

ExpertView

Iced Bovril with soda, anyone? Dealing with city heat in colonial Singapore

Our history can offer creative solutions for today's heat woes

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For The Straits Times

Living in Singapore means sweltering temperatures all year round. To escape the heat, we flock to air-conditioned shopping malls, restaurants and cinemas, emerging after the sun dips below the horizon.

Historians have wondered how people in colonial times managed before modern technology. Were the heat-related challenges the same as the ones now? Some heat is specific to the present: That emanating from cars stalled in traffic jams, or the daily temperature build-up in concretised streets and buildings. These factors have significantly changed the experience of city living.

The sense that urbanisation has had an impact on the local climate is nothing new. Since the late 19th century, people have lamented their lost, cooler past. Writing in the 1930s, Edwin Brown, an Englishman living in Singapore, recounted in his autobiography *Indiscreet Memories* the transitioning styles of Raffles Square since 1901.

Gazing out onto the glaring whiteness of the square with its

motor cars parked in orderly ranks in the centre, he remarked: "My mind goes back to the old days (of) the red laterite roads, the big shady flame-of-the-forest trees in the centre, the horses... standing under them for shelter from the sun while the 'mems' did their shopping; and wonder if we are any better off now – with all the present-day amenities – than we were then?"

Modern technologies have exacerbated urban warming. Air-conditioning and pollution contribute directly to warming cities, especially at night. Such practices cause the Urban Heat Island effect, where temperatures in the city are measurably hotter than those in surrounding rural areas. Combined with global warming, this presents a serious concern for future city-dwelling generations.

Our great-grandparents did not have to worry about such things. Singapore was less densely urbanised and the Urban Heat Island effect was far less noticeable. Before air-conditioning, they also had other ways to manage heat, in which case, ought we to learn from the past?

ICED DRINKS AND SALADS

A steady stream of information was available to help Singapore's residents manage heat. Keep cool with home decor colour schemes of greens, blues and yellows, *The Straits Times* advised on Sept 5, 1935, along with a light, cool-looking diet. This replaced hot teas and coffees with iced drinks,

chilled vegetable or fruit juices instead of soups, and recommended aspic cold meats or salad be substituted for hot meats and vegetables.

On June 16, 1941, the *Morning Tribune* published a series of recipes designed to take down your temperature, including snow blancmange with tinned raspberries and a frozen fruitcake. For those inclined to take an after-work drink, *The Straits Times* recommended replacing the daily stengah with the new craze from Paris: iced Bovril and soda. This advice, published on Sept 19, 1900, came, apparently, highly recommended by the medical establishment.

Dress was also important. No well-heeled lady should be seen to succumb to the ravages of the heat. For emergencies, it was considered a good idea to keep at hand a box of green face powder, for a dusting of

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this on a heat-flushed face tones down the colour wonderfully, said *The Straits Times* in the mid-30s.

Leave your nervous brilliant prints and ruffled frocks on the hangers when hot days come, the *Morning Tribune* counselled on Feb 8, 1940, and never forget to accessorise for the heat. A heavy load of costume jewellery will make you look and feel warm. But a frosty white plastic necklace with a dark frock may make you look fresh as a daisy.

Some of the advice from the past would not seem out of place today. In a statement issued in *The Singapore Free Press* on April 14, 1926, the municipal government warned inhabitants, "Don't waste water!", an epithet repeated throughout the 30s and 40s. Swimming was a popular recreational activity during the inter-war years, with a growing number of public and private pools available for inhabitants to exercise and cool down in.

The sense of nostalgia expressed by Brown for earlier, simpler times might not have been shared by everyone, however. Living without modern amenities had its drawbacks. On March 7, 1883, *The Straits Times* advised its readers to examine their tanks and bathrooms carefully before using them, because the hot weather then was bringing out many cobras and other venomous reptiles from their usual haunts in search of water.

Many schools did not have electric fans installed until the late 1930s. During a heatwave in May

1914, doctors advised that strict school uniforms must be relaxed: The boy exhausted and oppressed by the heat was not likely to be as attentive to his work as one who was more or less at his ease and not streaming with perspiration all day.

The fire brigade was called out several times a week during dry, hot months to deal with fires on vacant land, where dry, dusty lallang had spontaneously combusted. Water security was also problematic. In 1911, a drought caused clan fights to erupt on the street over access to standpipe water.

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While few of us would want to live without the modern technologies that make life both easier and healthier, it is useful to remember that there are alternatives. Our history can offer creative solutions for today's urban heat challenges.

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• This is the last of four articles in the Expert View series by Asia Research Institute academics.