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# The unique achievements of Japanese industries in the super-aged society

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ABSTRACT

Unique efforts of the Japanese industries in meeting the needs of the super-aged society are introduced through their association with International Association for Universal Design (IAUD). Considerations are made on how successes were brought about, what can be learned as well as what issues should be addressed in the future.



## 1. Super-aged society "Japan"

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication's Population Projections for Japan, Japan's population peaked in 2005 and has been on a gradual decline since. Due to the rise in the average life expectancy and the decline in the birth rate, moreover, the Japanese population is rapidly aging. With the aging rate (the percentage of those 65 and over) surpassing 21% in 2007, Japan has become a so-called super-aged society. It is estimated that one in four persons will be 65 or over by 2015. The percentage of those who are 50 and over, on the other hand, is already over 42%, which means that two in every five persons are 50 or over. No nation in the world has ever had a demographic structure as unique as Japan's today. It is feared that if the aging of society and this declining birth rate continues, the number of young workers, who play a vital role in keeping our society vibrant, will decrease, leading to a reduction in Japan's gross domestic product (GDP) and per-capita income (Population Estimates, 2009).

The problem requires active participation in the labor force of senior citizens, physically challenged persons, women, and non-Japanese, who up until now have been relatively underprivileged as regards employment opportunities in this country. People have also made proposals for improving the quality of labor, increasing productivity, and channeling resources into high value-added sectors such as IT and design. And it is in this connection that the concept of universal design, or inclusive design, has attracted attention. The concept involves comprehensively designing products, physical structures and services so that they can be used with ease by as many people as possible, and may well subsume and expand into such concepts as ecology and sustainable design as well. It is one of the few fields in which Japan can hope to maintain an advantage over the fiercely competitive Europe, the U.S., and neighboring Asian countries. For this reason, the Japanese industries envisage it developing into a core competence and becoming an integral part of their management strategies.

## 2. The role of the International Association for Universal Design (IAUD)

The International Association for Universal Design (IAUD), established in November 2003, is an incubator of various projects with the potential to develop into these core competences. IAUD has a membership of 134 businesses—including leading companies in the automobile, electrical appliance, housing, and construction fields—18 organizations, and 66 individuals. The member companies have developed a variety of UD products and services, which are looked upon by consumers with considerable favor and expectation (Fig. 1).

With His Imperial Highness Prince Tomohito as Patron and presided over by the President, IAUD's organization includes the Council, which approves the business plan and budget, and the Board of Directors, which executes IAUD's businesses. Under the Board of Directors, business activities are carried out by the Research & Development Planning Division, the Information Exchange Center, and a number of Committees. The Research & Development Planning Division, the R&D arm of IAUD, is at the heart of IAUD's activities. As of today, it has seven topical project teams (PJ) and a working group (WG). The project teams are Living Space PJ, Mobile Space PJ, Working Environment PJ, Leisure Time PJ, Clothing PJ, Food PJ and Media PJ. The working group is called the Standardization Study WG. Report of activities in, 2008 the

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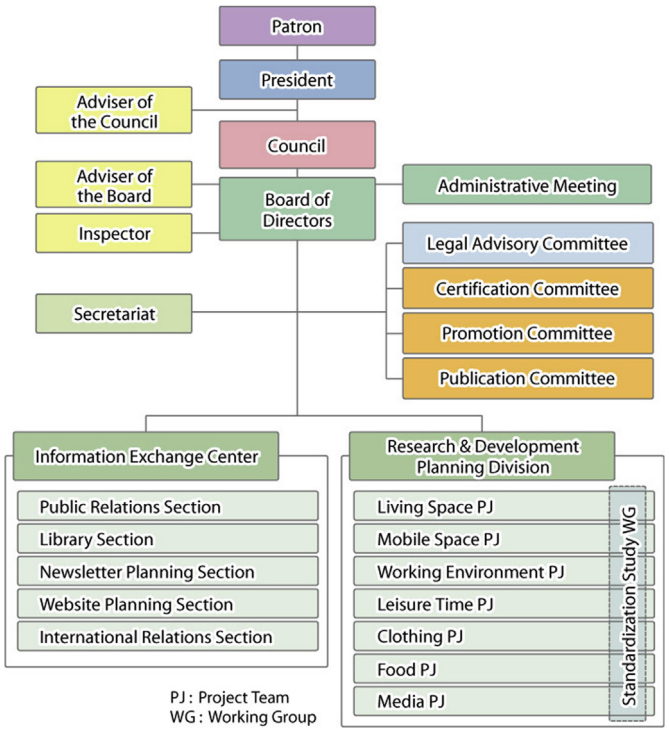


**Fig. 1.** Organizational structure of IAUD.

Information Exchange Center was established by annexing a library to the IAUD salon, which functioned as a hub for promoting member activities and exchange. The center's capacity for collecting and disseminating information on UD in Japan and abroad has been strengthened to further facilitate member activities and exchange. These activities include running of a website, publication of the IAUD Newsletter, and other publicity and publication activities. Also established Report of activities in, 2008 were the Certification Committee, Promotion Committee, and Publication Committee. The committees promote activities related to UD exams, UD mark certification, and awards, organize workshops and various other events, and publish deliverables generated from the activities of PJs and WG. They work towards building IAUD's expertise, improving IAUD's recognition, and raising public awareness of UD.

Although many full members of IAUD are in a competitive relation with other IAUD members in the same industry, all members are expected to cooperate in promoting IAUD activities, putting aside any conflict of interest and working towards raising the standard of universal design of the industry as a whole. Because of the limitation in a single company's ability to provide management resources, respective members contribute information, personnel, and other resources, exchange opinions on various issues, and share newly acquired know-how, while the fruits of these activities are equally distributed to respective members. Each IAUD project addresses a topic that is beyond the scope of a single company to tackle, and some projects even require the initiative of the national government. Shown below are just three examples of the PJs and WG's activities (Report of activities in, 2008).

### 2.1. Seamless mobility

The Mobile Space PJ's research topic is "Seamless Mobility." The basic concept of this project is to "allow each and every person to travel safely and in comfort to his or her chosen destination." The project aims to realize seamless mobility within the public transportation system through the effective use of transit signs and information. The directions and transit sign systems used by a single traffic operator (for example, by a subway) conform to a certain set of rules and are relatively easy to understand; the quality of the design of the signs is also generally up to par. However, because different operators use different sets of rules and signs, passengers often make mistakes or are confused when changing lines to a line operated by another operator or when changing, for instance, from a train to a bus. From the point of view of UD, this is one of the biggest problems with the transportation system today. The key to this problem is to eliminate disruption of information during transit. This year the project is conducting an investigation on the gap between different traffic operators, focusing specifically on connections between train stations and bus stops (Fig. 2).

The New Barrier-Free Law, which came into effect in 2006 following an amendment to fill the gap not covered by the Heartful Building Law and the Transportation Barrier-Free Law, calls for preparation and improvement of facilities based on the concepts of universal design. While the new legal framework can be commended for obligating facility operators to provide appropriate information to facilitate travel by users, the work of proposing a mechanism for promoting coordination among different operators without causing confusion to the users is left to voluntary initiatives by third-party organizations like IAUD. Therefore, there are significant expectations on the part of local governments and traffic operators placed on the activities of IAUD.

### 2.2. Pictogram of "caution-contents hot" for packaging

With the participation of volunteers from food companies and printing-related manufacturers, the Food PJ is conducting research mainly on food packaging. One of the topics that the team has been exploring since its foundation is "standardization of warning and

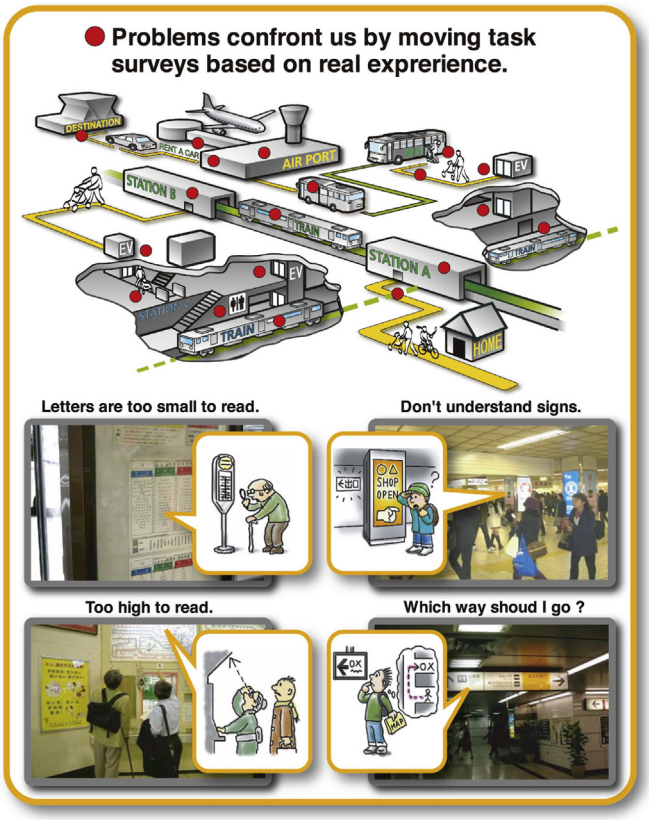


**Fig. 2.** Problems in mobility.