

The 50-Year Marathon from Osaka to the UAE

NOON SALIH: Running a marathon is not easy. Ask anyone who's done it and they'll tell you that it's not just about the 42 kilometers you run on race day. It's about the months or even years of training required, building up strength and stamina to make it to the finish line. And when you cross that finish line? All that preparation becomes oh-so-worth it.

Throughout this series, you might have heard the World Expo being compared to a marathon, and it really is one. Dubai's bid to host the Expo in 2020 was being shaped well before the deciding votes were cast in 2013. From there on, the city embarked on a long, 8 year journey until the Expo opened its doors.

NOON SALIH: The story of the UAE at World Expos, however, extends all the way back to 1970, when the people of the Emirates participated in the Osaka, Japan Expo. That was before the formation of the union - what is today known as the United Arab Emirates.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: What did we want to achieve with all our participations at World Expos? We wanted to tell the world about our past, present and future.

NOON SALIH: This is Abdullah Al Aidarous, whose name is synonymous with the UAE's participation at World and Specialized Expos. He is a former chief executive for support services at the UAE National Media Council, and also served as Deputy

Commissioner General and manager of the UAE Pavilion at Expos from 1992 to 2016. On top of all that, he also was the UAE delegate to the Bureau International des Expositions - the BIE - from 1996 to 2016.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: Our pavilion designs have always been inspired by and celebrated our heritage and our past. Inside the pavilion, we showcase the UAE's modernity and our many achievements today - with pictures, performances, films. And at the same time, we tell visitors about all of our plans for the future. So we're really telling our many stories across time.

NOON SALIH: In today's episode, we invite you to run a marathon with us. A marathon that lasts 50 years and takes you around the world - as we see how the UAE has participated at different World Expos. How did the country prepare the world - and itself - for the history-making event that would be Expo 2020 Dubai?

Are you ready? Feel warmed up? Good. This will be fun.

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: We kick things off in 1968 in Abu Dhabi, where the Emirate was planning its participation at the Osaka Expo in 1970 under the theme of 'Progress and Harmony for Mankind.'

Now, you might be wondering: "Why not call it the UAE's participation?" Well, at the time, the union wasn't formed quite yet. So in 1968, when the time came to discuss

involvement in the Osaka Expo, it was specifically Abu Dhabi that would be attending. But that wouldn't be easy.

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: Going back 50 years, you find there were difficulties everywhere.

NOON SALIH: This is His Excellency Rashed Al Nuaimi, former UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs who spearheaded the Abu Dhabi Pavilion at the Osaka Expo in 1970. His Excellency is in his late 80s but recalls Osaka 1970 as if it had happened yesterday.

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: In the beginning, Abu Dhabi was only an emirate. And pavilions in Expos were representations for countries. The challenge here was to give a national representation for the emirate of Abu Dhabi.

We were able to do this through the special relationship Sheikh Zayed had with Britain: a beautiful relationship based on trust. It enabled us to overcome the challenges that allowed us to present ourselves as a country despite not being a country yet.

NOON SALIH: Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the country's late founder and the people's leader at the time, also had strong relations with the leadership of Japan which increased demand for Abu Dhabi's presence at the Expo. And so, with that ambition and vision, His Excellency Rashid Al Nuaimi was tasked directly by Sheikh Zayed to start planning for the Osaka Expo.

The Expo opened its doors on March 15, 1970 and drew nearly 64 million visitors throughout its 6 month period. It was known for its unusual artwork and designs, perhaps most famous of which is Taro Okamoto's Tower of the Sun which still remains on the site today.

But no Expo is complete without national pavilions. Abu Dhabi was among nearly 80 nations and international organisations that participated, and the team had to present a pavilion that would introduce the emirate and its people to the world.

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: We didn't have experience when it comes to Expos.

We started with constructing the pavilion by looking to our heritage. In our building heritage, there's something called the Muraba'aa, which is always in every house, every palace, there's a Muraba'aa for defence. There's also a Buriy - a tower for defence. These are found in the entire area - our region of the Gulf.

NOON SALIH: At the time, His Excellency took with him the city planner who was responsible for much of the layout of Abu Dhabi: the late legendary Egyptian architect, Dr. Abdulrahman Makhlouf.

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: He was a designer and manager at the Abu Dhabi urban planning department. I took him with me because he was an expert in architecture, an expert in planning and an expert in design.

NOON SALIH: Dr. Makhlouf designed the pavilion as a replica of the Jahili Fort in Al Ain, which was constructed in 1891 under the rule of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan's grandfather, Sheikh Zayed bin Khalifa. Looking at old photographs and illustrations of the pavilion from Osaka, you can see the same motifs, the same square and cylindrical towers and designs from the Al Ain fort. Above the main entrance to the pavilion, the following phrase was engraved "A door of goodness opens in this glorious chapter, where joy and happiness reside."

MUSIC

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: This is our heritage. Al Jahili Fort is a part of our heritage. We brought a company for the design and we brought a company for the execution and so, we built the pavilion.

NOON SALIH: The theme of the pavilion was “Abu Dhabi: Past, Present, and Future.” Inside, there was a mix of cultural and technological showcases that spoke to that theme. These ranged from Arabic music and readings of “Arabian Nights” to displays on oil and how it’s extracted and used. But perhaps the most stand-out experience - and proof of just how much of a hit the pavilion was amongst visitors - was the Arabic coffee that was served.

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: I decided to set up a small tent at the entrance of the pavilion and offer something. I made some hot water and I had some coffee, so I tried making it. I tried it the first day, made some coffee, and sold it. The second day, I saw a long line. People wanted it – these small plastic cups. For one dollar each.

And winter came and it got cold. When it was cold, it was very popular! They wanted hot coffee to stay warm. So we started to make more of it.

We raised so much money for the pavilion from this little coffee tent and a kettle. And we used to sell coffee with a little bit of cardamom. Coffee with a little bit of clove. Coffee with a little bit of ginger. Three types. Each one for a dollar.

And each person would try one. Then the following day, they’d come to try another. They loved it.

NOON SALIH: Constructing and curating the pavilion was a feat on its own. But the creative challenges did not stop there.

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: This is also one of the amusing stories.

During the programming of expo, there's a national day for celebrating each country, specifically dedicated for them. At this national day, the flag is raised and the national anthem is played and we needed to play a national anthem.

But we didn't have one at the time. So we tried to find something to play. We used to have a piece of bagpipes music that was played by the police. This is music that was Scottish – Britain brought it to us – so we took the notes from this but they told us this won't work.

So I found a music teacher for us to write music, to compose the notes. So what shall we do?

Our first inspiration was the camel and the way it moves. We had, for example, the movement of horses. We have the waves, the sound of ocean waves.

Three movements. This is part of our heritage. But we need a musician who will understand these things so I brought this music teacher and we sat down and started composing.

And we spent a few days on this operation until we were able to add three movements to the police music. And it got us to something resembling a national anthem. And we made it!

NOON SALIH: His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE's current president, visited the Expo for Abu Dhabi's national day and delivered a speech to mark the special occasion.

The pavilion. The Arabic coffee. The national anthem. These stories all have the same spirit of innovation, creativity and learning that still burns strong in the UAE. What had started as an ambitious vision to put together a pavilion in Osaka 1970 has today blossomed into a World Expo hosting 192 countries in the UAE. And so

the moment Dubai won the bidding process was particularly special for His Excellency.

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: This is definitely a part of me, part of my culture, part of my identity. Part of the things that I created with my own hands. I certainly felt a massive joy.

Expos themselves are a social and cultural gathering. For cultures and people to meet others.

And Japan taught me lots of things: I learned from them how you don't need to know everything but you need to learn everything. You need to have the spirit of learning: regarding anything you want to do.

NOON SALIH: After Osaka 1970, World Expos went on a 22-year-hiatus and returned in 1992 in Seville, Spain. Of course, at that point, the union was 21 years old.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: We needed to introduce ourselves to the world and let them know that the seven emirates united to become the UAE.

NOON SALIH: Here's Abdullah Al-Aidarous again.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: I remember a lot of visitors would come up to us in the pavilion and ask, "Is this Dubai?" And I'd have to tell them no, this isn't Dubai or Abu Dhabi, this is the United Arab Emirates. And that was Sheikh Zayed's vision - for the nation to be referred to as a whole, not as individual emirates.

NOON SALIH: Abdullah's first experience at an Expo was Seville 1992 - his favorite out of all the Expos he attended other than Expo 2020 Dubai, of course. The theme

in Seville was “The Age of Discoveries,” and the UAE, once again, had to come up with a pavilion design that would introduce the young country to the world.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed asked his father, the founder of the country, “What would you like the pavilion to look like?” And Sheikh Zayed, once again, pointed to Al Jahili Fort in Al Ain, which belonged to his grandfather.

NOON SALIH: If you remember, the pavilion in Osaka 1970 was also a replica of the fort. The display at the 1992 pavilion included replicas of bronze age tombs and artefacts curated by famed archeologist Dr. Walid Yassin Al Tikriti. Other sections of the pavilion were devoted to the oil and energy industry – just like the Abu Dhabi pavilion in Osaka 1970. A reintroduction of sorts.

After 1992, our next stop is Hanover, Germany in the year 2000. Once again, the pavilion’s design was inspired by the Al Jahili Fort, but this time on a much larger scale. The pavilion was one of the largest on site at 3000 square meters.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: I think the pavilion had a capacity of 3500-4000 visitors at a time.

NOON SALIH: The theme of the pavilion was “From the traditional to the modern,” and both were presented amidst the sand and palm trees that were actually flown into Germany from the UAE.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: You could see Al Jalaf- a man who builds ships, at work. You could see men making fishing nets. You could see women who did embroidery on clothes, called Talli in Emirati culture. You would see them adding these beautiful designs to their Jalabiyas, on the sleeves. You could see Mohaniyat

- women who did henna designs on visitors' hands. And of course, we had a kitchen that served traditional dishes and drinks as well as the national folklore troupe.

NOON SALIH: For reference, the national folklore troupe has always played in UAE Pavilions at World and Specialized Expos, and there's a fun story about the troupe that will come up in Shanghai 2010. But first, back to Hanover 2000.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: One day, we received word that Sheikh Zayed sponsored a cargo flight carrying all kinds of fresh seafood from the UAE to Germany. All kinds of seafood - crab, octopus, fish, Safi, She'ri, small, large - every kind. And we were told that Sheikh Zayed wanted us to have a seafood day - like a traditional fish market, almost. He wanted us to let visitors pick the seafood they wanted and show them how we would clean it and prepare it in the UAE. How we would cook it. How we would eat it - with rice, or otherwise, something else. And it was incredible because imagine thousands of people that day came and got their Emirati seafood dish at the pavilion!

NOON SALIH: Of course, the pavilion showcased the modern alongside the traditional. The pavilion was equipped with a 360 degree cinema that showed videos of the modern-day desert and thrilling falconry practices. Also, many aspects of the pavilion were made of recyclable materials, exhibiting the UAE's early interest in sustainability which would become a theme of Expo 2020 Dubai.

With all of this, it's no surprise that the UAE pavilion was voted the best pavilion at Expo Hanover 2000, out of 155 participating nations and 39 international organizations.

NOON SALIH: Now it's worth noting that the UAE did not participate in Expo Aichi 2005 in Japan - but it did send representatives, including Abdullah, to experience the Expo and learn from it. This brings us to what Abdullah calls the UAE's strongest participation at a World Expo to date: Shanghai 2010 in China, under the theme of "Better City, Better Life."

That pavilion, for the first time in UAE pavilion history, had moved away from fort designs. And it did so in an incredible manner.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: The pavilion was shaped like sand dunes - we call it A'rageeb. There were two smaller sand dunes and a larger one. Each one of the smaller dunes had a capacity of 75 visitors and played the same short film, called Fi Lamh Al Basar - "In The Blink of an Eye."

NOON SALIH: The film follows the story of Rashid, a young boy who learns from his father about the founding of the UAE and its different cultural practices.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: This film showed visitors what life was like in the UAE in the past, before the union, up until 1971 when the union was formed and the country began transitioning into its glorious present.

You would then leave the small sand dunes and move into the larger one, which was an open space that had displays for Emirati arts and crafts. There, they would also see a short film called "The Dream Journey."

NOON SALIH: In this film, Rashid, the same boy from "In The Blink of an Eye," takes his friend - a young Chinese girl - on a journey through the UAE. The film

incorporates both live action and animation, and the two characters fly over deserts, walk through the cities, and swim under the sea.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: The film was around 7 minutes only - but the visitor wouldn't even sit on a chair for those 7 minutes. Why? From how exciting and thrilling the film is. People loved it.

NOON SALIH: The UAE Pavilion also focused on the country's sustainability initiatives such as the Masdar City Project in Abu Dhabi, which intends to be one of the world's most sustainable urban communities. Again, this all fits under the theme of "Better City, Better Life."

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: We showcased how the UAE, in 40 years, transformed. And the sand dunes, which were designed by Foster and Partners - one of the most famous architects in the world. The sand dunes represented our history, our heritage, but they were made out of the best modern materials, and inside you could get a taste of what life in the UAE was like and how we built the emirates...for what? Better city, better life. This all fit the theme of the Expo itself.

NOON SALIH: The UAE National Folklore Troupe has been a staple of the UAE's participation at World Expos, and in Shanghai, they were supported by the country's leadership.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: In Shanghai, did we take the National Troupe? Of course we did! I wanted to get them there for at least 10 days during the Expo's opening to present our culture. The sounds of the instruments, the drums, tambourines, the sound of sticks hitting the ground. It's not the same if you play it on a sound system. And to see the A'yala, the Harbiya, the Habban, the Na'ashat in

their traditional dresses - it has to be live. So we got them there for 10 days. We then were told that Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed would be visiting the Expo shortly after those 10 days, so I asked for the troupe to be kept longer.

He visited the Expo for 3 days and every day, he would start at the UAE Pavilion. He would then make his way around the national pavilions, then come back to the UAE Pavilion before leaving. And the troupe played throughout.

So when it came time for him to leave, he asked the Pavilion's Commissioner-General when the troupe would be leaving. The Commissioner General said, your highness, the troupe would be leaving shortly after you leave. Sheikh Abdulla immediately asked for the troupe to stay in Shanghai for the full duration of the Expo. That's an additional 5 months! It goes to show the significance and impact of cultural and traditional presentations at World Expos.

NOON SALIH: The UAE pavilion with its impressive offerings led to it winning the award for the top pavilion at the Expo. You can actually see those iconic sand dunes today at Manarat Al Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi.

The UAE didn't stop there, however. Even after winning the bid in 2013 to host the Expo in 2020, it left a strong impression at the Milan Expo in 2015 which had the theme "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life."

That pavilion, which you can see today in Masdar City, was once again designed by Foster and Partners and looked to the natural world for inspiration. It was made out of narrow walkways that had curved walls imitating the natural curves in sand dunes, with desert plants surrounding visitors. Inside the pavilion, displays included a model of the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park and a short 12-

minute film titled “The Family Tree.” It focused on water and food waste by telling the story of a young girl named Sara, who travels back in time to understand the importance of the palm tree.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: Like many of our pavilions, the film and the displays focused on the UAE’s past, present, and future.

NOON SALIH: Of course, with a theme surrounding food, the UAE Pavilion made sure to serve samples of traditional Emirati dishes.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: For free - we served Arabic hospitality - Lugaimat, Arabic Coffee and dates, Kabab and, depending on the time, Dungo. Khabees. A’seed. We invited visitors to taste our food - not just see it in pictures.

NOON SALIH: And the pavilion was a huge hit, and won the award for best exterior design. It also showed the world that the UAE was ready to host the Expo in 5 years.

Of course, throughout this episode we have only covered World Expos, but the UAE also participated at several Specialized Expos that are an integral part of its journey. These are shorter, 3-month Expos that take place between two World Expos.

These included Lisbon, Portugal in 1998 - which had a pavilion shaped after the Jalboot, or the traditional trade ship.

Zaragoza, Spain in 2008, where the UAE Pavilion had a light show highlighting the importance of water to the country.

And Yeosu, South Korea in 2012, where a fantastic film called “The Turtle” was shown. This film showed the country’s focus on maritime activities such as fishing, sailing, and pearl diving, as well as the importance of conserving our oceans.

All of these participations prepared the UAE to host its own Expo, now open for the world to see. Abdullah was a BIE delegate in 2013, when Dubai had a decisive win against its competitors in Russia, Turkey, and Brazil.

ABDULLAH AL-AIDAROUS: I remember when we were about to enter the hall for the final vote, I was approached by an Emirati journalist and asked, “You’ve been participating in Expos for so many years now - and after this long career, do you think the UAE and Dubai will win?” And I told him, the UAE, Insha’ Allah, will win. And we did win.

My feelings...I can’t describe it. And we won not by a small margin. It was significant.

And the impact of Expos is not temporary. A pavilion at an Expo can lead to an increase in tourism to a country, and those people come and they say that what they’re seeing in real life is so much more amazing than what they see in films. So what happens when the country actually hosts the Expo? And it’s not just tourism. I think investments will increase, and cultural researchers and intellectuals will visit the UAE, artists. There are so many benefits.

NOON SALIH: It’s important to note that Expo 2020 Dubai opened its doors in the year of the UAE’s Golden Jubilee - 50 years since the formation of the union and 51

years since Abu Dhabi's appearance at the Osaka Expo of 1970. A long journey that is far from over.

In honor of the next expo being held, once again, in Osaka, Japan in 2025, we asked His Excellency Rashid Al Nuaimi to see you through the finish line of our marathon as he reflects on the importance of Expos.

MUSIC

HE RASHID AL NUAIMI: The making of an Expo in itself is a global endeavour – with the exchange of culture to other nations and people. Every country makes their own culture, own innovations, and what they'd like to present to the rest of the world – that these are the makings of that country.

You learn lots from it. From a social point of view, Expos are a social gathering where ideas are married, ideas challenge one another, and where growth happens when different people come together. It's an opportunity to get to know people's cultures and traditions.

And therefore, every individual is a cultural being. As a cultural being, you are a collection of learnings: from a book you've read, or a lecture you've attended. Or something you've made with your own hands that you are proud of. And all these things make all of us.

Everyone here in the UAE has an ambition to be a leader. To develop themselves, to push themselves. And I hope this trajectory continues – especially this generation that is fuelled by science and innovation on this earth and beyond. And I hope for their success and happiness.

Inside Expo
Episodes 15 & 16: Legacy I: The 50-
Year Marathon from Osaka to the UAE



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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