

Woo Jun Jie

It was the nightmare every parent and night-time reveller dreaded: the crowd crush in which more than 150 people died while celebrating Halloween in Itaewon, a popular nightlife district in South Korea.

An estimated 100,000 had converged on the area on a Saturday night to party. Police later admitted that flaws in crowd control contributed to the deadly surge. Two-thirds of the victims were in their 20s.

In Singapore, with borders reopening and pandemic restrictions removed, large-scale public events, including conferences, concerts and exhibitions, are returning with a vengeance. Post-Itaewon, it is timely to examine how to shore up crowd control measures for mass outdoor celebrations and, in the longer term, look into how urban spaces can be improved as people get out more and seek to reconnect with their communities.

PARTY TIME IS BACK

Big events have filled the Singapore calendar so far, with more likely to return in fuller force in 2023. The recent dance music festival ZoukOut attracted close to 30,000 revellers, while the Formula 1 Singapore Grand Prix 2022 had a record attendance of 302,000.

New Year's Eve countdown parties are also just around the corner, including the Republic's biggest such event, the Marina Bay Singapore Countdown 2023, which is back with a bang – complete with fireworks – after a two-year hiatus. Before Covid-19, the annual event already attracted about 300,000 people to the area and it is sure to draw many more this time around.

Still, the crush in Itaewon shows how festivities can quickly turn to tragedy when crowds overwhelm both the urban street capacity and the capability of emergency response teams. "Revenge partying", largely due to the pent-up frustration of living under pandemic restrictions, has exacerbated the situation.

While such large-scale public events have long been par for the course in global cities such as Seoul and Singapore, rusty event organisers may have taken their eyes off the ball in preparing and coping with massive crowds after two full years of pandemic curbs.

Such crushes can be prevented with better crowd control measures. Indeed, Minister of State for Home Affairs Sun Xueling highlighted in Parliament on Nov 28 the Singapore Police Force's contingency plans, which include closing off high-risk areas pre-emptively and dispersing crowds at potential choke points if the numbers surge.

Limits announced on busking along Orchard Road in December could also go some way towards averting crowd crushes. The area has seen bigger crowds following popular local acts posting their



The recent dance music festival ZoukOut attracted close to 30,000 revellers. With Covid-19 restrictions eased and large-scale events returning, it is timely to examine ways to shore up crowd control measures, the writer says. ST FILE PHOTO

gigs on Instagram.

At the macro level, the move to ensure better flow of people when numbers balloon is something architects and urban designers are already looking into, as they examine how physical spaces can be better designed. Architects and designers call this "wayfinding".

How often have we found ourselves hunting for the exit sign in a shopping mall, or wondering where the nearest taxi stand could be? That conundrum is compounded in an emergency situation. How can crowds be dispersed quickly so people do not panic during a crisis?

By ensuring that streets and transitional spaces have clear signage and identifiable landmarks, urban designers can ensure the orderly movement and evacuation of people. The crush in Itaewon is one tragic example of how narrow, downward inclined streets can quickly become unmanageable in the midst of a deluge of people. Creating sufficiently wide streets,

minimising sharp bends or declines that can cause bottlenecks, and devising more exit points at popular streets will help alleviate the crowd pressure during festive periods.

Even in non-crisis situations, urban design that incorporates "wayfinding" goals can help orient individuals and familiarise them with their surroundings.

The Alzheimer's Disease Association's – now known as Dementia Singapore – Wayfinding Project involves painting murals of recognisable local icons, including an ang ku kueh, satay and a kopi cup, on the walls of HDB void decks in Ang Mo Kio. Placed strategically alongside block numbers, these images serve as visual markers to help the elderly differentiate between other blocks that look similar, recognise where they are, and guide lost folks home.

AGENCY ON THE STREET

In the heartland, the challenge for urban planners may be less

"wayfinding" and more of "belonging" in neighbourhoods. The community should be consulted when designing public spaces for communal purposes which, in turn, will provide residents with a sense of agency and autonomy.

A good example of this is TOUCHpoint@AMK 433, which involved the redesign of the first floor of an HDB block into a community hub. It's the first of its kind to transform a public housing void deck into a seamless indoor-outdoor space amid greenery with easy access.

Pavilions, gardens and a flexible indoor area allow for the co-locating of pockets of activities so seniors who regularly hang out at the void deck can continue to do so with comfort and ease. By creating this shared space, TOUCHpoint@AMK 433 fosters a greater sense of community and belonging among residents and encourages them to spend more time there together. At the national level, such efforts could involve citizen participation

in HDB's and Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) urban planning. After all, public participation in the removal of Dover Forest and the design of the planned Ulu Pandan estate allowed planners and citizens to come to a compromise over the potentially conflicting goals of nature conservation and housing development to find win-win outcomes and give Singaporeans a greater say in shaping their home.

Beyond ad hoc responses to urban plans, URA's Long-Term Plan Review (LTPR) is an example of how public participation can be woven into the Government's regular urban planning processes. Through four phases of public engagement, the LTPR has revealed strong public demand for "work-near-home" spaces, as well as the growing prevalence of e-commerce and food delivery.

In order to address these needs, URA is considering the expansion of regional centres featuring more co-working spaces and the

creation of courier hubs where delivery personnel can sort their parcels.

FEELING GOOD, WALKING AROUND THE 'HOOD

Having spent much of the past two years at home, citizens are seeking to re-engage with their neighbourhoods and find affinity with their surroundings.

Such re-engagement is necessary, especially as curtailing social interactions in 2020 and 2021 gave rise to a significant decline in mental health. In a 2021 online survey, 76 per cent of respondents in Singapore reported feeling sad or depressed since the pandemic began, and 65 per cent said they felt lonely.

Turning public spaces into places where people can gather naturally and hold communal activities can go some way towards tackling social isolation and remind people that they are valued members of the community.

TOUCHpoint@AMK 433 has shown how HDB void decks – which are found in every neighbourhood – can serve as a communal space for resident engagements and in meeting new functional needs.

To strengthen inclusion, the authorities and grassroots organisations should consider involving residents in the design and running of communal spaces within their constituencies.

Neighbourhoods should also be designed to foster a "sense of place" and strengthen the emotional connections residents have with their surroundings. Heritage conservation projects, like that of Golden Mile Complex, preserve not only Singapore's post-independence architecture but also the memories of an entire generation of Singaporeans who had frequented the building in their youth.

Similarly, creating intuitive walkways and routes snaking through neighbourhoods where residents can take walks and appreciate the finer details of their streetscapes can improve emotional bonds with physical places. Such routes, like the National Heritage Board's heritage trails, highlight the historical and aesthetic features of cherished neighbourhoods, enliven streets and give people a deeper appreciation of our beautiful and endearing home.

As we prepare for an uncertain road in 2023, let's design the city with the goals of improving well-being, strengthening community ties and becoming a home we feel proud of.

Urban planners and designers play an important role in inviting greater citizen participation, involvement and ownership of neighbourhood precincts and public spaces. This will help grow the "software" of our city state – its communities, networks and that mysterious sense of belonging.

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