

Publication: ST Online

Date: 12 August 2025

Headline: From survivable to liveable: The making of a green city

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SINGAPORE - Cities worldwide are in a dilemma, torn between the need to develop further and striving to become more sustainable and resilient to climate impacts.

On July 2, the Singapore Management University gathered policymakers, academics and business leaders in Vienna, Austria, to discuss how to “green” cities, which are vulnerable to climate change impacts while also being large emitters of planet-warming greenhouse gases.

Strategies from channelling financing and technology to creating mini forests in urban zones were raised at the SMU City Dialogues Vienna, which was co-organised with Urban Innovation Vienna in conjunction with the Singapore university’s 25th anniversary.

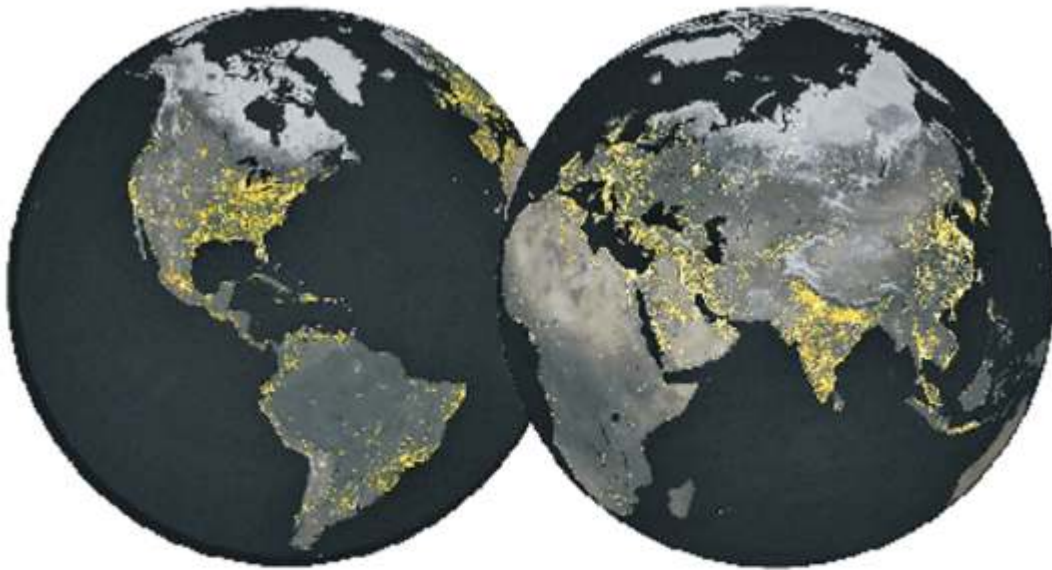
It was a partner event of the Mayors Forum of the World Cities Summit 2025, drawing over 100 participants from 20 countries, across academia, and the public and private sectors.

Urban growth

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NOTE: Yellow spots show the annual average of nighttime lights in 2023.

PHOTO: NASA

By 2050, around 70 per cent of the world's population will be living in cities, up from 55 per cent today.

Cities contribute more than 70 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

More than 60 per cent of people living in low-lying coastal areas are city dwellers, vulnerable to rising seas and typhoons.

A surviving city

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Metropolitan mayhem

Heatwaves, floods and wildfires can batter urban areas, damaging infrastructure and displacing residents. Even affluent cities, such as Singapore and Vienna, are not spared.

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But there are ways for cities to battle the climate scourge.

SMU's professor of urban climate Winston Chow said: "We need to see how investments in resilience can be more targeted to the different issues that cities face."

Some initiatives include greening a grey building to combat urban heat, maximising solar panel coverage, and weaving mini-forests into urban zones to allow biodiversity to thrive.

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How does a surviving city become a thriving one?



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The SMU City Dialogues discussed some strategies that Singapore and Vienna are exploring in their pursuit of resilience.

1) Double duty: Land reclamation as a multi-use solution to combat floods



In Vienna, the Danube River running through the Austrian city has a channel constructed beside it to increase its capacity to hold rainwater in the event of a flood.

The excavated soil was used to build Danube Island in the middle of the river, which now serves as a green oasis for residents.

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Source: URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

In Singapore, about 800ha of land is expected to be reclaimed off the East Coast area in the coming decades to protect the low-lying area from rising sea levels.

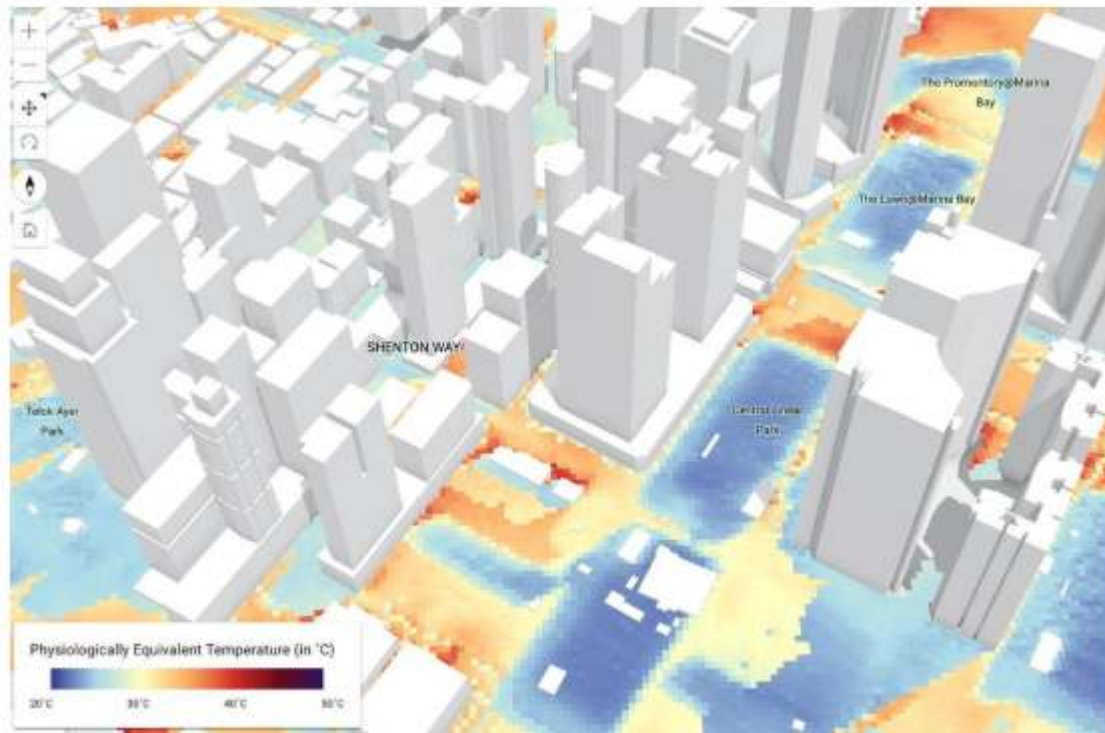
This Long Island will create a new reservoir as well as allow homes and recreational facilities to be built on it.

2) Turning to tech: New tools can help cities stay ahead of the storm

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Artificial intelligence and digital twins – a virtual replica of cities – and real-time data can help the authorities spot problems earlier and respond to them faster.

Early warnings for heat stress, flash floods or impending coastal disasters can help save lives.

Vienna has an advanced monitoring system that integrates real-time data on river and soil water levels and rainfall to forecast floods.

Professor Orlando Woods, director of the SMU Urban Institute, said: “It’s not about being a smart city. It’s about being a smart-enough city. Smart enough relative to the context, the specific problem we are trying to solve.”

3) Stronger cities: Build to weather, by building together

When people feel heard and are part of solutions, they are less anxious about climate change.

Both Singapore and Vienna recognise that people are at the heart of the city, and planners are involving them in efforts to climate-proof the city.

Suggestions from residents in Vienna that have been adopted include a cool zone to escape heat, more urban greenery and “worm hotels” to reduce waste.

In Singapore, the Government is consulting with residents on ideas for coastal protection.

SMU Provost Alan Chan said: “Resilient cities foster neighbourliness, inclusive mobility and inter-generational connection, and they make every effort to cultivate spaces of care.”

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