

Our invisible city: The social infrastructure that Singapore needs

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Lily Kong

Every National Day, Singaporeans return to familiar rituals. We lament not securing tickets to the parade. We wonder whether this year's theme song will be memorable. We gather around television screens to watch the state flag fly past and fighter jets streak across the sky. Children wave miniature flags while adults quietly wonder how another year has passed.

For a few hours, we are reminded that Singapore is more than a place on a map. It is home.

Yet there is another Singapore that rarely appears in our National Day celebrations. It is quieter, less visible, but no less important: the neighbour who waters our plants while we are away; the hawker who remembers we prefer less chilli; our childhood teacher who still asks after us years later. These small threads bind us together. They make up an invisible city, one built not of roads, MRT lines and skyscrapers, but of relationships, trust and a sense of mutual responsibility. Twice before in opinion articles published around National Day, I have asked what makes this place home. This year, I ask what will keep it so.

Singapore has spent the past six decades accomplishing what many thought improbable. We have transformed ourselves from a young nation with few natural resources into one of the world's most liveable cities.

But ask Singaporeans what they cherish most, and the answers are seldom about skylines. They speak of friendships forged during national service or in school, mentors who changed the course of their lives, grandparents present at every family milestone. We remember Singapore not as a

collection of buildings, but as a web of relationships.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE WE CANNOT SEE

National Day invites us to look backwards with gratitude and forward with hope. Perhaps it should also invite us to look around, and ask: What kind of society are we becoming?

Many Singaporeans would recognise a quiet paradox of modern life. We are more connected than ever, yet loneliness remains a growing reality. We know almost instantly where our friends have travelled and what they ate for dinner. Yet friendships that once required no planning now need to be pencilled into calendars weeks, even months, in advance. Part of this is neither surprising nor uniquely Singaporean. Modern life is demanding.

But there is also something particular about Singapore. We are, in many ways, an optimising nation: We optimise our time, moving efficiently from meeting to meeting, task to task, commitment to commitment. Much of our success has been built on precisely these qualities.

Yet relationships are, by their nature, inefficient. They require us to linger over a meal long after the plates have been cleared; to make an unplanned visit; to spend an afternoon with an ageing parent when there is nothing urgent to be done. The invisible city is sustained by acts that would make little sense on a spreadsheet.

Perhaps this is the paradox of successful societies: The very qualities that help us build prosperous economies do not always help us build deeply connected communities.

CITIES RARELY DECLINE ALL AT ONCE

Cities rarely unravel with a single dramatic event. Mostly, they decline quietly. Long before buildings crumble and economies weaken, relationships fray and trust erodes, bit by bit. Economic vitality and social cohesion do not always diminish at the same pace.

Singapore has been remarkably successful at ensuring that our physical city does not decline. Our challenge now must be to ensure that our invisible infrastructure does not either.

Who notices when someone disappears from a daily routine? Who would my students call if life became overwhelming, even while surrounded by messages delivered via Telegram, Instagram, Facebook or X? Would the elderly woman across the street, who sits alone daily, have any visitors? The answers tell us something important about the health of a society.

BUILDING SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Over the past six decades, Singapore has become

[CONTINUED ON PAGE B3](#)

If roads connect places, social infrastructure connects people

FROM B1

exceptionally good at building physical infrastructure. We plan decades ahead for transport, housing, water and energy. We think carefully about where people will live, how they will move across the island, and where businesses will cluster.

Yet from the beginning, our ambition extended beyond the physical city. We have long recognised that the built environment shapes social outcomes. Housing policies such as the Ethnic Integration Policy and the Proximity Housing Grant were designed not only to allocate homes, but also to foster integration, strengthen family support and nurture cohesive communities.

Our network of community clubs, libraries, parks and hawker centres reflects a similar conviction: Shared spaces matter because they bring people into contact with one another. If roads connect places, social infrastructure connects people.

Such efforts have not always been universally applauded. Some have criticised them as unnecessary social engineering. We may debate the merits of policies, and reasonable people will differ over where the balance should lie between public intervention and personal choice. But social cohesion is rarely the product of chance alone. Like economic development, it requires intentional design, sustained investment and continual renewal.

The question, therefore, is not whether we have invested in social infrastructure. We clearly have. The more important question is whether the forms of social infrastructure that served us well in the past are sufficient for the challenges of the future.

Despite these investments, many societies, including Singapore, are witnessing signs of strain: fewer close friendships, neighbourliness that feels less instinctive, and loneliness expressed by both older adults and young people. The picture is not one of social decline, but of social change, and our social infrastructure must evolve with it.

THE NEXT 60 YEARS

What we need now is the conviction to design for the invisible city as deliberately as we design for transport, housing and water. Over the next 60 years, we can act concretely in three areas: space, stewardship and standards.

First, we should treat “third spaces” as essential infrastructure, and resist our tendency to design space for efficiency only. In a land-scarce city, it is natural to ask what a space is “for”, how intensively it will be used, and whether it justifies its footprint. But when every square metre must defend itself on a spreadsheet, we end up building spaces for transactions and underbuilding spaces for relationships.

Take a university. Few would question the need for classrooms and laboratories: They deliver

instruction cleanly and measurably. Yet when trade-offs come, what is most easily labelled “dispensable” are often the very places that make an institution a community: residences where friendships are forged over late-night suppers, sports fields where strangers become teams, common rooms and courtyards where conversation happens without an agenda. We can still produce graduates efficiently. But we lose the conditions that produce belonging.

The same logic shapes the city beyond the campus. A precinct can meet every target for housing yield and transport connectivity and still feel socially thin if there are too few places where people can linger without paying: shaded seating that is not an afterthought, a usable common room, a library that stays open when working adults are free, a hawker centre designed for staying, not just eating and leaving.

If we want the invisible city to endure, we must plan for these “unproductive” spaces on purpose. They are not leftovers. They are where trust is built: in repeated, ordinary encounters, until strangers become familiar, and familiarity becomes care.

Second, we must fund the “maintenance layer”: the people who make shared spaces work. Buildings do not produce belonging on their own. Someone has to welcome newcomers, connect residents to activities, organise intergenerational programmes, and handle the



The very qualities that help us build prosperous economies do not always help us build deeply connected communities, says the writer. PHOTO: ST FILE

small frictions that otherwise cause people to retreat. We have long relied on goodwill and civic spirit. In the workplace, the social committee is often a volunteer committee, for example. But social infrastructure, like physical infrastructure, needs stewards who are trained, supported and present.

Third, we need standards for social value, so that social outcomes are specified, measured and rewarded, not merely hoped for. Today, we routinely assess developments by what is easiest to count: how many units they yield, how efficiently people move through them, how much they cost, and whether they meet technical requirements. These

disciplines matter, but they are incomplete. If social infrastructure matters, then we should also ask what a project makes possible in daily life: repeated encounters, intergenerational mixing, mutual support, and the simple ease of forming and sustaining relationships. But even that is not enough.

When we award major infrastructure projects, we could evaluate proposals not only on design, capability and value for money, but also on their intended social outcomes. We can require credible plans for how these outcomes will be delivered and tracked over time. That means clearer social standards in

procurement, outcome-based contracting where appropriate, and social impact measurement that looks beyond ribbon-cutting to long-term value. Singapore can take a practical step here.

THE GIFT WE LEAVE BEHIND

National Day is an exercise in intergenerational imagination. Each year, we honour decisions made by those who came before us: people who built institutions they would never fully benefit from, and planted trees whose shade they would never sit under.

In the next 60 years, Singapore will undoubtedly become greener and smarter. But we should be equally ambitious about something less visible: whether a child grows up with more than credentials; whether an elderly resident has more than services; whether a neighbour is more than a stranger who shares a corridor.

Sixty years ago, Singapore's founding leaders asked whether this city could survive. Today, few doubt that it will. The harder question is whether it will still feel like home, not only because it works, but also because we have made room, in our time and our spaces, for the relationships that make a society worth inheriting.

● Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University and Lee Kong Chian chair professor. This is the third of her National Day reflections for The Straits Times, following “Is this home truly?” (2024) and “Home truly is an idea that never stands still” (2025).