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Site designer on why expos matter more than ever

Sustainable Japan Magazine

TOSHICHIKA IZUMI
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

2025 is already being called a golden year for art and culture, with major events across Japan including Kagawa Prefecture's Setouchi Triennale, which is normally held every three years and attracted more than 1.2 million visitors before COVID, the Aichi Triennale, the Okayama Art Exchange and the Hiroshima Architecture Exhibition. The biggest of them all will no doubt be Osaka's Expo 2025, involving more than 160 countries and regions as well as several international organizations during its run from April 13 to Oct. 13.

The expo's theme is "Designing Future Society for Our Lives" and its concept is to bring together wisdom from around the world, including on advanced technologies, in order to develop new ideas for solving common problems faced by humanity.

In 1970, Japan hosted the first international exposition in Asia, the Japan World Exposition (commonly known as Expo '70 or the



The exterior of the Grand Roof (Ring). The beauty of its construction, like traditional Japanese wooden architecture, is plain to see.

Osaka Expo), which garnered attention from around the world. It attracted 64 million visitors, including more than half of Japan's population of about 100 million at the time. A generation later, Expo 2005 (commonly known as the Aichi Expo) was held, welcoming 22 million visitors, and so this is the third time an international expo has been held in Japan.

Japan's expos tend to attract attention not only for their exhibits but also for the architecture of their pavilions and other structures, and so architects often play a central role. Kenzo Tange was the general producer of the Osaka Expo, and Kiyonori Kikutake was the general producer of the Aichi Expo. For Expo 2025, architect Sou Fujimoto is the expo site design producer. With only four months left to go before the kickoff, there have been some disconcerting reports of delays in the construction of the overseas pavilions, and some have questioned the rationale of holding the expo at all. During a recent visit to the venue, we asked Fujimoto for his thoughts.

"As a producer of the expo site design, I would first like to give my own thoughts on the expo's significance. It is true that we are now in a very different era from the 1970s, when Osaka's last expo was held. This has prompted some people to ask why we are still doing expos in the 21st century. Others assume that expos must be outdated — and it is true that this is no time to be holding old-fashioned expos. But because of that very fact, expos are beginning to take on a tremendous new significance that is unique to the present day," he said, speaking passionately yet calmly.

"Eighty percent of the world's countries and regions will bring their traditions, cultures, histories, climates, lifestyles, foods and

music — in other words, their everything — here to this tiny island of Yumeshima, Osaka, and spend six months here together. I don't think any other event on Earth comes close to the magnitude of this. It is bigger than major heads-of-state summits, the United Nations General Assembly, the Olympic Games."

In an age of diversity and increasing fragmentation, can the world really remain interconnected? Fujimoto says the expo is a place to address this big question and demonstrate that "a diverse world can still be connected." Some may say that everything you need to know about the world you can find by searching online, but during the pandemic many people came to realize the power of in-person experiences. Fujimoto also said that no matter how advanced the internet becomes, real-life experiences and interactions are becoming more and more important.

The main symbol of the venue, the Grand Roof (Ring), was designed by Fujimoto as an expression of the connectedness between people and countries. The ring is one of the world's largest wooden structures, standing up to 20 meters high and having an inner diameter of 615 meters. On the inside, it is a comfortable space for visitors to stay, sheltered from wind, rain and sun, while from the roof visitors can see the entire venue and walk all the way around it. All of the overseas pavilions are within the ring, allowing visitors to visually sense the idea of the world being one.

"We designed the venue so that people of any generation and from any culture could look down at the venue and in an instant be made to feel that the whole planet is gathering here now, and that diverse worlds can be connected," Fujimoto said. "In these difficult



The Grand Roof (Ring) was designed by architect and Expo Site Design Producer Sou Fujimoto. It is a symbol of the event, and its roof serves as the 2-kilometer-long open-air Sky Walk. KOUTAROU WASHIZAKI

times, the world is still coming together in one circle, connecting and trying to create a future together. We hope that people around the world will realize this, and that this message will stay with people for decades to come. We believe that the ring symbolizes an era in which diverse worlds connect."

The design is functional as well as symbolic. Fujimoto's intentions for the ring can be summarized in five points.

1. The circular flows created by the ring will disperse the large numbers of visitors and let them move around more smoothly and efficiently than a boulevard-like linear axis or a central plaza would.
2. The ring protects the main circulation

route from the sun and rain, letting people enjoy the expo in all weather conditions.

3. The Yumeshima site is reclaimed land surrounded by seawalls, so visitors cannot see the ocean from ground level, but allowing them to walk on top of the ring lets them enjoy views of the venue, the sky, the sea and the city in the distance.

4. The circle is a neutral shape with no hierarchy. The only privileged location is its center, which will be occupied by a "forest" without a pavilion. This serves as a symbol of a future in which we will live in harmony with nature.

5. When approaching from the east or west, the ring welcomes people as a large

Sou Fujimoto

Born in Hokkaido in 1971. Graduated from the Department of Architecture in the Faculty of Engineering at Tokyo University. Established Sou Fujimoto Architects in 2000. Among his recent renowned projects was the residential tower L'Arbre Blanc (White Tree), winner of the second Architectural Folie of the 21st Century competition of Montpellier, France.

In 2015, 2017 and 2018, he won several more international competitions in various European countries. In Japan, he was selected as the expo site design producer for Expo 2025 and was selected in 2024 for the basic design of the tentative northern complex of Sendai's International Center Station.

His notable works include House of Music (2021), Maruhon Makiart Terrace (Ishinomaki Cultural Center) (2021), Shiroiya Hotel (2020), L'Arbre Blanc (2019), Serpentine Gallery Pavilion 2013, House NA (2011), Musashino Art University Museum and Library (2010), House N (2008) and many more.

gate. This creates a sense of anticipation for the special experience that awaits inside.

The material used in the construction of the Grand Roof (Ring), namely wood, is in itself considered a material of the future due to its sustainability. Building the structure required a fusion of cutting-edge construction techniques with thousand-year-old Japanese wooden building methods — and bringing these into the present through this project is also highly significant. Climbing up onto the roof and surveying the venue as it is built, it is hard to not sense the potential of this very 21st-century expo.

This article was previously published in the Sustainable Japan Magazine, a monthly publication exploring sustainable lifestyle choices and the future of our planet. To subscribe to the magazine, scan the QR code.



Ventinove

Italian wood-fired cuisine in Gunma



TAEKO TERAO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Kawaba, home of the Italian restaurant-inn Ventinove, is a village of about 3,000 people in Gunma Prefecture's Tone district. The small number of residents may evoke the image of a depopulated village in decline, but with its location at the foot of Mount Hotaka, one of Japan's "100 famous mountains," Kawaba is actually a vibrant tourist destination.

Ventinove's chef-owner, Yusuke Takeuchi, was born in Tokyo but lived in Kawaba from the age of 10. "Every summer, my dad takes city kids camping for two weeks in an area deep in the mountains. I went along with the group every year until I was 18. Each day we'd make a wood fire and use it to cook rice and heat bath water," Takeuchi said.

In 2006, while training as a chef, Takeuchi went to Italy, where he spent three years honing his skills. After returning to Japan, he worked for a year in Aomori Prefecture, and in 2011 he opened Trattoria 29 in the Nishio-gikubo area of Tokyo. Though the restaurant flourished, an eviction notice from the landlord came in 2019, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Takeuchi returned to his family home to take stock, and it was then that he became aware of the wealth of ingredients produced in Kawaba. He decided to



Address
Ventinove
2593-1 Yachi, Kawaba-mura,
Tone-gun, Gunma Prefecture
<https://www.29ventinove.com>

open Ventinove in 2022. "There are wild mountain vegetables, and also an abundance of mushrooms," said Takeuchi. "You can even forage for black truffles. I also go along on hunts, and as soon as I return, I butcher the hunted game in the meat-production facility." These mountain gifts and all the other ingredients used in the course menu (except seasonings) are sourced in Gunma Prefecture. All the cooking, including the Akagi beef bistecca — is done with wood fire, either on a grill or in an oven. This small restaurant will undoubtedly play a big role as a new destination in Kawaba, a town that has survived and prospered through tourism.

ICHITA YAMAMOTO GOVERNOR OF GUNMA

I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to Ventinove on receiving the Japan Times' Destination Restaurants 2024 award. As the local governor, I am truly delighted by this recognition.

Gunma is blessed with stunning natural beauty, including hot springs, mountains and rivers. At Ventinove, guests can fully enjoy dishes crafted from the diverse and high-quality ingredients from this region. I sincerely hope that this recognition will encourage many visitors to come and experience all that Gunma has to offer.

KYOTARO TOYAMA MAYOR OF KAWABA

I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to Ventinove being selected as a Destination Restaurant 2024.

The village of Kawaba, rich in natural beauty, is developing the community while promoting agriculture and tourism. Yuki Hotaka rice, nurtured by pristine waters from Mount Hotaka, has repeatedly won the Gold Prize in the Rice Taste Evaluation Contest. The roadside station Kawaba Denen Plaza is nationally recognized as a model destination. We invite you to experience Kawaba's tranquil charm and stunning scenery.

World Ocean Summit and Expo seeks sustainable sea changes

ESG/SDGs

MAIKO MURAOKA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The 12th annual World Ocean Summit and Expo was held on March 12 and 13 at the ANA Intercontinental Tokyo Hotel in Tokyo's Minato Ward, attracting more than 700 participants. It was organized by Economist Impact, a project of The Economist Group, a London-based media company, that aims to engage businesses, governments and foundations in finding solutions to pressing global issues. This was the first time the summit was held in Japan.

Supported by the official host, the Nippon Foundation, the summit brought together stakeholders in the ocean community from all sides — business, government, civil society and academia — to inspire new collaborations and strategies to achieve the United Nations' 14th sustainable development goal, on conserving and sustainably using marine resources.

More than 160 speakers shared their insights in about 80 sessions, which took various forms including speeches, panel discussions, interviews, presentations and workshops. The sessions covered a wide range of topics: ocean climate impacts and solutions, marine pollution, a sustainable "blue economy," food systems and technology, ocean science and infrastructure, financing ocean restoration, ocean stewardship, coastal ecosystems, tourism and the development of small island states. A reception and networking breaks were also held to facilitate interactions that could lead to future col-



Yohei Sasakawa, chairman of the Nippon Foundation, passes the baton to Kailli Levesque, the associate deputy minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. THE JAPAN TIMES

laborations to restore ocean health.

The first day of the summit featured a panel session titled "Putting nature at the center of the sustainable ocean economy." Using the example of the difficulty of assessing the values of standing trees and swimming fish versus cut timber and caught fish, Naoko Ishii, the executive director of the Center for Global Commons, said the fundamental challenge for nature, including the ocean, is how to update current economic, accounting and market systems to recognize the full value of natural capital and "put nature on the balance sheet."

Miyuki Zeniya, the group chief sustainability officer of Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group and chief sustainability officer of MUFG Bank, pointed out that the issue of ownership makes it particularly difficult to assess the value of the ocean in financial terms, whereas the value of land can be calculated because it is owned by someone and can be traded.

Pascal Lamy, the chair of the European Starfish Mission and adviser to the Back to Blue Initiative, agreed that people know much more about the land than the ocean, and added that there is also an emotional gap that makes people believe that ocean issues are happening somewhere far away. He also pointed to the missed opportunity of not investing in the ocean's vast assets, saying, "What creates the investment momentum is the evidence that it makes financial sense to invest money in conservation, in sustainable decarbonized shipping, in addressing coastal rights to the sea, in protecting coral reefs."

Elizabeth McLeod, the global ocean director for The Nature Conservancy, also addressed the need to "quantify the benefits of ecosystem services and support the regulatory environment, policies that encourage greater investment in the ocean." She explained that global organizations such as The Nature Conservancy are "helping to build the scientific foundation and catalyze the radical partnership across finance, the private sector and conservation, governments and communities" so that investable projects of different scales can be developed to conserve nature while ensuring that the benefits flow back to communities.

At the end of the first day, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba delivered a speech in which he expressed his commitment to making Japan a maritime power that takes greater respon-



Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba speaks at the World Ocean Summit and Expo. ECONOMIST IMPACT

sibility for maritime security and peace. "We wish to deepen cooperation with coast guards and navies of other nations, including Southeast Asian countries, to maintain peace at sea," he said.

The second day of the summit was also packed with opportunities to listen to and interact with a diverse range of ocean experts, including the panel discussion "30x30: Scaling up and the art of the possible," featuring officials and experts from four international organizations discussing realistic efforts to achieve the goal of protecting 30% of the oceans by 2030, as agreed on under the UN's Global Biodiversity Framework.

At the end of the second day, Yohei Sasakawa, the chairman of the Nippon Foundation, took the stage to pass the baton to Myungjin Kim, the director-general of the International Cooperation Bureau in the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries of South Korea — the host country of the upcoming Our Ocean Conference from April 28 to 30 — and Kailli Levesque, the associate deputy minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, which will host the 13th annual World Ocean Summit and Expo on March 3 and 4, 2026. Both events are expected to further accelerate global efforts and strengthen cooperation to conserve and restore the marine environment.

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