

How people can best make the transition to cool future cities

Written by Abby Mellick Lopes, Senior Lecturer in Design, Western Sydney University



Building the hotbox dream: another housing development in Western Sydney. Katherine Gibson,

Author provided

This is one of a [series](#) of articles to coincide with the 2017 [Ecocity World Summit](#) in Melbourne.

It is difficult to remember when we are in the midst of winter, but keeping cool in summer is a big issue for some communities. And the problem is likely to get worse as our summer heatwaves [grow longer and hotter](#)

When we have access to comfort we tend to be able to forget about how hot it is. When we don't, the heat affects how we feel, what we do, and where we go. It can have severe impacts on our health and wellbeing. Liveability depends, at least in part, on thermal comfort.

[Demographic research](#) shows the very young, the very old and those with limited mobility, dexterity and/or economic means are some of those most vulnerable to heat stress. However, it is not only who you are, but where you live that is important.

People living in "hotspots" such as Western Sydney, where we conducted [our research](#), have little access to shade, outdoor shelter or public drinking water. And they are coping with summer land surface temperatures into the mid-40s and beyond. This is far hotter than in the coastal suburbs.

When you live in a home that lacks passive cooling features or air conditioning, and don't have the means of transport to get you to cool refuges such as the mall, swimming pool or river, you have little choice but to stay put.

Dividing people and environments

We spoke to three groups identified as “vulnerable” to heat stress because of where they lived in Western Sydney.

These groups demonstrated very different approaches to keeping cool in summer. They ranged from highly resilient strategies of home adaptation in a group of elderly St Marys home owners to a group of young mothers in public housing in Cranebrook. The latter group said they and their kids coped with the heat by remaining as still as possible. That meant no walking or bike riding, and no outdoor play after mid-morning on hot days.

A group of carers and clients at the Nepean Area Disabilities Organisation explained that their wellbeing in summer was completely dependent on easy access to air conditioning and cooling refuges. Otherwise they just didn't leave home.

So, extreme heat divides people from the environment and from each other.

The people we spoke to – all longstanding residents of Western Sydney – described watching in consternation as new urban development rapidly transforms their suburbs. Said one carer:

All this multi-development – high-density units – we are all going to be in a hot dome. The heat is just going to sit on top of us. We need housing, but they are not thinking about how to do it.

These communities were thinking about how to stay cool. Some people shared memories of sitting in the river on hot days, plentiful shaded outdoor seating and drinking fountains. Such features made it much easier to get out and about without having to feel like a mall loiterer or resorting to expensive bottled water while waiting for the train.

Ideas for cool future cities

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Many people in our research had aspirations for a cool future city that didn't just hark back to a time when basic public amenities were an everyday, taken-for-granted reality. They had ideas for new ways of sharing public space and resources. These range from car parks that transform into twilight playgrounds and local parks with outdoor cooking facilities that extend beyond the barbecue, to neighbourhood skill-share workshops.

Cooling is a community issue. Planting trees is not enough. We need new ways of living well in a climate-changed future. We need to ditch the "hot box" and involve people in the design of the material and social environments in which they will live, with criteria of comfort, neighbourliness and affordability.

With the rapid densification of our cities, what kind of legacies are we building for future generations?

You can read other articles in the series [here](#). The [Ecocity World Summit](#) is being hosted by the University of Melbourne, Western Sydney University, the Victorian government and the City of Melbourne in Melbourne from July 12-14.

Abby Mellick Lopes does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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