



EXTREME PLACEMAKING:

Visitor entry experience at the Dubai World Expo (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)

DUBAI EXPO CITY



SWA Principal-in-Charge and lead designer John Wong meets with Expo 2020 clients

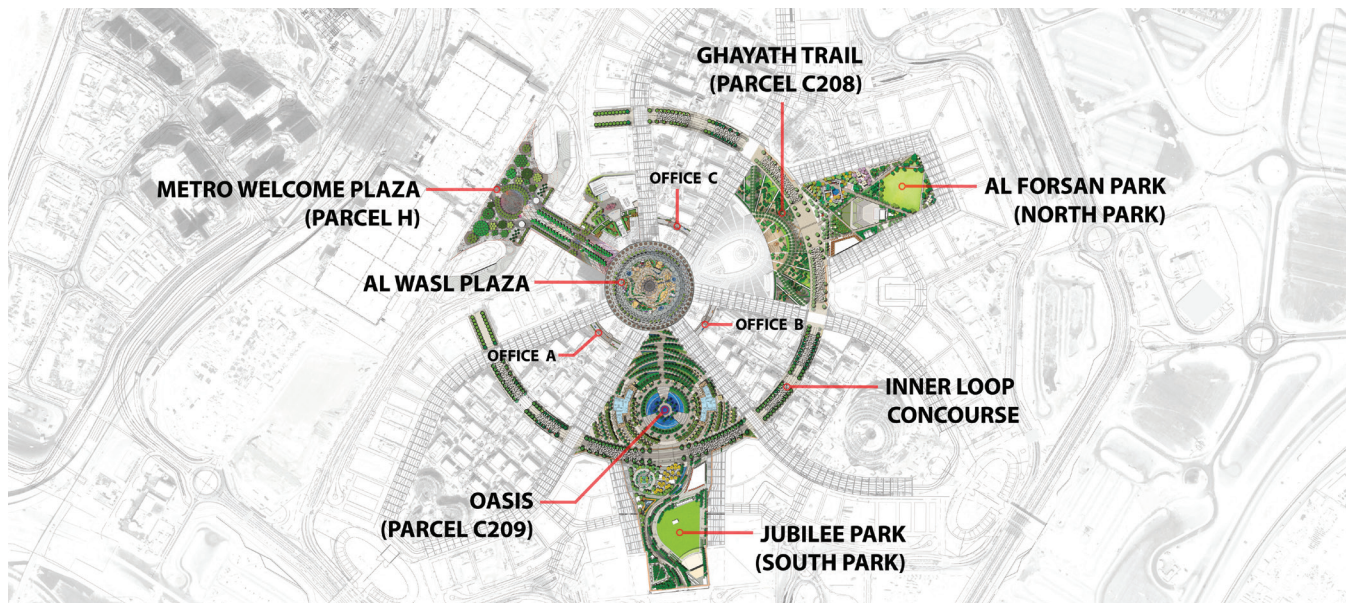
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Dubbed “the human-centric city of the future,” Expo City Dubai – most recently, the host of the United Nations’ COP28 climate summit – was developed around the innovations, technologies, and intercultural exchange showcased during the 2021-2022 World Expo. World Expos often highlight forward-thinking public realm design solutions that are widely applicable; the original Expo venue, designed by a consortium including Adrian Smith and Gordon Gill Architects, Arup, HOK, WET Design, and SWA Group, was no exception.

Dubai is home to a flourishing culture that has long contended with extreme temperatures and water shortages. The Expo venue celebrates landscapes that thrive despite these harsh conditions in an area nearly one-and-a-half times larger than New York’s Central Park, strategically located between Dubai and Abu Dhabi and adjacent to Al Maktoum International Airport. The venue’s three districts each correspond to a theme: Opportunity, Sustainability, and Mobility. The site is organized as a radial “village,” connected by a landscaped promenade known as The Loop that allows visitors to circumnavigate in shaded comfort.



Abstract falcon forms shade The Loop promenade (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)



Plan view (© SWA Group)

The SWA Approach

As the project's landscape architects, SWA designed the Expo's open spaces to express the spirit of Dubai while remaining adaptable for post-event uses, like COP28, that help to fulfill the UAE's Vision 2030 framework. Beyond being a symbol of international solidarity, the public realm for Expo 2020 contributes substantially to the larger Expo City Dubai as an exemplar of resilient, accessible green spaces. SWA's approach to the open space network explored wayfinding and sensory delight on the ground while responding to extreme climate conditions. Interpretive elements reflect the forms of the surrounding environment,

evoking wadi, sand dunes, and mountains. Hardy, drought-resistant native plants predominate, with water as an element used sparingly for select individual features.

Visitor comfort was a primary concern. The Loop boasts a ten-meter-tall trellis with hundreds of abstract, kite-like "falcons" shading the promenade below. Strategically integrated plantings, including a perimeter of native Ghaf trees, combine with resilient water features that reduce ambient temperature while adding tactile, visual, and auditory interest. Heat island effects are addressed by paving materials that exceed SRI reflective standards, providing for a cooler experience on the ground.



Al Wasl Plaza: beneath the dome (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)

The Entry Experience

A broad, welcoming plaza greets arrivals from the metro station before narrowing to a tree-lined promenade that escorts visitors into the Expo's heart: the Al Wasl dome, designed by Adrian Smith and Gordon Gill Architects, which encompasses an SWA-designed plaza. From Al Wasl, visitors can access each of the three surrounding districts – Jubilee Park/The Oasis, Al Forsan Park, and the Ghayath Trail to the north – using The Loop if they prefer not to return to the site's center.



Ghayath Trail's drought-tolerant palette of shade trees and grasses (© SWA Group, Jason O'Rear)

Park and Trail Connections

Jubilee (South) Park/The Oasis: Inspired by the seasonal desert rivers known as wadi, sinuous curves characterize this open space. Trees include the drought-tolerant, seasonally fruiting date palms found in wadi, alongside other native and adapted species and carefully introduced grasses. A gravity-defying waterfall by WET Design serves as the central “oasis,” and can be synchronized with sound and music; powered by hydrogen, the feature helps to generate its own water, underscoring the Expo’s sustainability theme. Paving patterns and pathways mimic the natural flows of water meanders, and follow the edges of the park’s central performance space and plaza, which are flanked by restaurants, snack facilities, and “souk market” kiosks.



WET Design's "Surreal Fountain" at Jubilee Park, with Al Wasl dome in background (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)



Event venue at Jubilee Park (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)



Shoppers browse offerings at Jubilee Park during the 21-2022 Expo (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)

Al Forsan (North) Park

Nestled between the “Opportunity” and “Sustainability” districts, Al Forsan reflects the historic and contemporary culture of the region. A mosaic of programs, themes, and epochs converge in geometric patterns that recall the famed Islamic art form. Responding to the tastes of various generations, interactive displays lay alongside contemplative areas. This park also offers dining and snack facilities, an outdoor performance space, and a large, open lawn.



Families gather in the shade at Al Forsan Park (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)



Ghayath Trail

Opposite Al Forsan Park, on the interior of The Loop, a crescent-shaped landscape hugs the UAE Pavilion. Here, visitors can extend their experience of Al Wasl's exotic and native plants with an art walk that arcs beneath Ghaf trees, encountering variously scaled sculptures and art installations along their way. The trail also connects The Loop and the Al Wasl dome to the arrival plaza at Al Forsan.

According to SWA Principal-in-Charge and lead designer John Wong, the Expo venue, "serves as a front door for Dubai."

"The Al Wasl dome, the bird canopy, and the site's transit connections within the greater Middle Eastern region are ways of bringing a future vision into the foreground of regional planning and design." The contemporary thinking driving the Expo's design responds both to the pressing needs of climate change and to the imperatives of technological innovation. Beyond the Expo's original boundaries, its legacy as the living laboratory at the heart of Expo City Dubai sets a precedent for future urban developments, inspiring cities and communities to embrace similar approaches for generations to come. ■

Visitors around a fire pit along Ghayath Trail (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)



Traversing The Loop's in the shelter of the canopy's stylized falcons (© SWA Group, David Lloyd)