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Japan's Message to Itself at Expo 2025

Osaka ^[1]

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Expos are snapshots in time, grand stages where countries reveal how they see the world and how they hope to be seen. Unlike mega-events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup, which project the host country outward to global audiences, Expos function in the opposite way. About ninety-five percent of Expo visitors typically come from the host city's region. That makes Expos primarily outside-inwards public diplomacy events, where the host country invites counterparts from around the world to present their visions and cultures to a local audience.

In Osaka's case, the Expo is less about Japan speaking to the world and more about the world speaking to Japan. Residents of the Kansai region will make up the overwhelming majority experiencing these global showcases. While the Japan Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka is not designed as a traditional public diplomacy tool, since it is directed mainly toward the local population, visiting as a foreigner created a unique opportunity to understand what the host country wishes to communicate to its own citizens within the framework of one of the world's largest public diplomacy mega-events.

The Japan Pavilion does not present Japan's history or identity explicitly, as I initially expected. Instead, identity is woven into its architecture, messaging, and exhibitions. The pavilion carries the theme "*Between Lives*," inspired by the Japanese concept of *junkan* (??), or circulation. This philosophy becomes tangible in the architecture: an elegant wooden loop that gives an impression of openness and vitality, in constant dialogue with its surroundings. The underlying message conveys a vision of life's interdependence, reminding visitors that human existence relies on other forms of life that dynamically sustain one another in cycles. This theme also appears in several of the Expo's Signature Pavilions, which focus on the Expo's overall theme and are created by the host country. I will explore these in a future post.

The exhibition unfolds as a journey through three interconnected spaces: Plant, Factory, and Farm, which together form a cycle of transformation. Visitors move in a circular path, embodying the Japanese aesthetic of circulation, understood as an eternal connection without beginning or end. With three separate entrances and exits, the pavilion itself offers multiple storylines.



My visit began in the Plant, where the pavilion revealed tangible applications of its central message. Food waste collected from across the Expo site is fed to microorganisms that decompose the garbage and transform it into biogas. This energy then helps power the pavilion itself. Through installations, visitors can watch the process unfold, experiencing sustainability not as an abstract idea but as a visible act of renewal happening before their eyes.

From there, the path leads to the Factory, where the familiar is reimagined. Algae are turned into bioplastic, and stools are 3D-printed using DURABIO™, a bioengineering plastic blended with algae-derived biomass developed in collaboration with Kanazawa University. The stools are designed with traditional Japanese woodworking principles of interlocking joints, requiring no adhesives or fasteners. After the Expo, they can be crushed and made into something else, embodying a design-for-reuse philosophy.



Finally, in the Farm, microalgae take center stage. The tiny organisms embodied both promise and responsibility, offering solutions for food, energy, and daily products. Their potential was woven throughout the exhibition and grounded in daily life. Visitors encountered products made from algae, including skincare, clothing, and playful collaborations with Japanese icons like Hello Kitty and Doraemon.



Throughout these spaces, the exhibition reflected traits often associated with Japanese identity: a refined attention to detail and aesthetics, a commitment to recycling and renewal, and a design sensibility where functionality and beauty coexist. Rather than relying on explicit narratives of nationhood, the pavilion expressed identity through experience, embedding values into the visitor's journey.

This approach reflects a broader trend in Expos, particularly among developed countries,

where pavilions often highlight not traditional symbols of national identity but the causes and practices the country wishes to champion. Germany has been especially consistent in this regard, using its pavilions to showcase themes such as sustainability, renewable energy, and environmental responsibility. Japan's focus on circulation and renewal fits within this pattern, presenting values and practices as a form of identity in themselves.

It is not only host countries that design their pavilions to speak primarily to their own people. At Expo 2020 Dubai, the Pakistan Pavilion also focused inward, though with a different purpose. The pavilion celebrated Pakistan's cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and economic potential, framing these elements as sources of pride. In this case, the "local population" did not mean citizens of the host country. Many visitors were members of the large Pakistani diaspora living in the United Arab Emirates, who experienced the pavilion as a reaffirmation of identity and national strength. This illustrates that foreign participants, too, often shape their pavilion messages for the local population, which may include their own citizens abroad.

The Japan Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka demonstrates how national identity can be expressed in subtle yet profound ways. Rather than presenting history or cultural icons in a traditional manner, Japan embedded its identity into architecture, visitor flow, and values such as circulation, renewal, and sustainability. This approach reflects a shift toward more deeply considered exhibitions, where identity is not declared but experienced.

For public diplomacy, this matters greatly. Understanding what Japan communicates to its own population through the Expo provides insight into the narratives and values the country wishes to reinforce domestically. Recognizing these inward-facing messages can inform future public diplomacy initiatives directed toward Japan, allowing them to align more closely with the themes and concerns that resonate most deeply within Japanese society.


