

Can Singapore be a city that bounces back and gives back?

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City-making is never straightforward, says the writer. It is about confronting trade-offs – between housing and habitat, growth and green, convenience and conservation. The answer, frustratingly and realistically, is often “both, somehow”. What is encouraging is not that consensus is always found, but that the conversation itself is widening.
PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

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City-making is both a science and an art, and sustainable cities should be resilient, regenerative and restorative.



Lily Kong

It is no longer just a problem for the polar bears in the Arctic, or the jhor Fig tree in the rainforests. Climate change is a here-and-now problem. Recently, I watched a video showing television actor Darren Lim hoisting his young son onto his shoulders, wading through knee-deep water. Location: Bukit Timah. They were caught in another flash flood. Along Jalan Seaview, residents have stacked makeshift flood barriers outside their homes, hoping they will hold against the next storm surge. For dementia patients, hotter and more humid nights have meant greater restlessness and confusion, where caretakers notice sharper swings in mood and behaviour. These are not distant warnings about melting ice caps or disappearing rainforests. They are the lived realities of Singaporeans today.

CONVERGENCE OF CHALLENGES

The climate-wrought challenges are not the only ones that cities face. For one thing, geopolitical instability in many parts of the world upends daily life. Just in recent weeks, a wave of protests in Jakarta paralysed transport and disrupted supply chains. Singaporeans felt the ripple effects almost immediately in higher logistics costs and delayed goods. In an interconnected world, political upheaval

elsewhere can hit cities hard, given their reliance on global and regional networks. Second, technological disruption brings both promise and unease. Artificial intelligence and automation are reshaping work, and fuelling fears about job losses. This affects those in cities most sharply. At the same time, mountains of electronic waste and strained environmental resources remind us that progress can create its own environmental strains. Then there are public health crises. Covid-19 was a stark reminder that a single virus could expose systemic weaknesses in healthcare, mobility, and food security. The looming spectre of an “unknown Disease X” continues to challenge national and city preparedness. And of course, cities confront the challenge of social fragmentation and intercommunal tensions. Around the world, trust between governments, businesses and citizens has also frayed. Singapore has fared better than many countries, but even here, surveys show a decline in trust among lower-income groups.

UNPACKING ‘SUSTAINABILITY’

In the face of these interwoven stresses, much has been said about developing “sustainable” and “liveable” cities. Just as this language is familiar, it needs unpacking, or risk having them stand as vague signifiers of distant utopias. What we need is an extended vocabulary – one that better captures the intertwined challenges of our age, and the responses they demand. Here is my proposal: sustainable cities are ones that are resilient, regenerative and

restorative. In short, cities must be able to bounce back, give back, and bring us back to health. Resilient cities anticipate shocks and stresses, and respond effectively when they come. This entails cultivating proactive capacities – the foresight to prepare; and building reactive capabilities – the flexibility to adapt. For example, given how nuclear energy is on many minds now as an alternative source of clean energy, what proactive safety measures need to be put in place, but equally, what emergency responses can be pre-coded, and what community strength and societal cohesion may be cultivated that will ideally emerge in times of crises? Regenerative cities go a step further. They do not only minimise harm, but actively replenish the ecosystems they inhabit. Singapore’s water story illustrates this: recycling used water into Newater, harvesting rain through a network of reservoirs, and desalinating seawater. In doing so, it closed the loop and gave back to its own system more than it took. Regenerative thinking also appears in urban greening, where trees cool neighbourhoods, attract biodiversity, and restore balance to overheated streets. Such efforts reflect an ethic of repair and replenishment – the city not just as consumer of resources, but also as caretaker of its environment. Restorative cities focus on human well-being. They ask not only how we build infrastructure, but also how we build belonging and well-being. Urbanists Jenny Roe and Layla McCay have outlined seven pillars of restorative urbanism: from the Green City that reconnects us with nature, to the Neighbourly

City that nurtures bonds of trust, to the Playable City that encourages joy across generations. In Singapore, void decks, playgrounds and parks have long created such spaces of connection. They are not luxuries. They are essential to building a nation’s social fabrics, countering isolation, and supporting mental health in a time of rising stress. Together, the 3Rs remind us that the science of city-making must be held in balance with the art of city-making. We need data-driven models and climate projections, but also trust, culture and care.

THE SCIENCE AND ART OF CITY-MAKING

Earlier this year, the Urban Redevelopment Authority unveiled its Draft Master Plan 2025, now on exhibition at the URA Centre and in the heartland. Its four guiding themes – Shaping a Happy, Healthy City; Enabling Sustainable Growth; Strengthening Urban Resilience; and Stewarding Nature and Heritage – hold up the very three qualities that I believe cities must cultivate: to be resilient, regenerative and restorative. To deliver this desired city, Singapore must pay as much attention to city-making’s science as to its art. As Singapore faces hotter, wetter conditions, storms that bring sudden downpours overwhelm drains, and longer dry spells test our water supply. Sea levels could rise by over a metre this century, which, with storm surges, would put a third of our land at risk. To prepare for this, Singapore has long worked at slowing run-off at source, widening canals, and raising low-lying roads. PUB continues to deepen waterways like the Bukit Timah Canal, while also trialling stormwater ponds and polders. Dikes are being tested at Pulau Tekong, holding back the sea, pumping out water, and creating new land. New science and technology has even allowed Singapore to reduce the need for sand. Further, regenerative nature-based techniques – green corridors, restored mangroves – play “infrastructural” roles – cooling neighbourhoods and absorbing stormwater. But nature-based “infrastructure” plays another significant role – as art and ornament – a shade tree on a hot street, or better, a concentration of them (increasing urban tree density), a park within walking distance, a connective green corridor that facilitates bird flight paths. To build such a city calls for an aesthetic sense and commitment to the restorative role of cityscapes in enabling well-being. Here, therefore, science meets art. Models can show us where breezes flow or water drains, but

cities must not just be efficient. They need to be thriving communities centred on respectful listening, meaningful spaces and places, trust among neighbours, and sense of belonging in a diverse society. Creating a city that enables such experiences is an art, and the aspirations of the Draft Master Plan 2025 – to shape a “happy, healthy city” – require just this dual focus. It requires the plan to be more than a technical blueprint; it desires a social compact – a shared commitment to how Singapore will adapt and flourish in a changing world.

TRUST AND SOCIAL COMPACT

While data has been said to be the new oil, for me, trust is the invisible infrastructure of resilience. Without trust, the best-designed infrastructure may falter. With trust, even difficult transitions become possible. Singapore is fortunate that trust levels here remain among the highest in the world. The Edelman Trust Barometer shows that confidence in government, business and institutions continues to be strong, even as trust has declined globally. Yet even here, fault lines are appearing. Among lower-income groups, trust is noticeably weaker – a reminder that inequality and exclusion can fray the social compact. That is why city-making must embrace participation. When residents contribute to biodiversity monitoring, or when feedback apps allow citizens to flag local issues, the effect is more than data collection. It signals that their voices matter. Transparent conversations about trade-offs – whether clearing forest for housing or reclaiming land for defence – help strengthen legitimacy, even when agreement is difficult. Trust is earned through sincere engagement. Leaders and technocrats who believe they have all the answers, who incorrectly assume Singaporeans just need to follow and execute accordingly, may find technical solutions but lose trust. **PUBLIC RESPONSE AND TRADE-OFFS** The Draft Master Plan 2025 is an encouraging story of public engagement. More than 200,000 Singaporeans have weighed in – the broadest participation in such a review to date. The current exhibition at the URA Centre, soon to travel to the heartland, has drawn strong interest. The enthusiasm is palpable. Many point excitedly to proposals for parks and green corridors, and appreciate the chance to conserve more heritage sites. Coastal residents are intrigued – if cautiously optimistic – about innovative flood defences. But some also note that plans for road expansion sit uneasily with car-lite aspirations. And at least

one observer said, “You can’t cool the city by cutting down trees.” He’s not wrong – lose too much canopy, and the place gets measurably hotter. These debates remind us that city-making is never straightforward. It is about confronting trade-offs – between housing and habitat, growth and green, convenience and conservation. The answer, frustratingly and realistically, is often “both, somehow”. What is encouraging is not that consensus is always found, but that the conversation itself is widening. Of course, city-making is not the purview of planners and architects alone. Universities, too, have a part to play – as crucibles of ideas, conveners of expertise and test beds of opportunities. At the recent City Dialogues in Vienna, convened by Singapore Management University on the sidelines of a biennial Mayors Forum, scholars, policymakers and practitioners from around the world came together to imagine more resilient, regenerative and restorative cities. Ideas flew in the hot Vienna summer, and a fourth idea emerged: the Sensitive City – a city that listens. Such cities use data and technology not only for optimisation, but also to understand how people feel, experience and interact in shared spaces. They recognise that vulnerability is unevenly distributed, and that resilience without equity can deepen exclusion. Sensitivity, then, is not the opposite of resilience, but its necessary complement. It reflects a posture of humility, reflexivity and empathy in urban governance. The convening power of universities creates conditions for new perspectives, inspiring new insights. Universities also serve as important test beds for new innovations. The Lee Kuan Yew Global Business Plan Competition, now in its 12th edition, is arguably the world’s largest university start-up competition. This year, it has attracted more than 1,500 participants from over 1,200 universities across 91 countries, pitching ideas and solutions for urban sustainability. Sixty finalists have converged at SMU – the closing event is on Oct 2 – to convince distinguished judges that their proposals have the best promise.

These pitches are as much about technologies as they are about their business plans, for technology alone without an appropriate business model will not be able to scale enough to have any real impact. Thus, collaborations need to extend too, to the business community, to venture capital, and the myriad parts of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. **CITIES AS ECOSYSTEMS OF CARE** As an interdisciplinary scholar with roots in the discipline of geography, I tend to think in ecosystem terms. Problems like biodiversity loss, poverty and inequality, and climate events are the outcomes of a myriad of interconnected conditions. Addressing them therefore requires an ecosystem approach – science to understand the natural and physical processes at play, technology to devise solutions, human insight to understand behaviours, build trust and act together, and business acumen to bring solutions to market. When I see young Singaporeans volunteering for biodiversity monitoring, thousands coming together to participate in master plan consultations, and entrepreneurs working together with engineers and scientists, I see hope for the future. We are on a journey to more resilient, regenerative and restorative cities. The question is not whether we will face more disruptions – we will. The question is whether we will face them as passive victims or active participants in shaping what comes next.

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