

# Redefining Mobility I: Not Just Planes, Trains, and Automobiles

**NOON SALIH:** The first recorded usage of the word “mobility” dates back to the 15th century; back then, it was understood as the “capacity for motion, ability to move or be moved”. And yes, it is derived from the latin word “Mobilitatem”.

Today, Merriam Webster dictionary defines the word “mobility” as “the quality or state of being mobile or movable”. So typically, when you think of the word “mobility”, you picture movement. Getting from point A to point B. You may also think of the different means of transport, and how those developed over the years.

In the past few years, the team behind Expo 2020 Dubai gave “mobility” a lot of thought. After all, it is one of Expo’s three main themes: Mobility, Sustainability and Opportunity.

So, where do you think this train of thought took the Expo team?

**MARJAN FARAIDOOONI:** Our challenge to ourselves is how do we go beyond what people believe what mobility is? And so we really wanted to focus also on the cultural aspects and intellectual aspects. And there's this whole notion of past, present and future, which we wanted to touch on.

**NOON SALIH:** This is Marjan Faraidooni, Chief Experience Officer at Expo 2020 Dubai. Marjan is responsible for the visitor experience on site, which includes the curation of all Expo’s pavilions. Among those is Alif, the Mobility Pavilion.

**MARJAN FARAIDOONI:** So the structure from the outside represented a lot of the physical components of mobility. But when we went inside, we wanted to challenge ourselves on how we could stretch people's imagination on what mobility was. And we wanted to do it in a way that was not typical, that was not boring, that was inspiring. And so we thought a lot about how we could do that.

**NOON SALIH:** Alif — The Mobility Pavilion — is a fluid, tri-petal shaped building. From the outside it looks like an ever-moving, triple infinity loop. It's stretched over seven floors. At full capacity, the pavilion can hold up to 2,500 visitors per hour. That's 30,000 per day.

On average, a visitor will take about half an hour to walk through the entire pavilion, though many will find it easy to linger for a little longer.

This episode, the first in a series on how Expo 2020 Dubai redefines mobility, is a tour inside Alif, the Mobility Pavilion. And who better to guide us inside Alif than Marjan, the driving force behind Alif, and Erik van der Schaft, Alif's director.

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

### **[INTRO STING]**

**MARJAN FARAIDOONI:** Alif is the first alphabet of many languages: the Greek alphabet, the Hebrew, the Arabic. And Alif represents the beginning. But if you also go to the definition of Alif, there is intrinsic to it the meaning of infinity. So that is why we chose the name Alif because it's the beginning, but it's not the end of a journey, but it also had this universal feel to it because it's the first letter of many languages.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** This building was designed by Foster and Partners, one of the top architectural firms in the world. And it has three petals and it has these steel fins around it. So it feels like it's in motion. It feels like, maybe car fenders or airplane wings, or even like a racetrack for cars.

**NOON SALIH:** This is Erik van der Schaft, the director of the Mobility Pavilion.

ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT: Alif, the Mobility Pavilion, takes you from the distant past all the way to the future. And it takes you from the Dubai desert all the way to Mars.

## MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** The mobility pavilion also takes us beyond the movement of people, goods and services to the movement of ideas, cultures and ambitions.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** The Alif experience is three main acts, and then some transitions in between. And this is like a movie, and that's deliberate because we want people to experience the past, present, future, but also experience it in a way that it feels familiar.

**MARJAN FARAIDOONI:** We also made the storyline, at the end when we talk about the future, open-ended. And we made it build up on the past, that we went through the human progress, but also the present journey that we're experiencing, whether it's through AI — Artificial Intelligence — or big data, or the movement of goods and people. And the last chapter was really about letting people know that we can create the future, however we see it.

**NOON SALIH:** On your way into the pavilion, you will meet a mare and a foal. A female horse and a young horse. A five and a half meter sculpture in proper running form.

At the foyer, which is themed after Saruq Al-Hadid, the archeological site where the gold ring that inspired Expo's logo was found, you will wait for the world's largest human lift. It will take you to the top of the building, and it's there that your journey begins.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** In the lift, there's also a statue of a Bedouin girl. And the Bedouin girl reaches up, and it's only when you get to the top that you see that she's reaching for a butterfly.

### **MUSIC**

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** But the whole idea of reaching is of course a symbol of ambition, of our desire to move ahead, of progress.

**MARJAN FARAIDOONI:** It's so unexpected. It's about a minute or so. And you're put in the dark. And you are faced with this little girl that looks so real from the past and she's reaching to the stars. And for me, it summarizes everything in that one instant.

And what I love about that is that we're immersing you and we're pushing you to think beyond the visual, and pushing you to listen to the different types of mobility. And it's taking you already to a new world. So for me, that experience with the music and the sound, it gives me goosebumps every time I go into that experience. And I have been many times. And it gives me a sort of reminder that what we did with this pavilion, it's a bit different.

**NOON SALIH:** During the lift ride, you will hear sounds of mobility, such as people walking and running, ships at sea, cars, helicopters and a rocket launch.

Right outside the lift, you will be met by Al-Khamsa, a digital installation of the five mythical mares believed to be the ancestors of the modern Arab horse. The five, larger-than-life horses lead you to the House of Wisdom.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** This was a place in 9th century Baghdad, where the ambition was to bring together every book in the world. Can you imagine that? Every book in the world. But pretty soon it became more than a library. It became a place where scientists from all over the world gathered to jointly develop new insights, new innovations in science and technology. So it was really the start of the scientific method that's still used today. And it's also like a symbol of Expo.

## MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** The House of Wisdom was established during Harun Al Rashid's caliphate, which spanned between the 8th and 9th centuries. It housed books, manuscripts and translations. It was open to men and women, and scholars of all faiths and nationalities.

But in the year 1258, Baghdad, along with the House of Wisdom, was completely destroyed by the Mongols.

In Dubai, in 2022, at this very moment, at the remake of the House of Wisdom, you will meet a sculpture of Al-Kindi, the Iraqi author, philosopher and scientist, in a replica of his study. Al-Kindi is known for his contributions in the fields of light and cryptography. But above all, for introducing the world to our current numeric system. Your next stop: The three giants of mobility.

## MUSIC

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** Al-Bakri, Ibn Battuta, and Ibn Majid. These are nine-meter tall statues in a space surrounded by an incredible work of arts, bas-relief

sculpture, with all of the highlights and milestones of mobility from shoes to spaceships.

**MARJAN FARAIDOONI:** We knew that we wanted to create something that was very visual and that would hit visitors. And that was the seed of coming up with the idea of... Let us exaggerate key people that have played a role in human progress. Let's bring to life the journey and the milestones of human progress, like people have never seen before.

And so these giants that you see today in the mobility pavilion, people when they see them, they're like, they're human but they're larger than life. And that experience of being larger than life is what shocks them, and what makes them remember that they met Ibn Battuta, that they met Al-Bakri, that they met Ibn Majid.

**NOON SALIH:** The three mobility giants are seated around a digital map table. And visitors get to learn about them through an immersive audio-visual journey.

**MARJAN FARAIDOONI:** We brought the elements of cinema to a walkable experience. And we include it in that narrative. So when you go through it, you hear somebody who takes you through that journey. You also hear music, a soundtrack that takes you through it. And then it's very visual in the way that it's depicted, and it's sort of like you're walking through a movie.

## MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** Since our next episode is dedicated entirely to these three giants — Al-Bakri, Ibn Battuta, and Ibn Majid — let's hop over to the early twentieth century. Around the 1920s and 30s to be exact, when the UAE's economy expanded beyond pearl diving.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** After the three giants, we have a pearl diver. Again, this is a larger than life figure. He's about four meters long or something like that. And you see him reaching for the pearl that's in the next space. So it's like, okay, that's the last pearl that we're going to grab. But at the same time, on that pearl you see the developments of the Dubai Creek from 1920 to 1970 through projection. So really what he's reaching for is the modern world.

**NOON SALIH:** The Dubai Creek is a nine-mile natural salt water stream that saw massive developments since the establishment of the UAE. It is now one of Dubai's main attractions.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** After the Pearl Diver, we come into a very intimate area where you see projections of the two founding fathers of the UAE: Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid. And you see them sitting in a tent in majlis in the desert, drinking coffee, eating dates, and figuring out what the new country should be like.

## MUSIC

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** The next big area is when we get to the present. And in the present, you see this giant globe. It's 12 meters tall, on which we project the movement of goods and people around the world. But on the other side of this globe, there is a model of the virtual world. So you see this kind of connection between all these screens. A bit like the internet is. I mean, it's everywhere; it's dispersed and at the same time, it's all connected.

And the message we give here is that there's a more and more complex relationship between the physical and the virtual world, but also that technology is our servant, and we need to decide what we want our future to be using those technologies. And that's why the call to action for this pavilion is: "Choose your future".

**NOON SALIH:** A surrounding sandscape highlights how modern Dubai has emerged from the desert. It also offers an immersive experience through an interactive installation. When you touch the display, buildings grow from the base to the roof.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** It's like an arty version of the desert, with pinks and yellows and oranges and everything and sparkly bits. It creates not only sand storms, but out of the sand storm come the landmarks from all the different Emirates. I've seen quite a few times where parents literally had to drag away their kids. And oftentimes the moms and dads too; they're kind of fascinated by this one.

## MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** Our next stop, the UAE's space program.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** So you see an exact replica of The Hope Probe that's currently circling Mars, and that's sending us information about the weather on Mars and the climate. And that is a first step towards figuring out what it takes for us to live on Mars.

**NOON SALIH:** There is also a replica of a research center that is currently being built in the Dubai desert. It emulates the circumstances in Mars, for a better understanding of the logistics and preparations needed for a colony on the Red Planet.

But most interestingly, you will also get to see yourself as an astronaut! There is this giant model based on the Emirati astronaut, Hazza Al Mansouri.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** And if you stand in the right spot in front of it, your face gets projected inside the visor. So, it's like you become an astronaut. It is the point



where very serious visitors — now we get these delegations from governments, agencies, ministers, etc — once they do that, they become little boys and girls.

### **MUSIC**

**NOON SALIH:** Mind you, this space section is built in the present; we still haven't made our way into the future.

### **MUSIC**

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** So act three is about the future. And in particular, the future as imagined by a group of kids.

**NOON SALIH:** Saeed, Alex and Shamsa. These are the three teenage protagonists of act three.

Saeed and Alex, each in his bedroom, collaborate remotely on a project for a worldwide competition called "The City 2071: Creating the Future". Their aim is to create a model of a sustainable, successful and harmonious city, using Artificial Intelligence. And as you make your way through the future act, you see their city come to life.

### **MUSIC**

**NOON SALIH:** Saeed's sister, Shamsa has a very innovative addition to this future city: butterfly-shaped drones that go around the city gauging people's happiness as they go about their lives. Because if they're not happy, something ought to change.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** The idea that cities are not a fixed entity, but something that we can adjust to maximize our happiness is I think quite amazing. Right after

this, people see this statue, you know, the Bedouin girl from the beginning, who's reaching up and she is almost touching with her finger the girl from the future, Shamsa, who is actually made up out of particles, in particular butterflies.

**NOON SALIH:** At that point, you have made it all the way through the three acts of Alif, and you are back on the ground floor. But your journey is nowhere near its end.

Outside the pavilion, there are two stages hosting performances and exhibits. And there is also a high-speed track for vehicle and gadget demonstrations. One of those vehicles is a solar-powered tricycle.

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** Now we have these solar tricycles from Zimbabwe. And they are used there by women, especially, to take their kids to school, to take produce to the market, to get water from pumps, etc. And rather than spending hours on these things, it now takes minutes. And it's fully sustainable. They have a recharging station in the village and they just go out and do their thing. So it saves them a lot of time for other activities.

So not only do people get a chance to sit in these tricycles and go around the track, but they're also told this story and I think that's quite important.

## MUSIC

**NOON SALIH:** The way the experience within the Mobility Pavilion was designed, not only shows models and examples of mobility, it is in and of itself an illustration of mobility. One that is very, very playful.

**MARJAN FARADOONI:** If I was to summarize how we brought it to life, we took a lot from what museums do in terms of providing information and we mixed it with a lot of what you see in theme parks. And theme parks are very experiential.

They're very fun. They're very immersive. So what we did is we decided to merge the two worlds.

**NOON SALIH:** According to Marjan, this was the philosophy behind the design of Alif from day one.

**MARJAN FARAI DOONI:** Through what we've done, through creating this immersive experience, we've been able to put people in awe and get them to be inspired by different cultures and different people and different milestones of mobility, in the way that they couldn't imagine. And the whole journey is you're going up this elevator that takes you to the third floor of a building and you're walking down it, but you don't feel that you're going down a ramp of four stories, because you're within this other world, and it's like a movie. You're part of a movie. And that in itself is a different type of mobility. I'd like to think of it as that I'm taking you to another world, and taking you to another world I'd like to think is a type of mobility. It's like going to space.

**NOON SALIH:** And what Marjan, as Chief Experience Officer, finds even more satisfying, is that the message and the definition of mobility that this pavilion carries, comes across to the visitors.

**MARJAN FARAI DOONI:** From the visitors that we've surveyed across the Expo period, more than 90% have really shifted their mindset on what mobility is. And more than 90% were inspired by the stories that were told through this pavilion. And again, more than 89% to 90% understood the role of the Arab world in human progress. And these were some of the key metrics that we had when we defined that storyline. Get people to think that mobility is beyond cars and trains and space shuttles. Get them to be inspired that they can make a change when it comes to defining what the future could look like. And third, getting them to understand the

Arab world more. I'm very proud to say that we've got more than 90% of our visitors who've told us that that's how they felt.

They felt inspired to make a change for a better future, that they understand the Arab world more and that they know that mobility is more than meets the eye.

## **MUSIC**

**ERIK VAN DER SCHAFT:** I think in summary, what we're saying is that physical mobility, virtual mobility, the movement of ideas, of information, and psychological mobility, you know — our attitude, our desire as humanity to always look ahead, look over the horizon and make new connections, etc, — with supporting technology, is the foundation for human progress.

**NOON SALIH:** This episode is the first in a two-part series on how Expo 2020 Dubai redefines mobility.

Tune into the next episode for more about the mobility giants, who they are, how they shaped history, and how the sculptures were created by the Oscar-winning Weta Workshop, the special effects, design and experience company behind Avatar, King Kong, The Lord of the Rings, and so many other iconic movies.

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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