

Building better libraries

The Star - 13/5/2007

The Government is always lamenting the fact that Malaysians don't read enough. Well, we might do better if our libraries were designed with more thought, reckons our columnist.

It is an undisputed fact that a thinking person is a reading person. And vice versa, of course. If a country wishes to have sound future leadership and a competitive workforce as well as a more independent people, then reading and books are indispensable items in any curriculum or programme of education.

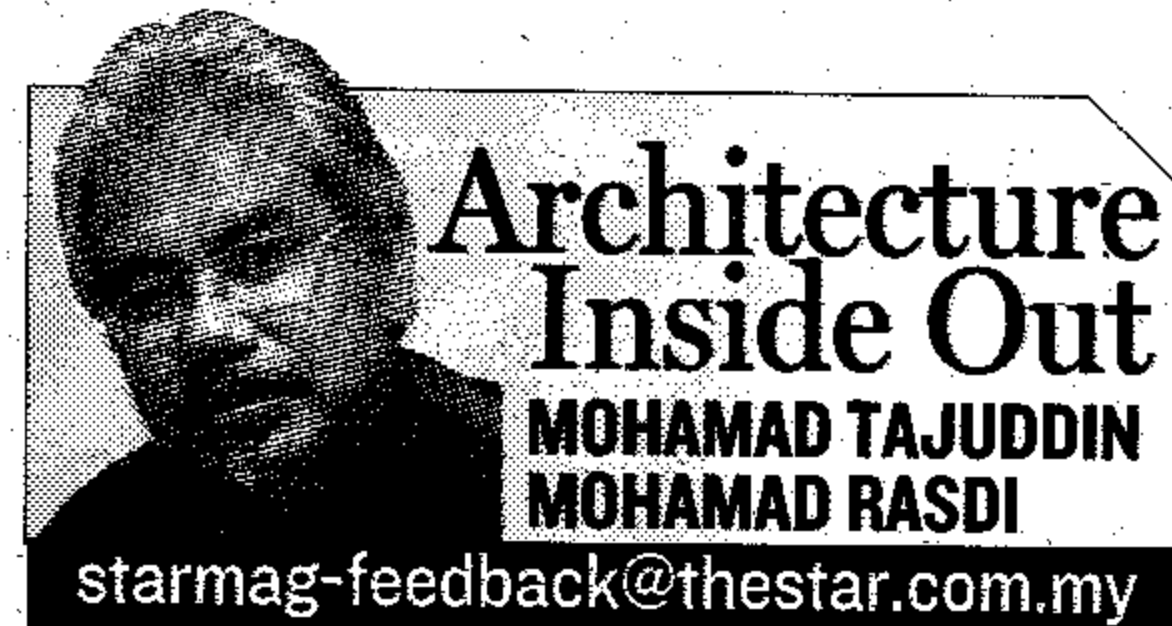
In architecture, the library is the traditional home of these two items. Of course, one can argue that the Internet is rapidly replacing books and, thus, the library, and so the future of such a building type hangs in the balance.

Personally, though, I think that we, as a nation, should not get ahead of ourselves and think that we are like a First World nation with computers in every classroom. Reading is a cultural trait that still needs to be nurtured in Malaysia. And books are the necessary "play-things" that the toddler, child, teenager, adult and older person must appreciate.

The space within which reading takes place – the home, school or community – must nurture, encourage and supplement this important habit.

But before deliberating on the design strategies of school and community libraries, I have a bone or two to pick with school curricula and pedagogy and also with their administration. If these "bones" are not picked, no amount of "architecturalising" of the library space will change anything.

My first bone of contention is the curriculum and pedagogy. How is reading encouraged as a pleasurable activity? Is time actually allocated for students to immerse themselves in a story book, a pictorial encyclopaedia, a *Popular Science* magazine or even a comic book in a library? There is hardly any time during recess. And the library is closed after school and on weekends and during long holidays.



Architecture
Inside Out
MOHAMAD TAJUDDIN
MOHAMAD RASDI

starmag-feedback@thestar.com.my

And then there's administration. Firstly, where is the librarian? No, no, I do not accept the poor teacher who has been drafted in to help as a proper librarian. Here's my biggest problem with administration: where are the books? I've seen many libraries with barely 30% of the number of books they should have in schools that are more than 10 years old. Of those few books these places do have, 80% are PMR and SPM books.

What's that you say? Malaysian children don't like reading? Well, please come to my house on Sundays and see how the children from the low cost housing block nearby eagerly flock to my 2,000-book home library to borrow Batman comic books, the *Archie Digests*, abridged classics, children encyclopaedias and even my health encyclopaedias.

So, if these problems can be addressed, we architects can help by advising on the design of libraries.

Firstly, do not site the library on the fourth floor or next to the head teacher's office. No one is going to go up to the fourth floor or walk by the head teacher's office to get to a library! It should be near the canteen where it is visible to the children. It could also be on the ground floor opposite the bus lay-bys and pick up points so that while waiting, the children can browse through the books and even do some homework.

Next, put in display windows like the bookshops do to attract young users. For the furniture, there should be varied sitting, such as settees, thick carpets with cushions



Our National Library looks impressive – but it is hardly accessible to children as it sits beside a major multi-laned and very busy road in KL.

and study carrels. Not too many of those canteen types of chairs and tables, please.

For the shelving, firstly, do not place the books in sunlight, as the writings and ink will eventually fade. The library should have different coloured shelves placed in rows or boxed in or L-shaped to create pockets of different spaces.

If possible, divide the library into a "noisy" section and a quiet one. You're surprised? How many Year One, Two and Three children do you know can keep quiet when they encounter beautiful and exciting images in books? So, let them exclaim! Let them show the book excitedly to their friends. Let the UPSR kids sit in the silent section to study if they feel so inclined.

Let us now consider the design of community libraries.

First question: where the heck are the community libraries? If the modern community in Malaysia is defined as housing estates with 500 or more families, then I would certainly expect a library for each estate. Okay, I'll settle for one for every three estates. But I don't see even that.

Libraries must be sited where children, teenagers and adults can access them easily and not have to

spend 40 minutes in a traffic jam to get to one. When I was in Britain, there were libraries everywhere and where there are none, the library truck would arrive five days a week. Now that is a real civilising effort.

We can't afford something like that, you say? Okay, then, why not attach a few library rooms to those woefully underused Dewan Serbaguna, or community halls? Or town councils could hire clerks to run libraries in shop lots in shopping complexes or wherever there are shops. We could also upgrade school libraries into community ones if we can site them between the school's boundary and the housing estate's streets.

The next strategic move is to get rid of any kind of fencing and just open up the library to the community. Who do we want to keep out with the fences? The community?

I would then design a large veranda space with seating in front of the library and add a small cafeteria or *warung* where people can come to read newspapers, magazines or comics while enjoying *teh tarik*. I would place a huge glass window that gives visual access from the veranda into the library stacks to psychologically invite the users in to read.

I would also attach a small playground right next to the children's "noisy" book section with a TV-lounge type of sitting area from which parents can keep an eye on their little ones.

As I said before, I would keep the quiet reading and reference section on the second floor for the UPSR, PMR and SPM readers. Seating areas should be varied and pockets of spaces – nooks and crannies – should be designed with colourful materials. Learn from interesting bookstores like Borders or Kinokuniya Bookstores.

We are what we read. First we must make the time for reading, then get the librarians for our schools and community libraries and then the different kinds of books. Finally, the architecture is simply to house all of them in an inviting, warung-styled typology with bookstore interiors. That, dear Malaysians, is the way to a thinking generation.

■ Universiti Teknologi Malaysia lecturer Prof Dr Mohamad Tajuddin passionately believes that architectural design that respects cultural values, religious sensitivities and the ideals of democracy is vital to nation-building and harmony.