

**Change Needed To Malaysia's Boring Libraries**  
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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 29 (Bernama) -- Boring, unexciting places that one would go to only if they had to. That was the honest answer given by some Malaysians when asked about the national libraries.

Some also found the library a place that is only suitable for children and university students. They believe the library is of no benefit to those past those ages.

Some Malaysians see the library as merely a place to search for references for their studies or research fields. It would be unfair to label these people as those who are not keen readers.

One may say this is because reading materials now have gone beyond what is printed on paper. We now have smartphone applications that feature all sorts of reading materials.

Perhaps, gaining access to such material no longer necessitates a visit to the library.

### **THE BOOKSTORES**

It is a different scenario at popular bookstores such as MPH, Kinokuniya, Borders and warehouse-type bookshops that sell books at a discount.

The number of visitors to such places is evidently greater than to libraries.

This quashes the theory that the latest technology has killed the public's interest in reading printed books.

Interestingly, many are more willing to buy books from such bookstores than to read them for free at the libraries in the country. Why is this so?

### **A BORING SELECTION**

Many studies have been done on the importance of environment in stimulating the interest of a person toward an activity or hobby.

An encouraging environment is a motivational factor in a person's life. In addition to boosting a person's work spirit, it can also help a person enjoy the time spent in a place, such as a library.

"I am sorry to say, our libraries are not among those places. A library may be big in size, but its ambience is one that is somber, poorly-lit and uninspiring.

"You can hold as many campaigns as you want, but if it's so boring and gloomy inside, people still won't come," said Mohd Yunus Ismail, a lecturer at the Dance Faculty of the National Arts Culture and Heritage Academy (Aswara).

He said that library management is not user-friendly. They impose too many rules, making

the public more inclined to visit bookstores.

Bookstores tend to have an ambiance that is not only more casual but contemporary as well. The arrangements of books and furniture are user-friendly, while the lighting and colours used are intended to make the environment more attractive.

The management of such bookstores allow customers to read without forcing them to make a purchase. This is why popular bookstores such as MPH and Kinokuniya are always flooded with visitors.

## **OUTDATED**

The ambiance is not the only factor that makes the public more inclined toward bookstores than libraries. The collection at a library is also an important factor in attracting visitors.

In an article in the Library Journal, a trade publication for librarians, a reference librarian at Brooklyn College, Prof Renee Feinberg, revealed that some college students prefer to use the popular American bookstore Barnes & Noble than their libraries.

This is based on an interview with 20 college students who were asked why they were more inclined to use the resources at a bookstore than at a library.

The respondents said it was because: 1) the books at the bookstore are more up-to-date; 2) the books are more specialized; and 3) the bookstore has a large and complete collection of books.

Besides that, bookstores operate until nighttime, making them more suitable for learning and research purposes.

Popular choreographer and dancer Joseph Gonzales also shared the view during an interview with Bernama recently.

"The books that I like most likely will not be found in libraries. This is because books on art are few and difficult to find. That is why I prefer to go to MPH, Borders or order online through amazon.com," he said.

## **ARE CAFES RELEVANT?**

Another possible reason why our libraries lag behind is the lack of a cafe area.

There are cafes in some libraries, but they are usually located a distance away from the books.

To get to the cafes, one may have to leave one building to get to another, and this is certainly not user-friendly.

In comparison, bookstores have cafes located near bookshelves, and visitors are allowed to read while they eat. This is a unique edge bookstores have over libraries.

In western countries, many cafes are located in the libraries itself, such as at the Farmington Library (Connecticut), the Hartford Public Library (Connecticut), the Brooklyn Main Library (New York) and the Burlington County Library (New Jersey).

Library management even allows visitors to bring their coffee and muffins to the reading galleries, further adding to the comfort of visitors.

This casual atmosphere has led to an increase of visitors to the library, based on records by the Multnomah County Library in Portland, Oregon.

It was also found that allowing popular coffee chain Starbucks to operate in the library resulted in the circulation of over eight million items a year.

"I have been to the library in Esplanade, Singapore. There, we can bring our coffee to our table in the library and I find that very user-friendly. The ambience was also more pleasing," said Mohd Yunus.

He said such a scene could not be found in Malaysia.

"Perhaps they are afraid we will spill our drinks onto the books and damage them," he said.

### **NOT A PROBLEM**

Bringing food and drinks to the library is not a new idea but one that has been discussed for some time among librarians in the world.

They do not see it as a problem because damaged books can be returned to publishers. They are, however, worried about the presence of pests.

Their concerns may be trivial. Reports from libraries that allow food and drinks to be brought in found the damage to the books to be only minimal.

### **A READING CULTURE**

It is clear that it is high time for libraries in the country to be revamped and equipped with the necessary changes to help them compete with bookstores and technological applications.

In this regard, credit is due to the Raja Tun Uda Library in Shah Alam. The six-storey building, covering an area of 203,600 square feet, is an excellent example of a library that encourages visitors.

Not only does it feature books, it is also equipped with the latest entertainment features, such as 3D film screening theatres.

It cannot be denied that appropriate entertainment can be an important factor in attracting visitors to a library. Perhaps one day, the face of libraries in the country will change to one that is more cheerful, up-to-date and user-friendly.

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