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Rethinking the three spaces for a longevity society

Lily Kong

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SINGAPORE – We are living longer, but have we fundamentally rethought how we live?

Much of the discussion about longevity in Singapore focuses on its implications for healthcare, retirement adequacy and aged care. These are important concerns. But there is a more fundamental challenge that deserves greater attention: The way we have organised our lives may no longer be suited to the length of time we can expect to live.

For generations, society has been organised around a relatively predictable life course: growing up, entering the workforce, raising a family, retiring and eventually entering old age. Our housing arrangements, employment practices and community institutions have evolved around this broad sequence.

Longevity disrupts this model. When people can expect to live for 20 or 30 years beyond traditional retirement ages, the boundaries between different stages of life become less distinct. Yet many of our institutions and social expectations continue to reflect assumptions formed when lives were considerably shorter.

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The three spaces of life deserve a rethink: the first space of home, the second space of work and the third space of community and informal social interaction. These are the settings in which we establish our roots, contribute to society, develop relationships and derive a sense of identity and belonging.

In Singapore, our chosen wisdom about home, particularly in recent times, is to age in place, often interpreted as staying in the same place one has been living in, for all the good reasons of affording familiarity and social networks.

With respect to work space, that is taken to disappear when we retire.

As to community spaces, myriad programmes in distributed locations seek to provide opportunities for activity and connection.

In a longevity society, we need to rethink all three. More importantly, we need to reconsider how they interact to support human flourishing across longer lives.

First space: Autonomy, not simply ageing in place

Home is the space of security, familiarity, privacy and a sense of identity. As people grow older, the ability to remain in familiar surroundings and maintain a degree of independence becomes particularly important. Singapore has rightly placed considerable emphasis on ageing in place, through home modifications, efforts to bring care services closer to residents, and a reverse mortgage scheme.

However, we should be careful not to equate ageing in place only with remaining in the same home for as long as possible. This may sound counterintuitive. But it is worth considering what ageing in place is intended to achieve and how else it could be derived. Ageing in place should be about preserving autonomy, not necessarily preserving one’s address.

Consider an older person living alone in an apartment or house that seems increasingly too large as the family diminishes. Managing daily household chores, preparing meals, and seeing to more significant household maintenance needs will become increasingly demanding.

Social interaction may also diminish, particularly if family members live elsewhere. The person may technically be ageing in place, but is this necessarily the arrangement that best supports independence and well-being?

By contrast, someone who moves into a well-designed senior living community may enjoy greater independence and a richer social life. Having a private living space, while sharing access to dining, recreation, learning activities and other facilities, can offer convenience, companionship and security.

Access to healthcare and assistance when needed provides further reassurance, without necessarily compromising personal autonomy.

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We need to reconsider the way we think about institutional and communal living. Such arrangements are often associated with frailty, dependency and the loss of independence.

Yet they need not be places people move into only when they can no longer cope at home. For some older adults, they can be positive lifestyle choices, offering opportunities for social engagement, learning and mutual support.

A longevity society should therefore offer a broader continuum of living arrangements, from independent living at home and purpose-built senior communities to assisted living and higher levels of residential care as needs change.

There should also be a range of price points so that these alternatives are not available only to those with substantial financial resources. In Singapore's early independence, "housing for all" was the mantra of the Housing Board. The same should apply now, though in the face of altered demographics.

Ageing in place also depends on much more than housing design. Accessible transport, neighbourhood amenities, healthcare facilities, home-based care services, digital technologies, community organisations and affordable financing all influence whether someone can continue living independently.

A well-designed flat offers limited reassurance if essential services are inaccessible or family caregivers are overwhelmed.

The challenge is therefore twofold: to make ageing in place viable, while developing attractive alternatives for those who prefer to move. The objective should be to expand people's choices, rather than prescribe a single model of successful ageing.

Second space: Contribution beyond conventional employment

The second space also needs rethinking. For much of the 20th century, life followed a relatively predictable sequence: education, employment and retirement.

Longer lives challenge this model. Work provides more than income; it offers purpose, identity, structure and social connection. These do not suddenly become irrelevant at 62, 65 or 70. While not everyone wishes or needs to work longer, many would welcome opportunities to remain engaged, even if not in full-time employment.

The crux is to separate contribution from conventional employment. Leaving full-time work should not mean leaving behind opportunities for purpose, contribution and meaningful participation. People moving out of full-time work can continue contributing through fractional work, mentoring, consultancy, or community service.

Yet much of the knowledge and experience accumulated over 30 or 40 years of working life is lost to organisations and younger generations upon retirement. We have clear pathways into employment, but far fewer ways for people to contribute beyond it. We need to design for this phase of life in as much as we have been intentional about designing for entry into employment.

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Employers can create opportunities for phased retirement, flexible work and knowledge transfer, while educational institutions and community organisations can draw on older adults' expertise. Just as the first space requires designing a spectrum of options, so too does the second space.

Third space: Belonging rather than simply engaging in activities
The third space encompasses the places where people gather and interact outside their homes and workplaces. These include parks, libraries, hawker centres, community clubs, cultural institutions, and other shared public spaces. They may be formally organised or entirely informal, but their common purpose is to bring people together.

Their importance becomes greater in a longevity society. As people leave the workforce, face changes in family circumstances or live alone, the everyday opportunities for social interaction may diminish. Workplaces and households that once provided regular social contact may no longer play the same role.

Third spaces become important. Yet there is a distinction between being surrounded by people and being socially connected. The challenge is not simply to provide more activities for older people, but to create communities in which older people are needed, recognised and valued.

This means moving beyond the idea of community facilities as places where seniors go to participate in programmes. Their greater value lies in creating opportunities for people of different generations and backgrounds to meet, interact and contribute to one another's lives.

A community centre that offers activities exclusively for seniors may serve an important purpose. But a shared space that also attracts children, young adults, working adults and families can foster more organic intergenerational relationships. Libraries and community centres, for example, can become places where people of different ages learn together, exchange knowledge and participate in civic life.

Older adults should not be seen merely as recipients of community services. They can be mentors, volunteers, educators, caregivers and active contributors to neighbourhood life. Their experience and capabilities are resources that communities should find ways to draw upon.

Equally important are the informal encounters of everyday life: meeting neighbours at a coffee shop and chatting with familiar cashiers at the supermarket, or gathering at a void deck. These interactions may appear ordinary, but, for some, they may be their only social interaction in a day.

Third spaces should therefore be understood as essential social infrastructure, not optional amenities or places simply to fill leisure time. Their purpose is not only to bring people together, but to create a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.

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The three spaces: An interconnected ecology of human flourishing

While it is useful to examine the three spaces separately, their greatest significance lies in how they interact.

Housing, employment and community are often treated as separate policy domains. But people's lives do not unfold in separate compartments. The quality of one space is frequently shaped by the other two.

Someone who lives alone may depend more heavily on community spaces for social interaction. Someone who continues working may need a home environment and transport arrangements that accommodate changing work patterns. A person who moves into a senior living community may benefit from shared facilities and companionship, but could become disconnected if the development is isolated from the wider neighbourhood.

The three spaces can reinforce one another, but weaknesses in one can also undermine the others. A supportive home and an active community network, for example, may help someone navigate the transition out of employment. Conversely, someone whose social relationships are concentrated almost entirely in the workplace may find retirement particularly isolating if there are few alternative opportunities for connection.

This suggests that we should think of the three spaces as an interconnected ecology of human flourishing. Their value lies not only in what each provides individually, but in how they collectively enable people to maintain autonomy, purpose and belonging throughout life.

There is also an important question of equity. The opportunities offered by longevity will not be equally accessible to everyone. Some people will have the financial resources to choose where they live, whether they continue working and how they spend their time.

Others may have little choice but to remain in unsuitable housing, continue working out of financial necessity or face social isolation without adequate support.

The New AGE

A longevity society must therefore be concerned not only with creating more choices, but with ensuring that these choices are accessible across different income groups and circumstances.

For Singapore, this calls for a more integrated approach to longevity planning. Housing policy, urban planning, employment practices, healthcare, social care and community development should not be developed in isolation.

From ageing society to longevity society

The ambition for Singapore should be greater than becoming a society that is better equipped to look after an ageing population. It should be to become a society in which longer

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lives open up new possibilities for living, contributing and connecting. Each of the three spaces of a longevity society requires intentional design, and a range of options rather than a singularity of approach.

We have spent considerable effort learning how to add years to life. We need to rethink the spaces in which those years are lived.

Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University and chair of the World Cities Summit Knowledge Council. A social-cultural geographer and urban scholar, she writes on cities, longevity, higher education and the future of society.

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