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Feb 23, 2022 by César Corona

Expo 2020 Dubai: Public Diplomacy from Around the World ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: This is part 1 of a photo essay series exploring Expo 2020 Dubai through historical context, individual country participation and public diplomacy opportunities through Expos. The author is CEO of ExpoMuseum.com. Read [part 2](#) and [part 3](#).

Expos are arguably the most extraordinary public diplomacy event in the world. For months, and through exhibitions, events and architecture, governments of virtually every country interact with millions of visitors.



World flags at Expo 2020 Dubai. Photo by César Corona / Expomuseum.

Over the last decade, the USC Center on Public Diplomacy covered [Expo 2010 Shanghai](#) and [Expo 2015 Milan](#). This series for the CPD Blog will now cover Expo 2020 Dubai through a series of posts that discuss the importance of Expos for public diplomacy, first by providing context and then by focusing on the outstanding participation of five countries from different regions at Expo 2020 Dubai.

Open from October 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022—due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) General Assembly postponed the Expo for one year—Expo 2020 Dubai is the latest in an almost uninterrupted tradition that began in 1851 in London with the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. Since the entry into force of the Convention Relating to International Exhibitions in 1931, the BIE has regulated 48 Expos.



UAE Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai. Photo by César Corona / Expomuseum.

The official names of Expo categories have changed several times, but we can group them into two types:

- 1) Large-scale Expos, officially called *General First Category*, *Universal* or *Registered*, are those where official participants are allowed to build their own pavilions. Expo 2010 Shanghai, Expo 2015 Milan and Expo 2020 Dubai are the most recent large-scale Expos.
- 2) Small-scale Expos, officially called *General Second Category*, *Special*, *Specialized* or *Recognized*, are those where official participants mount their exhibit in a prefabricated building provided free of charge by the host country. Expo 2008 Zaragoza, Expo 2012 Yeosu and Expo 2017 Astana are the most recent small-scale Expos.

Expo 2020 Dubai is officially a Registered International Exhibition. While it is the first large-scale Expo in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, it is the third Expo regulated by the BIE in the region, after Expo 1953 Jerusalem and Expo 1956 Beit Dagon, both officially categorized as Special International Exhibitions.




Cultural Event at Expo 2020 Dubai. Photo by César Corona / Expomuseum.

The central theme of Expo 2020 Dubai is “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future,” and accredited media were given the summary: “Innovation and progress are the result of people and ideas coming together in inspiring new ways.” The three sub-themes, Opportunity, Mobility and Sustainability, also serve as a guide to group official participants into three main districts throughout the Expo site. After the Expo closes, the site will become District 2020, a smart city that aims to become the newest urban planning landmark in the Expo world after Expo 1998 Lisbon.

The organizers of Expo 2020 Dubai secured the participation of the governments of 191 countries. For the first time, each official participant has its own pavilion. However, although all participating countries were offered the opportunity to build their own building, many chose to present themselves using the prefabricated buildings provided by the organizing committee.

The United States holds the record for hosting the most Expos, with a total of 11, from Philadelphia in 1876 to New Orleans in 1984. Nevertheless, a large part of its population is unaware that these events still exist. Despite this perception, Expos continue to be active and, in fact, have more visitors, more extensive exhibits and more attractions than the most successful amusement parks. The Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World, the most visited amusement park globally, received a total of 21 million visits in 2019; Expo 2020 Dubai, despite limitations imposed by the COVID pandemic, received 10 million visits in its first 100 days. In terms of size, the Expo 2020 Dubai site is five times the size of the Magic Kingdom, and in terms of content, Expo 2020 Dubai has more than 210 pavilions, compared to the Magic Kingdom's 41 attractions.



*Panoramic view of Expo 2020 Dubai. Photo by César Corona / Expomuseum.
(Full resolution photo [here](#) )*

Expo 2020 Dubai is a delightful event for its urban design and wide range of exhibitions, events, cuisine and architecture. On the part of the organizing committee, the work has been exemplary in many aspects, and it is foreseeable that this Expo will set new standards for future Expos. On the part of participating countries, a few stand out for their strategic approach and long-term thinking. Still, in most cases, there is a lack of awareness of the educational nature of the Expos, with exhibits excessively focused on business and investment promotion. International exhibitions continue to be relevant and valuable for public diplomacy, but most participating countries do not understand their role and miss out on valuable opportunities to communicate with foreign audiences.

The next article of this series will discuss the origin of Expos and how their educational purpose, international nature and intergovernmental regulation came to exist. In the meantime, through March 2022 there is still time to explore Expo 2020 Dubai in person or through a virtual 360° tour.

Lead photo: Main Entrance to Expo 2020 Dubai. Photo by César Corona / Expomuseum.
