

## Rethinking Social Innovation through Singapore: Are the “Unnecessary” Really “Unnecessary”?

Visiting Singapore had been on my bucket list for a very long time. Thanks to the Campus Asia Program, I got to tick it off from my list. As a senior undergraduate student from the School of Social Sciences, I've done plenty of field studies within Japan. However, this Social Innovation Field Study felt much different. It felt new, unfamiliar and exciting in the best way possible. Seeing the Singapore I saw through social media with my own eyes showed me much more than just tourist attractions. I would like to share all my insights and perspectives of Singapore in the realest way possible, as a small way of showing my gratitude for being selected as a participant for this field tour. By sharing my experience, I also hope to encourage anyone reading to take opportunities like this when they come.



## Day 1: Visit to Merlion Park, Dignity Kitchen, and Ethnic Neighborhoods



The very first place we visited was the iconic Merlion statue. The statue was a bit smaller than expected, but standing next to it was magical. For me, the Merlion in the middle of such a highly urbanized city felt like it was a reminder of humility. It was gently reminding visitors of how far the city has come while staying connected to where it began. Also, the inclusion of Feng Shui principles such as the Merlion facing east and the continuous flow of water (wealth) shows that cultural beliefs were carefully considered in its design. Such inclusive innovation made the city very compelling to observe for me, setting a great start for the tour.



The next stop was Little India. A colorful neighborhood filled with Indian culture, tradition and community. The streets filled with shops overflowed with flowers, fruits and other religious offerings reminded me of such streets near Hindu temples in Sri Lanka. I was genuinely amazed at how well they preserve culture within a modern landscape. I believe that this coexistence is a strong example for



cities that fear losing their cultural identity while pursuing innovation, and also for cities that have already sacrificed cultural heritage in the name of modernization. Visiting here also made me wonder what kind of policies and governance mechanisms were taken to enable such balance.

After a stroll at Little India, we headed to “Dignity Kitchen”, a social enterprise that trains the differently-abled and disadvantaged to cook and gain employment. I was really honored to hear from Mr. Koh Seng Choon, the founder of Dignity Kitchen, as he shared how it began and what continues to inspire him. One thing that really stayed with me was when he said his inspiration came with

questioning why there were rarely differently abled people seen in public places of Singapore. It was a simple observation. It made me realize that meaningful ideas do not always come from academic learning, but from stepping outside and simply observing the world around us. For me, the highlight of the day was learning sign language and ordering food. The food was delicious and overall it was a very meaningful experience. Next, we went to Kampong Glam, another neighborhood known for its rich Malay and Muslim heritage. Then I finished the day by visiting Gardens by the Bay, specifically the flower dome and the Supertree Grove. I’ve never seen such a combination of technology and sustainability before.

## **Day 2: Visit to Nanyang Technological University and Jewel Changi**

On day two, we visited the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), starting off with a lecture by Prof. Yeow Hwee Chua about economic expectations and financial markets. It was interesting to learn about Singapore’s high expectations despite its low levels of inflation. This made me wonder how similar or different these expectations might be in Japan, given its generally cautious consumer mindset. After the lecture, we had a great lunch kindly arranged by the university and afterwards went on a campus tour guided by students from the NTU School of Social Sciences. The architecture of the university was screaming Singapore through its interconnected building design, a full wooden (sustainable) building and especially the hive building. Apparently, the students of NTU call the hive building as



“dimsum”, which makes sense when you look at it. Next, we had another lecture by Prof. Gary Lit on the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore, where he shared stories of victims and terrifying events that history does bring much to the surface. After wrapping up our time at the university, I went to Jewel Changi with friends. We directly went to the famous Jewel Rain Vortex, where the sound of falling water combined with the indoor greenery created a calming contrast to the busy airport atmosphere. Then we took the shuttle that travels between terminals to get another look of the waterfall and ended the day successfully.



### Day 3: Visit to Singapore City Gallery, Chinatown, War Memorial park, and Raffles City

On the final day, we took the metro to the Singapore City Gallery, where I got to learn about the work and planning behind the Singapore I had seen over the past two days. Seeing all the plans made me realize how Singapore never focused just on long-term urban planning but sustainability too. Afterwards, I went to Chinatown, another neighborhood which looked really festive with the upcoming Chinese New Year celebrations. I was again surprised how the heritage felt carefully kept, yet never out of place within the modern city. The main road nearby had New Year decorations which showed that even modernity has adopted space for culture. Next, I headed directly to the Hawkers Center and had a delicious seafood laksa for lunch. Mentioned in Prof. Gary’s lecture, my next destination was the War Memorial Park, which I reached by taking the bus. On the way, a building with colorful windows caught my eyes, which apparently was the Ministry of Culture



and Communication of Singapore. Finally, I went for some shopping around Raffles City, enjoying the unique architecture around.

### Quiet Innovations in a Smart City: The Power of Small Adjustments

When in Singapore, I noticed small innovations that might be labeled “unnecessary” in another country. However, within Singapore those innovations were useful and meaningful, which I would like to share a few. To start with, I realized that most pedestrian routes to the metro were sheltered. Given Singapore’s extreme weather conditions like intense heat and sudden rains, having sheltered walkways was very convenient. Next, the toilet paper in public places were not rolls but interleaved sheets, which felt unfamiliar but also made me wonder why. When I looked into it online, I found that this was a practical measure to reduce waste and regulate usage.

Also, when I went to the Changi Airport, there was a spill-kit designed to clean spills, which I believe encourages individual responsibility in shared public spaces. Another detail that caught my eyes was the “no durians” sign in trains. Such a restriction, targeted at one food, shows how policies/rules are introduced even at a small, everyday level to protect shared comfort and social order. What I realized from these small adjustments is that Singapore has very well studied their problems and responds accordingly. Singapore shows that social innovation is not only big change, but small changes that increase quality of life.

