

A Space Like No Other: The Vision Pavilion

ANITA MEHRA: It was the beginning of the Christmas vacation and it fell [at] the end of November. So a few days before December 2nd, 1971. So I was, I didn't know anything about it, but when I landed and I saw these incredibly open spaces, all I could think about [was], "Wow, look at the horse riding I can have on this vacation".

NOON SALIH: This is Anita Mehra, whose father was a prominent doctor at the Iranian Hospital in Dubai in the 1970s. She recalls how she first came to visit her father right before the formation of the United Arab Emirates on December 2nd, 1971. Anita was eager to do some horse riding.

ANITA MEHRA: So I went to Zabeel Stables, which were probably six to eight horses next to the Zabeel Palace. That's it! In the middle of the desert. And I was given a stallion, which was trying to buck me off the entire time and His Highness came there to make sure that everything was okay. And my father was there and I stayed on the horse.

And that became something which we had in common: was our love of horses.

NOON SALIH: Anita is remembering her encounter back in the early 70s with His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and ruler of Dubai. They both share a passion for horses and horse racing.

In 1992, Sheikh Zayed who was the President of the UAE at the time, established the UAE Equestrian and Racing Federation which hosted an endurance race for horses and camels. Since then, it has grown to organise renowned equestrian competitions and events all over the country.

ANITA MEHRA: And there was always, you know, if this link to expo is that there was always this idea that incredible events should be held in Dubai to put Dubai on the map and definitely Expo has done that.

NOON SALIH: This idea of world excellence is at the heart of the vision for Dubai. A vision that directly comes from His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

In today's episode, we'll take you through the Vision Pavilion, a space unlike any other on the Expo grounds that showcases this vision. We'll hear from Marjan Faraidooni, the Chief Experience Officer at Expo whose team curated the pavilion as well as Anita Mehra, the Senior Vice President of Brand and Communications of Dubai Airports. Anita is someone who saw Dubai grow first hand.

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

[INTRO STING]

NOON SALIH: Located in the Sustainability District, the Vision Pavilion is an emotional and inspiring homage to the Ruler of Dubai and celebrates the vision of His Highness. The way that this space came to be is rather unique. Here's Marjan:

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: You know, this one time, Her Excellency Reem Al-Hashimy and I were standing in this place and we oversaw the site and we were reflecting at how much progress we made and, you know, I looked to her and I said, "This would have not been possible if we weren't given the chance to dream and to be ambitious."

And that really came from His Highness, Sheikh Mohammed. And as we were discussing it, it came to us very clearly that we needed to sort of pay him back in a very subtle way, in a very different way, in a way that's also introduced this visionary individual to the rest of the world.

And we wanted people to go through a journey where they understood that this journey that the city of Dubai has gone through is really grounded in the vision of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed and his father and grandfather before him.

NOON SALIH: The Expo team knew that it needed its own dedicated space – a space to tell the vision that enabled this whole Expo.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: And it was very clear to us that wherever we wanted to speak about the journey of Dubai and the journey of His Highness, we wanted the building to be subtle so we decided to have a space that's sort of reflected the city of Dubai itself, small in size, but huge in impact.

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NOON SALIH: The Pavilion itself is split into 3 main galleries, each with a distinct style, creative interpretation and feel. The whole pavilion – its three main galleries

and transition spaces – is carefully curated to reflect the stories of His Highness from his book 'My Story: 50 Memories from 50 Years of Service'.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: It was one of the most difficult exhibitions or visitor experiences to curate.

We knew that this one was going to be different because it wasn't talking about a theme, it was talking about a person.

It was very clear to us that we wanted something of a visitor experience that was not so typical in terms of how we interpreted a person's life. So not museum-like, not only panels. That was one of the most fundamental components of curating this exhibition is that it needed to be relatable. It needed to reflect the human behind the vision that made Dubai what it is today.

NOON SALIH: Marjan and her team went to great lengths to make sure the pavilion reflected the grand and inspiring vision of His Highness but also a space that was relatable and warm and welcoming. And so, a lot of thought and intention was put in every detail of the design, starting with the exterior.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: We wanted it to represent the development of the city of Dubai. We wanted it to represent the past and the future, but also it needed to have a component to it that represented the values. So the facade is a mix of stone that is sand in colour that represents the sands of Dubai, the city of Dubai, but it also has a steel to depict progress.

And one of the inspirations to the design of that facade is the Dubai Creek. And now if you know about a bit of the history of Dubai, what has really opened up our

economy is the investments that we've made in dredging the Creek and making it wider to welcome ships from all over the world. So the facade is also inspired by the way the Creek has expanded over the years.

NOON SALIH: In addition, the entrance to the pavilion had a very specific reference.

MARJAN FARADOONI: So it's not just any door that you enter into this pavilion. And we wanted to create the same sense of welcome that traditional houses have in the UAE.

So the idea was: how wonderful would it be to create a replica of His Highness's grandfather's door in a place called Al Shindagha in downtown Dubai?

So we replicated it and you actually enter that door and you have to open the door to go in. So there is the sense of welcome, but the design is exactly what it is in the Al Shindagha area.

NOON SALIH: What this pavilion brings to life is an embodiment of that vision. A vision which embraces the past with its traditions and heritage but is fiercely forward looking: ambitious and optimistic.

Anita explains:

ANITA MEHRA: I think it's pride - pride in who you are. The Maktoums are very proud people, and they want their people to have the best. So I think the inspiration comes from the history from their forefathers, but they don't stay in the past. They're always moving forward to make life better. And from what I can see, and

from what I've read in Sheikh Mohammed's book, is that the vision is to make life better and better for everybody who lives in the UAE.

It's always going from better to the best, never resting on your laurels, always reach for the sky. And give whatever tools you can to your people, whether they be expats or UAE nationals, to be able to develop themselves. And Sheikh Rashid had the same; my father would say the same thing when he would go and see Sheikh Rashid. That he has an amazing vision of what Dubai – look at open skies policy for the airport. Who would think in those days, in the sixties for somebody to say, “Let's open the skies to all the airlines, let's not be a monopoly and let all these airlines come in because that will help business grow.”

NOON SALIH: Here, Anita is referring to Sheikh Rashid Al Maktoum, the father of Sheikh Mohammed and the former ruler of Dubai. The Vision Pavilion showcases how this forward facing vision starts from His Highness's childhood.

In the first gallery, an animation chronicles the time Sheikh Mohammed spent in the desert as a child, his love for nature and animals, but also the story when he got bit by a scorpion.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: Particularly when he's bit by the scorpion is that the message is: there is good in everything, even if it seems bad at the first base. So when he was bit by the scorpion, the lesson was that it hurts, but then I'm completely safe from scorpion bites for the rest of my life.

And yes, it hurts but I'm somehow stronger after that experience and it's sort of like the rite of passage. But the message is the need to overcome challenges, which became really a core theme of the city of Dubai as it continued to develop.

So there's this whole message that the city of Dubai continues to innovate, continues to be resilient, continues to overcome challenges.

ANITA MEHRA: In 2000 when Rashid Terminal was built, it was the only terminal with gates in the region. And then terminal three, where you have concourse A, Terminal Three was the largest terminal in the world. And that Concourse A was the only terminal in the world, specifically built for the A380 and everybody laughed.

Everybody said, "Oh, these are, you know, white elephants." I've heard so many white elephant stories for Dubai from the days of the Trade Centre. What do they want to build a tower in the middle of the desert? Look at us now.

NOON SALIH: Between the first and second gallery, visitors go through a transition space designed like a cabinet of curiosities. Glass jars and glass boxes house a number of insects and drawings and sketches and collections from His Highness.

ANITA MEHRA: I found that I didn't know that he could draw, you know, he had all those sketches of that

I didn't know that – and he's very good – I didn't know he was so interested in, you know, in collecting insects and it was almost like he had his own little research lab there. I knew he had a lot of curiosity. I know he knows the desert, like the back of his hand. And old traditions that the Bedouin have taught him, he knows.

NOON SALIH: And from this intricate showcase, visitors are greeted in the second gallery by a 50 tonne marble sculpture of a horse. It's not any horse – but

specifically, Dubai Millennium, one of Sheikh Mohammed's favourite horses. Projected onto the magnificent sculpture is a show that contains some of the poetry authored by His Highness.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: That poetry, we had it narrated by this gentleman called Saif Al Saadi, who is known to be an orator of His Highness's poems.

So that's also something that a lot of people don't know about, but it was part of the details in this whole exhibition that we needed to make sure that we were respecting the life of His Highness, as much as we could to the level of making sure that the orator of his poetry was the person who always orates his poems.

MUSIC

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: In the end of the show in the horse gallery, there is a very poignant moment where Millennium actually wins the race for the first time in Dubai, on sand.

So in the second gallery, you get introduced to the passion of His Highness, which is horse racing, but there is a metaphor. It's a metaphor: his love for horse racing, for the relationships that he had with his horses during difficult races. It's also a lesson of hard work, passion, and perseverance takes you a long way.

And having the courage to take risks, this is His Highness, but it's also reflected in the city of Dubai: what we see today as a city is not an overnight success. It's something that depended a lot on hard work, but also to be passionate towards the work that we had.

NOON SALIH: And going into the third and final gallery, Marjan and her team showcased the human element of the vision of His Highness. In this room, you see a montage of interviews of 30 people speaking about their experience and connection to Dubai.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: So we interviewed over 30 individuals and the way that we chose these individuals was, we wanted people that we knew of in the community.

We didn't necessarily seek the famous because we wanted to represent people who were just normal people, who are part of the development of the city, but of course extraordinary in their own ways.

And when we interviewed them, they naturally talked about the role His Highness played in the development of this city. So that was really wonderful for them to surface that element of what Dubai meant to them and their time in Dubai. And, and you would see it in what was the final outcome of that gallery is that what we did was really interesting in the sense that we created a narrative of the development of the city of Dubai and the different industries.

We chose people who happened to cross paths in those industries. And then we weaved all of what we got from them in interviews into what the final product was.

NOON SALIH: Anita Mehra shares how the growth of Dubai can be tracked through the flourishing of Dubai Airport itself. It is considered one of the best airports in the world and the busiest international one as well.

And fun fact: this airport is 10 years older than the UAE.

ANITA MEHRA: I remember the airport in 1971 when terminal one was built. Prior to that, there was the smaller airport, which you see in many, many photographs and prior to that, the flying boats used to land on the Creek. But there was always a vision of taking it from strength to strength. So as an example, we celebrated the billionth passenger in 2018.

The very interesting thing is that the first 50 years or so is when we had 500 million, the next 10 years, we got the next 500 million. And so you could see then how everything was done better, faster, technology was brought in, people got more educated, look at all the universities, all the whole infrastructure of Dubai helped Dubai airport to get to where it is. It can't do it on its own.

NOON SALIH: It's that principle of openness in the vision of His Highness that underlines the growth of Dubai: one that is based on interconnectedness and diversity.

ANITA MEHRA: His vision was always that it needs to be a place of diversity and where people would feel they would love to be there, always spoken in that way. And Sheikh Rashid was the same and also the vision of Sheikh Rashid and Sheikh Mohammed was one of people have to work hard; you can't get to any place if you don't work hard. And the work ethic is really important and that is the beauty of Dubai.

NOON SALIH: When Expo finally opened, His Highness paid a visit to the Vision Pavilion and saw the galleries inside - the animation chronicling his childhood, his collection items, his poetry, a sculpture of his horse Dubai Millennium and a replica of his grandfather's door.

The team was eagerly awaiting His Highness's reaction.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: I think, if you ask me how that visit was, I think the best way for me to describe it is in the tweets that he had less than an hour after he visited. And his tweet basically said: thank you to the creatives who brought my biography to life. And for me, that was the biggest testament that I think we did something right.

ANITA MEHRA: You know, [in] my opinion, he is Dubai. You know? Without his vision, none of what we see now would have happened really. His love for his country is incredible.

MARJAN FARAI DOONI: The story is really part and parcel of the story of Dubai. So it was very important for us, for the international visitor to understand that we didn't over develop overnight. That it's really a result of hard work. It's a result of being resilient people, but also more importantly, being a city that's very visionary by virtue of the individual who leads us and that if you're a part of the city, nothing is impossible. Truly, it doesn't matter where you're from, but if you're part of the city of Dubai, you always think optimistically, regardless of the challenges that face you.

You come through this pavilion and you feel proud that you are part of that story and you're proud and you get to know a little more about the man behind the vision, but you know him already, but you get to know a bit more about him and you come out and say that I'm proud of being part of the city of Dubai.

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