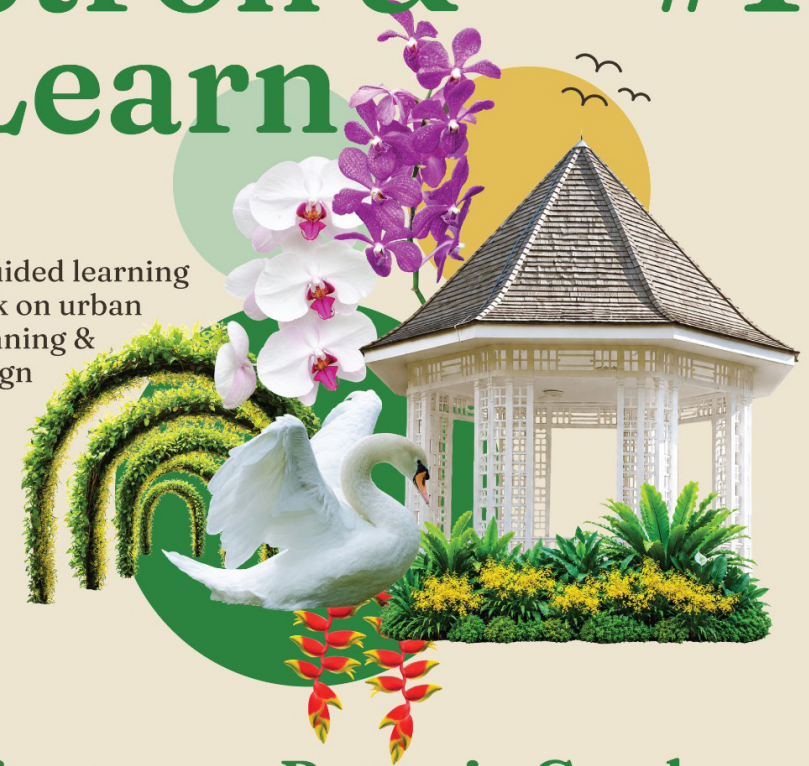


Stroll & Learn #1

A guided learning
walk on urban
planning &
design



Singapore Botanic Gardens

City in Nature • UNESCO World Heritage Site Submission

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**Friday 24 July 2026
3.00pm to 5.00pm**

Singapore Botanic Gardens

From Garden to World Heritage Site: Planning Lessons from a Living Landscape

The Stroll & Learn programme was born from a simple but powerful idea: Singapore itself is a living classroom. Its parks, neighbourhoods, streets and public spaces are the physical outcomes of decades of planning decisions, design choices, compromises and commitments. Yet their underlying stories — the debates, the trade-offs, the lessons learnt — often go unheard.

The inaugural Stroll & Learn session brought planners and built-environment professionals to the Singapore Botanic Gardens— the perfect venue to understand how scientific endeavour, evidence-based planning, and long-term stewardship have helped secure—and continue to sustain—its UNESCO World Heritage status.

The Singapore Botanic Gardens may appear effortless. Mature trees frame open lawns, winding paths lead towards lakes and historic buildings sit quietly within the landscape. Few places in Singapore carry as many layers — scientific, ecological, social, historical and civic

— as this remarkable landscape stretches back to 1859, showcasing the result of more than 160 years of botanical research, landscape planning, public use, conservation and sustained management. These layers of history formed the focus of the inaugural Stroll & Learn session.

Conducted in collaboration with NParks and the Singapore Botanic Gardens, this event was held on a warm Friday afternoon on 24 July 2026. While the event was organised by SIP, participation was welcomed from other professional institutions. Around 30 people attended, including SIP Council Members and SIP members, together with three members of the Singapore Institute of Landscape Architects and two members of the Singapore Institute of Surveyors and Valuers.

The result? A afternoon that was equal parts inspiring, eye-opening, and — dare we say it — genuinely fun.

Stroll & Learn #01 was held on 24 July 2026 at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, in collaboration with NParks.

The event was organised by SIP CPD II and awarded 3 CPD Points for SIP members, 2 CPD Points for SILA members and 2 CPD Points for SISV members.

Walking Through Wisdom: What Singapore's Botanic Gardens Taught Us About Planning Great Places



source: SIP 2026

Setting the Stage: Singapore's Only UNESCO World Heritage Site

The session was hosted by Mr Ooi Zong Yu, Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, together with Dr Nura Abdul Karim, Deputy Director, and Ms Rebecca Tan from NParks.

Before the walk began, participants gathered at the Botany Centre for an indoor briefing by Dr Nura Abdul Karim, and Mr Ooi Zong Yu.

Dr Nura walked participants through the remarkable journey of how the Gardens earned its place on the UNESCO World Heritage List — a distinction the Gardens achieved on 4 July 2015, making it Singapore's first and only World Heritage Site.

Every World Heritage nomination must demonstrate Outstanding Universal Value, or OUV. This means showing that a site has significance beyond its national context and is of exceptional importance to humanity.

The Singapore Botanic Gardens was inscribed as a cultural landscape under UNESCO Criteria (ii) and (iv). Its OUV case drew together its scientific contribution, historic landscape character and continuing public and institutional functions.

The inscription rested on two UNESCO criteria:

- Criterion (ii):
The Gardens demonstrated an important interchange of scientific and horticultural knowledge — from pioneering rubber cultivation research that transformed the regional economy, to world-class orchid breeding that put Singapore on the international horticultural map.
- Criterion (iv):
It was recognised as an outstanding example of an English Landscape Movement garden adapted to tropical conditions — its open lawns, winding paths, lakes, framed vistas and historic structures forming a coherent and beautiful whole.

The Gardens' case was strengthened by the fact that it had retained both its historic form and its living function. It continued to support scientific research, education, recreation and public life rather than surviving only as a historic remnant.

This demonstrated that the value of a place may lie not only in individual buildings or landscape features, but also in the relationships, activities and institutional practices that have developed around it.



The key elements for the submission for the Gardens
source: SIP 2026

Why OUV Alone Was Not Enough

A strong OUV case was only the first part of the submission. The nomination also had to demonstrate the Gardens' integrity and authenticity.

But perhaps the most memorable line of the entire briefing came from Dr Nura herself:

"Outstanding Universal Value supports nomination, while evidence of integrity and authenticity supports inscription."

In other words, it's not enough to argue that a place is special. You have to prove it — through documentation, through evidence, through showing that what made it great is still there, still alive, still protected.

OUV explains why a place matters. Integrity and authenticity demonstrate whether the qualities supporting that value remain complete, credible and adequately protected.

Integrity concerns the wholeness and intactness of the property. For the Gardens, this meant showing that its historic layout, principal lawns, lakes, paths, views, buildings and botanical collections remained sufficiently connected to express its significance.

It also required the Gardens and its setting to be protected from change that could fragment the landscape or weaken important spatial relationships. The lesson for planners was that conservation cannot be limited to individual assets: views, approaches, settings and the connections between features may be equally important.

Authenticity concerns whether the attributes that carry heritage value continue to credibly express the site's history. In a living botanical garden, this does not mean preventing all change. Trees mature and are replaced, collections are replanted, buildings are repaired, and visitor facilities evolve.

The test was whether these changes had respected the Gardens' historic character, scientific role and continuing purpose. Thoughtful renewal could therefore sustain authenticity when it was evidence-based and grounded in a clear understanding of the site's significance.

Historical plans, photographs, planting inventories, scientific records and conservation reports were central to demonstrating both integrity and authenticity. They allowed the nomination team to trace the Gardens' development, identify what had endured and explain why particular interventions had been undertaken.

For planners, this reinforced the importance of documentation. Record-keeping is not merely administrative; it preserves institutional memory and allows future practitioners to understand the reasoning behind earlier decisions.

A Structured Path to Inscription

In 2010, an assessment identified the Singapore Botanic Gardens as a potential World Heritage candidate. Singapore ratified the World Heritage Convention in 2012, after which the Gardens were placed on the country's Tentative List.

The following period involved historical research, comparative analysis, mapping, documentation, stakeholder engagement and preparation of the management framework.

The nomination dossier was submitted to UNESCO in January 2014. It was subsequently evaluated by the International Council on Monuments and Sites, or ICOMOS, which reviewed the submission and requested further clarification and supporting information.

On 4 July 2015, the Singapore Botanic Gardens was formally inscribed during the 39th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

The formal nomination journey took about five years. Its credibility, however, rested on over 160 years of continuous stewardship.

A Coordinated National Effort

The nomination also required extensive institutional collaboration.

Although NParks led the process, the submission involved agencies responsible for planning, heritage, culture, international relations, tourism and education. These included the National Heritage Board, Urban Redevelopment Authority,

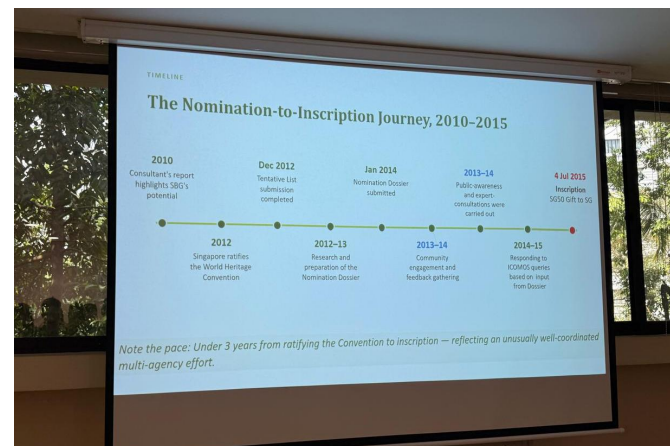
Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Singapore Tourism Board, among others.

Their involvement reflected the breadth of the nomination. World Heritage status had implications for conservation, land-use planning, international representation, visitor management, education and public communication.

The process demonstrated that complex planning outcomes depend as much on governance, coordination and shared ownership as they do on technical quality.

Inscription as a Continuing Responsibility

Dr Nura emphasised that World Heritage inscription was not the end of the process. It introduced an ongoing responsibility to protect the Gardens' OUV and sustain its integrity and authenticity.



Timeline for the nomination of the Gardens
source: SIP 2026

The Site Management Plan provides the main framework for this work. It is treated as a living document, reviewed and updated in response to environmental conditions, visitor needs, scientific knowledge and operational requirements.

Its key components include the conservation of historic features, zoning and visitor management, care of botanical collections, community engagement and biodiversity enhancement.

These principles are translated into daily practice through specialised horticultural care, inter-agency coordination, regular monitoring and scheduled reviews.

The Gardens must also respond to real-world pressures, including tropical weather, ageing built and botanical heritage, high visitor numbers, biosecurity risks and the need to retain specialist knowledge within the organisation.

The wider planning lesson was that approval or recognition does not guarantee a successful place. Long-term value depends on what follows: management, monitoring, maintenance and the ability to adapt without losing the qualities that made the place significant.

That's the kind of long-game thinking that separates good planning from great planning.

After the briefing, participants split into two groups and ventured into the Heritage Core of the Tanglin area. What followed was a series of stops, each one turning an abstract planning concept into something you could see, touch and feel.

The Walk: Where Concepts Became Real



Existing trees forming constraints and opportunities to develop around nature, as seen in the case of NParks's Botany Centre

source: SIP 2026

Stop 1

The Botany Centre: Design Around Nature, Not Against It

The first lesson was almost immediately visible. The buildings around the Botany Centre were not placed on a cleared site with trees added later as decoration. Instead, the existing mature trees shaped the buildings around them — influencing positioning, form and identity.

The constraint became part of the architectural response and identity of the place. It became the character.

The planning lesson: Existing site conditions — trees, topography, water, ecology — are not obstacles to work around. They are opportunities to design with. The best places often begin by asking, “What’s already here, and how do we honour it?”



*Holttum Hall
Previously the office and laboratory of Richard Holttum, the director of the gardens. Currently houses the Singapore Botanic Gardens Heritage Museum*

source: SIP 2026

Stop 2

Holttum Hall: Heritage That Breathes

Near the Singapore Botanic Gardens Heritage Museum, participants encountered the Gardens’ magnificent Coco de Mer palms from the Seychelles — living specimens that have been part of the collection for close to a century.

Unlike a historic building, living botanical heritage cannot be simply preserved and left alone. It demands continuous care, propagation, monitoring and specialist knowledge to survive and thrive.

The planning lesson: Some of the most significant things we inherit are not objects but practices — the institutional knowledge, scientific expertise and curatorial traditions that give a place its soul. If those are lost, the place loses meaning, even if its physical form remains.



Lawn E with its historical significance and its English landscape design and the value of the heritage vista
source: SIP 2026



An installation that fits its original use for gathering and creation of memory
source: SIP 2026



Vanda Miss Joaquim Garden; Singapore's national flower
source: SIP 2026

Stop 3

Lawn E: The Art of the Designed Natural

Overlooking Swan Lake, participants paused at Lawn E — one of the Gardens' most iconic views. The open lawn, informal planting, still water and framed vista all looked effortlessly natural. They were, of course, anything but. Every element was carefully and deliberately composed in the tradition of the English Landscape Movement.

And there, above the historic treeline? The glittering towers of the modern Singapore skyline, visible in the distance.

The planning lesson: Great landscapes frame the world around them. Integrity is not about a single tree or building — it is about the relationship between open space, planting, topography, water and views. Protecting that relationship matters as much as protecting any individual element.

Stop 4

The Bandstand: Memory is Part of Heritage Too

The Bandstand presented a fascinating case study. The present gazebo was actually added later — it was not the original structure. Yet the space had become deeply meaningful to generations of Singaporeans through continued use: performances, ceremonies, weddings, family gatherings and personal milestones.

The planning lesson: A place can be authentic not only through its physical fabric, but through the continuity of social life and public attachment it sustains. Memory and meaning, layered over time through lived experience, are themselves a form of heritage worth protecting.

Stop 5

Vanda Miss Joaquim Garden: Change Can Be Conservation

Singapore's national flower had been replanted in improved beds to support healthier growth and more reliable flowering. The planting arrangement changed. The meaning and botanical purpose were sustained.

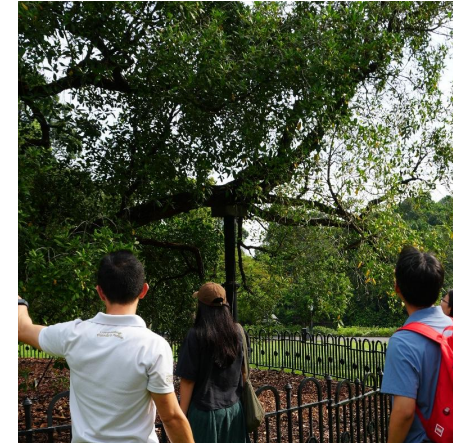
The planning lesson: Authenticity does not demand that a place remain frozen in time. Adaptive conservation — change introduced thoughtfully to preserve the qualities for which a place is valued — is not a compromise. It is good practice.



Keppel Discovery Wetlands presented a different landscape character from the more composed lawns and formal collections encountered in previous stops
source: SIP 2026



SIP Honorary Secretary Ms Constance Leung posing with the backdrop of our \$5 note tree
source: SIP 2026



Mr. Zong Yu (NParks) outlines the Tembusu's structural care and roof protection. Custom details like balustrades and signage ensure the design remains true to the garden's Victorian heritage
source: SIP 2026

Stop 6

Keppel Discovery Wetlands: Embrace the Wildness

Moving from manicured lawns and formal collections into the wetlands was like stepping into a different world — and deliberately so. Forest trees, waterways, reeds and aquatic habitats were retained and woven into the visitor experience.

The planning lesson: Not everything needs to be tidy. A great public landscape can hold multiple characters simultaneously — formal and informal, designed and wild, cultivated and ecological. The contrast itself becomes part of the richness.

Stop 7

The Tembusu Tree: Supporting What Matters

No stop was more moving than the one beside the beloved Tembusu tree — the ancient, spreading specimen that graces Singapore's five-dollar note and the hearts of generations of Singaporeans.

NParks shared the remarkable care that goes into sustaining this ageing giant: steel braces supporting its branches, mulching, fencing, and careful management of its root protection zone. Participants shared their own memories — wedding photographs taken beneath its canopy, childhood visits, family portraits.

Even heritage design details like balustrades and sign poles were styled to match the Victorian lamp poles of the Gardens' history, ensuring that every intervention respected the place's character.

The planning lesson: Protecting what is significant sometimes means visibly intervening. Integrity is not passive — it requires active, informed, sustained effort. And sometimes the most meaningful places are the ones that hold the most personal stories.

The Bigger Picture: Lessons for Urban Planners and Designers



**Great Places Are Built Over Time,
Not in a Single Masterplan**



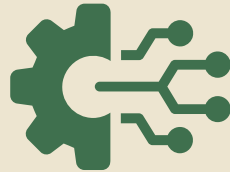
**Documentation is a
Form of Stewardship**



**OUV, Integrity and Authenticity
are Planning Concepts,
Not Just Heritage Jargon**



**Conservation and Vitality
Are Not Opposites**



**Complex Planning Outcomes
Require Coordinated
Governance**



**Approval is the Beginning,
Not the End**



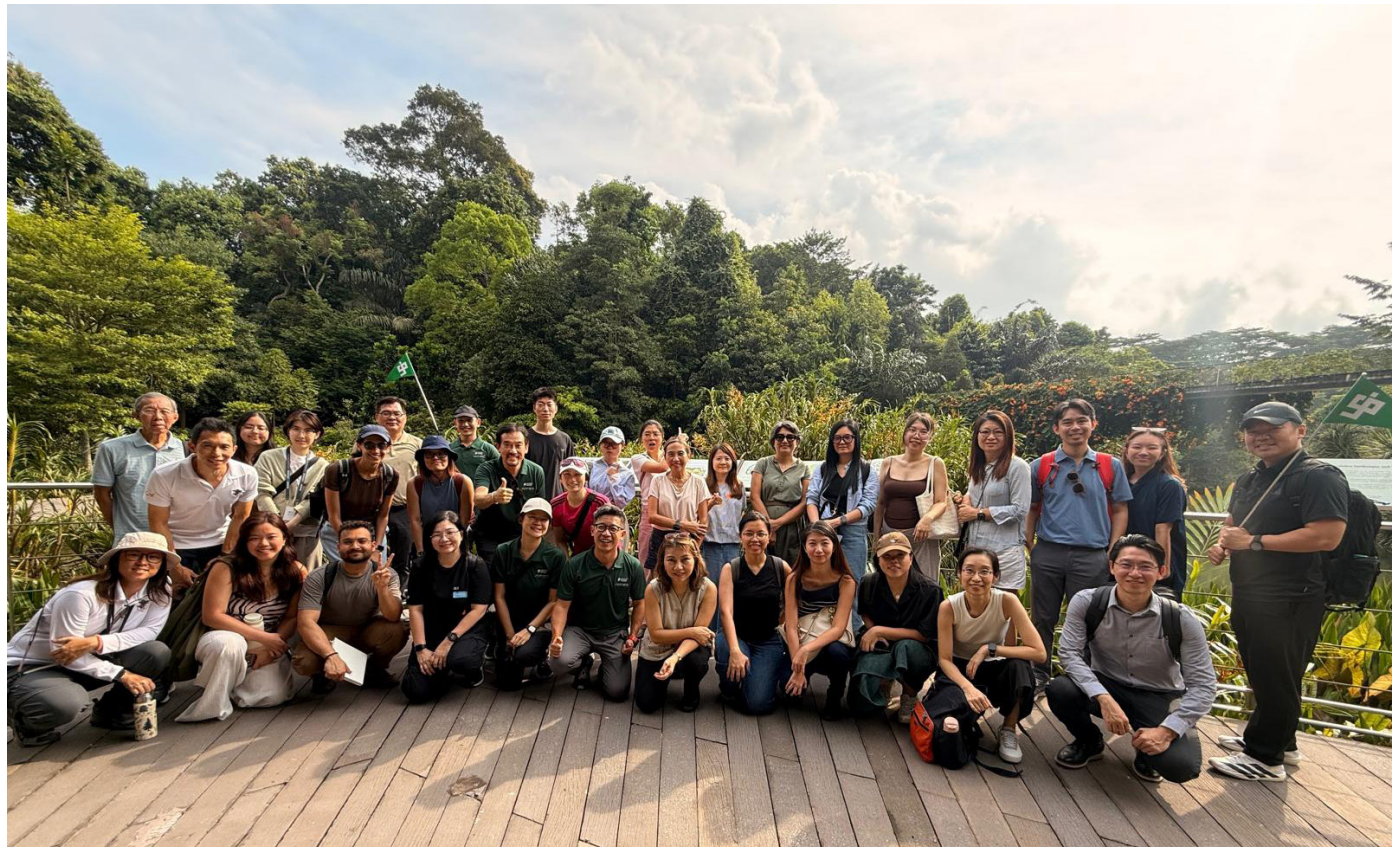
Go Out and Learn in the Field

Final Thought

The Singapore Botanic Gardens is not a monument to the past. It is a living, breathing, growing landscape — one that continues to age, adapt and delight. Its UNESCO inscription honours exceptional historical and scientific value. But its true planning lesson is something more enduring:

Successful places are not accidents. They are the result of significance clearly understood, evidence carefully assembled, and change managed with patience, knowledge and purpose.

That is as good a definition of great urban planning as we have ever heard.



Group photo at Keppel Discovery Wetland and learning about the wetlands with efforts for wilding in the gardens
source: SIP 2026



A historical setting, and lawn kept for posterity

source: SIP 2026

Thirty participants left the Singapore Botanic Gardens that afternoon with something that is hard to manufacture in a classroom: a different way of seeing.

The familiar lawns, the towering trees, the still lake, the old bandstand — all of it was now legible as the outcome of deliberate planning, hard-won knowledge and continuous care. The invisible had been made visible.

For **younger planners**, the session showed the immense value of asking questions and learning directly from practitioners who have lived through the decisions.

For **senior practitioners**, it was a reminder of the importance of sharing institutional knowledge — not just conclusions, but the reasoning, the alternatives considered and the lessons learnt along the way.

For **all of us**, it was a quiet but powerful reminder of why we chose this profession: because **the places we help create become the backdrop to people's lives, memories and sense of belonging.**



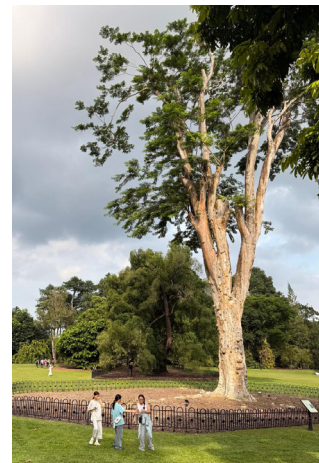
SIP Vice Presidents Mr Li Yu Zhou & Ms Lim Shu Ying presented token of appreciation to NParks Mr Ooi Zong Yu and Ms Rebecca Tan.

source: SIP 2026



Stroll, learn, and sketching

source: SIP 2026



NParks Ms Rebecca, sharing on the species of trees being conserved and biodiversity efforts being done at the gardens

source: SIP 2026



Group Photos at Botany Centre at the end of the event

source: SIP 2026

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Stay tuned for the next Stroll & Learn session — and bring your walking shoes.