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# **Expo 2025 Viewpoints: Sensory Design** <sup>[1]</sup>

*This article is part of the CPD Blog series, “Expo 2025 Viewpoints,” featuring essays and photographs by USC Master of Public Diplomacy students who toured the Expo in Osaka, Japan. This article by Katerin Ortega Villanueva is also available as an [interactive website](#).*

World Expos have long served as platforms for countries to project their identity, values, and ambitions on the global stage ([BIE](#)) . This project explores how national pavilions at Expo 2025 Osaka function as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power, with a particular focus on Sensory Design. Sensory Design, engaging visitors through sight, sound, smell, touch, and even taste, is a powerful strategy in creating memorable, emotional, and immersive experiences. In an age of global competition for attention and influence, these multi-sensory environments reveal not only how nations see themselves, but how they want to be seen by the world.





## **United States of America**

The United States emerged as one of the most popular destinations at Expo 2025 Osaka, with visitors queuing for up to two hours to experience its bold and immersive journey through space, according to a U.S. Youth Ambassador present at the event (personal communication, May 2025). With a focus on innovation, space exploration, travel, and connectivity, the pavilion captivated audiences with a cinematic experience reminiscent of a Universal Studios

attraction. Its mascot, Spark, represents the “spark of imagination and creativity” and acts as a guide throughout the experience (U.S. Mission Japan).

Upon entering, guests are welcomed into an indoor waiting area, where digital displays introduce the cultural and geographic diversity of the U.S. through animated posters and flashing visuals. The main attraction unfolds in an enclosed theater surrounded by five massive screens, where Spark leads viewers on an interstellar journey enhanced by smoke effects simulating a space launch. The entire experience is anchored by a memorable theme song, sung by Spark, that lingers long after visitors exit, creating a lasting emotional connection and reinforcing the U.S. presence as both informative and experiential.



## Japan

As the host nation, Japan's pavilion gracefully blends cultural tradition with futuristic innovation, offering a multisensory narrative of balance, beauty, and progress. Natural materials like wood and paper reflect Japan's architectural heritage, while cutting-edge technologies, such as algae-based biodegradable materials used in 3D printing, demonstrate the country's forward-looking solutions for sustainability. A highlight of the pavilion is an

interactive tactile feature: when one visitor taps a circular panel, the same motion is mirrored in another part of the space, linking strangers through touch.

Thematically aligned with Expo 2025's title, "Designing Future Society for Our Lives," Japan's solution-oriented design provides a window into a better future ([Expo2025](#)). Throughout, visitors experience carefully orchestrated environments of light, scent, and sound that showcase Japan's philosophy of *omotenashi* (hospitality). The Algae x Hello Kitty mascot fuses pop culture charm with environmental messaging, underscoring Japan's mastery in communicating complex themes through soft power and sensory elegance ([Japan Pavilion](#)).

## **Germany**

Germany's pavilion stands as a model of interactive learning and sustainable innovation. Under the motto "Innovating for a Sustainable World," the pavilion fuses education, technology, and play. The structure's exterior, built from biodegradable textiles and recycled materials, sets the tone for a hands-on journey focused on the circular economy ([German Pavilion](#)). Inside, kinetic installations, energy-harvesting zones, and tactile games draw visitors into a participatory experience that reflects German engineering ingenuity.

Guided by the Circulars, friendly, kawaii-style mascots who communicate in German, English, and Japanese, visitors explore how everyday actions can contribute to a sustainable future ([Circulars German Pavilion](#)). One standout feature is the motion-powered "Circular Living" zone, where guests generate their own vision of the future through an interactive display. Germany's pavilion leaves visitors with a sense of empowerment, showing that fun, education, and ecological responsibility can go hand-in-hand.





South Korea

South Korea's pavilion, themed "With Hearts," merges traditional aesthetics with high-tech immersion (Korea Pavilion). The exterior's pixelated façade hints at transformation and digital evolution, while the interior offers cutting-edge interactive experiences that respond to movement and gesture. A striking light installation greets visitors, laser-like beams criss-cross through a darkened space, creating an evolving matrix that reacts to the audience in real time.

Another notable feature is the bubble creation zone, where participants complete the cycle by breathing into specially designed horns, symbolically giving the "breath of life". These bubbles float freely around the space, visualizing the guests' active participation in building the future. (Exhibit Space ?) While the pavilion does not feature a named mascot, its dynamic and responsive environment effectively communicates South Korea's commitment to innovation grounded in culture and collective experience.



Singapore

Singapore's pavilion, themed "Dream Sphere" offers a tranquil yet emotionally resonant journey into the nation's vision of sustainable and harmonious living. Housed in a striking red sphere, the experience winds through white paper-like cut out gardens, responsive installations, and a series of immersive environments, filled with the soft glow of ambient lighting (Singapore Pavilion).

A standout feature is the "dream release" station. Visitors write their personal hopes or wishes on illuminated discs. With a gentle swipe of the hand, the wish transforms into a digital shooting star, gliding across a canopy overhead. This moment captures the pavilion's essence: small individual acts contributing to a collective future. While there is no official mascot, the experience itself, alive with interactivity and symbolism, becomes the embodiment of Singapore's forward-thinking spirit and its belief in nurturing human potential through design and care.





### **Honorable mentions: Australia, Switzerland, France, Canada**

Australia's pavilion impressed with its recreation of the natural world, celebrating forest, land, and sea through an enveloping sensory journey grounded in environmental storytelling ([Australia Pavilion](#)). Switzerland delivered a minimal yet poetic experience, combining ambient light, immersive projections, and a bubble-blowing exhibit similar to Korea's, all emphasizing precision and eco-consciousness ([Switzerland Pavilion](#)). France took a more theatrical

approach with dazzling light displays and shimmering bead curtains that reflected the country's artistic flair and innovation ([France Pavilion](#)). Canada rounded out the group with a strong emphasis on Indigenous storytelling and diversity, weaving together natural textures, interactive soundscapes, and cultural artifacts([Canada Pavilion](#)). Each of these pavilions, while distinct, contributed richly to the Expo's collective narrative of global creativity, sustainability, and sensory engagement.

## **Conclusion**

The national pavilions at Expo 2025 Osaka collectively demonstrate how technology and sensory design can powerfully communicate both cultural heritage and futuristic visions. From the immersive storytelling of the United States' space journey to the tactile algae-based innovation in Japan, each country utilizes a distinct blend of interactivity, spatial design, and multi-sensory engagement to evoke emotion, curiosity, and connection. Technology is not merely displayed, it is embodied, often requiring the visitor's movement, breath, or touch to activate the narrative. Sensory design deepens this engagement, using light, sound, scent, and texture to root abstract ideas in personal experience. Whether emphasizing sustainability, diversity, digital transformation, or emotional resonance, these pavilions use design strategies that place the visitor at the center, turning passive viewing into active participation. In doing so, they not only showcase national identity but also invite a collective reimagining of our shared future.

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