

Latifa, Rashid, and the Guardians

NOON SALIH: On one foot, he's wearing a pointed, high heeled shoe. And on the other, a rounded flat one.

On one hand he wears a white glove, kind of like Mickey Mouse. The other hand is four times as big, completely orange from the shoulder and resembles a wing. His head is in the shape of a yellow crescent moon; his chin and the top of his head are black.

And he's got a large turquoise-coloured nose.

His name is Twipsy and he's the mascot for the Hanover Expo, back in 2000. His eclectic combination of features is certainly unique but mascots as a whole have been a part of World Expos since 1984 and they've taken on lots of different shapes and forms.

Take Kiccoro and Morizo, for example, the mascot duo for the Aichi 2005 expo in Japan: two furry green creatures. Or 'Foody', the smiling face made out of fruits and vegetables for the Milan 2015 expo mascot.

In this episode, we're introducing you to the wonderful family of mascots for Expo 2020 Dubai which includes two siblings, three robots, and a tree!

AMNA ABULHOUL: We didn't want it to be just a mascot to meet and greet or to wave hello for people to come in and out. We studied what mascots represent in the world expos and Olympics and FIFA.

But as always in Dubai, we want to set a different thing. They are beyond just a character. They have souls. They have personalities. People need to have an affinity with them. And in order to do that, you need to show the world their story. They're the Expo family.

NOON SALIH: This is Amna Abulhoul, the Executive Creative Director at Expo 2020 Dubai. If she sounds very enthusiastic about mascots it's because she is the one who brought them to life - in some ways literally. By now, the characters that make up this expo family as Amna describes them have become pretty synonymous with Expo 2020 Dubai.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Who are we doing these characters for and the mascot. Is it for marketing and media and promotion? Or are we doing it for children?

NOON SALIH: I'm Noon Salih, and this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made.

[INTRO STING]

NOON SALIH: Mascots, stemming from the French word *mascotte* meaning good luck charms, have long been used at mega events and past Expos. The first one was a cartoon of a white pelican bird dressed in a blue tuxedo jacket and top hat. His name was Seymore D Fair – a play on words to invite people to see more of the fair, referring to the 1984 Louisiana Specialised Expo. He appeared at the fair grounds but also travelled internationally to promote the fair and appeared on television shows, including 'Saturday Night Live'.

But the mascots of Expo 2020 Dubai are different; Amna wanted to create more than an emblem. She wanted to craft a narrative, she wanted visitors to develop sentiments toward the characters. She wanted to create a legacy out of them.



AMNA ABULHOUL: If you would know me, I'm very patriotic, the love for this country and the city is beyond. I want the world to understand our culture, rather than just having a plush, that they will hug all the time and that will fade after the expo, after the event finishes.

I understand how the world kind of see Disney cartoons. I've worked there and I understood how they see the Arab world. And when I came back, I was like, wow, this mascot thing is an opportunity to show the world that we have authentic culture.

My first job was at Disneyland, Anaheim. So I used to actually create 3D models of rides after the engineers would give me their drawings, I would theme it and create rides out of it. So there were no boundaries. It's a very nice combination between animation and architecture.

I saw that we have a world expo coming up soon. And I wanted to be part of this team, even if I would clean desktops.

NOON SALIH: Amna was first recruited as a content producer in the marketing and communications department before eventually rising to her current role. Back then, the mascots were being developed by an external agency. And because of Amna's background in cartoon and animation, she was asked to weigh in.

Armed with ambition and vision, Amna got to work to make sure the mascots represented Expo, Dubai and the UAE. During staff meetings, she would sketch shapes that would slowly transform into characters as she drew inspiration for their would-be personalities - and more importantly their storylines.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Thankfully I got the trust from the highest leadership and that person is Her Excellency Reem Al Hashimy. She believed in that scribble on an Expo notebook.

MUSIC

AMNA ABULHOUL: I sketched a boy and a girl under a ghaf tree.

NOON SALIH: The Ghaf is the UAE's national tree and carries deep cultural and environmental value in the country.

AMNA ABULHOUL: The first thing I did is I went to the site and the site was just being built, but there was a tree on a corner over a hill.

When this plot was decided to be Expo, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum came to the site and said, let's move the site a little bit so we don't affect the camels that are under that tree because that tree was their home and that's where the site got shifted a little bit, but that tree remained the tree.

I was like, wow, that means she witnessed everything, this tree. Why can't the tree be our mascot?

MUSIC

AMNA ABULHOUL: I called her Salama based on the mother of Sheikh Zayed. I created a little short animation of her story that she witnessed the different generations and how, the tree has a soul.

And then Latifa and Rashid are her grandchildren. They always used to play under her because it's like their backyard.

NOON SALIH: So begins the journey of the two wide-eyed siblings, the empathic Rashid and the curious Latifa exploring their world at the dawn of Expo 2020.

ARCHIVE

Latifa: My dream is to share my innovation at the greatest meeting of minds in the world at Expo Dubai 2020. I've heard that it will open its doors soon.

Rashid: Do you remember when we were younger and they started building it? Everyone used to talk about Expo all the time!

Back to the interview with Aman Abulhoul:

AMNA ABULHOUL: Rashid will always wear a candora, but what makes him unique is he always has the expo pin and Latifa is wearing her afternoon galabia with that pants - or the sirwal as we call it - and the sandals. And it is something to be very honest, what I used to wear a long time ago.

When I used to play in the neighbourhood with my cousins, discover trees, different, weird stuff around the neighbourhood, this is what we used to wear. And I know nowadays they don't, but I want to show the kids that this was part of your culture because I don't want it to fade.

NOON SALIH: The visual elements play a big part of branding a mascot of course but Amna also equipped them with personalities, with emotions. She held auditions with more than 60 children to find the perfect voices for Rashid and Latifa. She presented them with challenges and built plots to drive their story forward. Even their sibling dynamic is embedded into this whimsical world of mascots.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Their personalities are ying yang. Rashid is really a sweet boy that if he was in reality, I would be scared to let him run in life because life will be



too harsh for him. Latifa is my favorite, because I see myself in her a lot, she's short, she has long hair. She always thinks she's the smartest. She always wants to push forward, but when it comes to a crisis, she would just go behind Rashid.

NOON SALIH: Kids on school trips would stop at the visitor center even before Expo 2020 launched and even though it got quite noisy, Amna would spend a lot of time there during her creative process. Because she was telling the mascot story primarily for children, she would spend this time learning from them.

AMNA ABULHOUL: I presented to them Salama and Latifa and Rashid. They were like, who are these? How come she's their grandmother? And they were like questioning all of this.

I told them, Latifa is such a gamer. She loves playing games. She's scientific. She plays sometimes soccer and the boys were like eww no, that doesn't work. Rashid needs to do that. I said, no Rashid paints, loves plants.

Then I said, raise your hand if you love drawing boys. One boy raised his hand, but he was shy. And then suddenly you see four, four kids raising their hands. This is a good time to switch the stereotype.

NOON SALIH: And then this one kid...

AMNA ABULHOUL: One kid told me that's boring. Where are their friends? I was like, interesting. You know what, I love the conversation with these kids.

NOON SALIH: Indeed they did get friends. But the mascots still had a mission; they still needed to iconize Expo 2020 Dubai's mantra of connecting minds, creating the future. They may be fictitious and playful but they still had work to do.

AMNA ABULHOUL: How can we educate children before coming to the site and create a world that is exactly expo, but in a cartoonified way. How can we teach the kids the colors of the district? How can we teach them what the personality of each district: sustainability, mobility, and opportunity?

So we created the guardians.

NOON SALIH: Terra, Opti and Alif: a guardian for each of the three pavilions at Expo 2020.

AMNA ABULHOUL: We created Opti on wheels and he speaks so slow just as a metaphor, that opportunity doesn't come fast and he's full of confetti. Whenever he says something magical. Then we created Alif who is always the show guy, the optimistic, the fun, and everyone wants to play with.

Then we created Terra is the queen. She kind of controls everyone. She's the only female with the guardians and she's kind of the boss.

NOON SALIH: Amna went back again to show the children what she had come up with based on their suggestions.

AMNA ABULHOUL: They loved the characters.

NOON SALIH: But naturally, they had more to say.

AMNA ABULHOUL: There was one smart, young boy. He's seven years old. He was like, that's not fun. I said, what again?

NOON SALIH: Rashid and Latifa were designed to be the protagonist superheroes with the three robots watching over them as they navigate their Expo world under

the guidance of their grandmother Ghaf. But this little boy noticed a missing piece of the puzzle.

AMNA ABULHOUL: He said, who are they fighting for? What are they doing? Where's the evil villain guy? How can we know they're good or bad?

So we created Mr. Scrap.

NOON SALIH: The story goes that Mr. Scrap, the evil genius once revered for his environmentally destructive inventions is on a mission to destroy the world, and the Expo district as it moves toward sustainable living. We see this play out in a five-episode animation of this epic of sorts.

AMNA ABULHOUL: The first episode is when they meet for the first time in al-Wasl Plaza. Second episode is about mobility. The third episode is about opportunity fourth the episodes about sustainability. The fifth episode is all about beating Mr. Scrap. And that happened the night before the opening ceremony.

NOON SALIH: With the help of his loyal minion robot Floppy, the classically bald-headed lanky villain wants to chop Salama and deplete her powers, and the hero crew must stop him. Terra with her power of invisibility, Opti who can time travel and Alif with his transportation shape-shifting abilities, help the kids in their quest to save the world.

AMNA ABULHOUL: So, this is where we created a plot before Expo opens.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: The mascot story is designed to be timeless so that children even 10 years from now will still find it relevant. Visitors at Expo 2020 Dubai are already growing obsessed with Rashid, Latifa and the gang.

AMNA ABULHOUL: When you go around the site, every child, every few seconds you would look around a child is holding one of the mascots. This wouldn't happen without the vision of the children. Seeing every child hugging a character while his other hand is holding his mom or dad, for me is the best picture painted I've ever seen in my life.

NOON SALIH: Meanwhile while Opti cruises around the Expo site, Terra and Alif drones fly around, turning the kids' imagination into something of a reality. There are also live mascot shows that have, apparently, been all the hype.

AMNA ABULHOUL: We created two staged shows: one, which is an adventure around the world. The other one is Mr. Scrap returns. And it's an immersive show that apparently every night it's played, it's a full house.

Mr. Scrap Returns is a show that is kind of a continuation of the five episodes. He wants to hijack Al Wasl Dome, take over the system, and remove the guardians from taking care of their districts. So you can hear kids, "Rashid, you can do it! Latifa, he's behind you!"

What's interesting with animation is it becomes an archiving piece later on. All these stories in between the episodes will become for the future archiving of what expo was and how it kind of impacted everyone around the world.

It will not be only an archive for the world, even for the expo staff, it will be a memory for the staff that worked hard all these years.

NOON SALIH: Amna would actually sometimes jot down some of the dialogue from her staff meetings and use it as inspiration, if not verbatim, within the mascot story. And fun fact, the voice of Mr. Scrap just happens to be... well someone you might have heard on this very podcast.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Mr. Scrap is actually the voice of the chief of real estate and delivery Ahmed Al Khatib. He's - we would say - the king of the site; he built it all and he's so serious. He is the sweetest human being you'll ever meet, but has the best voice, for a villain.

NOON SALIH: For Amna these quiet behind the scenes moments are where much of the magic happened. The voices, like the personalities and their visual expressions, were just as important for immortalizing the mascots.

AMNA ABULHOUL: With the guardians we wanted grownups because the voice of a child, let it be on a child's body. The way we chose the voice of the mother Salama, we wanted warmth whenever you hear her voice. This is where the balance happened. When you hear them all together, you know automatically, how they look, how they interact.

MUSIC

AMNA ABULHOUL: Everything happened, not randomly, but very organically. When you draw the characters as a silhouette and just black shapes, you actually figure out how they can be a family.

The mascots should never continue to be a marketing tool or a meet and greet, or just a beautiful image stuck into a box or a poster. They need to be friends with the children.

I saw a child crying to grab the toy, Opti. I just went and got him the toy and came back and gave it to him. If you only saw his eyes, maybe I'm exaggerating, but I saw his eyes grew 10 times bigger.

Inside Expo

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EXPO 2020 DUBAI UAE

And if I impacted one child, that love for the character, how about seeing the entire site with these characters?

NOON SALIH: Inside Expo takes you behind the scenes at Expo 2020 Dubai, sharing our stories and others across the 170-year history of this global event. Learn more by visiting VirtualExpoDubai.com.

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