this exhibition showcased chairs by 26 notable 20th-century designers, from A to Z, attracting considerable attention until its closure on October 27.



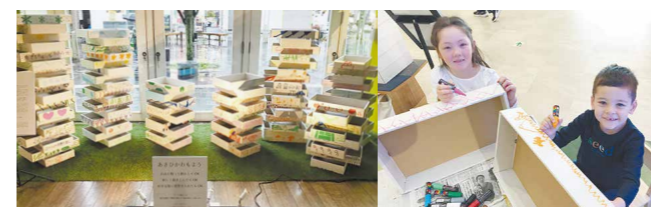
The Four Seasons in Asahikawa, Japan

This exhibition combining plants that represent the four seasons of Asahikawa was held at the Ash Atrium from October 21 to 25. Adorned with art flowers to express harmony between nature and culture, the delicate arrangements and colors delighted the eyes.



Participatory Art Exhibition “Asahikawa Moyou”

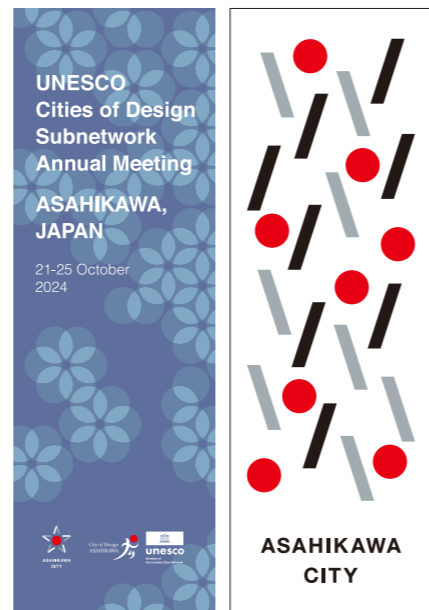
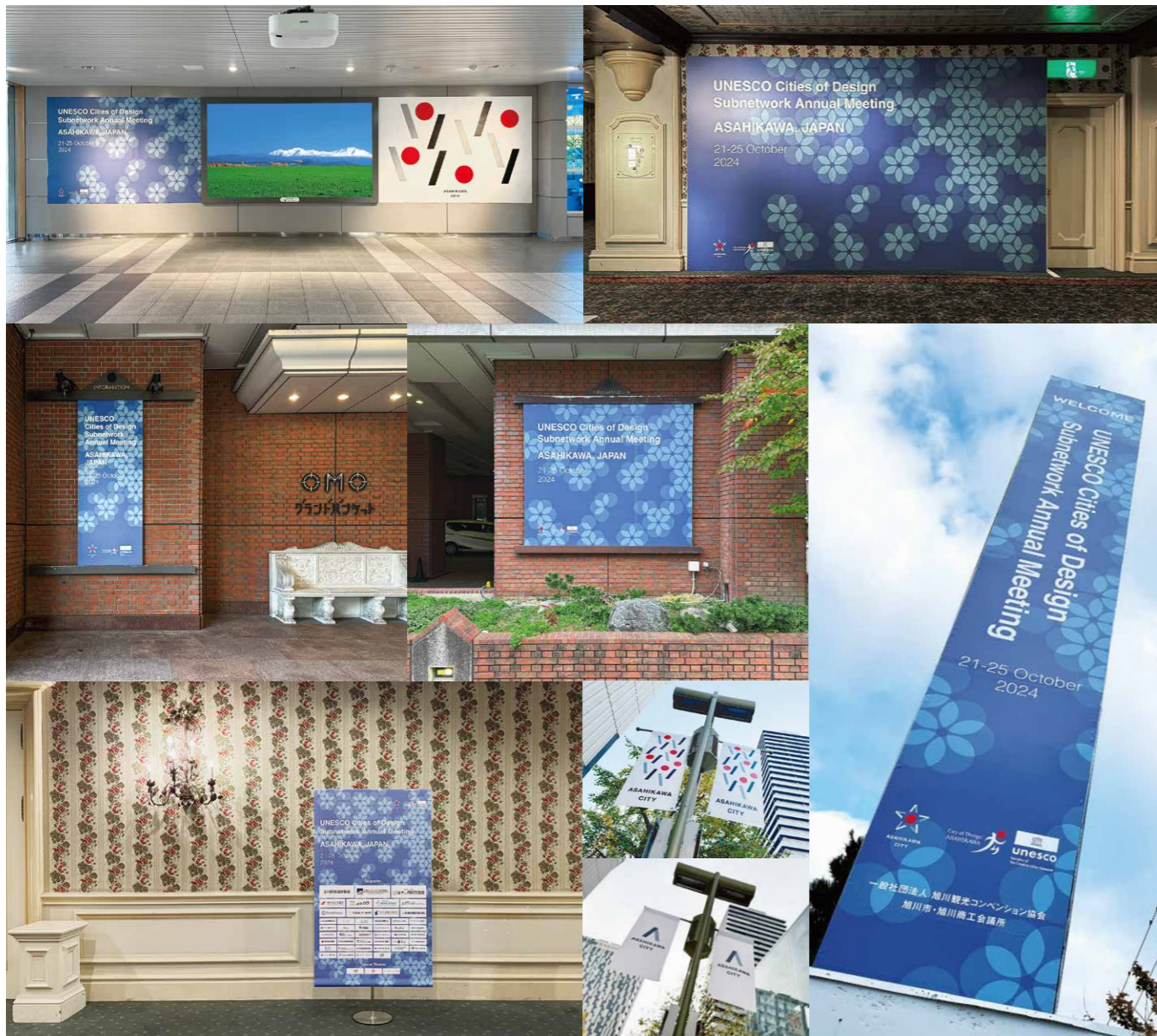
‘Asahikawa Moyou,’ a participatory art installation depicting the city’s nature, culture, and hope, was displayed at the Food Terrace from October 20. Assembling the works nurtured citizens’ creativity and love for the city.



Design City Tour

From October 22 to 24, a one-day bus tour was held for local residents. On the 22nd, participants rediscovered everyday design with “Sketch Wizard” Kenichi Ogawa, experiencing visual inspiration at the Asahikawa Museum of Sculpture and Kitasaito Garden. On the 23rd, they visited woodworking companies with furniture craftsman Taisuke Kosukegawa, exploring the charm of crafting techniques. On the 24th, a food tour guided by the editor-in-chief of gourmet magazine “kutta”, Mitsunori Ozaki, focused on the health benefits and flavors of fermented foods. Many participants commented that they gained new perspectives on the region’s charm.

Key Visuals



Supporters

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Special Thanks



2024 UCCN Cities of Design Asahikawa Subnetwork Meeting Executive Committee

Chairman: Hirosuke Imazu, Mayor of Asahikawa

Asahikawa City • Asahikawa Chamber of Commerce and Industry • Asahikawa Creative City Promotion Council • Asahikawa City University • Asahikawa Tourist & Convention Association • Taisetsu Kamuimintara DMO • Asahikawa City Hotels Forum

Our heartfelt gratitude goes to the 48 organizations whose generous support made the 2024 Cities of Design Asahikawa Subnetwork Meeting a success.