



Design Toolkit

Rediscovering Emerald Hill

Designing for Inclusion and Social Sustainability

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DERC Reference Number: 000990 (College of Design and Engineering)

Acknowledgements

This project builds upon the earlier advocacy and community efforts of Keep 37 Emerald Hill and the SCGS Alumni community, whose commitment to memory, heritage and collective stewardship laid the groundwork for this research.

Disclaimer

This report draws on work from a number of sources and has not undergone a full academic peer review. The views and recommendations in this report are based on available information and contributing authors will not be liable for damages of any kind arising from the use of this report.



Rediscovering Emerald Hill: Executive Summary

Introduction

In 2018, it became clear that 37 Emerald Hill — once home to Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS), the country's first secular girls' school (founded 1899) — faced possible demolition to make way for higher-value commercial development. The school was relocated from the corner of Hill Street and Coleman Street in 1925 to this Emerald Hill site, where it operated until 1994. In that year, the cohort relocated to its newly built Dunearn Road campus.

Prompted by alumni who independently launched the *Keep 37 Emerald Hill* campaign in 2018, this research study was collaboratively conducted by the Social Design Lab and Civic Resilience Lab at the Department of Architecture, NUS (November 2025 – January 2026). We aim to explore the role of women in the built environment, and to develop appropriate methodological tools which could embed the datasets consistent with our research subjects. The *Keep 37 Emerald Hill* case study and the old school site served as our hypothetical site to propose an urban toolkit. Our question: Do places that hold a community's daily life and memory count for as much as places that turn a profit? Our answer is that they do, and that good urban planning needs the right tools to prove it.

To answer it, we developed two complementary methodologies for surfacing the lived experience of the place. The first is a *quantitative trajectory*: GPS-tracked walking interviews recorded with action cameras, transcribed, and analysed with the help of a Large Language Model (LLM) to map emotions, themes, and stop locations across the site. The second is a *qualitative co-drawing workshop* in which participants produced spatial memory collectively and tactilely — through writing, drawing, and collage on a shared base map.

Together, the two tools translate community memory into evidence robust enough to inform design, and have produced a concrete set of design recommendations for what the site could become.

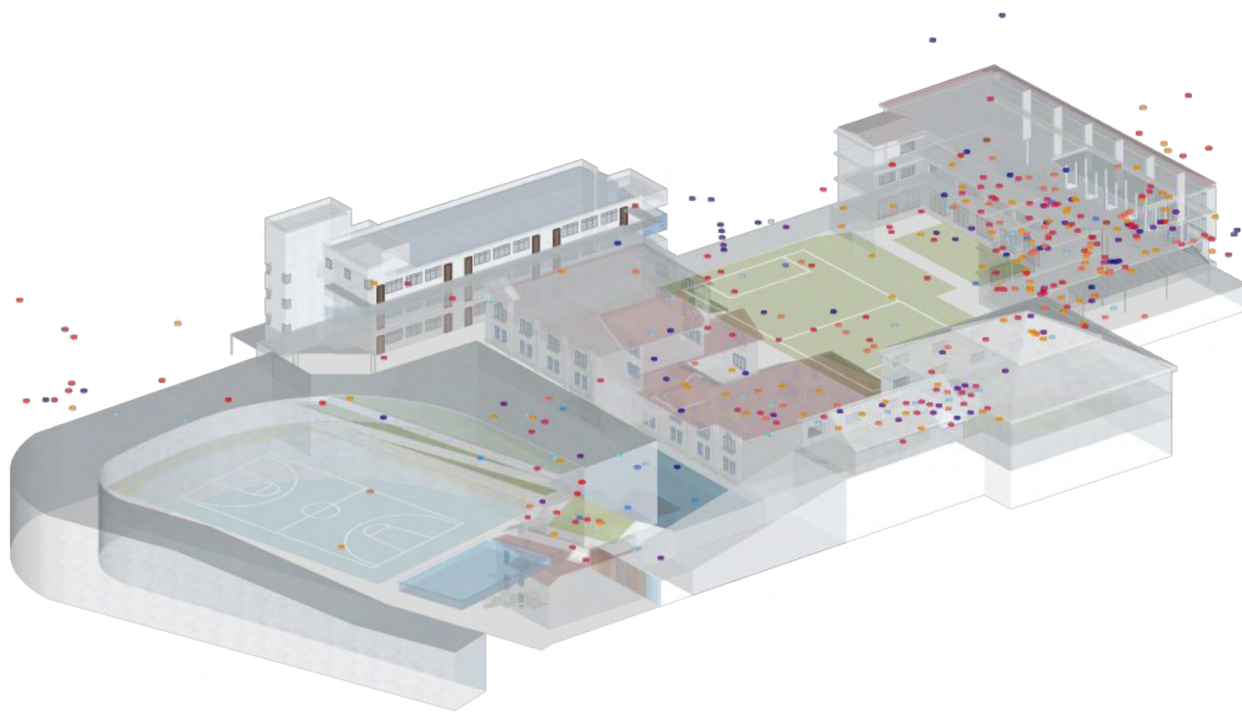
The implications extend beyond 37 Emerald Hill: in any redevelopment where an older building of dense social significance is *partially retained* — facade kept, interior life at risk of erasure — the same methods can surface what is genuinely at stake.

Fieldwork: Methodology

Over three weeks in January 2026, we walked the campus with thirty-two people who knew it well — alumni, former staff, and members of the wider neighbourhood, ranging from their forties to their seventies. The work unfolded in two parts.

First came the *walking interviews*: each participant moved through the site one-to-one with our team, telling stories where those stories happened — at the canteen where the mee pok man served generations of girls, on the slope they ran down as children, in the corridors that doubled as social spaces. Memories surface differently when prompted by smell, light, and place than they do across a desk interview.

Second came the co-drawing workshop held in the final week of January 2026. We brought everyone back together around a large base map of the campus and worked through a *Write-Draw-Collage (W.D.C.)* sequence: warm-up sketches to dissolve any shyness about drawing — a self-portrait drawn with the non-dominant hand, a shared object passed around the circle, a canteen scene built up sequentially as the page travelled from person to person — followed by an individual emotional map of one chosen place (what did the corridor, the bookshop, the principal's house look and feel like?), and finally a collaborative map onto which the whole group layered routes, gathering points, and shared stories. Tea and open cross-cohort discussion closed the day. The format made room for what one-to-one interviews tend to miss: shared confirmation, gentle disagreement, the small details that only surface in collective recall. *(continued)*



WALKING INTERVIEWS: HEATMAP OF STOP LOCATIONS BY LEVEL

Walking Interview Data: Image of 3D stop locations in the building coloured by reported emotions, see page 14 for more information. [IMAGE: Xinyi He]



CO-DRAWING WORKSHOP: COLLABORATIVE WRITE-DRAW-COLLAGE (W.D.C.) MAP

Final collaborative map layering participants' memories onto specific locations across the 37 Emerald Hill base map, using the Write-Draw-Collage framework, see page 28 for more information. [IMAGE: Co-drawing workshop participants]



37 Emerald Hill when it served as Chatsworth International School
[IMAGE: The Straits Times]

THE WOMEN OF
37 EMERALD HILL

Calling all women of the SCGS community! Join our NUS study on 37 Emerald Hill! We invite you to lead us on a walking tour of the former SCGS campus and surrounding area, sharing your experiences, memories, and observations to help us create a dynamic map about women's needs and aspirations in the city.

AIMS Our study seeks to document and integrate women's experiences of the built environment into future urban design strategies to better support their safety, comfort, and sense of attachment to the city.

RESEARCHERS
(NUS DEPT. OF ARCHITECTURE)
Dr. Lilian CHEE,
Dr. Chaewon AHN,
Dr. Dorothy TANG

DETAILS Participate in a 1-hour walking interview (Jan 2026).

CRITERIA Participants must be women aged 21 and above, or at least 18 years old if currently an NUS student.

SIGN UP HERE!

RECRUITMENT SOCIAL MEDIA POSTER

Posters circulated on CiRe social media and SCGS alumni channels.
[IMAGES: Pari Sen Biswas (left), Ren Yukun (right)]

**Rediscovering Emerald Hill:
Co-Drawing, Co-Making Workshop**

Join us for a lively creative session after the walking tour and rediscover Emerald Hill together! This joyful, hands-on workshop welcomes all — no art or drawing experience needed.

Come connect with fellow SCGS alumni from the project, swap cherished stories and turn memories of the building into playful drawings and crafted pieces. Everyone will receive a specially designed art memento inspired by Emerald Hill to bring home.

Refreshments and snacks will be provided
— just come curious, relaxed, and ready to doodle.

See you there!

Date: Saturday, 31 January 2026

Time: 10:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Venue: FARM Architects

Address: 261 Waterloo Street, #04-29, Singapore 180261
(Meeting rooms are at #04-20)

Project team:
Researchers – Dr. Lilian CHEE, Dr. Chaewon AHN, Dr. Dorothy TANG;
Research Assistants – Joelle HUNG, Pari BISWAS, Rachel FONG, Shobhit GOEL, Xinyi HE;
Student Associates – Bi Hongyuan, Jamie LOH, Laura DIETZOLD, REN YUKUN

Scan
to RSVP

(continued)

In the analysis that followed, we read the material through three lenses: *physical form* (how spaces looked), *social occupation* (who used them, and how), and *emotional density* (the feelings, attachments, and fears attached to them) — across sixteen named campus locations.

What emerged most clearly was that what people most wanted to protect was not the physical fabric of the building, but the community life that the building had made possible. Even the apparently empty spaces between memory clusters were reread not as voids but as thresholds — connection points as spatially and socially significant as the memory-rich zones they linked.

The Tools

We carried action cameras, Bluetooth microphones, and GPS trackers; we offered Instax photos as keepsakes. Recordings, transcripts, and locations were brought together in a custom data pipeline, with an AI assistant helping us tag emotions and themes across hours of conversation — though every interpretation and conclusion was made by the research team.

For the workshop itself we used an analogue and tactile *Write-Draw-Collage* framework: three steps, each unlocking a different kind of memory.

The Design Toolkit and Recommendations

Three design strategies emerged from the fieldwork. They are framed here as *transferable principles* — applicable to any project in which an older, socially significant building is being partially retained within a more commercial urban context, and in which a designer or planner is asked to decide what should be carried forward.

1. Design for relationship density, not commercial intensity. On sites surrounded by retail or transactional pressure, the building's most enduring value lies in its capacity to host human encounter rather than maximise shopfronts. Prioritise generous corridors, shaded edges, sheltered transitions, and the in-between spaces where people naturally pause, meet, and linger. Protecting and expanding their generosity is the most reliable way to sustain community within a dense urban precinct.

2. Reframe programme as care infrastructure. Where conventional planning optimises for retail efficiency, an alternative calculus organises space around wellbeing, learning, and cross-generational exchange. Pair commercial uses with non-transactional ones — seating, rest points, shared tables, small workshops, places to wait. Favour small-scale, operator-led tenants over branded chains. Design everyday amenities around the most vulnerable user; the resulting environment is more welcoming for everyone.

3. Preserve social fabric, not only physical fabric. When conservation is partial — facade retained, interior life at risk — the conventional checklist of heritage elements is not enough. Identify and protect the rhythms a building has made possible: the daily routes, the gathering edges, possible named routines, and the landscape elements that anchor orientation and memory. Treat lived experience itself as a form of evidence, equal in weight to the architectural drawing or the planning brief.

Conclusion

What makes 37 Emerald Hill valuable is precisely what cannot be measured in floor area — the relationships, routines, and shared memory the building has hosted for generations. This report offers the evidence for one site, and a transferable toolkit for many others: a way of working with older buildings of social value that ensures what is carried forward is not only the wall, but the life it once held.



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