

2026 CAMPUS ASIA Social Innovation Study Program in Singapore

Intersection of Social Innovation and Urban Planning

Introduction

As a social sciences and urban planning student, I am grateful for this opportunity to participate in this program to further expand my studies regarding the intersection of social innovation and urban planning in Singapore. In this photo journal, I aim to reflect on our fieldwork activities and explore how they connect to my research theme.

DAY 1: Dignity Kitchen

On the first day, we visited the Dignity Kitchen, a hawker center and a social enterprise that advocates for individuals with disabilities through training programs and career support. We received a warm welcome from the founder, Koh Seng Choon, who described his inspiring journey in establishing the enterprise. The Dignity Kitchen emphasizes the importance of building on existing skills and supporting a smooth transition into permanent employment once trainees complete their program. This visit provided insight into the social stigma and inequalities faced by individuals with disabilities. For this reason, I was inspired by how the Dignity Kitchen works to challenge these perceptions by creating an inclusive space, which ultimately serves as a strong foundation for community development while raising awareness of ongoing social issues.

In relation to urban planning, the Dignity Kitchen reflects a form of social innovation that focuses on how residents can freely participate in city life. It presents an opportunity to engage with neighbors while having a space that can connect to future employment opportunities that help sustain diverse lifestyles. I found that the Dignity Kitchen represents an example of redistributive urban planning in which it allocated resources to vulnerable communities, which tackle existing structural issues seen in city development. Through this social innovation, it creates sustainable change that can influence generations of individuals and ensures that no one is left behind amid rapid development.



Figure 1: Photo of Koh Seng Choon in front of the Dignity Kitchen



Figure 2: Nasi Lemak with fried chicken



Figure 3: Mural art display

DAY 2: Lectures at Nanyang Technological University and Visit to Gardens by the Bay

We attended Nanyang Technological University, where we participated in two lectures on economic expectations and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore and Malaya. In the first lecture, it was insightful to learn about Singapore's economic growth and the social behavior that influences economic output. I believe that urban planning can further support social innovation by forecasting consumer demands for services, resources, and infrastructures, all of which directly affect the economic flow of a city. Moreover, social innovation can shift economic expectations by influencing consumer perceptions of what is necessary to improve lifestyles at different scales within a city.

During our visit to Gardens by the Bay, I encountered the Far East Organization Children's Garden, which represents both social innovation and a response to economic expectations. Given that land is highly valuable in Singapore, its efficient use supports equitable living while promoting social wellbeing and economic growth. Gardens by the Bay is a major tourism attraction that significantly contributes to the national economy, while also providing a free, educational space for children. By encouraging active learning outside of formal schooling and fostering community engagement, the space may help reduce educational disparities while supporting social and emotional development. Overall, this example shows how tourism-driven economic priorities can simultaneously generate opportunities for social innovation that benefit residents and shape future urban development strategies.



Figure 4: Nanyang Technological University



Figure 5: Gardens by the Bay



Figure 6: Far East Organization Children's Garden

In regard to the second lecture focusing on the Japanese Occupation of Singapore and Malaya, it provided an opportunity to reflect on and honor the survivors of this dark period in history. We discussed that as these countries move forward, history should never be forgotten, and education should be intertwined with our daily lives through schools, site visits, and taking the time to truly understand survivors' experiences.

As I walked through Chinatown, I came across the Sook Ching Inspection Center, where two boards stood at a street intersection explaining the tragedy in different languages. Its public display reflects a form of social innovation in which history and education are made easily accessible, illustrating how their memory remains deeply embedded in the city's urban landscape. The site demonstrates how Singapore has been designed to embrace its diverse communities while encouraging collective memory and awareness.



Figure 7: Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum



Figure 8: Chinese Shophouses

