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'Better weathering' together: Enabling everyday life in a hotter Singapore

The country does not need 40 deg C days for heat to start altering society.

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This summer's heatwaves across East Asia have shown how quickly extreme heat can rearrange everyday life. In South Korea, Yangsan reached 42.5 deg C in August, the highest temperature recorded in 122 years. Cooling shelters were expanded, water distributed, and baseball games cancelled as the authorities moved into emergency-response mode.

Singapore does not need repeated 40 deg C days before rising temperatures begin altering how society functions. Urban heat already disrupts outdoor activity, sleep, work, commuting, and social life. Retreating into air-conditioned homes, offices, malls and public transport is understandable and often necessary. But what happens if staying safe means increasingly withdrawing from outdoor and communal life?

Our parks, playgrounds, hawker centres, exercise areas and neighbourhood spaces matter not only for recreation, but also for physical activity and mental well-being. They help sustain the everyday encounters that nourish community. A heat-ready Singapore must therefore do more than prevent heat illness and cool buildings and streets. It must keep everyday life possible as urban heat penetrates our bodies and lives.

HEAT CAN MAKE OUR LIVES SMALLER

Heat changes behaviour in vital yet often overlooked ways. People shorten walks, avoid stepping out during certain hours, sleep poorly, or retreat into cooled indoor spaces, thereby risking isolation. Still, embodied experiences of scorching days and gruelling nights in Singapore remain less studied than thermal comfort and productivity.

Heat can shrink a person's world long before it sends them to hospital. When sports areas and other outdoor meeting places become less usable, should we really urge children and young people to shift from their screens to the playgrounds outdoors? For older residents – including those with medical conditions – and people with disabilities, less outdoor activity can also mean less exercise and fewer ad hoc interactions, which further increases their vulnerability.

The policy response should therefore treat social participation and outdoor activity as heat-adaptation goals in their own right, centred on the practices and places residents value. Community and recreation programmes could become more heat-responsive while upholding a neighbourhood's social fabric: moving activities to cooler hours, extending evening access where practical, providing temporary shade and water for events, and using localised heat forecasts to adjust rather than cancel activities.

LIVEABLE HOMES, COOLER JOURNEYS

Indoor liveability matters enormously. A 2026 study of more than 400 HDB households found substantial differences in indoor thermal conditions, with seniors and residents of smaller and rental flats enjoying distinctly fewer cooling options. Some homes were even warmer than their outdoor surroundings. For those with limited resources, better "heat literacy" cannot substitute for improved ventilation, shading, efficient fans, retrofits and affordable cooling.

But people also need to be safe when leaving their homes. A community club, an MRT station, a park, or an air-conditioned public facility is useful as long as people can reach it. A recent geographic information system project at the National University of Singapore shows why standard assumptions about walking distance can dangerously overstate access to cooling spaces for our rapidly ageing population and mobility-limited residents.

Singapore should therefore design cool journeys alongside cool destinations. Neighbourhood heat-accessibility audits could identify where shade, rest points and drinking water are absent and flag missing links between homes, transport, markets, clinics, hawker centres and social facilities. These routes should be tested with the elderly, children and people with mobility constraints instead of assuming a hypothetical moderately fit pedestrian.

The policy response should treat social participation and outdoor activity as heat-adaptation goals in their own right, centred on the practices and places residents value, says the writer. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Digital wayfinding could help too. Melbourne's "Cool Routes" tool uses spatial heat information, shade, greenery, water fountains and time of day to suggest cooler routes for walking or cycling. Singapore could explore a similar system, building on its already extensive network of covered walkways and public transport.

Let's not underestimate non-human companionship. For socially isolated residents, walking a dog often provides exercise, routine, company and neighbourly conversation. If the route becomes too hot for either person or dog, that world contracts even further. Shade-giving trees, bodies of water and hospitable parks therefore function both as social and ecological infrastructure.

COMMUNAL COOLING

Air-conditioning is essential in Singapore. Yet, allowing private or commercial indoor cooling to become the default substitute for a liveable public realm is worrisome.

Singapore needs more places where people can cool down without having to buy something or disappear from communal life. MRT stations already function partly as cooling refuges. Libraries, community facilities, void decks and sheltered semi-outdoor areas could expand free or low-cost respite. Visiting air-conditioned public spaces remains one of the most effective outdoor heat-management strategies identified by Singaporean residents.

We must go beyond supplying communal cooling to communities. Residents ought to be invited to co-design "better weathering". Neighbourhoods could develop simple thermal care protocols for very hot periods: This means identifying where residents sit and talk (including after dark), children play and delivery riders stop. It entails deliberating on the most meaningful shade and rest places, opening hours for community facilities, and neighbour check-ins for people living alone or with limited mobility. These need not involve expensive technology. Their strength is that they are designed around everyday routines and relationships.

Singapore could pilot community-designed cooling plans in selected neighbourhoods, particularly where there are many seniors, outdoor workers and others with constrained access to cooling, and lots of old or one-bedroom HDB flats. This would also address a recurring weakness in today's heat research: People considered vulnerable are still far more commonly surveyed than involved as genuine co-designers of solutions. The goal is dual: Keep people cool and ensure they remain part of the social fabric.

HELPING THOSE WITH FEWER CHOICES

Heat inequality is about control over exposure. An office worker with air-conditioning and flexible hours can often choose when to engage with heat, but a construction worker cannot. A delivery rider cannot simply retreat indoors when trying to earn, while low-income households may ration air-conditioning because of cost. The fewer choices somebody has about heat exposure, the stronger society's obligation to provide protection.

Singapore already has significant protections for outdoor workers, such as employers monitoring heat risk or providing mandatory hourly rest breaks once the wet-bulb globe temperature (WBGT) – an index used to measure environmental heat stress – reaches specified levels. Nonetheless, we need ways to track whether such protections are usable in real life. One option is to test heat-triggered rest arrangements that do not jeopardise income or incentives. For instance, the government of South Korea and key delivery platforms agreed in May that riders should be able to take breaks during extreme weather without being penalised.

Finally, Singapore can become a role model in widening what counts as successful heat resilience. This means not just monitoring WBGT, airflow, energy consumption and heat illness, but also making sure that people can remain mobile, sleep adequately, use public spaces, participate socially and reach cooler places when they need to. Such social and relational indicators, although poorly captured in current heat research, would allow us to recognise thermal struggles before somebody appears in a hospital ward.

Singapore should not wait for recurrent 40 deg C days before asking what urban heat is doing to our society. Gradually air-conditioning more of life while accepting retreat from outdoor and communal space as inevitable would be shortsighted.

It is not enough to demonstrate how well people become accustomed to hotter conditions. The ultimate test of a heat-ready Singapore should be whether people can still sleep, move, work, play, meet one another and belong in the city as it continues to warm.

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