

The Hidden Stories

NOON SALIH: The 1982 sci-fi action film, Tron, had one of the most iconic Easter eggs in pop culture. In one scene, the villain, Sark, looks at a grid on a control screen with a little yellow circle eating everything in front of it. Remind you of anything?

That's actually Pac-Man, one of the most iconic video games in history. Pac-Man isn't important in this film about humans stuck in a virtual video-game world, but it's a small detail that adds so much depth and lore to the world around it. A video game within a video game. A story within a story.

Now, you might be wondering, "Why is Noon talking about Easter eggs on a podcast about World Expos and Expo 2020 Dubai?"

There's a very good answer to that question. The Expo is full of Easter eggs! These small things that help give this material space a character. A soul.

DR. FEDERICA BUSA: And the small things are also there as a reward, because you don't always want to tell everything.

NOON SALIH: This is Dr. Federica Busa, Expo 2020 Dubai's Senior Vice President for Visitor Experience.

DR. FEDERICA BUSA: We don't expect all of the visitors to see everything because together, just like the colors and the pillows and the paintings that you have in your home, they create an atmosphere and a sense of comfort and a sense of intimacy that just make that place a great place to be.

MUSIC

So I think that the small things are there to make the big things shine, but the big things or the big architecture, without the small things, they would be probably big statement without a lot of soul. And the small things are giving the personality and the identity, and that sense of who you are and what you stand for. And that for me are the small things at Expo.

NOON SALIH: In today's episode, we go on an Easter egg hunt as we see, hear, smell, touch, and feel all the details that make Expo 2020 Dubai the lived-in city that it is. What stories do the small things tell, and how do they make this place a home?

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: Before we start looking for Easter Eggs around Expo 2020 Dubai, we wanted to take a step back and appreciate the 'bigger picture,' if you will.

Throughout this podcast, you might've heard me or our different guests describe the layout of the Expo; the three petal shaped districts, with the beautiful Al Wasl Plaza at the heart of everything. This kind of design didn't happen by accident — it was all part of the Master Plan.

AHMED AL KHATIB: The Master Plan is actually the plan that you will build everything on. And it's just the main recipe that you will follow in order to achieve the vision of what you are trying to do and what you are trying to build.

NOON SALIH: This is Ahmed Al Khatib, Expo 2020 Dubai's Chief Development and Delivery Officer. Ahmed oversaw the transformation of the land on which Expo was built, from when it was a stretch of desert on the southern end of Dubai, to the moment it became the history-making liveable city it is today.

AHMED AL KHATIB: Our KPI really was perfection for every element in the Master Plan, talking from buildings, talking from public realms, talking from planters, talking from roads, from parking... Really paying the same equal attention, whether it's to Al Wasl, to the arrival plazas, to the parks, to the signages and wayfindings. We didn't compromise anything at all.

NOON SALIH: And despite many changes to the Master Plan over the years, one thing remained the same. Its attention to detail, from the biggest architectural marvel to the smallest tile on the ground.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: The success of the Master Plan for Ahmed wasn't measured by numbers or by data, which might come as a surprise given that he is an engineer. Instead, it was measured by something... quite adorable, actually.

AHMED AL KHATIB: The way to measure any development as a successful development is actually to walk with kids into that development. And when you see the kids running, then it's successful development.

So now you look around like kids, they just running, enjoying, jumping up and down on things. They just feel they belong to this space. It's not a foreign space to them. So they are not shy from being themselves and enjoying the environment and whatever is there, whether it's from trees, benches, columns, signages. It is just really, really beautiful.

NOON SALIH: In fact, so much of Expo's public realm was designed to inspire a sense of child-like wonder, something that Chris Atkins, Expo's Senior Manager for Audio and Video Content, spoke to us about.

CHRIS ATKINS: I felt like this is my opportunity to really go a bit creative and make it as wonderful and extraordinary as possible so that kids do tap their mom on the shoulder and get the mother to listen to what the kid's listening to.

AHMED AL KHATIB: The key thing or the key word, the magic sentence was everything we build should have a meaning. And we really went extreme on achieving the sentence.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: We start our Easter egg hunt at the Sustainability Entry Portal, which takes you into Earth Plaza. In front of you, there's Terra, the Sustainability Pavilion, which rises like a forest canopy towards the sun. To your right is Sidr Avenue, with unique lines on the ground and wayfinding signs around it.

AHMED AL KHATIB: We wanted everything around the site that looks and feels UAE-unique by reflecting that in our design, whether it's like the ground; you see the straight lines, that reflects the Sadu, which is a way of weaving in the past. You

see the signages and wayfindings, which is like strings and just fabric inserted in between them.

NOON SALIH: The ground also has circles drawn out using the tiling. This is unique to the Sustainability District, and helps visitors orient themselves on the huge site.

AHMED AL KHATIB: Each petal is more or less of the same copy. However, in order to create this unique addressing system for that, we came up with a geometric shape for each one of them. If you look at the Opportunity, it's the square. If you look at the Sustainability, it's the circle, and the Mobility is the triangle. We made sure that those geometric shapes actually are relevant to those zones.

NOON SALIH: The soundscape in the district was also carefully curated.

CHRIS ATKINS: When we thought about sustainability, we thought about how it'd be nice if these ambient sounds that you're listening to were almost like a zen garden. So when you think of sustainability, you think of landscapes, you think of the sea, you think of jungles and forests and meadows and peaceful natural environments.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: There are two beautiful installments down Sidr Avenue. First, a water fountain that you can stop by to get a cool drink of water, wash your hands, or simply appreciate for its beauty. This fountain - one of 37 across the public realm - was an initiative by Expo and Art Jameel, inviting Emirati artists and designers to reimagine the traditional Sabeel fountains. A gesture of community and solidarity for travelers and passersby.

DR. FEDERICA BUSA: We are very proud of that... not only serves its function to provide water and free waters to visitors and to the staff onsite, but tells the cultural story about the UAE and has an aesthetic value in the public realm.

NOON SALIH: Next to the fountain, there's also a bench that, frankly, doesn't look like a bench at first glance. It's shaped after the Arabic word "Al Hazm" - or "Decisiveness," and it's one of nearly 50 calligraphy benches found throughout the public realm of Expo. These are the product of a collaboration between British architect Asif Khan, who designed the Expo's entry portals, and Amsterdam based Arabic-typographer Lara Captan.

The words from which these benches were made were not decided by Asif and Lara, however. They were crowdsourced through a social media open call. These benches differ in their designs; some are meant for sitting, while others encourage people to lie down. The one that reads Al-Ro'eya, or "Vision," for example, is transparent. Everything has a deeper meaning.

AHMED AL KHATIB: So when you walk around the site, you saw those benches designed to those Arabic scripts across the site, which actually reinforces that this is the first Expo in an Arab nation, in the Middle East, in the UAE. It gives it like more of uniqueness about being in this region.

NOON SALIH: Sidr Avenue crosses Ghaf Avenue, which is shaded by many Ghaf trees, the national tree of the UAE. In fact, these trees can be found all over the site.

AHMED AL KHATIB: We looked at the Ghaf trees and how much we can bring Ghaf trees to the site. It's a very, very complicated process that we managed to move more than 480 Ghaf trees to our Expo site. And it actually was a very successful journey, and we are extremely happy that actually the end result looked amazing on the Ghaf Avenue.

NOON SALIH: In addition to the Ghaf trees, parks throughout the site have different fruit trees depending on the district: nabj, or jujube, in Sustainability; mango and lemon in Mobility; and olive trees in Opportunity. The public realm is also scented!

AHMED AL KHATIB: You know, you have this unique smell of flowers and jasmines. So we didn't only think about what you see; it's about also what you smell and what you experienced from the landscaping across the site.

NOON SALIH: It's hard to wander the public realm and not come across Expo's heart and its most stunning structure — Al Wasl Plaza. Even this 'big detail' has a small story hidden within it.

DR. FEDERICA BUSA: If you look around on the floor, we have this one meter of diameter, bronze medallions. There are 42 of these medallions in Al Wasl. Each one represents a year in the life of the UAE from 1971 to the time that UAE was awarded the honor to host Expo 2020.

And that's why we have these 42 medallions, and each of the 42 medallions celebrate one aspects of the culture of the UAE, or one area that the UAE it's putting its foresight for the future.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: Throughout the site, you'll hear many different soundscapes that also help shape your experience at Expo. These, once again, were intentional from the very beginning.

CHRIS ATKINS: So at Expo, we want everything to be bigger, better, and try things that haven't been done before. If you walk around Dubai, often in public spaces you'll come across music, but very rarely you'll come across soundscapes, which are made up of sound design and music.

MUSIC

CHRIS ATKINS: So at Expo, we really wanted to enhance the visitor experience by introducing soundscapes into the districts onto the site, which give a sense of place. We just thought it'd be amazing that if a visitor, for example, they'll be able to close their eyes, and just by hearing the sounds around them know exactly where they are on the Expo sites.

MUSIC

CHRIS ATKINS: Me personally, I really felt like my job was to paint the spaces with sound. So for example, I really want Opportunity to feel happy and happiness. I remember us going to the park with my wife and my niece and there was just like laughing and laughing and I just thought it was a great time to kind of maybe record these sounds of happiness.

MUSIC

CHRIS ATKINS: If I would say, what does Mobility sound like, it sounds like the future. You will hear Hyperloops swishing by; you will hear electric vehicles; you will hear bicycles; you will hear things that sort of move; and you will hear airplanes and rockets and things which are all about mobility.

NOON SALIH: And perhaps, if you finish the Easter egg hunt in the Sustainability district, right where it began, you might just hear one of Chris's favorite soundscapes.

CHRIS ATKINS: One of the soundscapes that I really, really love, and I really get excited when I walk back to my car at the end of the day and it might be playing, is this magical under the ocean scene, where you have magical music and then you have a whale, and then the whale will come out the ocean and you'll hear dolphins. And then when you're outside the ocean, you'll hear seagulls. And then the whale will go back into the sea and then you hear magical twinkles and bubbles and the sound of a vast ocean.

MUSIC

CHRIS ATKINS: And that's something that I spent a lot of time doing and something that I'm quite proud of and something that's very different to a lot of the soundscapes that we created.

NOON SALIH: What we tried to do in this episode is give you a virtual taste of some of the placemaking Easter eggs — these little hidden stories — that can be found across the Expo site. Perhaps on your visit to Expo 2020 Dubai, you'll find

some or all of them. Perhaps you might find none at first, combing the site for clues as to what you missed!

These Easter eggs, these small things, give the site a character — just like Pac-Man in Tron. They give it a soul, an effect on its visitors that goes beyond the initial “wow!” as they look at a marvelous building. A feeling of being home.

DR. FEDERICA BUSA: Sometimes you don't know why you walk into a certain place and it feels really good. It feels great to be there. And for us, these are the things that make the place feel great, just like the music. There are certain public spaces that if you take away the music, they feel really empty. But very often you don't notice that the music is there.

So the thing is that the small things you would probably notice when they're not there. Because the place doesn't have that sense of connection, doesn't have that sense of hospitality, doesn't feel that you have somebody behind that's really thought about it a lot — how to make it a great place to welcome you.

If I have to take the point of view of a small thing is... they are there knowing that they're not the heroes, but they are that necessary supporting act that allows all of the heroes to shine.

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](https://virtualexpodubai.com).

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