



From programmes and initiatives targeted at children, to courses and senior-friendly print material for the elderly, and even mobile bus services for those with special needs, the public libraries of Singapore have been tirelessly serving and engaging the residents of the nation.

Singapore Public Libraries

Past, Present and Future

The public libraries in Singapore can trace their roots to 1823 when the foundation stone of the library of Singapore's first English school, the Raffles Institution, was laid. This library later became part of the Raffles Museum, and eventually moved into premises on Stamford Road in 1960 after becoming the National Library. Singapore's public libraries thus began as part of the National Library group of libraries and each branch was seen as an extension of the National Library in Stamford Road.

The National Library Board (NLB) was formed on 1 September 1995, and today oversees the National Library, Public Libraries and the National Archives.

The public libraries have come a long way from being mere satellite branches of the National Library. The current range of services and infrastructure within the public libraries have been developed to support the Libraries for Life masterplan that aims to see the libraries into 2020.

BUILDING LIBRARIES FOR LIFE

Under the Library 2000 plan,¹ which was conceptualised in 1996 by the Library Review Committee, an extensive and ambitious building programme was implemented to make libraries and information more accessible with the goal to expand the learning capacity of the nation. From

just seven public libraries, the public library system grew at an incredible rate into a three-tier structure consisting of three regional libraries, 10 mid-size libraries and 12 small libraries.

Today, the mid-size and small public libraries provide information and library materials as well as programmes to meet the needs of the people living in the surrounding areas every day of the week. Accessibility for the residents is key.

The regional libraries on the other hand, with extensive collections that include reference materials and services, cater to a wider catchment area and more specialised information needs.

Located in Chinatown, the most recent public library opened on 31 January 2013 as a themed library specialising in Chinese Arts and Culture, with its own unique and carefully curated collection. This is the first public library to be privately funded and staffed by volunteers. The next library expected to open its doors in 2014 is library@orchard, which is located in the heart of Singapore's shopping district, Orchard Road. This is our first public library planned and conceptualised through the use of design thinking.

The libraries in Singapore have always been considering how to redefine and design their spaces. An example is the creation of a dedicated space in 2004 for the Teens Library Service at the Jurong Regional Library called "Verging All Teens"

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(V.A.T). This space and the services offered were planned, designed and managed by teen volunteers.

Another example is the the Bamboo Garden at the Central Public Library. It was designed to maximise the use of library spaces, allowing visitors access to the sculptures in the garden as well as NLB's heritage — 5,000 bricks from the former National Library at Stamford Road's facade are located there.

Much excitement surrounds "My Tree House", which is the world's first green library for children housed at the Central Public Library. This environmental library features a green collection, green programmes and a green design.

READERS FOR LIFE

The goal of promoting a love for reading among Singaporeans has always been a

part of the Public Library's culture and mission. This goal is now one of NLB's key initiatives of Reading, Learning and Info-Literacy. Under this umbrella, programmes tailored to specific needs of the different customer groups are in place and being developed to support early literacy and youth and senior services. To achieve this and other goals, collaboration with partners and with community volunteers has become a pillar for the accomplishments of the public libraries.

Current and planned efforts to encourage reading in children differs from our past efforts in that current strategies utilise a more integrated approach to equip educators and support parents in the development of early literacy. Thematic activity toolkits allow educators to use storybooks and audiovisuals to ignite interest in reading. There are advocacy packages for parents to engage children

through fun activities that include talking, singing, playing, reading and writing. Low-income parents, in particular, can receive ready resources to use with their children.

In addition, the public libraries are in the process of setting up an early literacy library (at the Jurong Regional Library) for children below six and their parents. This will be a space where parents can learn about early literacy practices that will help the development of pre-reading skills in their children. To this end, the public libraries are partnering like-minded organisations to provide programmes as well as resources and services.

Engaging the youth or teenagers has been challenging for our libraries. In partnership with the Ministry of Education, the Whole School Reading Programme was piloted at 14 schools from 2010 to 2011. A full range of reading packages and activities has been developed and this will be



rolled out to 330 schools over the next five years to strengthen and raise literacy and reading skills.

Singapore's ageing population has highlighted the need to provide for this segment of our society. Going beyond providing collections with large printed fonts, the libraries are now exploring and providing more senior-friendly content and formats such as audio and e-books. The accessibility of libraries is also critical, and a team of librarians have been dedicated to bring library services out of the libraries to spaces where seniors congregate, such as wellness centres, hospitals and homes.

To this end, the Silver Infocomm Junction was set up at the Woodlands Regional Library in November 2012. This was a collaboration with the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore with the hope of creating a learning space dedicated to seniors where they can pick up IT skills such as web surfing, social networking and photo or video editing. Silver Infocomm hotspots have been set up for seniors to encourage greater use of multimedia stations and Internet services.

CREATIVE READING PROGRAMMES

Read.Write.Tell is a national reading and storytelling movement under the Arts & Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) and this encompasses reading clubs in schools, the community and organisations as well as writing communities and programmes. The goal is to cultivate a love for reading and provide opportunities to write and tell stories about Singapore. Older reading clubs focused on reading and sharing, thus this new movement makes writing a deliverable for the 25 Read.Write.Tell communities.

NLB launched its first ever nation-wide reading initiative, READ! Singapore, in 2005. This initiative, adapted from highly successful reading programmes around the world, encourages communal reading, followed by facilitated discussions on the selected stories. READ! Singapore's target audience was initially Singapore residents aged above 15 years old. In 2012 it expanded to include younger audiences aged 7 to 14 and introduced an enhanced MobileRead, a free application that allows access to selected content and enables reading while on the move.

kidsREAD is a national project that, together with the People's Association and community self-help groups, promotes the



love of reading and good reading habits to children from low-income families, aged 4 to 8. Volunteers aged 15 and above form the backbone of kidsREAD. They read to children in Reading Clubs that are located at centres, kindergartens, homes and welfare organisations, as well as primary schools. In 2012, it was proposed that children would remain in the kidsREAD programme until they completed Primary 2, instead of graduating them after a year in the programme.

CREATING NEXT GENERATION LIBRARIES

Growing Readers for Life also requires creating next generation libraries. This goal involves strengthening the role of libraries as well-loved spaces, and providing equal access to knowledge for everyone. It also includes having libraries serve as social touchpoints for community engagement.

Thematic Libraries

Building on the already large network of public libraries, and in order to develop the next generation of libraries, thematic libraries are being set up in existing library spaces. The goal is to cater to more diverse interests of the reading public and encourage further levelling up of reading and learning in special subject areas.

For example, the Jurong Regional Library has been selected to be an environmentally themed library and it will develop special collections, programmes, exhibitions, facilities and services on the subjects of green initiatives, sustainability, recycling and conservation to a depth and

range beyond that of the other public libraries in Singapore.

The Asian Children's Literature Collection was launched at Woodlands Regional Library in April 2012 and its 23,000 volumes include a selection of 800 books in handwritten, out of print and fairytale classics in various Asian languages. This collection has been recognised by UNESCO under its list of Nationally and Internationally Significant Collections.

Other themes include financial literacy at the Tampines Regional Library where the SGX Investment Knowledge Gateway has been housed since April 2013. This learning facility was born out of working with partners to offer interactive financial tools that would provide information on personal financial planning, together with a collection of business and finance books, and free financial literacy programmes.

Mobile Libraries

A mobile library service was launched in 1960 with two mobile libraries known collectively as the Library Extension. This increased to 12 mobile library service points and the unit served about 20 percent of public library members as there were insufficient branch libraries to serve the ever growing population. Eventually, after the first eight public library branches were set up, the mobile library services were reduced and then terminated in 1991.

In 2008, Molly (a mobile library in a custom-designed bus) was introduced, providing wireless mobile library services and targeted specifically at the underserved. Molly-Reloaded was launched in 2012 to



further extend the reach of the libraries and to serve a wider community. New features of the updated Molly include eight iPads for access to eResources, an internal bookdrop and upgraded borrowing stations for visitors to borrow items from the 3,000-item strong collection. Molly visits usually include storytelling, puppetry and other activities. Plans for the future include a mini Mobile Library to go where Molly is unable to go, as some schools and venues are unable to accommodate a full-sized bus. Special education schools are one of Molly's key targets, but visits are also made to orphanages, schools and homes.

Public Libraries as Social Touchpoints

All public libraries are being positioned as social touchpoints for the community to interact with or have the opportunity to collaborate on arts and culture, either in terms of creation or appreciation.

To provide Singaporeans with regular opportunities to learn about different art forms, a series of Arts & Culture 101 sessions comprising performances, workshops and talks related to the various forms of art are held. These sessions leverage on the libraries as touchpoints and are curated and facilitated by newly trained Cultural Concierges (librarians who answer queries pertaining to arts and culture).



Digital Library Initiatives and New Media

Public libraries everywhere are being challenged to engage the digital generation within their preferred spaces and adapt to new technologies. The public libraries have a vibrant presence in social media.

One of the earliest efforts was a blog to commemorate the relocation of library@orchard in 2007. There is also a library blog featuring music, dance, theatre and film that has been curated by library@esplanned, the performing arts library.

Blogs such as High Browse Online recommends good reads and provides updates on books and reading. Read & Reap is a blog

with excerpts from literary texts to inspire readers to move beyond reading to provoke questions and conversation. This blog complements the posters and toolkits that have been made available to parents and educators. The ASK blog (Actively Seeking Knowledge with Public Libraries Singapore) showcases interesting queries received via the ASK! Service (an Advisory & Enquiry Service) at the public libraries.

All the individual libraries have their own Facebook accounts, and there is also a Public Library SG Twitter account and a Public Library SG Instagram account, all launched in 2012.

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READ! Singapore has its own website and Facebook page to highlight the nation-wide reading initiative. Volunteers have their own Friends of the Library portal through where they can pick and choose their volunteer opportunities, and they, too, have a Facebook page.

The public libraries also made available from 2012 a free loan service for iPads, Kindles and Tumble Books Playaways at the Bedok Public Library and iPads at the Bukit Merah Public Library to enrich readers' reading experiences and expose them to a range of new reading platforms.

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"THE ONLY THING THAT IS CONSTANT IS CHANGE." — HERACLITUS

Library spaces will change even more in the future due to changes in the way people access and share information. This inescapable fact has led to the next phase of

development in public libraries that is being conceptualised in a new plan, the Library 2025 Plan. The need for this is based on factors such as the completion of the implementation of the Library 2000 plan in 2014, changing user needs and technological changes, as well as a projected increase in Singapore's population by 2025.

Mobile devices and the Internet have impacted the way people access information. Instant gratification and needing information on the go is now a norm. The way in which people consume information has also changed. People sample, repurpose and remix information to create their own take on it. The result is a new product incorporating repurposed content that is shared with a wider community through social media and other channels.² Given the rapid change in technology, libraries today struggle with helping their users develop skills to handle information and digital literacy.

The Library 2025 Plan has two main strategies. The first is to create libraries that meet community needs through all seasons of life. This strategy will address the expansion of the physical network of public libraries, and make sure that the libraries are situated at accessible sites so that their resources, services and programmes are available to all Singaporeans.

The second strategy is to re-make libraries to inspire in new ways. This is the part of the plan in which library spaces and services will be revamped to address new literacies and changing behaviour in terms of learning. The vision for this future re-making contains collaboration with part-



ners as well as expanding the co-location of libraries. The goal is to optimise resources and achieve synergies and efficiencies in delivery of services.

The future library space will be one that incorporates reading, building and creation as integral parts of the learning process, where collaboration and peer-to-peer sharing are encouraged. The library aims to bring together people of diverse interests and backgrounds to build vibrant and creative communities. At the same time, inspiration, reflection and contemplation are equally important in the creative process. Just as there is a need to accommodate different forms of learning, and different groups of users, so should library spaces be malleable, reflecting a balance between quiet, intimate spaces on the one hand, and vibrant, creative, casual and social spaces on the other.³

Looking towards the future and the implementation of the new plan is both exciting and challenging for the public libraries; change is constant and we look forward to the various programmes that will be carried out with enthusiasm. ●

ENDNOTES

1. Library 2000 Review Committee, 1994.
2. Tan and Taha. *Icons of learning*. BiblioAsia, Vol 9 Iss 1 and also Caron, D.J., 2012.
3. Lim, J, 2013

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(ABOVE) Library users sitting in a prototype of a specially-designed cocoon for library@orchard.
 (TOP RIGHT) Children enjoying books brought to them by Molly.