

Public Libraries in Singapore 2001/2002

Background

The National Library Board of Singapore oversees the planning, development and operations of the National Reference Library, the public libraries and the government department libraries. It also sells value-added services such as planning, development and management of libraries and packaging of information services to any client, in and outside Singapore.

In 1992, the Minister for Information and the Arts set up a broad-based committee to review all publicly-funded libraries, with the aim of improving access to libraries and resources.

In 1995, the Library 2000 report was completed and the recommendations accepted by government. The National Library was converted to a statutory board and renamed the National Library Board (NLB).

The public library system is a key component of the NLB. It comprises two regional libraries, 18 community libraries and 46 community children's libraries.

New libraries in 2001

Woodlands Regional Library

2001 was an important year for the NLB. The Board's first full-fledged regional library was opened in Woodlands in April 2001, attracting some 100,000 people on its opening day. The Woodlands Regional Library or WRL in short, has a floor area of 11,000 sq m, and is made up of 4 floors of library space, and a fully-equipped training room and an auditorium for 250 people in the basement.



Average visitorship is 8,000 to 10,000 per day on weekdays, and on weekends, some 15,000 to 18,000 people would visit the library per day. The response was just amazing. To date, over 5,427,096 people have visited the library since its opening in April last year.

Woodlands is one of four regional centers in Singapore, with an estimated population of 250,000 in Woodlands new town itself, and a surrounding population of some 450,000 people in the neighbouring new towns, namely, Yishun and Sembawang.

New services that were prototyped in WRL included the following :

- i) a semi-enclosed video screening room which seats up to 30 persons,
- ii) wireless technology for laptops to be used in any part of the library,
- iii) a whole floor of over 2,000 sq m allocated to reference collections and services, with a complement of dedicated reference librarians to provide the service,
- iv) a whole floor of over 2,000 sq m allocated to children's collections and a pool of children's librarians dedicated to the service,
- v) a large music listening lounge to allow users to enjoy music while reading and learning in the library, and
- vi) over 100 local art pieces, including sculptures, with full description of artists and their works to give our customers a chance to immerse in art and culture while using the library.



WRL chose nature and ecology as its theme for décor and library programming, as the library is located in the north of Singapore, in the midst of large spaces of nature and near the Singapore Zoo, the Kranji and Seletar Reservoirs, and the Sungai Buloh Nature Park, also a bird sanctuary.

Bedok Community Library

November 2001 saw the opening of the NLB's second major upgraded library in the Bedok new town.

This library was opened in 1985 and had its first major upgrade in 2001. The library has a floor area of over 3,500 sq m and comprises 3 levels. It serves an estimated population of 200,000.



New services introduced in this library included the following :

- i) an activity area called health@BE which gives customers a go at experiential learning by way of health machines, fitness test equipment housed side by side with the library's health collections. The activity zone is also next to the programming zone where regular health talks and programmes are held to highlight the services and collections,



- ii) a Malay library service which provides a special focus for the large ethnic Malay community in the Bedok new town. This includes a large collection in Malay, and a website which helps customers by pointing them to relevant websites of particular interest to this community,



- iii) a Quiet Reading Room for about 30 customers to read in silence. This special room was set up in response to customers' feedback that the NLB's libraries were becoming too noisy for some people who wished to read in complete silence.



As the number of visitors per branch had increased from an average of 1,500 to 3,000 before 1995 to 3,000 to 8,000 per branch today, noise has become one of the top three complaints received by the NLB in 2001. So far, response to the Quiet Reading Room has been very positive, and this service is rolled out to other libraries being upgraded.

New community children's libraries

Four new libraries were opened in 2001 to serve the needs of children under 10 years old. These are on the ground level of government housing which makes it very easy for parents or grandparents to bring their young ones to visit the libraries. They are open 7 days a week. A total of 46 such libraries have been set up in the past 10 years.

Other major initiatives

A major promotional programme called "Born To Read, Read To Bond" was launched by the NLB in Nov 2001 to encourage parents of babies and young children to register their newborns as library members, and to enjoy significant discounts in the NLB's workshops on parenting and reading with your child.

This was a major joint effort by the NLB with several partners, including the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, and a number of companies selling baby products. Together, the partners contributed over \$1 million in cash and in kind towards the year-long programme.

Another major programme was a year-long campaign mounted to reduce the noise level at the NLB libraries. This was in response to customer feedback.

In transforming the NLB from a traditional public library to a lifestyle library with a wide range of enhanced services, the NLB managed to increase the number of loans and visitors to the libraries, from 10 million loans in 1994 to some 28 million in 2001, and from 6

million visitors to over 27.8 million during the same period. The large increase in usage also brought about a corresponding increase in noise level, which is now being addressed.

The campaign has been very successful, and customer feedback has dropped from first place in the list of complaints in June 2001 to fifth position in February 2002.

Another interesting area to note is the continued success of thematic programmes organized by the NLB. In 1998, in an attempt to revitalize the NLB's programming efforts, a dedicated team of staff was set up to plan and develop programmes for the whole system of public libraries.

One of the outcomes of this effort was the prototype of thematic programmes, where a series of talks and workshops were organized around a theme such as health, family and sports.

The prototype proved very successful, attracting crowds of between 100 to 400 people at each programme. In 2001, the new thematic programmes introduced were [Life Sciences@Courtyard](#) (National Library), [eco@WRL](#), and [health@BE](#).

Future plans

We are now planning for a new niche library at the mega Arts Centre called Esplanade, to be opened on 12 September 2002. This will be a 2,200 sq m performing arts library which is located on level 3 of the Esplanade.

Another new library will open in the SengKang new town. We are exploring introducing a completely new concept of DIY (do-it-yourself) library to enable the library to open 365 days a year, 10 am to 10 pm daily. The library is targeted to open in November this year.

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