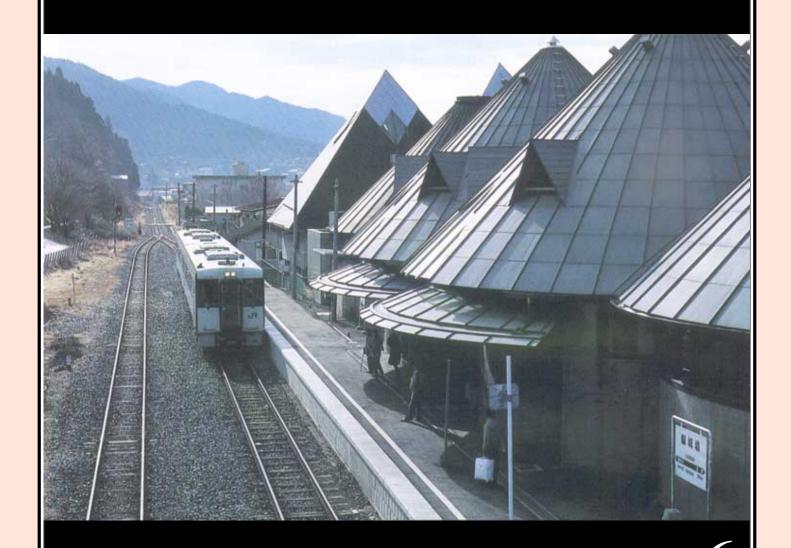
Rail JAPAN & Transport

Special Feature

Changing Roles of Stations

Japanese Railway History 6

Upgrading Narrow Gauge Standards



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Editorial

Changing stations

Westerners often appreciate grandiose style in architecture. Although station buildings were relatively small at the very beginning, the early railway operators soon started to build what were called Iron Cathedrals in their capitals and other major towns. Stations symbolized the railway as the most advanced technological achievement during the latter half of the last century. They also served as new landmarks of rapidly-growing cities. In those days, stations were the most fashionable place like today's airports. But today, many (if not all) western stations are dirty and often even dangerous. It will harm railways if stations become places where ordinary people dare not go.

Japanese love modest buildings and lack a sense of grand design in planning. The prewar Japanese railways built relatively-small stations with few exceptions such as Tokyo Central, which was designed not for passenger convenience, but to demonstrate the grandeur of a country trying hard to catch up with the West. Because of rapid growth of demand and wartime destruction, stations in large towns had to be rebuilt again and again.

Postwar Japanese stations were much too uniform and functional. The deficit-ridden national railway invited private investors to build new stations, in which station facilities gave way to shopping centres and too many commercial advertisements overwhelmed information signs for passengers. In functionally-designed shinkansen stations people wonder whether they are in an airport or in a station.

Today, people want something more in stations and railways want a more honourable social position for stations. Cultural activities in stations such as classical concerts or fine-art exhibitions at Tokyo Central are welcomed by passengers and the general public. New stations in smaller towns are designed to house public facilities such as libraries, conference halls and even hot-spring baths. Although the growth of motor transport has considerably reduced the role of railways as a means of transport, stations are finding new roles. If people accept and support such new roles, it will safeguard the future of railways.

[T. SUGA]

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