

A Sensory Introduction to Diversity

The moment I stepped off the plane at Changi Airport, I realized that this was going to be different from any travel experience I had before. Even the air felt different, heavy with tropical humidity and smelling of damp earth. I was immediately struck by the green wall and small plant installations integrated throughout the terminal; seeing how they use nature to improve air quality and mood within an airport was my first lesson in Singapore's "City in Nature" philosophy.



Photo taken by the author.

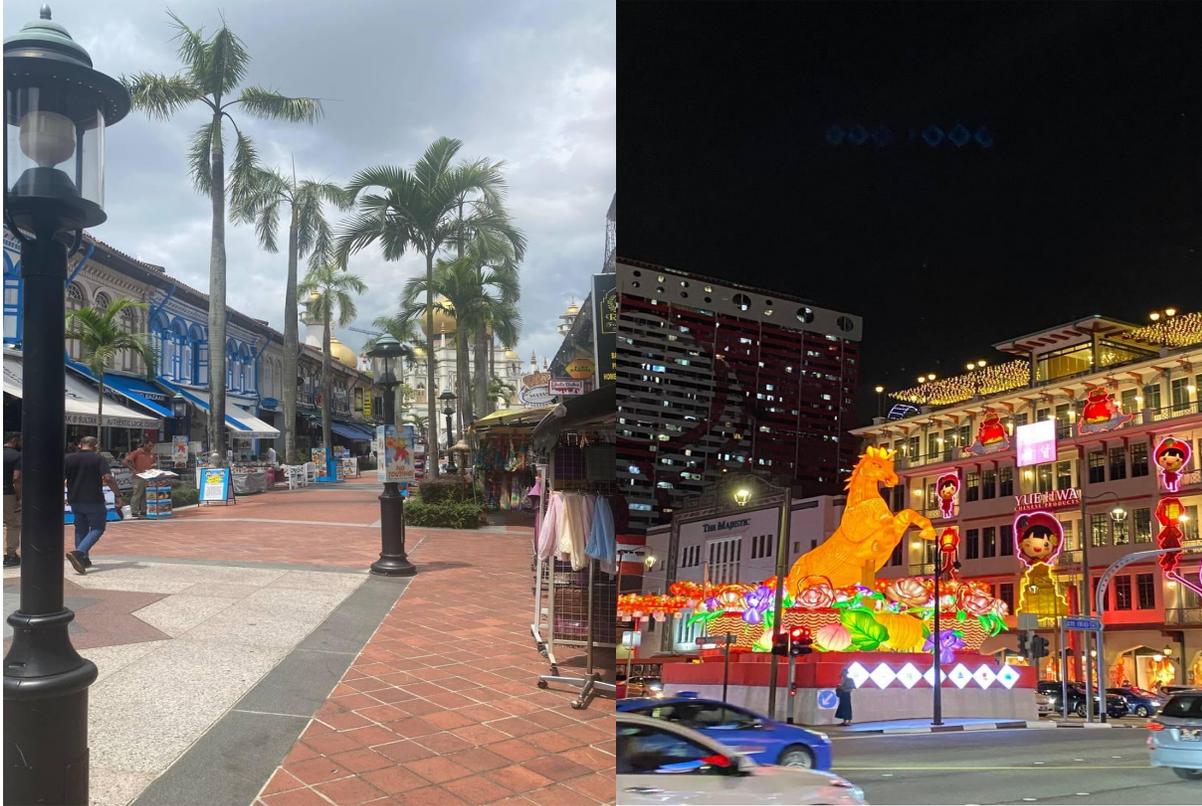
Our first stop was Merlion Park. The view was truly immersive, standing before the Merlion with majestic Marina Bay Sands in the background felt surreal. During our break, my two friends and I walked around the park, while observing the architectural harmony of the skyline, which felt futuristic and welcoming.

From there, we moved to Little India, which felt like a total departure from the orderly streets of Tokyo. Exploring the local markets was fascinating. I saw stacks of vibrant moringa drumsticks, bitter gourds, and sugarcane juice machines that can be seen only in tropical climates. Seeing these foreign vegetables in such abundance highlighted the biological and cultural distance we had traveled.



Photo from shared-photo album by the CAMPUS Asia Office

The main highlight was Dignity Kitchen. This visit was incredibly insightful, especially because I could draw direct connections to my previous Waseda coursework on social business. Seeing the “inclusive engineering” in their kitchen, such as the modified prep stations for staff with physical disabilities made the theories I learned in class come to life. It was a rare and powerful experience to listen to the founder, Mr. Koh Seng Choon, explain the mechanics of dignity directly. He didn’t just speak about charity; he spoke about the logistical innovations required to make the business viable. Hearing him describe how he manages a high-pressure hawker environment with a diverse workforce was like watching a living textbook of social entrepreneurship. Witnessing the pride the employees took in their work moved me deeply and has genuinely inspired me to pursue starting a similar venture in the future.



Photos taken by author.

We concluded the day exploring Arab Street and Chinatown. In Arab Street, the Middle East felt remarkably close. The area around the stunning Sultan Mosque was filled with the scents of Turkish perfumes and the sight of intricate Mediterranean textiles. Walking past shops selling Turkish lamps and Istanbul-style mosaics, I was so glad to see how beautifully these traditions are preserved. Finally, after dropping off our baggage at the hotel, my friends and I went to Chinatown. The juxtaposition of the traditional shophouses against the backdrop of modern skyscrapers was a perfect finale to the day. As it was almost Chinese New Year, the street was more congested with local people, and of course, tourists. Seeing a mosque, a Hindu temple, and a Buddhist temple all within walking distance was a powerful testament to how Singapore is not just diverse, but intentionally integrated.



The Hive building NTU (Photo taken by author)

The second day was centered at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The Hive is undoubtedly my favorite building. Its unique structure encourages accidental encounters. I was particularly drawn to the way greenery is integrated inside the buildings, blurring the lines between nature and study spaces.



Photo taken from shared-photo album by the CAMPUS Asia Office.

Beyond the architecture, the highlights of the campus tour were the conversations we had with the NTU students who were smart and friendly, and our small talk was incredibly memorable; they spoke with such passion about the interdisciplinary nature of their studies and their schools. These interactions made a lasting impression on me.

However, the day also had its somber moments during our lecture on Singapore's wartime history. The lecture did not shy away from the brutality of the past, specifically the hardships faced by the local population. It was not an easy topic to handle, but I realized it is of the utmost importance not to forget these chapters of history. This

lecture gave me a deeper meaning to our dialogue of civilizations, reminding me that social innovation is not just about technology, but about healing and maintaining peace.



Marina Bay Sands (Photo taken by author)

Later that night, the mood shifted to awe as I visited Marina Bay Sands. Watching the Spectra Water show and exploring the Cloud Forest and Flower Dome felt like stepping into another world. The sheer high-tech scale and the swarm of global tourists underscored Singapore's position as a futuristic global hub, making the afternoon's history lessons feel even more significant, the city has risen from such a painful past to become this beacon of progress.



Singapore City Gallery (Photo taken by author)

On our final official day, we visited Singapore City Gallery to understand the “brain” behind the city. Looking at the massive scale model, I learned how Singapore uses every square inch of its land with surgical precision. We explored the concept of “Green and Blue” planning, integrating parks and water bodies to manage the tropical heat. This session connected the dots between the culture we saw on day one and the technology we saw on day two. I realized that Singapore’s success is not accidental. It

is the result of long-term multi-generational planning that anticipates social needs decades in advance. This day solidified my understanding that social innovation must be supported by robust urban infrastructure to truly flourish.

During my self-study time, I analyzed Singapore's use of Biophilic Design, the practice of integrating nature into the built environment, as a form of social innovation. My research focused on how greenery is used to improve public health and social cohesion.

Nature as public infrastructure

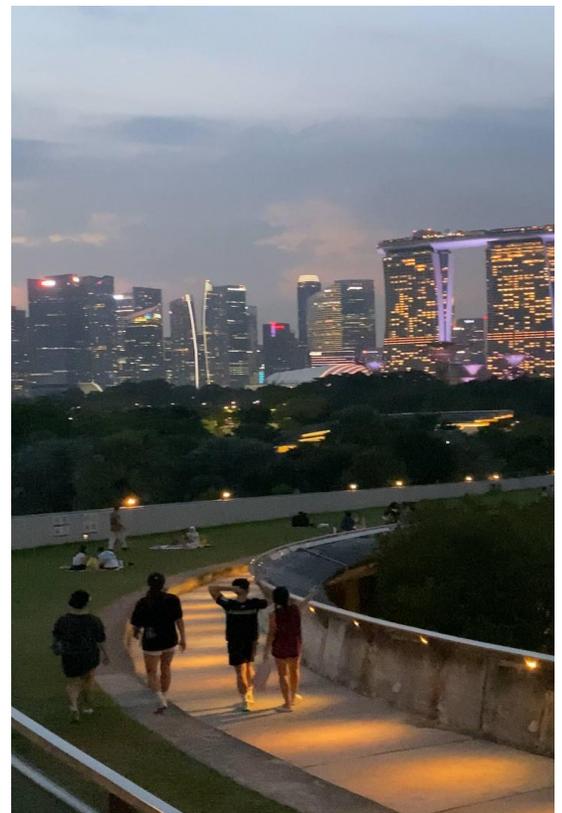
From the air purifying plants at Changi Airport to the vertical gardens at NTU, Singapore treats nature as essential infrastructure rather than an ornament. During the tour of NTU, I observed how the presence of plants inside the Wee Cho Yaw plaza created calming atmosphere that facilitated student collaboration. This is a social innovation; by reducing urban stress through Biophilia, the city improved the mental well-being and productivity of its citizens.

Environmental equality and public access

A key observation was the accessibility of these green spaces. Locations like the Cloud Forests, the Marina Barrage, and the various park connectors are designed to be inclusive. Unlike many cities where green views are a luxury for the wealthy, Singapore's urban planning ensures that even high-density residential areas are surrounded by lush greenery. This promotes environmental equity, ensuring all social classes have access to nature, which is vital for physical health in a high-pressure city.



Flower Dome and Marina Barrage (Photos taken by author)



My three days in Singapore have been a whirlwind of inspiration. From the academic rigor of NTU to the “Business-for-Good” heart of Dignity Kitchen, I have learned that

social innovation is a mix of empathy, technology, and strategic planning. And I am deeply grateful for the laughter and the conversation that made this trip so special. I return to Japan not just with a notebook full of data, but a heart full of memories and new friends who are equally committed to make a difference.