

# Five key areas cities must rethink to tackle extreme heat: A roadmap for the thermal emergency

—by Cristina Garrido & Raül Daussà

Sleeping? Nearly impossible. Walking? Intolerable. Going to the beach? Not even an option—it's too hot to leave the comfort of home. **June 2025 was the hottest month ever recorded in Spain**, offering just a glimpse of daily life in cities like Barcelona, Huelva and Murcia, where **temperatures exceptionally soared past 40°C**—weeks before summer usually reaches its peak. The same phenomenon affected France, Italy and Greece, where major cities such as Marseille and Athens saw record-breaking temperatures.

This isn't normal. In the northern hemisphere, the hottest stretch of the year typically falls between mid-July and mid-August. What's most alarming is how **this abnormality is rapidly becoming 'the new normal.'** Every year, we seem to relive the same headline: "the hottest year on record."

## A new, hot and uncomfortable urban normal

For cities, the consequences are real—and dangerous. **Urban materials like concrete, asphalt, and brick absorb and retain heat.** The result? Scorching nights, unbearable days, and short walks that feel like marathons. On top of that, **extreme heat increases ground-level ozone, aggravating asthma, driving up respiratory illnesses,** and even contributing to cardiovascular and autoimmune conditions. Spain's national mortality monitoring system recorded nearly 100 heat-related deaths between June 1 and 21 alone.

**This isn't just a southern European problem.** Here in the Mediterranean, we may be feeling the brunt of it—but cities across the continent are heating up. In the UK, temperatures have already hit 33°C this year.

At this point, it's clear: **extreme heat is no longer a seasonal disruption. It's a structural challenge**—one that's forcing cities to rethink how they're designed, managed, and experienced.

With nearly 15 years of experience working with urban systems, **we've identified five essential shifts that every city—regardless of geography—must urgently make.** These aren't short-term solutions. They're **long-term, systemic changes.**



## 1 | Stop cities from absorbing so much heat

**Urban heat islands make heat waves worse.** When cities are packed with **dark surfaces**—like asphalt, concrete, and rooftops—they absorb sunlight during the day and release it slowly at night. That can **raise local temperatures by 5 to 10°C**. Add pollution from traffic and industry, and the result is a hotter, more polluted city with lower quality of life.

One proven fix? Use **high-albedo materials**. Surfaces with a high solar reflectance—like **cool pavements**—bounce sunlight away instead of storing it. The higher the albedo, the more radiation gets reflected. A material with an albedo of 0.3, for example, reflects 30% of incoming solar energy. It's **passive cooling** that helps keep entire neighborhoods more livable.

## 2 | Plant smarter — not just more

**Green spaces aren't just nice—they're cooling systems.** Parks, trees, and open spaces help cities breathe. They boost natural ventilation and lower temperatures, especially during heat waves. And **thanks to satellite imagery, sensors, and data analysis, we now know which tree species offer the most shade**—and where planting them will have the biggest impact.

But there's a global gap. **A recent NASA study found that cities in the Global South—like many in Latin America, Africa, and Asia—have far fewer green spaces** than cities in the Global North. That means they can only achieve about 70% of the cooling effect through vegetation compared to their northern counterparts. In a warming world, that disparity matters.

Extreme heat is no longer a seasonal disruption or a problem confined to specific countries or regions. It is—and will increasingly become—a structural challenge. Cities must rethink how they are designed, managed, and experienced from now on.

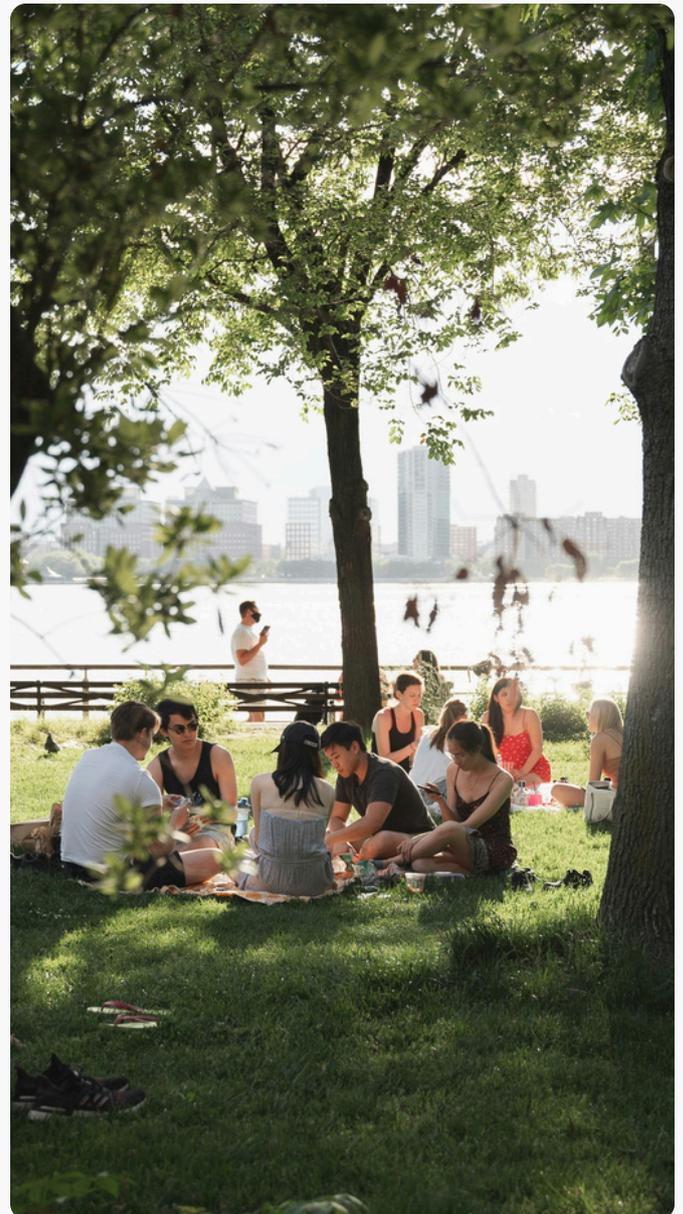
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## 3 | Treat climate shelters as a city-wide network

**Shelters that offer relief during extreme heat are gaining traction—but many still function as isolated spaces.** What's needed is a connected network.

Think: shaded parks, libraries, air-conditioned public buildings, and even underground spaces—**all linked to allow people to move through the city in relative comfort**, even during heatwaves. Cities like Barcelona, Bilbao and Vitoria have started to implement this approach—and they're expanding it.

We also believe that **extending the hours of public facilities like libraries, museums, and sports centers during heatwaves can make a real difference**—so long as it's balanced with energy efficiency and noise management.

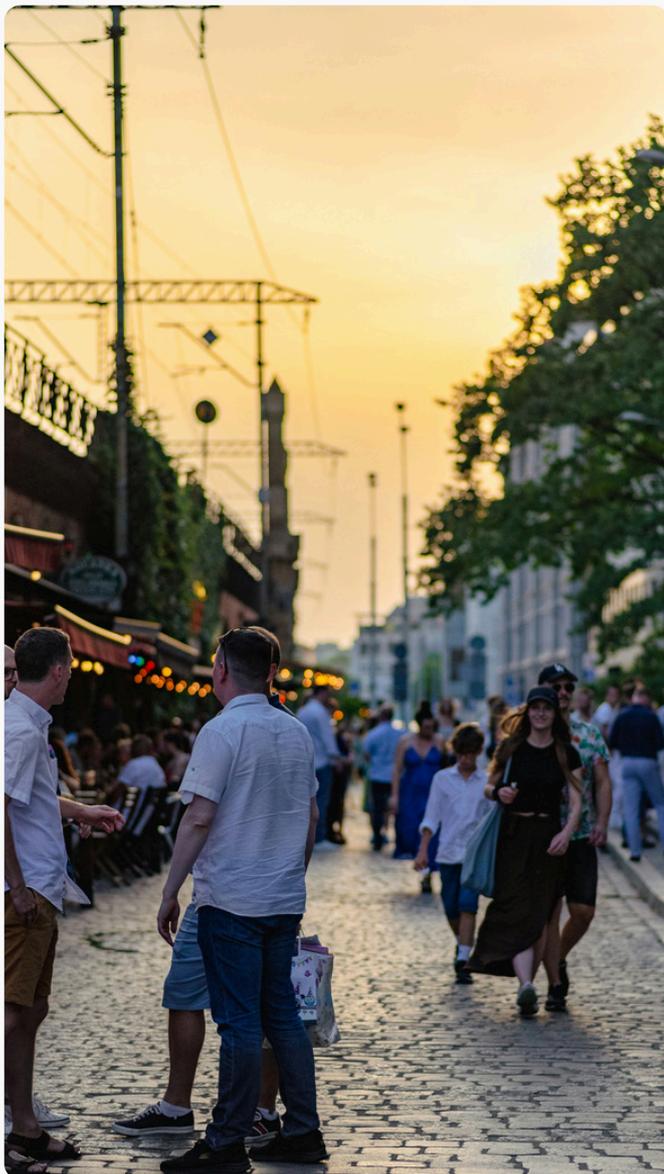


## 4 | Break down silos — heat affects everything and must be managed holistically

**Extreme heat isn't just an environmental issue.** It touches nearly every aspect of city life: health, transport, housing, energy use, public space.

That's why we advocate for **cross-cutting climate governance**. Cities need to weave climate resilience into every department—from urban planning to social services. A good example comes from **the Andalusian regional government**, which created an **interdepartmental climate commission** to make sure resilience is factored into all policy decisions.

**This is climate policy, yes—but it's also public health policy, housing policy and equity policy.**



## 5 | Put thermal justice at the center

**Heat doesn't affect all neighborhoods equally.** Densely built areas with poor insulation and little greenery heat up more—and the people who live there are often the most vulnerable.

**In Spain alone, more than 4 million people can't afford to keep their homes cool during summer.** That's why we believe **thermal equity** must be a guiding principle: **access to shade, airflow, and comfortable indoor temperatures should be a basic urban right**—not a luxury. Cities that are truly climate-resilient are cities that protect those who are most at risk.

## In short: it's all about structural transformation

In short: **we can't afford to treat heat like an occasional anomaly.** It's here, it's intensifying, and it's changing how cities need to operate. **The only real answer is structural:** we need to redesign our urban environments, rethink how we govern them, and invest in public services that can cope with the reality of a much hotter future. ●

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