

What is an Expo?

NOON SALEH: If you tuned into the Expo 2020 Dubai opening ceremony last month, you would've seen a line up of regional and international artists - like Andrea Bocelli... Ellie Goulding... and Mohamed Abdu... all performing underneath the domed roof of the iconic Al Wasl Plaza.

MANAL ALBAYAT: You have times when you're not sure if you're awake or you're dreaming, or if you're living the dream or dreaming reality, I think I'm in one of those situations.

NOON SALEH: This is Manal Al Bayat - she's the chief engagement officer at Expo 2020 Dubai, and she's been with the team since the very beginning.

MANAL: I think it hasn't sunk in yet because it's been such a long journey from 2009 and here we are 2021. It's been a dream waiting for our gates to open to the world.

NOON SALEH: And it might not have struck you at the time, but the journey to that opening event-- actually started more than a decade ago.

MANAL ALBAYAT: So in early 2009, we started serious discussions around hosting a major event. And back then, when we looked at it, we realized that our region - and when I say region, I'm talking about the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia region - we had never hosted a major event. We knew that our region is capable of hosting it. We recognized that our region has over 3 billion people and deserves to have its own story told on a global platform. And so in 2009, we decided to do a feasibility study to see if debates should bid for the Olympics and

or the world Expo in the year 2020. At the end of the feasibility period, we decided to go ahead and bids for world Expo.

NOON SALEH: To bid for a world Expo, a delegation has to put together a detailed bid dossier that outlines how the bidding cities are going to pull off the world Expo. Then, all of the International Bureau of Expositions member states get together in Paris and it's put to a vote.

MANAL ALBAYAT: So all of those details were submitted. Two-year journey. At the end of those two years on November 27th, 2013, that was the final day of the vote where each member state regardless of size of the nation, geographically, or financially or any other metric, each country had one vote to give. I mean, I remember that day, like it was yesterday. I don't think I've ever felt heavier in my life. You literally feel the hopes and aspirations of a nation on your shoulders.

I remember the room that I was in, when the votes came in and every round of votes, you see this bar that comes up on a bar chart that slowly starts to move. And you're just looking at Dubai in the UAE and waiting to ensure that your bar continues to move when others stopped. And it was incredible because the third round of votes it's between us and another city and the minute Ekaterinburg's bar stopped and ours continued. You just heard an uproar of cheering and clapping and tears. It's not an easy thing, but it was also the most joyous day of my life coming back home with that victory, was something incredible for us.

NOON SALEH: And now, 12 years later, here we are. Expo 2020 Dubai is officially open. And today, in the first episode of Inside Expo, we're going to rewind to nearly 200 years ago, back to the beginning of Expo history - to understand what a exactly world Expo is and how they've have changed our world.

I'm Noon Salih - and welcome to the first episode of Inside Expo, an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai, where history is being made. Listen to legacy unfolding in real time, and across nearly 200 years of Expos around the world.

INTRO STING

NOON SALEH: What exactly a world Expo is can be a little hard to define - especially if you haven't visited one and seen it for yourself. So we asked Manal if she could sum it up in two sentences.

MANAL ALBAYAT: That's a very tough one. I think if I were to explain a world Expo specifically Expo 2020, I would say the Expo is where you can visit the entire world in one place and get to see what the future holds.

NOON SALEH: Often Expos are like little mini maps of the world, where countries are able to tell a story about their achievements, and where they're going in the future. Historically, each Expo has been based around a theme - in the past it's been "feeding the planet" or "the age of discovery". This year, the theme is Connecting Minds, Creating the Future - with three sub-themes: opportunity, mobility and sustainability.

MANAL ALBAYAT: We picked our theme, connecting minds, creating the future because it's built around the belief of the power of partnership and the power of collaboration. And that is something that Dubai and the UAE has always believed in - it's parts of our development model. And it's also what the rest of the world needs at this point in time.

NOON SALEH: A lot of what happens at Expos happens in the multilateral conversations between countries - but they're also designed to leave an impression on their visitors. Charles Pappas is the senior writer at Exhibitor Magazine, and the author of *Flying Cars*, *Zombie Dogs* and *Robot Overlords* - a book about the history of world Expos. He's been attending these events for years now, and his first was over 50 years ago... but he still remembers it.

CHARLES PAPPAS: Oh, I certainly do. I was nine, a very young nine.

ARCHIVE: Welcome to a journey into the future, a journey for everyone today, into the everywhere of tomorrow.

CHARLES PAPPAS: And that was kind of a wonderland. I mean, it really is like going down a rabbit hole of technology and wonderful architecture. For me, I remember the man with the flying jet pack where it was just 20 seconds, but he may as well have been Icarus flying towards the sun. But it gave you a sense of mobility. One of the themes of Expo 2020 and what you could do. And it was magic.

But that wasn't really what imprinted itself on me. For me, it was the IBM pavilion. It was this massive round eclipse of sorts. And you stood under 45, 30 foot tall steel trees and waiting in line.

You looked up at this white dome with the letters IBM in Boston, 3000 times in three dimensions. And by the time you got around its jaw opened. So, this huge mouth seemed to open up and 500 at a time, went in and you sat on these sort of bleacher like seats, and it lifted you as far up as nine stories in the air.

And then the lights go and there's 14 projectors shooting towards nine polygon shaped screens. And I remembered those screens because of course you were used to the rectangles of your basic movie theater, but these were different in by themselves. And they went into how computers work now, why is this a big deal? I mean, today computers are everywhere. Chips are in everything, right? The internet of things, but then they were still mysterious objects. They were huge. They were the size of rooms, men and white coats, like priests attended to them. If they were lucky, they had five megabytes of memory for, I think, to touch shelf IBM computers at that time. And in this dark space way high up to call it a cathedral. Is not an exaggeration because it gave you that sense of awe.

When you're lowered down after 15 minutes, you go into the rest of the pavilion and they do things like you can go up to this one segment where you can print out a date and then the computer reads it, handwriting recognition. That was bizarre. That was science fiction. We didn't have that then. And it read out on that date based on a database from the New York Times, what happened on that date, the headlines from that day. And that was pretty astounding. That imprinted itself on me, which 50 plus years is still there. It doesn't fade with age. That's what Expos can do. They can be so intense a moment of recognition, of awe, that never leaves you, that it stays with you for life. That's the power of what they can do.

CH2: Expo history

NOON SALEH: The first world Expo was in Britain, in 1851. According to Charles, a few years before a couple of British men had attended a national fair in France. And they had this idea - why not make something like this, but on a way bigger scale? Basically - they wanted to flex Britain's position as a superpower to the

world - and reinforce the idea that London was the center of the universe. So they started putting a plan together.

CHARLES PAPPAS:They wanted a basic building to house, the expo that would show the best and brightest of bridge siblings. So, what do you do? You'd have a contest and they had 245 entries for the design of this building. All of them were considered incredibly boring, incredibly prosaic, incredibly dull. They have about two weeks before the deadline, and they hate everything - the judges hate everything they've seen. And that's when a guy named Joseph Paxton enters the scene. He's a horticulturalist of all things, he designs greenhouses of all things. But he thinks I'll try my hand at this.

So during a meeting, one day, he sketches out his idea on a piece of paper. He's got it. He's based it on a waterlily from the Amazon named in honor of Queen Victoria. And this is a piece of genius because the waterlily - about the size of a man, but it weighs only a few pounds yet it can support 325 pounds. So what, about 150 kilos. It's an amazing piece of natural technology. He creates the Crystal Palace out of. The idea is a hit. The public loves it. The judges see the writing on the wall and they think let's go for it. And they do.

So you get this glass house. I mean, imagine this a glass house in 1850s technology, that's pretty amazing. It's roughly 1,851 feet long - it was extended to match the year - about 408 feet wide, nine stories tall, and it sets the standard for the bizarre echo architecture of all Expos ever since. It was biomorphic design, imitating nature, which has now become a thing in architecture, but this was started in 1851-170 years ago, which gives you a sense of the impact it had.

And it is in a kind of a snowballing sense. It creates the regular exhibition industry we know today. You know, the regular shows, trade shows that we have that go on around the world. That's what this one show creates.

Now, it wasn't beloved. Karl Marx hated it. He thought it was capitalism at its worst. Charles Dickens was overwhelmed by it. But the consensus today based on a new biography is that it changed and elevated his writing, starting with Bleak House and going on with every novel after that. That not only did he see all of the world as connected, but rather connected in the same great story.

NOON SALEH: And since then, Expos became a place for the world to go to be seen. At each event, countries from across the world would bring their best and brightest innovations and inventions. For visitors, they offered a kind of compressed world tour. You could visit the Japan pavilion, then cross the street and find yourself in a mini-Morocco.

And as they grew, they become more and more influential. Even if you don't know it, Expos have had a surprisingly central role in most of our lives. So we asked Charles - in a minute or less - to take us through a kind of laundry list of inventions that we now take for granted, but which actually originated at a world Expo.

CHARLES PAPPAS: Okay. 1, 2, 3, go. If you ever zipped up a piece of clothing, if you ever use a touch screen, if you ever rode an elevator or an ESCO. If you ever use a computer itself, if you ever use a telephone, if you ever listened to recorded music, if you ever paid for gasoline at the pump, if you ever put on a nylon, if you ever had an x-ray, you've done something that was introduced at or hit the tipping point of popularity at an Expo.

The expo is like a silk road where all these goods go through and they become so popular there. And there's a reason for that because millions went there 6 million to the first one 30 million in 1889. And. There are estimates that an 1893 in Chicago, somewhere between 25 to 40% of America saw that expo. That's an astonishing figure. That's that gives you an idea of the impact. And it's not for the 30 seconds of a television commercial. It's not for the seven seconds of some web ads. This is something where you might go for days or weeks and look at something over and over and over. Until it finally imprints itself on you and it's live and really nothing replaces. That's the power of Expos.

NOON SALEH: And while there were plenty of inventions and tangible products, Expos have also been a space for less tangible things - like ideologies, or milestones in social movements.

CHARLES PAPPAS: Everything from kindergarten to buying on credit was introduced at expos, which I find kind of fascinating. Art deco in 1925 was popularized at the exposition in Paris. At the 1900 exposition in Paris, art nouveau hit its tipping point. At the 1915 expo in San Francisco, the pan Pacific international exposition, 500,000 women signed a petition for suffrage for the right to vote, which was then delivered to Congress 500,000 women. That petition was 5,500 meters long. The other one at the expo that I find kind of interesting is incubators for babies.

Now, roughly at that time, the mortality rate for infants in America was about 165 per 1000. It was bad. It was terrible. Incubators had come out in the last few years, but they were not trusted it's technology. We fear it. And why would you put a delicate little baby in this contraption? Well they did an exhibit at that fair. Millions walk by it, millions see babies being taken care of. And that becomes the tipping

point for the idea that incubators are safe - now, obviously today we consider them just something you use, of course, that's what you use to help prematurely born infants. Back then, not so much, but Expos changed that.

The social power of expo is also tremendous though, again, it's something that you oftentimes have a bit of trouble grasping because it's vaguer and wider. But again, they affect us just as much.

NOON SALEH: Obviously, we live in a very different world now to the one we lived in in 1851. And as the world has changed, Expos have too. Charles traces the evolution of the Expo in three broad phases: products... progress... and preparation.

CHARLES PAPPAS: About 1851 to I'd say 1933, you had what I call the products phase. You are showing everything that can be manufactured. And then about 1933, you hit on the idea of the future. You hit on the idea of progress and it's no coincidence that the depression had hit the world then and people were looking for something better for hope belief in the future. So you're seeing technology or what we call them technocracy, which was a kind of social movement in the United States where we emphasize technology's role in solving all social ills comes to the fore.

So we see that with the house of tomorrow that I mentioned in Chicago, we see it with futurama in the United States fair in 1939, 1940, and then 1964-65, you had another Futurama with general motors and an even bigger version of that Diorama again, selling this time, underwater hotels and moon bases, but the hope that technology is going to be this amazing savior.

Then we hit what I call panic or preparation where we're saying the world is changing. Environmentally not for good. And that hits about 74 then with a first real ecologically minded expo. 75, continuous that. And then after that, we still see these themes around the ocean, around helping the world. And we see Shanghai take that up in the biggest way possible with their 2000 Chen expo with better city, better life focusing on urban areas.

Because again, we're now crowding into urban areas more than before. And we need to solve those problems. And everyone since then has been hitting that theme, relentlessly water, food, urban living, and now renewable energy in expo 2020. So you can see where it's gone from the gee whiz stuff to how do we solve these problems?

NOON SALEH: So, Expos have this big influence on our world - but they're also reflective of the time and context that they take place in. And so today, as we're experiencing the meltdown of our climate in real time... Expo is finding itself in a new, and more urgent context.

CHARLES PAPPAS: You hit it right there. Much more urgency. This is what happened in the last couple of years. The Australian fires in 2020 to give you some context, they were the size of 110 London's. That's an amazing statistic. A few weeks ago in Sicily, they recorded the highest temperature ever in Europe, about 122 degrees Fahrenheit. That's happening right now.

The last hurricane that hit New Orleans was bad, but apparently the worst effect was when it moved up the east coast and swapped New York so even the waves would come into the New York subway system. We're not prepared for that. It's hitting us now. Not in the year 2050, not in 2075. It's hitting right now in 2021. So

yes, this is urgent and this expo accordingly is more important than ever before because it's offering ideas, it's offering technologies, it's offering solutions.

The question is, are we going to pay attention? Is the world press going to take away the right lessons? Are the visitors going to take away the right lessons or are they going to think that's cute, that's interesting. But what does it have to do with me?

NOON SALEH: So, this Expo is happening at a time when all of our worlds seem to have changed - the global pandemic and the increasing climate meltdown have us asking more urgent questions about the future of our world. So how can Expo 2020 Dubai help contribute solutions to those problems?

MANAL ALBAYAT: If I look at what I hope this Expo will achieve, I hope this Expo will achieve action.

NOON SALEH: This is Manal Al Bayat again - chief engagement officer at Expo 2020 Dubai.

MANAL ALBAYAT: There's a lot of talk, there's a lot of planning. There's a lot of highlighting of issues and challenges and potential solutions. I think we need a lot more action towards implementing those solutions. So, what I hope is that countries and companies and individuals utilize this Expo platform to first of all, learn and understand the actual details of the problem. The more you understand the problem, the better and easier it is to identify solutions.

Second, once we identify those solutions, working out ways that they can be solved. Obviously you've got different layers. You've got policy and government

layers which are critically important. You've got corporates, you've got the research and development component and actually developing solutions - that's obviously critical. But then you have your everyday person, your, your average person that needs to understand how they can be part of the solution as well. I think if we just look at international organizations and governments and say, let them solve it - that's not enough. It needs to be a bottom up and a top down approach. And that's what I hope. I hope that nations and international organizations use this Expo platform to come to agreement on action and announce those actions through this Expo.

NOON SALEH: Another critical question being posed at this Expo is - how does the world recover after such a devastating global pandemic? Expo 2020 Dubai was postponed because of COVID-19, and now as it goes ahead in 2021, some things about the visitor experience have changed - but the core themes haven't.

MANAL ALBAYAT: I don't think the pandemic has changed this Expo. I think it has highlighted its importance even more than ever before. There are obviously some changes. If we talk about precautionary measures taken onsite from sanitisation temperature, vaccinations, PCRs. There's a lot of factors that were not part of the original planning - social distancing - all of those measures we had to operationally build into our model and that wasn't there before.

However, when we look at the topics of conversations, the programs, the international cooperational elements that we are looking to push stronger through this Expo, our objectives, our vision - none of those were changed. However, whenever we used to say the power of collaboration in the past, whenever we used to say, we live in such an interconnected world, that we no longer have the

luxury of saying that's not my problem, that's happening somewhere else in the world. The pandemic helped everyone truly understand what we meant.

So everything we had been saying became very visibly real to everyone during the pandemic, which made the importance of this Expo even more so, since the pandemic. So I don't think it changed it. I think it just reemphasize the need that the world has for this Expo.

NOON SALEH: Manal, at the beginning of this episode we heard from Charles Pappas about how his visit to a world Expo as a child imprinted itself on him for life. For children visiting Expo 2020 Dubai, what do you hope they'll come away thinking about?

MANAL ALBAYAT: World Expos are usually a magnificent place for younger audiences because it really sparks their imagination and it's inspires them for the future. And seeing so many young children on site, seeing their eyes light up, seeing them learn about the different cultures and understand the different regions of the world, not just in terms of the diversity, but the commonality, the things that we have in common as human beings is incredible.

The past 18 months have been truly challenging and difficult for a lot of us all around the world. And I think what I hope is that the children that visit the Expo during the six month period, understand the responsibility. But I think they're too young to understand that responsibility now. So the best that I can hope for is that they're inspired, inspired by what they see.

And I think the more they understand now they will grow up naturally processing some of these potential future solutions and coming up with innovations and

technologies and ways to help us achieve that better future that we're looking forward to. The 18 months that we've lived in have been dark, and I'm hoping that this Expo is a bright light, because we are looking at that sense of optimism and hope and children are the ones that are going to deliver that for us. So I really, really hope that this Expo inspires them enough to be the change makers and the future leaders that we desperately need.

NOON SALEH: Inside Expo is an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai. Connecting minds. Creating the future. Learn more by visiting virtualexpodubai.com.

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