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Why Dubai World Expo Matters [1]

The World Expo is arguably the single biggest showcasing event of a nation outside of its own borders. It is one of the few mass events that command worldwide attention. But unlike the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup, the World Expo is not a “media event,” an event primarily experienced through media broadcasts; rather, the spectacle is to be sensed and experienced by “being there.”

This mega event (otherwise known as the “World’s Fair”) began in 1851 when London hosted the “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations,” with 34 countries participating. The next World Expo (rescheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic) will open its gates this Friday in Dubai, United Arab Emirates and run through March 31, 2022 with 192 participating countries. It will be the first time in history for the event to be held in the Middle East.

While it will not be the most attended Expo in history (record set by Expo 2010 Shanghai with 73 million visitors), the Dubai Expo is expected to attract the most culturally and ethnically diverse audience of any previous Expo. This coincides with the rise of a global middle class,

especially from emerging economies, which is expanding its interactions with the world through work and leisure. In a mid-pandemic world, this enormous gathering of countries and people constitutes a singular global communal moment.

The World Expo is a multifaceted event—a political, business, cultural and technological project. It provides a platform for nations to bring their cultures and innovations into direct contact with large numbers of people. It is also a vehicle for national promotion for the host country. Every participant nation naturally tries to present the best of itself to the world. The fascinating question inevitably lies in how visitors come to view these national representations, and above all, what the experience at the Expo means for them.

The World Expo embodies the technology of storytelling in vivid ways, from architectural experimentations to multisensory extravaganzas. This pandemic is poised to change some of the fundamental practices of the Expo that will endure in the years to come.

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Even before the pandemic, our digital life started to interact ever more with the physical realm. In our growingly tech-infused world, there seems to be craving for a sense of place and a sense of conviviality that an in-person event like the Expo provides. Physical presence remains a more elemental form of communication and a transcultural human condition. This has been made particularly poignant, as national and individual isolations over the past year have accentuated the need to recover our senses of space and place. While we seek genuine person-to-person contact, our lives have also been normalized into contactless and socially distanced existence during the pandemic. How to forge compelling and meaningful interactions on the Expo ground is a new, daunting challenge.

The Expo begins as a place-based attraction. Advancements in digital technology are upending how people experience and enjoy the event. Think about all the selfie moments and instagrammable places, as visitors are empowered by mobile technology and a 5G network. The Dubai Expo will be less a closed and choreographed physical space, but a more fluid, open-ended one where visitor experiences are increasingly transmedia and can be instantaneously shared beyond Expo grounds.

As we explore the many possibilities of digital technology to create new experiences of gathering, the Dubai Expo may very well turn out to be a hothouse experiment for making sense of how the boundaries of the World Expo will be redrawn and redefined to embody connectivity between the physical and the digital, and how our changing expectations of narrative formats and platforms will shape visitor experiences.

The Dubai Expo is taking place at an inflection point of shared interruptive challenges. The Expo itself exemplifies both global and national consciousness. It has always reflected the underlying landscape of international relations. And national identity, both of the pavilion and the visitor, is rendered visible and salient at the Expo. In fact for most people, national representation is the *raison d'être* for them to choose and visit a particular pavilion.

Admittedly this outsized event by its very nature presents narratives that are decidedly optimistic, selective and often times self-congratulatory. Some argue that such public engagement is superficial at best, as they point to national pavilions as pandering tourist fare and visitor experience as being shallow. But our research has shown that the experiences created by the pavilions, when done well, are meaningful and memorable for visitors, and can even be transformational.

It is in the space of the pavilion that people and ideas from different countries and cultures become linked and connected. And national promotion in contemporary Expos is performed in the context of cosmopolitanism. Teeming with hundreds of pavilions and attractions, the Expo ground is competitive but not conflictual. It validates and recognizes each participant nation. The spectacles of national pavilions forge a physical sense of the diversity of human experiences.

In these times of tensions and uncertainty as we confront economic and ecological challenges that are not divisible between domestic and international boundaries, the Dubai Expo offers a welcome moment and space for re-igniting our cultural imagination and our belief in human agency. This spirit of finding harmony and hope amid divisive and discordant voices in the global arena is important and urgent now more than ever.