

Bright Lights, Smart City: Dubai Projects Its Future at Expo

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has established itself as a primary player in the fields of luxury tourism, logistics, and financial services, not only in the Middle East but the world. The country aspires to be a global leader, but to achieve this it must constantly reinvent itself and innovate to keep pace with the magnitude and speed of transformation in today's world. The country's economic, political, and social policies reflect this goal. Last year marked the UAE's golden jubilee, and to commemorate this milestone the government announced the [Projects of the 50](#), a scheme of groundbreaking projects and deep-seated reforms, such as the provision of [public incentives](#) to Emirati citizens eager to enter the private sector job market or the introduction of [legal measures](#) easing residents' daily life when dealing with divorce, inheritance and marriage procedures.

Expo 2020 Dubai was originally meant to culminate during the 50th anniversary of the UAE's founding, but the Covid-19 pandemic forced organizers to postpone the event for a year. Nonetheless, the world's fair, the first to be hosted in the Middle East, represents the UAE's ambitions to gain international legitimacy as a first-class hub for sustainable and digitally driven economic initiatives. Expo's guiding core theme, "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future," and its [three sub-themes](#), "Mobility, Sustainability, and Connectivity," capture the country's vision for its future.

A Global Handshake: How Pavilions Shape Perceptions

Expo has become a visitor-centric spectacle aimed at stimulating the mind and capturing the heart. Pavilions are places where all the senses come together with evocative settings, sounds, and experiences created using the most-advanced digital technology. High-resolution mega displays, impressive water features, and idyllic micro-gardens can all be seen on the site's grounds without even going inside a building.

Pre-pandemic projections of [25 million](#) visitors might not be met, but [over 10 million](#) have attended Expo 2020 as of Jan. 18th. "While the pandemic has certainly undercut and limited the event's potential from a public diplomacy perspective, Expo 2020 is the largest in-person public diplomacy of the year, and it is a significant accomplishment for the host country," emphasizes Jay Wang, Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Southern California.

Expo is a highly competitive environment with 192 countries vying for the attention of thousands of guests daily. Some countries seek to distinguish themselves by investing heavily in the architecture of their pavilion, believing the aesthetic is as important a message as the interior content. Others, either through choice or out of necessity, rely on storytelling in their exhibition space. "The great pavilions have been products of experience and design both inside and out," says Nicholas J. Cull, Professor of Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, who wrote a guide on Expo pavilions, which outlines nine "commandments" for designers. "Some exhibitions place too much emphasis on an innovative format and not enough on the quality of their content."

The most-important function of a pavilion is to engender emotion in visitors and trigger individual engagement. Beyond the aesthetics and artistic dimensions of the international fair, pavilions embody a complex political and social role. "A pavilion is a little tent under which big worlds and embattled perceptions of the world come into view," [writes](#) Joel Robinson, a Research Associate at the Open University in England. Expo is therefore an extension of [public diplomacy](#), to the extent that it allows countries to brand a carefully engineered image of themselves on a global stage. For "rising nations," mega-events are a sort of "a rite of passage," argues Prof. Cull, while established world powers see such

fairs as “a mechanism to demonstrate continued relevance and status.” Most countries consider Expo a platform to express ambitions and propose their future vision to a worldwide audience.

From Souks to Stocks: Doing Business at Expo

Culture and art aside, Expo represents a vital business opportunity, with countries from around the globe gathering to promote their national flagship industries and latest technological innovations, and buyers and investors scouting pavilions in search of profitable projects. Major powers often use the mega-event to re-affirm their leadership positions, but emerging economies see the fair as a chance to seize new market share. Expo is a good platform for capital-deficient economies to connect with an international audience, many of whom have disposable income. A pavilion for such countries is a way to advertise business opportunities, explain how to invest in their country, or just to help raise awareness of where they exist on a map.

Visit the pavilions of some of these lower-tier countries and you will encounter well-designed signs such as “Doing business with Myanmar” or “Malawi is open for Business.” Inside, there are diagrams, such as Bhutan’s “Foreign Direct Investment Map,” that chart the step-by-step bureaucratic process for foreign firms to obtain business licenses. At Expo you can visit the entire [global market](#) in 4.3 square kilometers. Pavilions are carefully designed to showcase national products and sell pristine crafts and often include intimate reception spaces where business talks can take place and contracts can be signed.

Writing its Name in the Stars: The Success of the Dubai Model

The UAE plays a [strategic role](#) in the network of the global capitalist economy. The so-called Dubai economic model, which dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, is based on what Middle East geo-political expert Afshin Molavi [has dubbed](#) the “three-Ts:” trade, transport, and tourism. Dubai is a global player in logistics, features the world’s busiest airport, and is also a frontrunner in the [Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions \(MICE\) industry](#). Expo 2020 offers an unprecedented opportunity for the UAE to showcase its entrepreneurial zeal; two of Dubai’s flagship companies, [DP World](#) and [Emirates](#), even have dedicated pavilions. From government to the private sector, the Emirati economy’s gears are working in synergy to ensure the [highest resonance](#) possible via such a global fair, with massive digital marketing campaigns and ticket resellers playing a critical role in raising awareness for Expo 2020. From large tour operators – such as Arabian Adventures and Expedia – to small family-run businesses, travel agencies scattered all over the world are Expo 2020’s frontline outposts. By reaching out to an international audience, they spread information about the global fair and market it as an appealing destination to foreign tourists. The campaigns highlight the so-called “[Dubai phenomenon](#),” a combination of [thematic attractions](#), futuristic architecture, and proficient infrastructure.

“Praised as the growth engine to fuel the future economic development of the city, Expo 2020 acted as the consecration of Dubai strategy of post-oil diversification,” comments Delphine Pagès-El Karoui, Senior Lecturer in Geography at INALCO University. “Expo 2020 is an excellent way of branding the city to the world, both as a global innovation hub and as a city where you can encounter the diversity of the world.”

The UAE has proved it has a [comparative advantage](#) over its regional and global competitors in managing crowd-puller events, such as the [Dubai Shopping Festival](#), celebrating its 27th edition in 2022, and the [F1 Grand Prix](#) annual racing event in Abu Dhabi. Expo 2020 Dubai stands out because of its “impressive organization, state-of-the-art infrastructure, and digital programming with high-quality streaming,” emphasizes Prof. Wang. “In many ways, the UAE has set standards for future and other similar events.” Other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states will try to replicate Expo 2020; Qatar [is set to host](#) the FIFA World Cup 2022 later this year, and Saudi Arabia [has officially declared](#) it will bid to host Expo 2030. Though competition in this mega-event industry is bound to get more and more fierce in the region, Dubai has the advantage of being first.

With Expo 2020, Dubai has positioned itself as a model city in terms of urban planning, global trade, and financial business, but it has also shown its [resiliency](#). The country persevered through the Covid-19 pandemic and held the event under arduous circumstances. “Dubai has handled this mega-event better than Japan handled its Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics,” says Prof. Cull. Even though [possible closures](#) over a spike in infections remains high, Expo organizers have managed to keep the event running, adhering to stringent [Covid-19 protocols](#), including proof of vaccination or a 72-hour negative PCR test.

The UAE’s leadership hopes to realize economic gains related to Expo 2020, but any financial boon is secondary to the boost in reputation the country hopes to achieve from running a well-organized, safe, and memorable event. “When a country is admired, it has more support from the global community and is more secure,” says Professor Cull. “Expo 2020 is a contribution to the ongoing reputational security of

the UAE." A case in point is the solidarity shown by the [international community](#) to the UAE in the wake of the Jan. 17 [Houthi drone attacks](#), which targeted [oil facilities](#) in Abu Dhabi, killing three.

Local Heroes: Emirati Volunteers and Person-to-Person Diplomacy

Undoubtedly, Expo 2020 Dubai is an unprecedented opportunity for visitors from all over the world to meet after months of travel restrictions and limited mobility induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is estimated that foreigners account for around [70 per cent](#) of the total attendance. However, it should also be highlighted that this mega-event was designed by Emiratis and meant to address an Emirati public. The Dubai government and the federal authority have deliberately implemented hundreds of initiatives prior to and during the international fair to encourage nationals to actively participate in this once-in-a-lifetime moment.

One example of such local involvement is the [Expo 2020 Volunteer Program](#). [Sponsored](#) by Etisalat, the national telecommunications company, the initiative led to the selection and preparation of 30,000 volunteers, [nearly half](#) of who are Emiratis. It is estimated that [61 per cent](#) of the total volunteers between 18-24 are young nationals, who will directly interact with thousands of tourists. Through the volunteer program these locals act as "positive megaphones" of the Emirati culture, promoting the values of the country and engaging in [person-to-person diplomacy](#) with a captive audience from many countries. Expo, therefore, is not only an opportunity for young Emirati nationals to discover the best of what each country has to offer and mingle with different cultures, but an [empowering moment](#) that offers them the chance to get individually involved on a global stage while expressing their national pride.

The mixture of local volunteers and non-Emiratis all working toward the same goal — to make the Expo experience meaningful and memorable for every visitor — also conveys the message of multicultural cosmopolitanism that Dubai in particular and the UAE in general wants to project. "Expo 2020 Dubai volunteers are the embodiment of the UAE's diverse and cooperation-loving community," [praised](#) Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence, and Commissioner General of Expo 2020 Dubai, on the occasion of the International Volunteer Day on Dec. 5, 2021. "We are proud that the volunteers — Emiratis and expatriates — demonstrate the best of our nation."

The UAE can also use Expo 2020 Dubai as a platform to promote national unity. They have offered [paid leave](#) to government employees to visit the global fair and encouraged Emirati citizens to attend with special packages. With its iconic "falcon wings" shape, the UAE's pavilion is a tribute to the country's heritage but also to its progress. The pavilion tells a story that moves from early nomadic life in the desert to the discovery of oil and the most recent technological boom, thus embodying a message shaped explicitly at boosting civil morale and community pride.

When the Party Ends: The Legacy of Expo

One of the most significant challenges for countries that host Expo is how to ensure that the vision of the event continues after the crowds have gone. World fairs are [temporary in nature](#), but the messages they convey are meant to last. The physical pavilions often survive — the Eiffel Tower in Paris and Atomium in Brussels, for example — and become an integral part of the host city's urban fabric. Host countries are therefore evaluated not only on the Expo itself but also on how well they integrate their core themes and architecture once the event is over. "The long-term success of an Expo requires careful design," says Prof. Cull.

For this reason, good planning must feature prominently in the strategic compass of the organizers. From the early stages, Expo 2020 has devoted significant resources towards developing a master plan for future use of the venues and space. The outcome of this plan is called [District 2020](#), an urban project expected to retain 80 per cent of Expo 2020 Dubai's structure and further the themes of mobility, sustainability, and connectivity [by combining](#) the drive towards more sustainable lifestyles and the integration of smart tech solutions into the daily routine of its residents.

Developed in a previously empty space at the edge of Dubai, District 2020 does not impose on older residential neighbourhoods or threaten environmentally protected areas. It is a [15-minute ride](#) from the city centre and will be serviced by modern, efficient [modes of inter-city transportation](#), including Dubai Metro. The project is strategically located between Dubai's business and tourist hubs and the city's biggest [port](#) and [airport](#), and will thus become a critical connector for the city's economic network. The [logistics](#) and mobility sectors will be central in this urban reconfiguration as Dubai strives to create a more diversified economy. "District 2020 presents an opportunity to reinforce a new centrality in the south of Dubai, around Jebel Ali port and the brand-new Al Maktoum International Airport," notes Pagès-El Karoui.

A Blueprint for a Green Future

Expo 2020 is more than a showcase of picture-perfect tourist destinations or an entertainment event. The goal of such a world event is to enable a mutual understanding among nations and enhance partnerships within the international community. "Expo provides an opportunity to listen and learn, to share and anticipate, to imagine what the world could yet be," says Prof. Cull. "Partnerships need shared visions that set an objective for participants and Expos are exactly the place to look for visions of our collective future."

The shared vision of the Dubai Expo is for the UAE, its neighbours in the Middle East, and all responsible countries worldwide to step up and find joint strategies to address present and future threats to humanity, including the need for [green energy solutions](#), more sustainable, decarbonized lifestyles, and the increased use of smart, digital technologies. The UAE hopes that Expo 2020 shows its willingness to move from petrostate to global leader for sustainable development. The event also acts as a method of political imaging, demonstrating the capabilities of the country, and thereby hoping to increase its development in other sectors. The world fair, however, is only the first step. If the country is to maintain its newly earned credibility on these green issues in the long-term it will need to deliver on its promises and be a bridge between governments, private companies, and international organizations on the global stage.

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