

Legacy II: District 2020

SANJIVE KHOSLA: I remember still, me and my wife, we ran out onto the street, with my kids. And we took pots and pans and we were banging them, and everybody was celebrating. It was very sweet. The city really came together in a way that I had never seen happen before.

NOON SALIH: That's Sanjive Khosla, Senior Vice President of the Transition Unit at Expo 2020.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: You knew then that this was something really powerful. That this was something that could unite and change the city and its future.

NOON SALIH: This moment of the win will likely be remembered as one of the most iconic moments in the UAE's history as a nation. Excitement was high. Fireworks shot through the sky and crowds poured into the streets, rejoicing in celebration all through the night.

But in the lead up to that moment, years and years went into planning how Expo will contribute to shaping the future of Dubai, and there was a whole team of people dedicated to ensuring that those plans became a reality.

In this episode, part two of our series about Expo legacies, we'll get a glimpse of a future Dubai where the Expo site is a prominent feature, one that will live on decades after the event has left town.

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: In a way, we are in our event mode right now, but we have activated long before our plans for after Expo. So it was something very important for us to ensure that we thought of it right from the get go, that it was not an afterthought.

My name is Marjan Faraidooni. I'm the Chief Experience Officer at Expo. I'm also the Chief Human Resource Officer at Expo.

NOON SALIH: Marjan started her Expo 2020 journey in 2014, as the city was coming out of its bid phase. Back then, she was a volunteer. What lured her in to join full time was the Expo leadership's grand vision, not only for the event, but for what would happen in Dubai after the event.

MARJAN FARAIDOONI: Organizing for an Expo is not something that's typical or usual, because you needed to think about planning on different levels.

The first stage of the planning was making sure that you deliver on a site, on a promise, in a very short period of time that is around five to six years. You actually had to build the city. The second part of the challenge of this Expo or an Expo organization is that you need to think about what happens next.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: From day one...

NOON SALIH: This is Sanjive again.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: When we designed the master plan for the event site, the legacy consideration of all of the entire site and its individual elements was paramount, and was as important as the event usage. In fact, probably more important.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: The best way I could explain it is that we actually built a city that happened to host a world Expo in 2021. So we didn't want to have this as a six-months event where people come and enjoy one day. We wanted it to be a place that continues to live on, but also one that creates inspiration for the future generation.

NOON SALIH: After Expo ends in March 2022, the site will be transformed into District 2020, an all inclusive, smart city, where 80 percent of Expo's built environment will be turned into a global innovation hub, where people can come to work, live, study and attend cultural events.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: The legacy use of the Expo 2020 site is to transform itself into what we describe as a human centric city of the future.

Now to achieve that, we needed to think about how that was going to be delivered while planning for the event, six or seven years back. Because the vision was very clear, that once the event is over, this needs to transform itself into a 15-minute city.

NOON SALIH: Meaning, every amenity, every need, would be 15 minutes away on foot.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: So we've designed it in such a way that the infrastructure and the built environment and the public realm which is there, supports that vision. A vision which, I think for its time, was quite forward-looking.

MUSIC

NOON SALIH: The vision that Sanjive and Marjan describe was a guiding principle — a figurative blueprint. In practice, all the cogs would have to turn in sync for this future smart city to function. So what would living or working in District 2020 actually look like?

SANJIVE KHOSLA: A new moment in time in the course of history, not just of the country, but of the region. We want to do that by staying true to the theme of connecting minds, and creating this incredible new future.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: All our buildings are, you know, built to be efficient in the use of energy and water, for example. But we also have one of the best technology infrastructure in the city of Dubai, and perhaps in the United Arab Emirates.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: We generate about 22% of our electricity on site. The balance of it comes directly from the solar park that Dubai has built. All the trees that we have planted out here are essentially local trees.

NOON SALIH: And it's not just about the resources. It's that human-centric experience as well.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: District 2020 is what we call "a living lab." You would see people working around the place with new technologies and testing them in a new, real-world environment.

You will see artists and creative people using the public realm to express themselves.

You will see this place as being an Epicurean delight, where you can kind of sample the foods of the world.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: We're really trying to focus on being a city that takes into consideration the wellbeing of the resident of that city. So we have bike tracks, we have running tracks.

The fact that we were building it with the individual in mind was a huge winning point.

NOON SALIH: It's also really well connected. The area is a stone's throw from Dubai's new airport. Roads have been overhauled, new bridges were installed and the ever-efficient metro network is already proving to be popular with Expo visitors.

The physical structures at the current Expo site will eventually be repurposed as housing units, office spaces and retail shops. Some global corporations have already committed to moving their Middle East headquarters to the new district, taking over the spaces that are currently used as pavilions.

And then, needless to say, there are the architectural marvels of Dubai's Expo.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: As an Expo, we had a responsibility to build pavilions that talk about our themes of mobility, sustainability, and opportunity.

It wasn't only about attracting the big organizations. And if I take the example of the sustainability pavilion, we built it with the future in mind. So it's going to become a children's and science center.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: The incredible architecture stays: Alif, which is the mobility pavilion designed by Foster + Partners, which looks like a fidget spinner that is about to take off; or Al Wasl Plaza, the incredible projection dome. All of this will be there to inspire you.

NOON SALIH: District 2020 is built to serve the next generation, but also the one after and many others to come. That means that it's constantly evolving.

MARJAN FARADOONI: For Dubai, we are in the path of continuing to develop. I mean, our nation is only 50 years old.

When we decided we wanted to host this world Expo, it was not by accident. It was part and parcel of a larger plan to continue to develop the city of Dubai.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: One of the incredible things about the legacy element, and of District 2020, is that you're following on from Expo 2020.

How do you keep this project, at that same level of intensity, of incredibleness, of amazement, which Expo was able to do? We have to keep that energy, that spirit, that level of creativity going. Not just for the six months after or the one year after, but for the five years after, the 10 years after. This is going to be a really big ask, and a tough act to follow. But it's a good thing too. It just means we need to work harder and be creative, and come up with new things.

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NOON SALIH: The impact of a mega event goes beyond just the physical and tangible. The themes in and of themselves have to translate effectively decades from now.

MARJAN FARADOONI: We always had to think of it through the guiding principle of what does it mean in terms of leaving a legacy? Legacy in terms of economic legacy, social legacy, political legacy and reputational legacy. I mean the principles are simple, but very, very deep.

NOON SALIH: A part of that process, Marjan says, is learning from past Expos. Not only from London, where the first exhibition took place, or Lisbon, which redefined

an entire city, but also from more recent ones, like Milan in 2015 and Astana in 2017.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: There was a wealth of experience in terms of observations that my team and I got to understand, what the ethos of an Expo is. What were the ingredients of making it happen?

And it was very clear to us that the question of “after the event” was always [at] the top of [our] agenda.... the cities, the policymakers, the citizens, the community.

NOON SALIH: One of Expo 2020’s mandates is to pay that learning process forward, so that future cities and mega events can be inspired to create and leave their own legacies behind.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: We are documenting all the learnings that are happening through our programs. That's why we've worked very hard on developing education programs for school kids across the country, and also internationally through our virtual programs. We're also documenting, through a very solid archiving system, the whole journey, so that we remember this as a moment in history.

So we didn't want to do things that will have no value, and we were very keen on the social aspects of the legacy we wanted to leave behind.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: At the smallest level, it's essentially trying to just collect documents, objects, artifacts, which tell the story of Expo. We are setting up an Expo museum and an archive, so we want to collect items which tell the story of Expo for anybody who may be — five years from now and 10 years from now — curious.

The second way in which we do it is what I'm doing with you right now.

NOON SALIH: In other words, this very episode, this audio story captured in real-time while Expo 2020 Dubai is happening, is part of Expo 2020's mission to archive the history of the site that will one day be someone's home, a place where they will make and create new memories.

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SANJIVE KHOSLA: The other day I had three school girls who walked in, and then I asked them, do you think you'd like to live here and work here in the future? And just the looks on their faces, they were like, "Do you think we really could? That would be like the greatest thing."

And that just makes my day, right? You know, the kids of tomorrow — the students, the youth of today — they're all going to come here and they really want to do these amazing things.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: When we decided to also host this Expo, we had the community in mind, the person in mind, in order to create a city that also put the human at the center of what that development could look like. We are living in a world where integration with the community is important.

SANJIVE KHOSLA: We always ask people, "What's the one phrase that you think of when you come to this district?" And everybody says, "It's very human." The scale is very human. You feel very connected to it. You feel that it's nurturing you and taking care of you.

I really think that when you come here 10 years from now, you won't want to leave. You'll be home.

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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