

Mobility II: The Giants of Mobility

NOON SALIH: In 1325, a young scholar by the name of Ibn Battuta left his hometown of Tangiers, Morocco, to join a convoy headed to Mecca. He was to perform the Muslim Pilgrimage of Hajj and, at the time, the journey was expected to last over a year.

But, Ibn Battuta would not return home for another 28 years.

He made it to Mecca but then continued a lifelong journey that would make him the most well-travelled man of his time. He visited almost every realm of the Muslim world: from Baghdad to Tanzania, from Spain to Mali, from Tunisia to Indonesia.

In doing so, he travelled 120,000 kilometres which is enough to circle the world 3 times.

RIZWAN AHMAD: Ibn Battuta is someone who went far beyond the horizons that were literally perceivable at the time and pushed the boundaries of knowledge...

NOON SALIH: This is Rizwan Ahmad, head of research at Barker Langham, a cultural heritage consultancy.

RIZWAN AHMAD: Both in a physical sense, who could traverse the furthest in terms of the landscape of the earth – no one had been as far as he had been before. And also in terms of that contribution, and not only undertaking that passage, but writing it down and preserving that knowledge for generations to come.

NOON SALIH: Ibn Battuta's story reminds us of just how timeless mobility is. Exploring new horizons, building connections, improving society - these desires lie at the very core of human progress.

In the second episode of our Mobility series, we look at the lives of three extraordinary individuals, including Ibn Battuta, who shaped our understanding of the world through the lens of mobility. How did Alif - the Mobility Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai - breathe new life into these larger-than-life historical figures?

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

[INTRO STING]

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: Our challenge to ourself is: how do we go beyond what people believe what mobility is?

NOON SALIH: Here's Marjan Faraidooni, Expo's Chief Experience Officer, to remind us of Expo's vision for Alif, the Mobility Pavilion.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: 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. 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.

NOON SALIH: The definition of mobility here goes beyond the physical sense; it includes social mobility; intellectual mobility. The mobility of humans towards new horizons and beyond.

To meet this definition, the Expo team collaborated with Barker Langham, an international cultural heritage consultancy. Rizwan, who we heard from earlier, led a team researching many historical figures from the Arab Islamic tradition. And from that wealth of research, the Expo team chose three individuals to tell this exciting story of mobility: Al-Bakri, Ibn Battuta and Ibn Majid. Three individuals who, according to Rizwan, are not as represented and celebrated as their European counterparts, like Galileo or Da Vinci. We asked Rizwan to give us a brief overview of each one, starting in the 11th century with our earliest explorer, Al-Bakri.

RIZWAN AHMAD: Al-Bakri was one of the greatest geographers of Muslim Spain. Muslim Spain at the time was known as Al-Andalus, and Al-Bakri was born at a time when this intellectual tradition in Al-Andalus was just at its peak. He was enthralled and really intrigued by all this access to knowledge that he had at his fingertips.

But what he was, he was interested in the wider world around him. One of the interesting things about Al-Bakri is that despite him being a geographer, he didn't move. He actually stayed in Muslim Spain for the majority of his life, but was able to write extensively about the world around him. And some of the most important contributions to geography from this period come from Al-Bakri.

NOON SALIH: He wrote extensively about philology - or the study of the history of language. He also wrote about Arabic tribes and botany. One of his most notable works is The Book of Roads and Kingdoms.

RIZWAN AHMAD: It's almost a catalogue of different kingdoms and civilizations around the world in the 11th century and the 12th century, when Al Bakri was born.

NOON SALIH: This catalogue included writings about the glorious Ghana Empire, Morocco's Almoravid Dynasty and the trans-Saharan trade.

RIZWAN AHMAD: So, in a sense, Al-Bakri represents mobility at the crossroads of knowledge, because he wasn't a person who actually physically travelled to different locations. He was at a junction or a nexus of civilizations. And traders, writers, contributors to different aspects of knowledge were all passing through this landscape and he was there at the conduit of it or the source of it.

NOON SALIH: Whereas Al Bakri mostly listened and didn't travel extensively, our next explorer, Ibn Battuta, was the exact opposite.

RIZWAN AHMAD: He actually was born very close to Al-Bakri, but is separated of course by about 200, 300 years but he was born in North Africa.

NOON SALIH: Morocco, to be specific. And he went on to travel incredible lengths to visit all corners of the world.

RIZWAN AHMAD: It was a magical experience. He was travelling through desert, through mountains, through landscapes that he had never dreamed of. But not only the actual physical landscapes was something that captivated him, it was equally the diversity of the people that were travelling on this journey. And so of course, in North Africa, you have Berber populations, you have Arab populations, you have Sub-Saharan African populations and tribes that were also travelling on this journey and using the same route.

NOON SALIH: He travelled all around the Middle East into India. He made it out to China and Indonesia and wrote about the Maldives too. And when Ibn Battuta returned home after his 28 year journey, he dictated an account of it to the Andalusian writer Ibn Juzay. Today, this book, "The Rihla," or "The Journey," is considered the most important life summary from the 14th century.

RIZWAN AHMAD: It's commonly known as The Rihla but actually "Rihla" is more a kind of theme or genre or type of book but the actual name of the book was, A Gift to those who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling, which is quite a long and quite, perhaps boring title, but it's - the content of which was incredible and remarkable at the time.

NOON SALIH: Our third and final explorer is the most contemporary: Ahmad Ibn Majid, born in 1432 in today's Ras Al Khaimah, in the UAE.

RIZWAN AHMAD: His nickname was the Lion of the Seas. And I think this is an absolutely fitting nickname because he was - his contribution, both intellectually and physically in terms of navigating the oceans is immense.

NOON SALIH: For context, Ibn Majid came from a family of seafarers. His writings included both prose and poetry describing seas and maritime routes along the African continent and India. But he also pioneered different instruments.

RIZWAN AHMAD: One being known as the Kamal, this system of being able to determine how far away you are from a particular point just by looking at the stars.

So Ibn Majid was the third of the three candidates that really was someone who was going above and beyond to push the boundaries of our understanding of the seas. And he does this both himself and travelling, but also in terms of producing this phenomenal bank of 40 treaties that he brought together so that this preservation of knowledge could continue for generations to come.

NOON SALIH: Now it's one thing to research the contributions and writings of these three historical figures, but it's another endeavour altogether to try to figure out what they looked like, from their facial features to their clothing.

All in all, this process took 2 years, and required a team of specialists from different fields like history, literature, and archaeology. They even had experts on historical clothing in the Gulf region!

No matter what they looked like, what they wore, or where and when they were born, these three giants all share one thing.

RIZWAN AHMAD: When thinking about the concept of mobility, it's important to spotlight such individuals and think about how many centuries of observation and thought and collective ingenuity it took to arrive at the knowledge that we have today. I think through spotlighting these individuals and going back to this concept of pushing the boundaries, of going beyond the horizon and we have done that in the sense of space exploration, humans landing on the moon, Mars Rover mission, and going even beyond Mars and to planets in our distant galaxy. All that stems back to this point and these individuals.

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NOON SALIH: And so, with all this research in their hands, the Expo team moved on to their next challenge: translating it into something that would meet their definition of mobility while still touching the hearts of visitors.

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: It took a lot of us thinking out of the box. But it also took a lot of risk-taking and a lot of courage because we didn't want to just be another pavilion with screens giving you information. We wanted to impact you. We wanted to put you in awe. And let's not forget when we were tasked with doing this pavilion, we had to keep in mind that we're getting visitors of all ages. Of all backgrounds. Of all nationalities. So it had to be universal.

NOON SALIH: The Expo team looked all around the world for talent that could achieve that universality, from architects to experience-creators. One of those talents happened to be... a bit of a well-known New Zealander.

RICHARD TAYLOR: By total coincidence, I have - this is the very first model kit I ever made...

NOON SALIH: This is Sir Richard Taylor. He just goes by Richard.

RICHARD TAYLOR: Sitting next to me is a gremlin. Sitting behind me is Frankenstein, of course, 'cause my alter ego. And then all across the room, you can see there's over 150 models that I've made around me. So, even at the age of 57, I'm still collecting these models and manufacturing and glueing them together when I get a moment.

NOON SALIH: But Richard is...more than just an avid collector of action figures.

RICHARD TAYLOR: I run a company with my wife, Tanya, in Wellington, New Zealand called Weta Workshop. And we're a design and manufacturing facility servicing the world's creative industries. We're best known for our work on feature films like the Lord of the Rings and Hobbit trilogies, the Avatar movies, King Kong, District 9, Wandering Earth, etcetera...

NOON SALIH: Yup, you heard that right. Weta Workshop is the team behind the cities, creatures, monsters, dragons, weapons, robots, and vehicles in some of your favourite films. But they also work on location-based immersive experiences. Including the one in - you guessed it - Alif, the Mobility Pavilion.

Weta's journey with the Expo began in 2018 when the Expo team, led by Her Excellency Reem AlHashimy, visited the Workshop in Wellington. To show the Expo team an example of Weta's immersive experiences, Richard took them to the

Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa. There, Weta had created an immersive exhibition called Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War. It tells the story of the Gallipoli campaign in World War I through the eyes of eight ordinary New Zealanders who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: And it was a small exhibition. But we were so moved by it because we saw larger than life individuals. So they could have easily told the story by saying, "This is a character and this was his storyline." But they took us through a journey where they exaggerated the people and they made us relate to them in a way that we didn't experience ever in our life. There was also a mixture of sound, scent, music.

And so with that, 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.

NOON SALIH: And so, the idea was born to make larger-than-life sculptures of key characters in the mobility story that Expo wanted to tell.

RICHARD TAYLOR: It was imperative that we brought a human story to the idea of mobility. It's a very intangible concept, mobility. Tell the story of mobility. But that narrative, if you can't get it right, it's trying to make a movie without a completed script. It's an imperative that lays the foundation, but we got there and that informed what we needed to build.

NOON SALIH: Several story treatments were written over the course of 6 months. The result is what you experienced in the first episode of this Mobility series as you toured the pavilion. The mare and foal that stand outside Alif; Shamsa, the Bedouin

girl you meet when you first enter; the Emirati astronaut. All of these story elements were turned into visual spectacles made by Weta Workshop. Actually, they weren't just made - they were brought to life in a hyper-realistic way, with tons and tons of research to back every choice.

To demo that commitment to both narrative and historical research, Richard showed us his personal favourite sculpture: the one of 9th century Arab thinker, Al Kindi, as he sits in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. Richard actually has a replica of it at the Workshop.

RICHARD TAYLOR: You can see there, even the hairs on the face have been implanted into the nose and, you know, the glossiness and the mucus along the bottom rim of the eye, etcetera. The tapered eyelashes. The cut of the beard. The level of sunburn one would endure on the face in that region and therefore how their faces would be impacted. The pageantry of the clothing. The graphics, the textures of the fabric became imperative. You can't just scale up the faces and hands and make big clothes. You actually have to get fabric woven with the right pilling, the right scale of thread count to replicate eight times life-size large fabrics. Really, really tricky stuff.

NOON SALIH: But the pièce de résistance of Weta's creations for Alif is 3 giant sculptures of the 3 explorers we met earlier: Al Bakri, Ibn Battuta, and Ibn Majid.

These 3 explorers were not contemporaries in real life - they were born hundreds of years apart, each in his own context. But in Alif, they come together in the same place at the same time, becoming the so-called "Giants of Mobility." And really...they're giant.

RICHARD TAYLOR: It's hard to comprehend how big they are. If they were to stand up, they would be 18 meters tall.

NOON SALIH: Now, to fit into the pavilion, the giants had to be designed sitting down and even then, they're 9 meters tall. For reference, that's more than four times the height of Michael Jordan.

RICHARD TAYLOR: These are very, very large objects. The sculptures themselves took many, many months to do, inspired by three actors that were used as models for the sculptures. A single eyeball is the size of a beach ball. We only have to cast the piece that is inside the eye and we in fact 3D-printed the eyes. And then just the hair alone. We get the hair manufactured by a company out of Korea, 25,000 individual hairs drilled into a single face to implant the hair. But the most extraordinary thing to think about is the fabric of their clothing. It takes 1.5 kilometers of fabric for each layer of clothing. And a gentleman of this period is wearing a lot of layers of clothing. So we had to dress them with forklifts and cranes to lay on the layers of fabric.

NOON SALIH: Even Marjan wasn't prepared for how big they would be in person.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: I didn't think it would have this impact until I first visited New Zealand, Wellington to see how the progress was. And they put me in a store area and I stood there and I was nothing compared to these 9 meter statues and I was taken aback.

And what I saw was just a metal structure, which was beginning to take shape. And then when I saw the progress of the work and the details around it, and how real it was, I was like, "This is going to really surprise people." And lo and behold, it did when people visited it.

NOON SALIH: The sculptures are not presented in isolation, however. They're part of a bigger exhibit that tells the story of mobility. Enter the bas-relief, a 58 meter wall that wraps around the 3 Giants. It's a surface that has been sculpted to create different figures and objects, producing a 3D appearance which can be viewed from all angles.

RICHARD TAYLOR: It's a historical technique used across the world in various memorials and sculptures. The idea with the bas-relief is it unfolds the story of mobility from the emergence of humankind, coming out of the beginnings of time, passing through the first foundational moments of mobility, which is really forming the tribe, working together as the group, looking beyond the boundaries of the fields and lands in which you hunt. Putting footwear on for the first time. And then slowly moving through each component of mobility.

NOON SALIH: This wouldn't be easy, however, for something like mobility. Something that, by definition, has constantly been on the move.

RICHARD TAYLOR: The greatest challenge with the bas-relief is that one form of mobility never stopped to allow another to start. You don't stop riding horses to get into a car. The different components of mobility interweave like a rope. And so, I coined the phrase with our team, "The Harmonics of Mobility." And if you could imagine interweaving rope strands that pass over and under each other to form a, almost a helix, a DNA coil of mobility. And that's how we started to think about it.

And when you see the bas-relief, you can see very clearly how one form of mobility builds to point of critical importance and then starts to fade. But before it fades, another form starts and then another form and another form. And in turn, we ultimately produced about 200 human figures, vehicles, animals in this massive bas-relief.

NOON SALIH: And finally, in between the 3 Giants is a cartographer's table with a map projected on top of it. This is one of the exhibition's very few digital displays.

RICHARD TAYLOR: And the map that unfolds as a projection across the surface of this cartographer's table that sits between our three giants is organically playing across a very textural and landscaped environment on top on the map to lessen that sense that you're just looking at the television, that you're looking at a movie screen.

NOON SALIH: Just the bodies of the 3 Giants took about 6 to 8 months to finish, not including all the work that went into the immersive aspects of the exhibition. But when the Giants were finally assembled, it was an incredible moment for everyone involved.

RICHARD TAYLOR: The day that we lowered the heads on, the hand slipped on, and we started to dress them was a very happy day. Everyone in the company came down for a look and just all stood there in awe of what everyone's created.

And in the case of the day I described, myself and a couple of other close colleagues and friends all put on our climbing harnesses and clambered up onto the top of the table and just sat literally on the hands of these giant figures, while all of our crew circulated around five, six metres below us on the ground. All looking up in awe at these figures.

And once you are there and you're standing in front of them and you realise that they have captured a presence, and they are in the moment in front of you... You start to feel confident that the guests that visit the pavilion in the future will likewise be emotionally stirred by the result of being near or around these giant figures. And that was a very special moment for us.

NOON SALIH: And Richard's colleague Rik used a beautiful phrase to describe the experience of being around these giants: "Intimate Immensity." And, unsurprisingly, the pavilion's visitors are getting that feeling of intimate immensity around Al Bakri, Ibn Battuta, and Ibn Majid.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: A lot of people have thanked the Expo team for making them larger than life, because they have been larger than life. But to put them at that scale, hands down, the giants have been the highlight of this place for all the visitors that have visited. That's something that people don't forget. My niece, she's seven years old. When she visited it, she's like, "The giants. I can't forget the giants. They were so big and they were so real. I thought they will talk to me."

NOON SALIH: As we come to the end of our Mobility series, we ask perhaps the most important question of all: why tell the neverending story of mobility through this level of immersion?

RICHARD TAYLOR: Why create giants? Why create these huge characters? Well, they're representing the pillars of history that stay with us into the future. And by building them at scale, it causes us to arrest our journey and inspect, to consider, to think for a moment or for a while about the contributions that these people have made to modern society. How they have influenced and inspired cultures across the world and why it's important as an audience that we stop and ponder the important people that have added to the mobility of the human race.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: And if this is mobility, yes, I think this experience defines mobility because through what we've done - through creating this immersive experience, we've been able to put people in awe. And the final message in that pavilion is that you could draw out what your future could look like and that you have a role to play in drawing out a future that could matter to humanity.

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Mobility



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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