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EXPO 2020 DUBAI

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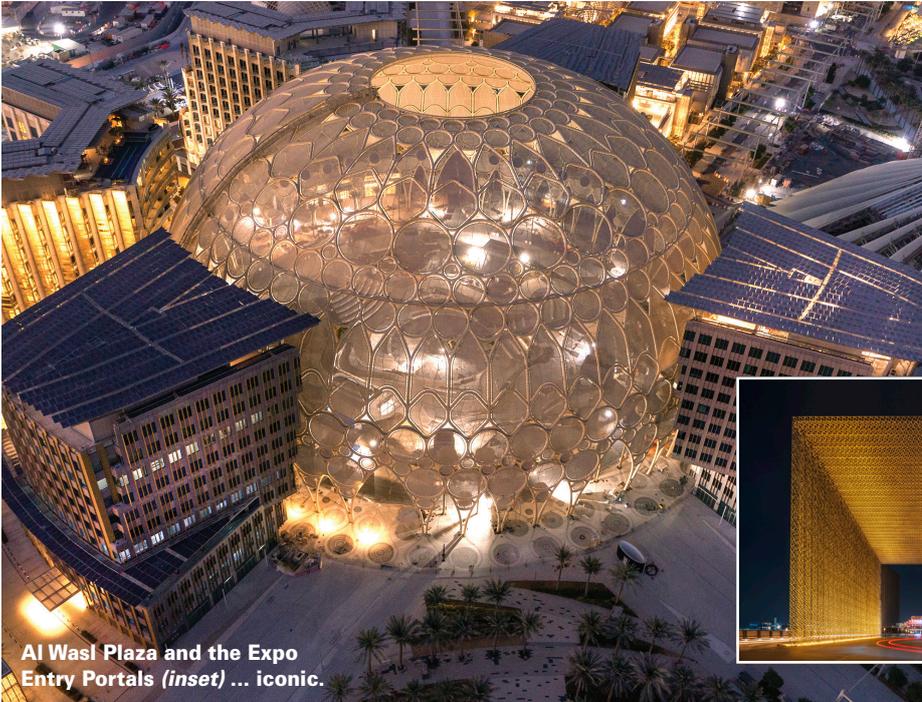
AL BAWANI



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SUPERLATIVE SHOWCASE!

After a year-long uncertainty and delay caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Dubai is finally set to transform into a giant showcase of innovation, human creativity, culture and progress as some 200 countries flaunt their best talents and expertise on this world-class Expo 2020 Dubai platform.



a public park.

Billions have been spent by the organisers of the show as well as the emirate's government entities to ensure that Expo 2020 Dubai is conducted in a safe, secure and orderly fashion.

Commenting on its spending, a spokesperson for the organisers told *Gulf Construction*: "Expo 2020 Dubai's capex budget is AED25 billion (\$6.8 billion). While we have had to make some difficult

decisions as a result of postponement and the impact of the pandemic, our financial position remains strong. We are excited to welcome the world to an exceptional World Expo."

The three Thematic Pavilions include:

- Mission Possible – The Opportunity Pavilion, which will encourage visitors to think and live differently and to make a meaningful contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- Alif – the Mobility Pavilion, which will explore the movement of people, goods, ideas and data, and how mobility has driven humanity's development.
- Terra – the Sustainability Pavilion, which will tell the story of humankind's

DUBAI is set to open the giant portals of the Expo 2020 site this month to the first event of its kind in the Middle East and the largest global gathering since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It has been a massive exercise in planning, designing, engineering, construction and collaboration to create an assemblage of world-class architectural marvels, including not only the three Thematic Districts that reflect the subthemes of Opportunity, Mobility and Sustainability but also the showpiece pavilions that have been erected by some 200 countries participating at the mega event.

Expo 2020 Dubai's theme is 'Connecting Minds, Creating the Future'. The event indeed will have far-reaching goals and implications as it will bring the entire world together during the six-month event (October 1 to March 31, 2022).

Located within the Dubai South district, close to Al Maktoum International Airport, the Expo 2020 site covers an area of 4.38 sq km – approximately 2 sq km of

which will form the Expo gated area, featuring individual country pavilions, food and retail options, as well as state-of-the-art conference and meeting spaces and entertainment areas.

The remaining 2.4 sq km will feature supporting amenities and facilities, including the Expo 2020 Village for participant and staff accommodation, warehousing, logistics, transport nodes, hotels, retail and



The Sustainability Pavilion ... designed to meet the highest environmental standards.



The Opportunity Pavilion with the lights on during the evening.

Mission Possible – The Opportunity Pavilion, designed by AGi Architects, was conceived as a large plaza to reflect its aim of providing a platform for social and cross-cultural engagement. Floating 32 m above the ground, the pavilion’s canopy represents clouds, which are in constant transformation, and the dreams that we all aspire to achieve, while a terracotta ‘carpet’ covers the ground and the pavilion’s facade, representing Earth and inviting visitors to share their experiences.

The Expo Entry Portals are made of high-grade carbon fibre and resin. Laid out end to end, all of the carbon fibre filaments used would circumnavigate the world more than 5,000 times. The 21-m-tall doors of the portals are light enough to be opened by a single person, according to the organisers.

Among other awe-inspiring features of the Expo site are the Expo 2020 Water Feature and the Garden in the Sky, a 55-m observation tower and “flying park” in one (see also *Architecture & Design feature in Gulf Construction’s Digital Edition this month*).

SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

Dubai’s Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) has spent more than AED15 billion on various road infrastructure and mass transit network projects in preparation for Expo 2020.

The portfolio of projects completed comprises the Route 2020 of Dubai Metro run-

relationship with nature and is designed to empower visitors to understand their impact on the environment and become agents of change.

Linking the three Thematic Districts is Al Wasl Plaza, named after the Arabic word for ‘connection’ and the iconic centre-piece of Expo 2020.

In terms of statistics, let’s look just at the Al Wasl alone. Its dome is 67.5 m tall, weighs a total of 2,544 tonnes – as much as 25 blue whales. The dome’s 550-tonne steel crown encloses a space of 724,000 cu m – the volume of almost 300 Olympic-size swimming pools. Its dome uses 13.6 km of steel – equal to the length of 16 Burj Khalifas and its 1,162 individual sections had to be joined together with a margin of error of less than five millimetres!

Other interesting facts about the pavilions:

Terra – The Sustainability Pavilion, designed by UK-based Grimshaw Architects – is meant to meet the highest available accreditation for sustainable architecture – LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum certification. Its 130-m-wide canopy and 18 Energy Trees help generate 4GWh of energy per year. The pavilion and surrounding grounds cover approximately 25,000 sq m and feature innovative irrigation techniques and local plants to reduce water by 75 per cent.

Alif – The Mobility Pavilion, designed by

Foster + Partners, features the world’s largest passenger lift, which is capable of holding more than 160 persons and has a twin sister in Singapore. A partly underground, partly open-air 330-m track runs around the pavilion, above and below ground, featuring cool mobility devices in action. Alif hosts larger-than-life, 9-m-tall historical giants of mobility from the Golden Age of Arab Civilisation created by Academy Award-winning Los Angeles-based experience company Magnopus and physical manufacturing facility Weta Workshop. Global design agency MET Studio also worked to create the pavilion’s inspiring visitor experience.



General view of the Mare and Foal Statue at Mobility Pavilion.

ning 15 km and connecting seven stations, procuring 50 trains with roomy and stylish interiors, constructing roads spanning 138 lane-km with nine flyovers, deploying 200 public buses, designating 18 stations/stops for buses at hotspots in Dubai and other key cities of the UAE and managing 30,000 parking slots at Expo site.

RTA's preparations for this mega global showpiece included the construction of the Enterprise Command and Control Centre, one of the biggest and most sophisticated control centres in the world. It also constructed the Intelligent Traffic Centre that uses cutting-edge smart technologies in managing traffic movement.

Due to the immense nature of the road projects, which were completed in 2020, they were divided into six phases and included constructing the junction of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Road and Expo Road; increasing the number of lanes of Expo Road from four to six lanes in each direction, constructing service roads in both directions, and providing free turns through the bridges. The project increased the road capacity from 16,500 vehicles per hour to 69,000 vehicles per hour.

Meanwhile, Dubai Municipality (DM) has completed several landscaping projects across all the roads and main intersections leading to the Expo 2020 Dubai site. Involving an outlay of AED205 million, these projects cover an area of over 2 million sq m and include the extension of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Road, the Expo Street and Sheikh Zayed bin Hamdan Street in the direction of the Expo 2020 Dubai site.

More than 20,000 trees were used to form a green belt along the roadsides of the area, and over four million seedlings were planted around the roads leading to the venue. Approximately two million seedlings were also planted at the site of the mega event.

The landscaping projects by Dubai Municipality also covered key landmarks near the Expo 2020 Dubai site, including the entrance to Dubai Parks, over a total area of 177,123 sq m. Additionally, the main irrigation lines were extended by 10.3 km and sub-lines by 60.1 km. A pumping station with a concrete tank for irrigation water was also constructed at a value of around AED40 million. ■

Expo 2020, a key catalyst for realty growth



Speller ... "an exciting time for Dubai's real estate"

MEGA events such as the Expo 2020 are key catalysts for growth of the real estate sector, with the world-class event having given rise to new shopping centres, luxury housing, hotels and over 400 restaurants since it was announced, says Chris Speller, Group Director of Cityscape, a major real estate event set to take place in-person in Dubai next month (November 7 to 11).

Despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, he expects the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) region's real estate industry to recover within one to two years. The Expo 2020 Dubai will usher in potentially hundreds of new businesses, and real developers in the UAE should look to offer value for money for either larger units or high-end facilities in order to attract buyers.

Longer term, the Expo 2020's legacy will continue to have an impact of the emirate's real estate sector. The Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan has outlined and divided the city into key areas for continued urban development, focusing on efficiency, sustainability and mobility.

"With a clearly outlined road map on the future development of these areas, it really is an exciting time for Dubai's real estate," Speller states.

Cityscape is moving to the brand-new Dubai Exhibition Centre which is co-located with Expo 2020.

EXCERPTS OF THE INTERVIEW:

Please highlight the impact the Expo 2020 has had on Dubai and the UAE's real estate sector, right from the announcement that the emirate would host the event.

Since the announcement that Expo 2020 would take place in Dubai, there has been an increase of residential and commercial development around the site. New shopping centres, hotels and over 400 restaurants as well as luxury housing and cycling paths are to be completed prior to the highly anticipated event.

According to a recent Ernst & Young report, titled 'The economic impact of Expo 2020 Dubai', the event is estimated to bring in AED122 billion (\$33.2 billion) to the overall UAE economy. While that will largely be made up of the tourism, hospitality and F&B industries, there has been a noticeable uptick in demand for rented apartments as an increase of visitors are expected to gather in Dubai. It is the perfect opportunity for landowners and investors who are on the lookout for a strong market for their properties.

The demand from foreign real estate investors has also been projected to increase and has spurred on the development of high-end residential projects across Dubai such as Palace Residences and Tonino Lamborghini Residences. The Expo 2020 site will house several advancements in real estate including the architectural wonders of Middle East pavilions.

As for developments made in hospitality, according to the TopHotelProjects database, the year began with 434 hotel projects, and 81,792 rooms scheduled to go live globally in January 2022.

Despite the recent challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the 'UAE & Mena Real Estate Report', which was produced by Informa Markets in 2021, found that 74 per cent of respondents are anticipating a recovery for the Mena region's real estate industry within one to two years since 2020. A key catalyst of this growth are regional mega-events such as Expo 2020.

What are the types of projects that developers have opted to push ahead with?

It is key that developers understand the changing demands of potential investors and organisations, especially with Expo 2020 Dubai ready to open its doors to potentially hundreds of new businesses. Offering value for money for either larger units or high-end facilities will be key to attracting buyers. Commercial real estate developers will need to offer flexible areas for investors to create the perfect space for their business as opposed to pre-structured floorspace.

We are already seeing the implementation of these changes first-hand. Developers are focusing on adding high-end facilities such as gyms to established living spaces. In addition, environmentally friendly buildings are in the making.

Due to the pandemic, working from home has become the norm. This shift in workspace has encouraged homebuyers to look at investing in larger properties including villas and townhouses to ensure comfort while working from home.

Has there been a surge in demand for property over the recent months? Which areas are most in demand?

Yes, market activity has increased over the last six months. Pricing for family vil-

las and high-end beach and golf course properties has begun to stabilise. As Standard & Poor's credit analyst Sapna Jagtiani mentioned earlier this year, prices were down by 40 to 50 per cent from the last peak in 2014. By the end of 2020, rent was five to 10 per cent lower than ever in the last decade.

Over the last few months as prices have increased in the market, developers have been eager to start constructing new apartments and villas again. The interest rates have been lower than usual, just like the property prices and mortgage rates, making them look extremely attractive to those looking to buy in the market.



A satellite view of the Expo 2020 site.

Do you expect a surge in investors among visitors to the Expo 2020 Dubai? What are the incentives that are being offered to attract such investors?

With a surge of new visitors to the emirate for Expo 2020, we expect that there will be a surge of prospective investors in Dubai's real estate sector. The likelihood of investing in Dubai has become increasingly more attractive due to a number of proactive government incentives such as the introduction of new visas; special investor and retirement visas, golden long-term visas, and the reduction of the loan-to-value (LTV) for first-time homebuyers to 20 per cent initiated by the UAE Central Bank. These initiatives will provide a significant boost to the industry and, in turn, the economy."

What are the latest trends in the real estate market and how do you see these evolving in the post-pandemic era? Post

Expo 2020?

There is no doubt that the pandemic will continue to affect our lives and it is a pertinent topic for many industry leaders and decision makers. As people have adapted to working from home and creating safely distanced workspaces, we will likely see a continuation from the commercial real estate sector as it reacts to shifting demands.

Businesses will review the way they structure and operate in commercial and private spaces. As these changes continue to impact businesses, we will see developers review their traditional approach to design and react accordingly.

And, with the addition of the Dubai 2040 Urban Master Plan, which will see large-scale changes to the city's developed areas, Expo 2020's legacy will continue to have an impact of the emirate's real estate sector. The initiative has outlined and divided the city into key areas for continued urban development, focusing on efficiency, sustainability and mobility. With a clearly outlined road map on the future development of these areas, it really is an exciting time for Dubai's real estate.

With the development of the Expo site, please comment on the impact it has had on the development and demand for real estate in the surrounding areas. How do you see it post Expo 2020?

Expo 2020 has opened up a new focus for investors in areas such as Business Bay, Jumeirah Village Circle, Sports City, Barsha South and areas close to the Expo site. While the property occupancy is still low, the expansion of Maktoum airport has anticipated a dramatic increase in tourism to these areas. With upgraded infrastructure including new metro links, additional commercial and residential spaces – the area is rapidly growing. There has been an influx of tourists who have been working from home, from Dubai and this is expected to steadily increase.

The Expo site will have a new community designed to be utilised post event. Over 10 km of cycling tracks and 45,900 sq m of parks, and other facilities will lead to the area becoming a commercial and residential hotspot post the event. ■