



The Greatest Show on Earth? Considering Expo 2020, Dubai

Nicholas J. Cull¹

Accepted: 16 April 2022 / Published online: 3 May 2022
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On 31 March 2022 Expo Dubai 2020 closed its doors, ending the latest iteration of perhaps the greatest show on earth, a universal exposition in the tradition of London, 1851; Paris, 1900 and Montreal, 1967. Despite many prophecies of doom, Expo Dubai succeeded against the odds and proved a welcome reintroduction to the in-person event to a world weary from 2 years of zoom calls and social distancing. The COVID pandemic required a year delay in its opening and the imposition of a range of vaccination and testing requirements on participants. The Expo also survived a call for a boycott from the European parliament on grounds of UAE's poor record of human rights. In the event, all went much as planned. The wealthy or most eager countries built pavilions. The less prosperous or more skeptical presented exhibits in space provided by the host. Visitors attended as hoped. There were remarkable cultural events—Ireland organized a choir featuring participants from a record breaking 146 nations—and unexpected moments like the wall of solidarity messages at Ukraine's pavilion created in the expo's final month. The final admission figures passed the 24 million mark, a number that seemed out of reach at the expo's half-way point. An impressive showing to be sure, but what does it tell us about the state of our world of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy?

The first question in any assessment of Expo 2020 is whether it enhanced the image of Dubai and UAE. There were elements in the show which spoke to the UAE's preferred image of tolerance and openness. A female director general—Reem Ebrahim Al-Hashimi—and a pavilion dedicated to women's achievement challenged stereotypes. But the truth is that reputations are not made by single events, even if held on a vast scale. They are built and maintained by years of engagement in areas relevant to the wider world. In the case of Expo 2020, the fact of hosting successfully plays to the claim of UAE to be a global crossroads as did

the kudos of being the first country in the region to host such a global mega event. Dubai has successfully paid rent on its claim to be a world leader. More than this, Dubai hosted in style. The state commissioned a series of astonishing buildings for the expo, most obviously its national pavilion designed by Spain's Santiago Calatrava in the shape of the wings of a desert falcon. Yet the experience of Dubai 2020 was less of a moment for the world to meet Dubai or for Dubai to meet the world. Given that 90% of the workforce in Dubai are foreigners, more than any expo in history this expo was the world meeting the world facilitated by the host. The expo took place in the English language. The staff who did the welcoming were from South Asia and East Africa. Their warmth was as much a feature of proceedings as the glorious new buildings. In fact, while Emiratis passed through expo they seemed distant as if somehow on a different plane. The small country pavilions which addressed an Emirati audience, hoping to attract trade or investment, seemed a little desperate and irrelevant to the actual theme of expo 2020: connecting minds, creating the future. The great pavilions of expo 2020 addressed the world.

As ever, Expo showed the power of an iconic building to represent a country. While UAE's own falcon-shaped building stole the show, Poland's wood pavilion with a shimmering exterior decorated with white cutout birds (a tribute to the annual migration of birds from the Middle East to Eastern Europe) also won many admirers. Saudi Arabia spent an astonishing sum on its pavilion (reputedly five times the budget of Germany) and Emiratis appreciated the gift. Luxembourg had a beautiful building resembling a moebius strip. Peru's building had wonderful colors. Yet Expo Dubai proved once again that an impressive exterior is not sufficient. Technology proved the undoing of some otherwise impressive offerings. Britain's sophisticated pavilion featured AI which visitors could use to build a collective poem, but with just a few ipads available to enter words the lines were long, requiring visitors to queue in full sun. The solution to this—moving the line to the shady side of the building—eliminated the opportunity to view the pictures of British places and technology which carried some of the

✉ Nicholas J. Cull
cull@usc.edu

¹ University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA



public diplomacy freight. Korea was worse. The pavilion expected each visitor to become swiftly familiar with an augmented reality device which was supposed to provide bonus views while heading round the pavilion. Pavilion staff were curt in their instructions and so regimented that the Argentinian architecture writer with whom I visited cheekily asked if they were representing North or South Korea. Russia's decision to make a special feature of its facial recognition software and provide data on visitors in real time struck many visitors as sinister. Despite the friendly staff, cute mascot and cheerful 'From Russia with love' slogan, the implication was that in Putin's Russia exhibits look at you.

Expos typically reflect the state of the art in exhibit technology. By this token Dubai was the year of the video wall. Many pavilions—even the small ones—included video walls, many with drone footage of sweeping vistas, often augmented by digital animation of birds. One day into my week at expo such walls seemed a cliché. What worked were pavilions that went beyond just impressive sights to engage the whole person in the experience of a visit. Multiple pavilions decided to work with scent at Expo 2020. Oman's pavilion was dedicated to frankincense and the perfume industry; Palestine included five scents evoking Palestinian tradition; Austria had a pine scent naturally rising from a wood floor, in a pavilion that was naturally cooled by air currents; Kazakhstan included the scent of the steppes. Some of the best pavilions including Poland and Palestine invited visitors to touch their exhibits. The US pavilion allowed visitors to touch a piece of moon rock. Others had invitations to move or even dance. Lebanon and Germany both had swings in their final room. In Lebanon it was a chance for a selfie. In the German pavilion when visitors swung in sync a splendid display lit up, underlining the possibility of collective action to stop climate change. Israel and Colombia invited visitors to dance. Some pavilions contained all round sensory experiences. Switzerland created a foggy mountain side. Netherlands made rain from desert air. Singapore had a rainforest. Australia was especially generous with live music. Kazakhstan not only had live music for people lined up outside but a terrific final show in which a dancer interacted with a robotic hand.

Some countries had unusual journeys to Dubai. Israel's attendance was the fruit of a diplomatic breakthrough. Its pavilion was a heartening invitation to cooperation. The US came close to not attending expo Dubai. Laws passed in the 1990s require a specific congressional appropriation if the US is to take part in an expo and successive administrations have counted on the private sector to pick up the tab. Appeals by Secretaries Tillerson and Pompeo both failed to raise enough funding and it was only through the generosity of the Emirati government that the US could afford its \$60 million pavilion. The debacle has multiple implications. It speaks of enduring weakness in the legislative support

for US public diplomacy. It also shows a 'pull' factor in US global leadership. There is an apparent desire for the US to be present at the head of the western world. Perhaps America's absence would undermine the prestige or claim to universality of a mega event. Perhaps, for all its flaws, no successor the USA can yet be as trusted.

There are some countries that always seem to embrace expos, reflecting a commitment to building soft power and maintaining reputational security across decades. Past Expo host nations Germany, Kazakhstan and Italy all excelled and were named the top three by many visitors. Portugal included wonderful immersive video rooms. Spain was perhaps over-reliant on a quirky film show and the people who booked in advance reported that Japan was wonderful inside as well as out. It was interesting to see where countries that have previously emphasized expos dropped the ball. Of the countries which bid for 2020 against Dubai, besides Russia (which wanted to host in Yekaterinburg), Brazil (which proposed Sao Paulo) was free standing but tatty and underwhelming. Turkey (which proposed Izmir) made do with space in a UAE-built building and offered little more than a tourist display. Are the glory days of Turkish and Brazilian public diplomacy nations past?. Most surprisingly of all China's pavilion was very weak. Built to look like a traditional Chinese lantern it lit up the evenings with an impressive light show, but inside—beyond the giant welcome video from President Xi—there was little to latch onto. The finale was an allegorical film about space exploration in which kids around the world search for a missing space probe and then grow up to become astronauts. The American kid turns out to have been working a generation earlier than the rest and by the climax of the film is an aging professor who passes the torch of leadership to a young and attractive Chinese woman and similarly handsome Emirati man, who blast off to explore the galaxy as inheritors of America's mission. 'All the lights in the universe are your loved ones' we are told in dialogue that presumably made sense before translated into English.

The flip side of expo regulars underperforming was the terrific contributions of countries not usually judged great participants, who should now certainly be considered worth watching for future outreach. Part of the reason for this was the presence in Dubai of substantial guest worker populations. UAE was not the only country with people on hand to please. Expo Dubai saw a fascinating fusion of diaspora diplomacy and expo diplomacy as country's with substantial worker populations in the Emirates looked to inspire pride in their own citizens and introduce themselves to their employers and colleagues in the UAE work force. Philippines created a gorgeous pavilion built around art installations. The climax was a set of brightly colored figures suspended as if flying in space, symbolic of the overseas Filipinos who constitute the country's 'gift to the world.' Pakistan shone



even brighter. Its pavilion was spectacular inside and out, and communicated a warmth, openness and even a spirituality missing from the country's effort in Shanghai 2010. India took its pavilion a little too far. Video footage of tanks and an entire floor dedicated to the cult of Modi undercut splendid rooms dedicated to art and culture. Thailand actually included an exhibit showcasing people who had relocated to the country in a transparent attempt to recruit Dubai's high-flying expats: a different kind of diaspora diplomacy. The US had anticipated a diaspora audience and noticeably included South Asian faces and voices in its displays about innovation and education in the US. It was a subtler invitation to partnership than the Thai. As in past years the diversity of the United States manifest in its multilingual corps of Youth Ambassadors was the US contribution's secret weapon.

Besides the attention to diasporas there were a few other signs of the times. Expos always look to the future and Dubai had no shortage of technical marvels on show. Visitors shared the walkways with cute robots some of whom proclaimed in suitably tinny voices that they were delivering 'delicious meals'. There were electric cars and aircraft on show and Bolivia had an impressive rechargeable motorbike. Many pavilions included elaborate future cityscapes. UAE and Belgium did this especially well. Some pavilions looked to the past giving audiences a chance to see meaningful historic objects in person. The US scored by including a translation of the Koran once owned by Thomas Jefferson. Egypt made a splash with a mummy. France fell flat with an original 35 volume set of the first great *encyclopédie* created by Denis Diderot. Of the great struggles of our time, there was lots of attention to gender equality. Many countries made an effort to showcase ethnic or religious diversity and inclusion of indigenous peoples. Of the absences, ability/disability didn't figure much. Besides issues of access in some pavilions, I spotted a display featuring a Paralympian in Belgium, a boy in a wheelchair in Australia and a woman

with Down syndrome included in a montage in Canada. Unlike Milan in 2015 countries did not showcase same sex marriage rules. A trans performer scheduled to appear at the Thai pavilion was held and reportedly mistreated at the UAE border. Of our political fault lines, the presence of an Israeli pavilion suggested that political history can move on. The quiet miracle of an Irish pavilion which presented elements from both the South and North (as a result of the island's single tourist authority) served as a reminder that in some places it already has.

In the last analysis Expo 2020 showed the continued viability of the expo as a public diplomacy form. Its future seems secure. Plans for expo 2025 in Osaka are well advanced, bids for expo 2028 include a terrific proposal from Bloomington, Minnesota. The US now has a permanent expo unit within the Department of State and plans to seek a rolling budget allocation specifically for expo participation. On top of this, the race to host expo 2030 is on. Contenders bidding include Riyadh, Rome, Moscow and Odesa, Ukraine, which must now be considered a front runner provided its peace can be restored in time for the vote in 2023. Ukraine's candidacy for 2030 is further evidence that a nation state eager to introduce itself to the world, even on the brink of war as it was at time of its bid, can still consider hosting an expo as a first-rate way to engage the world. Expos will clearly be with us for many years to come.

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Nicholas J. Cull is editor emeritus of this journal. This is the fifth expo for which he has contributed an editorial commentary. He served as a consultant to the US pavilion and visited expo as a guest in February 2022.

