

Saying Goodbye to Expo 2020 Dubai

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: So what I do sometimes when I leave my office is I walk to Al Wasl and I sit there after the Maghreb prayer, when Al Wasl awakens. And I will never forget the moments of time that I've seen families with their kids and the kids going, "Wow, wow. This is beautiful, Mama." And just seeing them get so engrossed with it, these moments are precious and I will surely miss them. That was emotional.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Before the pandemic, before everything, when we plugged the first projection on the Dome. It was something that I've never felt it before in my entire life. Something that gave me shivers from the top of my head till the ground.

MANAL ALBAYAT: And I remember the night. It was March 2018 and we first tested the projection and we saw the lights, the music. And the group of people who were there, I swear to you, each older than the other, more mature than the other and we were all jumping up and down in joy like children, just seeing two circles of projection. So that moment I will never forget because if those two circles moved us, we were only imagining what Al Wasl can do. And alhamdulillah, alhamdulillah, Al Wasl has surprised almost every single person that has stepped within her sphere, that has experienced her majestic beauty, that has experienced her strength. She can be very loud at times, but also extremely soothing.

HE REEM ALHASHIMY: I'll miss the sounds. Every now and then, there's a bench I tend to sit on and I close my eyes and I just try to listen and it's between the sound

of the visitors, our PA-VA system, and Al Wasl Dome who has a very distinct music at different hours of the day. And I think I'll miss the sound of life in this site.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: On March 31st, 2022, the history-making 6-month event that was Expo 2020 Dubai officially closed her doors. Her last heartbeats emanated from Al Wasl Plaza at 7:45 PM.

Heartbeats that were heard across the world.

Heartbeats that marked an end to a decade-plus long journey.

Heartbeats that celebrated a new beginning for the city of Dubai and the world.

In this episode - the very last of our series - we say goodbye to Expo 2020 Dubai, "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future."

I'm Noon Salih, and for the very last time, this is Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history was made.

[INTRO STING]

HE REEM ALHASHIMY: You know, it's hard to crystallize one favorite moment.

NOON SALIH: Her Excellency Reem AlHashimy, the UAE's Minister of State for International Cooperation and Director General of Expo 2020 Dubai.

HE REEM ALHASHIMY: There are many. I'll give an example of one that happened just a few days ago...

There's this incredibly adorable family from Al Dhaid, not too far from here, who have been coming to Expo every opportunity they get. And they have these little kids...say maybe three boys and two girls all under the age of 10.

I've been here every single day and I see them all the time. God bless them. They know the site really well. And I was walking with the head of a delegation of a country and they just so casually said, "Oh, Um Hazza, can we take a picture with you and your guest?" And this confidence!

And then they asked him, "So where are you from?" And these are little children, like they're barely a hundred centimeters and they're here talking to a head of government with such confidence and with such hospitality. And this is their home. Forget about us as organizers, forget about us as Expo's management. They feel that this is theirs to show the world. And I think there's something very special about that moment that I remember very fondly.

It's a feeling of...we overcame collectively. And as we've overcome, we've overcome not more bitter, but more hopeful. More excited about what the future can unfold and we will be part of that unfolding.

MUSIC

MANAL ALBAYAT: It has been an insane ride to say the least. It's had its ups, its downs, its happy moments, its sad moments, its challenges. A lot of gray hairs, a lot of years later. It is very bittersweet.

NOON SALIH: Manal AlBayat, Expo 2020 Dubai's Chief Engagement Officer. She

takes us back in time, to the moment when it all first started.

MANAL ALBAYAT: The first time I heard about Expo was in 2009 when we got the mandate from His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid to look at whether we should bid to host the World Expo and/or Olympics in the year 2020.

NOON SALIH: Of course, Dubai ended up bidding to host the World Expo.

MANAL ALBAYAT: One of the reasons we decided to bid for the World Expo in the year 2020 was the fact that the UAE was going to be celebrating its Golden Jubilee. Normally, Expo hosts put on the event during a six-month cycle within the same year, but we asked for an exception and we asked to host it from October 2020 to April 2021, in our initial dates, because we wanted to make sure that we enter the year of our Golden Jubilee with the world.

So the importance of celebrating our 50 years was there from the get-go and was one of the driving forces behind us going ahead and bidding for this Expo.

NOON SALIH: And part of that bidding process meant campaigning amongst the close to 170 member nations of the Bureau International des Expositions - or the BIE. This is the intergovernmental body that organizes Expos.

MANAL ALBAYAT: November 2011, it was the first general assembly for the BIE that we attended as a candidate city. And we were the last ones to speak. The other candidate cities came up and presented. Gentleman after gentleman, after gentleman, after gentleman. Elderly gentleman, after elderly gentleman, after elderly gentleman.

And then to represent Dubai and the UAE - the Arab region, the Muslim world...Her Excellency, Reem Ebrahim AlHashimy steps up to the podium and speaks in fluent French and then in fluent English. And I think just that moment alone broke so many stereotypes without us even trying that that was an incredible moment that I will never forget.

NOON SALIH: And after three rounds of voting, Dubai won the bid by a landslide against its competitors in Ekaterinburg, Izmir, and Sao Pãulo.

MANAL ALBAYAT: The 27th of November, 2013. A date that I will never, ever forget..

NOON SALIH: Fireworks lit up the sky around Burj Khalifa as the city and the nation celebrated. This was not only a milestone in the Expo journey, however. It was a challenge to make history and extend Dubai's legacy as the home to many world-firsts. It only made sense then to plan the ending of the Expo and its legacy at the very beginning of its journey.

And so, work began on transforming what was then...a stretch of desert, really, into the "world's greatest show."

MANAL ALBAYAT: Again we went through many milestones. There was the setting of the strategy and the plan. There was the design of the site. There was the groundbreaking of construction and starting the construction phase on site. There was the...going out to countries and getting confirmations of their support of participating in this Expo.

NOON SALIH: And on September 30th, 2021 - after the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the event for an entire year - the Opening Ceremony of Expo 2020 Dubai was held at Al Wasl Plaza.

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: That was our time. That was basically the moment that all the hard work and the hardships that we went through together came to life.

NOON SALIH: Marjan Faraidooni, Expo 2020's Chief Experience Officer.

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: And we didn't realize it on the night, but in retrospect, we were an opening for the world and not only for the city of Dubai.

NOON SALIH: And to welcome the world, the Expo team designed the visitor experience in such a way that it was different for each one of the Expo's over 20 million visitors. From the way they navigated the public realm; to which of the over 22,000 cultural events they saw; to the soundscapes in the three thematic districts. Everything was intentional.

MUSIC

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: Visitor experience was about creating a sense of place that you will always remember. So we spent a lot of time curating the music that you listen to in the public spaces. So each of our districts, whether you were in the Sustainability District, you hear music that is related to nature. Same goes to Mobility, you hear drummings from all over the world.

MUSIC

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: So that is the type of detail that we went into the visitor experience because it's, of course, to make the visitors safe, but it's also to create experiences that they wouldn't forget.

NOON SALIH: Marjan also oversaw the Expo School Programme, which welcomed nearly 1 million students through the Expo's Entry Portals over the course of 6 months. She also led the team that would help Expo transition into her legacy site, District 2020.

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: Of course after we close our doors, there are elements of the site that will remain and elements that will not remain. About 80% of what has been built will be staying. And the remainder of what's not staying are basically country pavilions that are moving their exhibitions and their pavilions from site.

But there are main features that will be remaining such as the Alif Pavilion, the Terra Pavilion, the Vision Pavilion.

And of course all the structures that we have built will remain and will be in its transitional phases welcoming new family members, if you will. So they'll be welcoming organizations, whether they're corporates, education institutions, to residents to live on the site. But also it will welcome visitors to the pavilions that will be staying. So it's going to continue as a city - not so much as the World Expo, but as District 2020 that will carry very strongly the memory that it hosted the World Expo.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: And to mark that transition - that new life that Expo 2020 will take on, a Closing Ceremony was held at Al Wasl Plaza on March 31st, 2022. The mastermind behind that Closing Ceremony is none other than the mastermind behind the Opening Ceremony. Expo 2020's Executive Creative Director, Amna Abulhoul.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Al Wasl turns into a garden of memories and that's the difference between the opening. In the opening, we call people to do something. We call them to action something. In the closing, we leave them with a question mark. For legacy, for their future. It's like...a backpack of responsibilities and what have you held for the future?

NOON SALIH: In the Opening Ceremony, we were introduced to a young girl who represents the future generation's hope for a brighter tomorrow. She was curious and wide-eyed - just like the child in all of us. In the Closing Ceremony, the young girl returns after having experienced the Expo for 6 months.

Except...she's changed.

AMNA ABULHOUL: She grew up and she walks with confidence. If you notice in the Opening Ceremony, she was curious, jumping everywhere, looking around. Now, she just moves with her shoulders up high. She has the responsibility of the world to make it a better place with the youth.

MUSIC

AMNA ABULHOUL: What we did with the Closing Ceremony is we literally wanted

the Dome to cry and say goodbye.

What's interesting is...we saw a humongous ring that came down with the song of: "As Tears Go By." And Al Wasl, as a woman, was...like a duet with the young girl on the main stage. And suddenly we see the ring showers with water. You literally see water coming down the ring while it's descending to the stage. And the girl is curious, she's touching the water. She comes back to show Al Wasl, but it's the moment of a goodbye. And the girl doesn't want Al Wasl to leave. So the attachment situation was choreographed in a very delicate way where Al Wasl would take on the water from the girl's hand, hold her shoulder, but it's the last goodbye.

MUSIC

AMNA ABULHOUL: And when the ring enters the ground - I would say the stage... Al Wasl disappears. You don't see her. You only see the young girl with a developed new dress. She took elements from Al Wasl and she's our future. And that moment came after a silence. The silence of, "What just happened?" We reflected that...everything's gone.

And then for every end, there's a new beginning, and this is where the site burst with fireworks. And the song of "A Million Dreams" came up, and the site boomed up again from darkness and silence into a new life.

NOON SALIH: Expo 2020 Dubai was more than just an achievement to be celebrated. It was, in its own way, a celebration.

A celebration of 50 years since the Emirate of Abu Dhabi participated in the 1970 Expo in Osaka, Japan.

A celebration of the UAE's Golden Jubilee - 50 years since the formation of the union.

A celebration of the UAE making history as the first Arab nation to successfully arrive at Mars.

A celebration of Expo 2020 being the first World Expo held in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia region.

A celebration of the record 192 countries that participated at the Expo - each with its own national pavilion for the very first time.

And, ultimately, a celebration of the world finally coming together after nearly 2 years of social distancing, isolation, and hardship.

HE REEM ALHASHIMY: The Expo happened not during that pandemic, but despite that pandemic.

AMNA ABULHOUL: Here's Her Excellency the Director General again.

HE REEM ALHASHIMY: And it's hard to divorce the Expo from the context at which she was held. She was held at a difficult time and she was able to highlight and project strength and confidence in all of us. And that is not something that we can distance ourselves from.

We find incredible confidence in the continuous resolve of the visitors that come through, the business delegations that come through, the government leaders that come through, both ours and from around the world to celebrate, and to talk about, and to debate where their nation is and what plans they have for the future.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: And as these leading women look back at a decade of their lives, they will cherish their memories of Expo 2020 Dubai.

AMNA ABULHOUL: There is one item that is dear to my heart, which is the first stone of Al Wasl Plaza that I kept in my pocket for years. And now it's in my collection. It's a white marble. It was the first marble that was put on the ground, but it got broken and I took a piece of it. And that will always stay close to my heart. It will be the one and only item that reflects the entire memories of all these years.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: One of the things that I think I'll keep forever is the Expo pin. Because I think that amalgamates this whole experience in one way.

MANAL ALBAYAT: There is no way I'm going to keep one memorabilia or one item as a souvenir or something to remind me of this Expo. I actually have a full room of memorabilia.

I've got the Bid Dossier, the Registration Document. Eventually, I'll have the Closing Report. I've got pins from the bid days to the national day edition of the pin, to our

countdown of four years to go, three years to go, two years to go, one year to go - oh wait, no, another one year to go. I have so many souvenirs that I honestly don't think I have enough. And I keep wanting to make sure that there's enough of this place that I keep with me.

NOON SALIH: But are they ready to say goodbye?

AMNA ABULHOUL: No, I'm not ready! I wish we invented a time machine that - until now we didn't invent the time machine. I don't know why...since 1851?! But I think we needed to - we really missed inventing a time machine because I would repeat the six months on and on and on and on forever. And I am totally not ready to wake up, 2 April, 3 April, 4 April - without seeing Expo with its people.

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: It's not going to be the same. It's not going to be the place where you actively have more than 200 participants, 192 nations. And the number of people who come through. It's never going to be the way that it is.

MANAL ALBAYAT: You need a sense of closure. You need to end this chapter. You need to say goodbye to it. You never forget it, but you have to say bye to mark the ending.

AMNA ABULHOUL: But for me? She lives in the heart of the flowers in the garden. She lives in the hearts of the birds who fly in every day to nest behind her projector pods. She lives in everyone's soul and not only human beings - animals and plants.

Yes, we say she passed away, 31 of March, at 7:45 PM. But she still lives in the heart and soul of everyone.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: And so, at the end of Inside Expo, we ask the same question we asked at the very beginning, all the way back in the first episode...

What is an Expo?

MANAL ALBAYAT: Where else can you literally visit the whole world in one location? Where else can you have breakfast in one country, lunch in another and dinner in another and coffee in another? Where else can you try the different cuisines of the world without getting on a plane? Where else would you experience entertainment from all around the world? And not only see that separate entertainment but how it fuses and the fusion that is created out of those cultures colliding, if you will.

And if you really want to find innovative solutions to the challenges that the world faces today...it's not just a sentence or a statement that we say. It's not about just the buildings. It's not just about the architecture. It's not about just the events or just the speakers or just the panelists and different conferences that are on or forums.

It's about the soul.

HE REEM ALHASHIMY: I think Expo Dubai proved what was possible. We see now the theory play out in action. We talked a lot about "connecting minds to create the future," but then we had programs and initiatives during the Expo that really brought it to light in a very strong way. Countries got together, countries did well

together, visitors interacted with one another and with countries. There was a multi-stakeholder-ship of private sector, civil society, different groups within the community - yesterday, I was talking to my team about indigenous tribes that we have worked with over the course of these few months and what we've learned from them and how do we take that forward.

These are the kinds of things that I think don't fizzle away. They just don't. You don't just bring people together. You bring people together, you do something good. And I think we all did something very good together. And so the impact is that together works and together matters and together can happen. And that is hopeful and it's inspiring.

And it's what I think we - against significant odds and I say "we" in the most collective and inclusive manner - have all managed to pull off. We couldn't have done it without the countries, couldn't have done it without the volunteers, we couldn't have done it without the visitors, we couldn't have done it without the students. It's all interconnected with one another. And so you almost have a coalition of believers who said, "Oh, you know what, we're going to pull through. This is going to be really, really tough...but we're going to actually do it. And we're going to enjoy it and it's going to be one for the history books.

NOON SALIH: And history, indeed, was made. Throughout Inside Expo's 45 episodes, we have shared only a fraction of the stories told at Expo 2020 Dubai and other World Expos...

Stories that took us from Earth to space...

Stories of humans inspiring one another for change...

Inside Expo
Episode 45: Saying Goodbye to Expo
2020 Dubai



Stories about our rich past and challenging present..

Stories about connecting minds and creating the future.

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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