

A 10-minute walk from the MRT. But for whom?

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A 10-minute walk from the MRT. But for whom?

The meaning of 'easy navigation' changes in a super-aged society.

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A well-connected city. What that means can depend on who you are.

A 10-minute walk for a healthy 35-year-old is a very different proposition for a 78-year-old with a walking frame, or someone recovering from a hip replacement, or an older person with poor eyesight navigating confusing signage in the rain.

Singapore is ageing fast, and we have the policy frameworks to show for it, such as Age Well SG and the Action Plan for Successful Ageing. But the lived realities of getting old in this city aren't fully

captured in those measures or conversations.

The gap shows up in surprisingly mundane ways, such as the experience of walking to an MRT station for an older person. Or the urgent search for a toilet in a mall and whether you can find it in time.

Equally important are the types of amenities available within a 10-minute walk from home. Access to essentials such as grocery stores, clinics or parks can make a critical difference in supporting independence, especially for older adults who live alone.

As Singapore joins the more than 40 countries in the super-aged club where over 20 per cent of the population is aged 65 years and older, it is important to address the fundamental social conditions that enable older adults not just to live longer, but to live well.

These conditions involve inclusive neighbourhoods, accessible infrastructure, strong social networks and a deep sense

of belonging. This is especially so given that "ageing in place" is often promoted as the ideal to which we should aspire.

For a country that has long relied on the family to care for its vulnerable members, and where land scarcity has made the concept of retirement communities largely unfamiliar, an urgent reassessment is needed on how we prepare for a super-aged society.

As we look ahead to a future fraught with uncertainty – how long we will live, whether we will age well, and whether we can maintain our mobility and independence – remaining in one's current home is the option many will cling to.

EASING NAVIGATION

Infrastructure upgrades are essential for creating age-friendly environments that support mobility and independence. And Singapore has done well, developing a layered

ageing-in-place ecosystem.

The Housing Board upgrades the home, the Urban Redevelopment Authority shapes the neighbourhood, and the Land Transport Authority ensures mobility across the city.

The goal is clear: to enable older residents to age in place – remaining in familiar surroundings while staying safe, mobile, and socially connected. These are essential conditions for ageing well, particularly in a dense urban environment like Singapore.

Yet, important gaps persist. As we age, mobility naturally declines. While we often rely on convenient shorthand such as a "10-minute walk" to define accessibility, this is ultimately a social construct – one that must be grounded in lived realities and evidence.

Three key distinctions deserve attention. First, the population aged 65 and above is far from homogeneous.

Physical capabilities vary widely. A 10-minute walk to an MRT station may be effortless for a younger senior, but it can be an insurmountable barrier for an 80-year-old who depends on a walking stick. This raises a critical question: should such individuals be expected to rely on alternative modes of transport – and if so, are these alternatives adequate, accessible and affordable?

Second, infrastructure planning must prioritise access to basic necessities. But defining what counts as "basic" is not

straightforward. Whose needs should set the benchmark? More importantly, if these essentials cannot be brought within a 10-minute radius for everyone, how do those outside this boundary cope with daily life?

Third, we must confront the realities of Singapore's tropical climate. High temperatures and frequent rain make walking physically taxing, even for the relatively fit. How, then, do we design environments that shield seniors from heat and weather, enabling safe and comfortable mobility?

If we focus narrowly on infrastructure alone, we risk accepting that some will inevitably be left behind – confined largely to their homes. This cannot be the outcome we settle for.

A more powerful approach is to cultivate communities that actively support and "cocoon" their more vulnerable members. In such communities, neighbourly care becomes a dependable resource.

For seniors living alone or only with another elderly person, strengthening non-kin relationships is especially vital. When family support is limited, social ties with neighbours can fill critical gaps. These connections can be intentionally fostered through thoughtful urban design and innovative community programmes, transforming proximity into genuine social

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Important to look beyond safety and mobility alone

support.

Shared community spaces foster daily, organic social interactions where neighbours connect, friendships grow, and informal support networks emerge. Over time, such spaces become the

heart of resilient communities, where people rally to care for one.

NURTURING A SENSE OF BELONGING

Ageing in place is not just the ability to remain at home as one transitions into later life – it is

about living in an environment that fosters attachment, continuity and well-being. This requires both the built and social environments to be supportive.

In essence, effective infrastructural planning requires not only hardware upgrading but also deliberate “heart ware” strengthening. It is important to look beyond safety and mobility alone.

As family structures change, ageing societies will need to rely more on non-kin and community-based care. This means treating neighbourhoods,

social networks and local institutions as part of care infrastructure. This is where “third places” become important.

To encourage social interaction within neighbourhoods, it is important to curate accessible third places such as social hubs where relationships can be built and sustained.

Such places are vital to community life because they foster conversation, inclusivity and a sense of belonging. They help build social ties, reduce isolation and strengthen civic engagement by providing a relaxed, welcoming

environment where people can interact regularly.

Suburban malls play a vital role as neighbourhood social hubs for seniors. Far beyond places to shop for essentials, these malls draw residents weekly – often with family or friends – for dining, leisure and social connection.

Their importance is amplified by community-focused amenities such as seating areas and libraries, which encourage people to linger, interact and spend meaningful time together.

With their proximity to homes and easy access by foot or public

transport, suburban malls stand out as inclusive, everyday gathering points that foster participation, belonging, and connection at the heart of local communities.

Planning for more senior-friendly third places should be viewed as an investment in social infrastructure rather than an optional amenity. They serve as platforms for active ageing, enabling seniors to participate in community life and maintain a sense of purpose.

In the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing’s work on the

housing aspirations of seniors, we found that residents are more likely to choose to age in place when they feel a strong sense of social belonging within their neighbourhood. Residents deeply valued having a neighbourhood community – one that embraced them and fostered a strong sense of belonging.

What mattered most for well-being was not the type of living arrangement, but the quality of relationships built within the neighbourhood. Living alone did not necessarily mean being isolated; when individuals were healthy, mobile, and socially connected, they remained active participants in community life.

Ageing can no longer be framed solely as a health issue, nor as an individual life trajectory to be managed in isolation. Such perspectives are too narrow for the scale and complexity of the demographic shift we are experiencing.

Instead, we must recognise ageing as a collective social phenomenon – one that is shaped by the environments we build, the relationships we foster and the systems we sustain.

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We must focus on the fundamental social conditions that enable older adults not only to live longer, but to live well. This means fostering inclusive neighbourhoods, building accessible infrastructure, strengthening social networks, and nurturing a deep sense of belonging.

Just as importantly, we must recognise that the needs and aspirations of seniors evolve as new generations enter this stage of life. To respond effectively, our actions must be guided by solid evidence – shaped through ongoing conversations with the very people we seek to serve.

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