

NLB'S LAB STORY



READING, LEARNING
AND DISCOVERY

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Interviews by Hong Xinyi.

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READING, LEARNING AND DISCOVERY





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Introduction



“How Are We Going to Get Disrupted?”

The year was 2019. All was well.

The National Library Board (NLB) had revamped many public libraries and launched new services in the last four years. And the numbers were looking good. Loans, visitorship, and customer satisfaction were all growing steadily. But something was bothering Ng Cher Pong, who had taken over as NLB's Chief Executive that year.

Before that, he had led the SkillsFuture movement, a national push for continuing education and training (CET) because new technologies were upending every industry, and everyone needed to continue learning to keep up with the times. Ng knew from experience that a major disruption would leave no sector untouched. As he took stock of NLB's road ahead, one question loomed: “How are we going to get disrupted?”



“ARE WE LIVING UP TO OUR FULL POTENTIAL? ARE WE THINKING HARD ENOUGH ABOUT THE FUTURE, ABOUT HOW TO STAY RELEVANT AND HOW TO POSITION OURSELVES TO DO MORE AND DO BETTER?”

— Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive

Looking for New Opportunities

"I started talking about transformation from day one," said Ng. One major focus of these conversations was NLB's patrons. Or rather, our non-patrons – who were we not serving?

With Singapore's ageing population, NLB was naturally seeing a shift in our user base. While we have been successful at engaging children, there were opportunities to further enhance offerings for adults and seniors.

“THERE WERE PROGRAMMES FOR ADULTS, BUT THEY DID NOT HAVE A CLEAR FOCUS, AND WE KNEW WE NEEDED TO PAY MORE ATTENTION TO ENGAGING SENIORS.”

— Catherine Lau, Deputy Chief Executive

Who else could be converted into patrons? Could the National Archives serve an audience that went beyond researchers? Could new digital initiatives make a play for those who were more likely to be found online rather than among library stacks? In the beginning, the answers to these questions were tentative and exploratory. There were concerns about constraints – in manpower, budgets, and skills.

Then everything changed.

Catapulted From the Comfort Zone

In April 2020, all NLB facilities were closed to contain the spread of Covid-19. These would remain shut for the next three months. Never had we closed our doors to the public for such an extended period. It was disorienting. What was a library if there was no physical space?

As months of the pandemic stretched into years, lockdowns and other constraints kicked the consumption of digital content into a different stratosphere. How were we to continue our operations and services in this strange new world? And how could we adapt to our patrons' changing habits?

This was a difficult time. Yet, a new sense of possibility emerged. What if we could reimagine our offerings since the idea of what was normal had been completely overturned? That became the driving question for LAB25 (Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025).

New Networks and Discovery Channels

The leadership team looked to industries outside the world of libraries and archives, such as retail and digital content platforms, that were shaping the zeitgeist. What could we learn from them?

In retail, "the Alibaba and Amazon types were becoming more omni-channel, by setting up physical stores and pop-ups to reach out to

What's a library without a book recommendation service?

Here are some books that inspired LAB25.



***Billion Dollar Loser: The Epic Rise and Spectacular Fall of Adam Neumann and WeWork*, by Reeves Wiedeman**

This co-working space had been envisioned as a physical social network. How could the libraries and archives draw from this idea?

***The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power, from the Freemasons to Facebook*, by Niall Ferguson**

In contrast to the top-down nature of a hierarchy, a network connects hubs and nodes in a horizontal direction. How could the libraries and archives tap on the potential of the network?

***Facebook: The Inside Story*, by Steven Levy**

Extremism, polarisation, and echo chambers online were flummoxing even this tech giant. How could we better support information literacy?

***No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention*, by Reed Hastings and Erin Meyer**

Netflix's recommendation algorithm was responsible for almost 80 percent of what its viewers watched. What lessons could the libraries and archives learn from this mode of content discovery?

***The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon*, by Brad Stone**

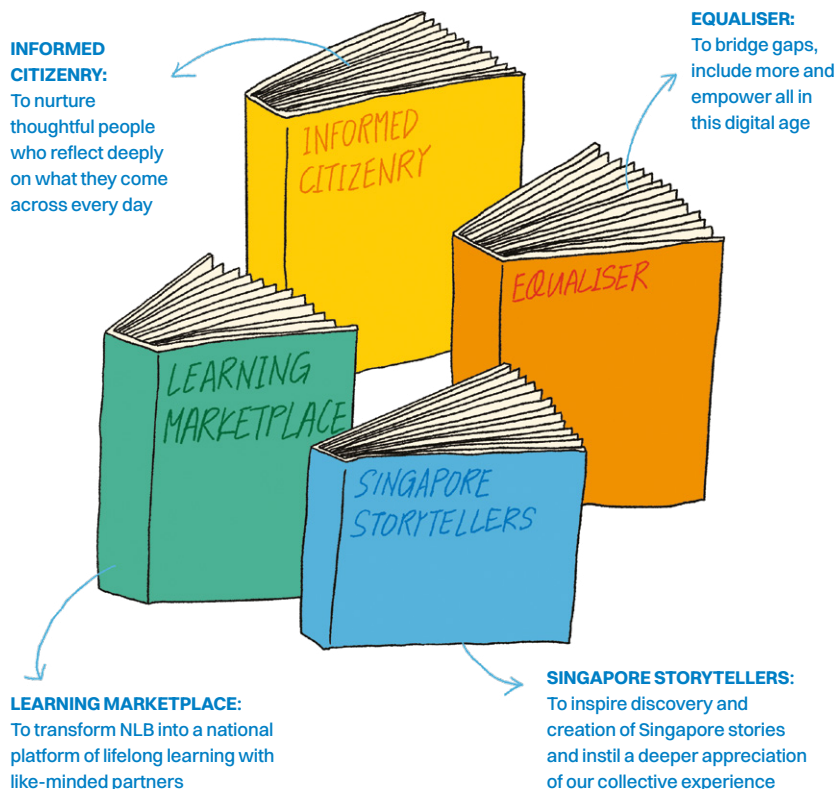
Amazon used differentiators such as lower prices to build up more mutually reinforcing competitive advantages. Could we create our own version of this flywheel effect, tapping on our existing strengths?

new customers”, Ng said. This made us think deeper about the way NLB ran its own digital and physical points of contact for its patrons. How could these two realms be better integrated?

Meanwhile, the importance of recommendation algorithms for driving discovery on digital content platforms “really made us sit up”, he added. “If people are increasingly relying on personalised recommendations to discover things, and search is increasingly used less, then that raises a very fundamental question for us. If we are only in the search business, and not quite in the discover business, then we’ll be in trouble sometime down the road.”

The Pillars of the House

Fuelled by all these ideas, the four pillars of LAB25 were born.



Strategies for Transformation

As the acronym of LAB25 suggests, it was not a conventional masterplan. Rather, an emulation of a “laboratory environment” was created to incubate fresh ideas.

“WE KNOW WHERE WE WANT TO BE, BUT WE DON’T KNOW EXACTLY HOW AND WHAT IT TAKES TO GET THERE. SO THERE’S A NEED FOR AGILITY, RAPID PROTOTYPING, AND LEARNING ALONG THE WAY.”

— Ng Chee Pong, Chief Executive

Different teams presented proposals on initiatives they hoped to pilot, and the leadership team probed and challenged these pitches.

“IT WAS VERY, VERY DIFFICULT, BUT IT WAS AMBITIOUS, AND I THINK WE HAD SOME VERY INTERESTING BREAKTHROUGHS.”

— Gene Tan, Chief Librarian and Chief Innovation Officer

The feedback helped the teams to move things forward and land on products that could be piloted. There was also a conscious effort to form inter-divisional teams to tap on talent and ideas from across the organisation.

This style of prototyping was a new way of working for us. Due to funding constraints, we did not have huge budgets for complex technology systems. We started adopting a more proof of concept, minimum viable product kind of approach, to see if the technology really served its intended outcome before we made any decision to scale.

To strengthen capacity quickly, building partnerships with diverse sectors became an important priority for LAB25 as well.

The ambitions of LAB25 also meant that our staff had to develop new skills. TeamLab, a Japanese art collective, was invited to give a talk on creating immersive digital experiences. Companies like Singtel and Changi Airport Group shared their expertise on omni-channel development. But when it came to adapting all this knowledge for NLB’s

Re-Organising to Unlock Synergies

- The Archives & Libraries Group was created so the public libraries, National Library, and National Archives could work together more closely.
- The Innovation Office, Equaliser Office, and Digital Readiness Office were set up to support LAB25's new priorities.
- Gene Tan took on the new role of Chief Innovation Officer. "I see this role as helping to pull together the tech world and NLB's content and community roles, in order to fully transform the business," he said.

own work, trial and error was the only way forward. Nowhere was this truer than in the realm of generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI).

In November 2022, the launch of ChatGPT brought Gen AI into the mainstream. Trained on a large body of data, this technology can summarise information in a conversational way. Could it help to boost the discoverability of our content?

“I STARTED PUSHING THE TEAM ON GEN AI ALMOST RIGHT AFTER CHATGPT CAME OUT. BY BEING AN EARLY MOVER, I AM HOPING WE WILL LEARN MORE ABOUT THE TECHNOLOGY BY BEING HANDS-ON AND SHAPE SOME OF THE NORMS ON THE ETHICAL USE OF GEN AI. WE COME IN EARLY, WE DO SOME PRODUCTS, AND IF THE PRODUCTS ARE ACCEPTED BY THE MARKET, MAYBE THE COMMERCIAL OPERATORS WILL TAKE THE SAME APPROACH AS WELL.”

— Ng Chen Pong, Chief Executive

So we dove right in, and it's been quite a ride. Gen AI was so new that training programmes were scarce, and those that focus on how to use it in libraries were pretty much non-existent. Our staff working on Gen AI projects were on the frontline of learning and experimentation.

And the experiments of LAB25 went far beyond this. In the following chapters, we share our experiences with these experiments, and how we have learnt from them. What new technologies will further transform our business? What seismic events will reshape the way our patrons learn?

Anything is possible in the age of disruption. Only one thing is certain – we will continue to innovate and keep a step ahead to serve our patrons!



CHAPTER 1

Re-framing Disruption



The Library of Today

At first glance, the library looks just how you might expect it to. Illuminated shelves full of books and quiet seating areas for patrons to sit and browse. But there's also much more.

In this library, tucked away in the basement of the National Library Building along Victoria Street, uniquely Singaporean murals and red bricks reminiscent of the old National Library on Stamford Road line the walls. If you peek into the programme room, you might see some seniors creating structures with 3D pens. Unexpected? Maybe.

Nearby is a compact exhibition about the history of leisure in Singapore in a space called Singapore Alcove. It's complete with artefacts, photos of days past and even a quirky quiz to find out your *lepak* personality.



Singapore Alcove at Central Library, which reopened in 2024.

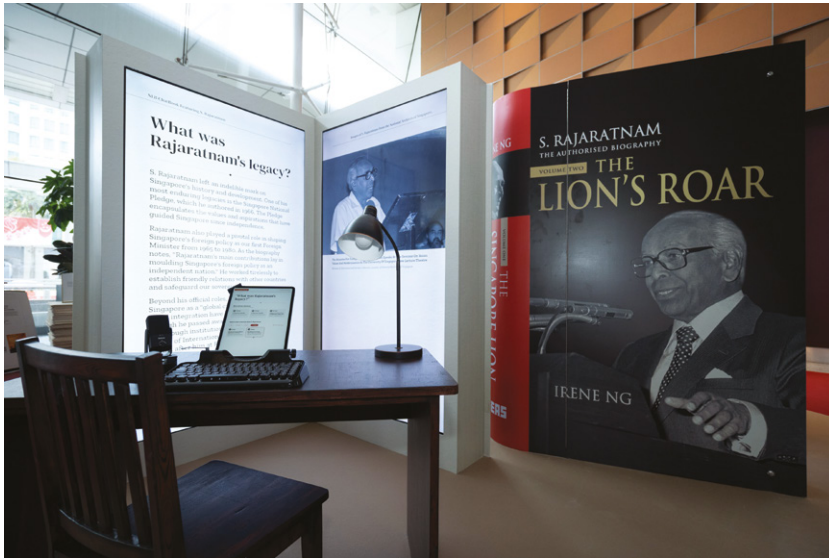
Then there's the mysteriously dark, enclosed room in a corner of the library. Signs say it is the home of StoryGen, a tech prototype powered by Gen AI. This is where customised versions of well-known stories can come to life on the room's walls, complete with whimsical background music and images generated by AI.

Who would've imagined that the library would be so much more than books?

Boosting Discovery with Gen AI

CHATBOOK

Each iteration of this Gen AI-powered chatbot, called ChatBook, draws on the content of a specific book or books and related NLB resources. Users can ask questions and learn more about the book's subject through the generated responses.



ChatBook Featuring S. Rajaratnam was housed at the National Library Building from July to October 2024.

Step into a study and take a seat. It's your chance to chat with a book. Specifically, a book about S. Rajaratnam, one of Singapore's founding fathers and member of the first Cabinet of independent Singapore.

Either use the typewriter on the desk, or speak into the microphone to ask your question. Watch as the answer appears almost immediately

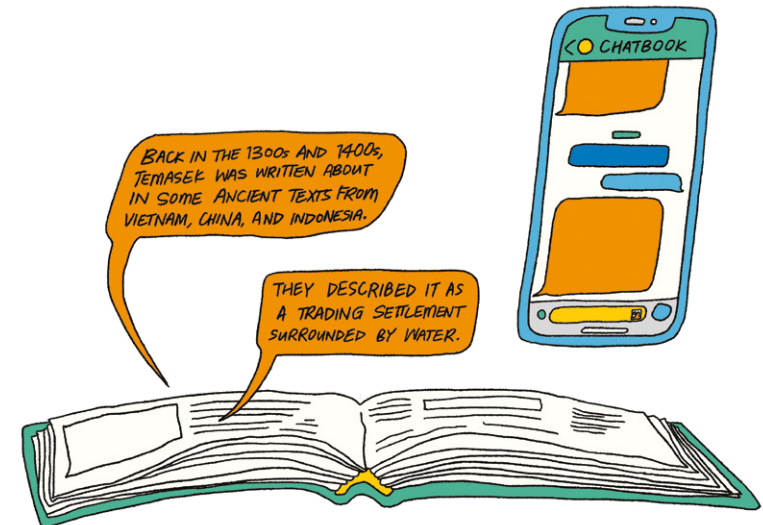
on the screen in front of you, embellished with replicas of Rajaratnam's handwriting. You might even be presented with photos and audio clips, drawn from our archives. This is the second iteration of ChatBook, one of NLB's Gen AI prototypes.

When ChatGPT launched in late 2022, we did not know how Gen AI would affect the information world. But waiting to react would put us behind, so we started dreaming the incredible. What if we could have a conversation with a book as a starting point for discovery?

Taking the Plunge

Meet The Innovation Office

NLB is no stranger to innovation. In fact, we have several longstanding departments and initiatives that encourage ground-up innovation. But to promote an organisation-wide culture of innovation as part of LAB25, we set up the Innovation Office. It's small and nimble by design - by testing new ideas such as ChatBook on a small scale with different NLB divisions and external partners and iterating quickly, the Innovation Office figures out which ideas have wider transformative applications for NLB.



With this in mind, we partnered Amazon Web Services (AWS) to build our first iteration of ChatBook, which came in a web and a WhatsApp version. Much like chatting with a friend online, you could

“chat” with the book, *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*¹, typing in questions and getting answers in text. Following intensive testing by our own staff to ensure it gave accurate answers, over 700 members of the public were invited to take it for a spin.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Finding a Balance

Controlling the dataset minimises the likelihood of AI hallucinations, but ChatBook may not be able to answer many questions if the dataset is too limited. We had to finetune the size and content of the dataset to ensure a meaningful user experience.

Appetite for Variety

Several users suggested to expand the formats of responses beyond just text. Including visual and audio formats was more technically complicated, but we were determined to give it a go in the next iteration so that NLB's multi-format collections could be showcased.

“DURING THE TESTING PHASE, WE USED ‘I’M SORRY, MY FRIEND’ AS A DEFAULT OPENING RESPONSE WHEN CHATBOOK WAS NOT ABLE TO PROVIDE AN ANSWER TO A USER QUESTION. THAT RESPONSE BECAME AN INSIDE JOKE AMONG THE TEAM, AND WE WOULD USE IT AMONG OURSELVES WHENEVER OUR SUBSEQUENT PROTOTYPES COULD NOT PROVIDE SUITABLE RESPONSES OR WHEN SOMETHING WENT WRONG.”

— Geraldine Seah, Deputy Director, Innovation Office

1 *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*, by Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, Peter Borschberg and Tan Tai Yong, was co-published by NLB and Marshall Cavendish Editions in 2019. Even though NLB owned the copyright to the book, we obtained permission from the book's authors and co-publisher to include it in the dataset for ChatBook.

Iterating with Flair and Care

The first prototype went well. So, we kept going. What if we gave ChatBook a physical home?

We built the next ChatBook using both volumes of the authorised biography of S. Rajaratnam by Irene Ng and published by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, as well as 14 hours of oral history by Rajaratnam from the National Archives. We also added e-resources on Singapore including the National Library's Infopedia articles and our publications such as *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*.

Working with AWS, we visualised almost every frame of the screen interface and experience for the user. This interface was then placed within the setting of a study, to underscore Rajaratnam's love of reading and writing.

The response so far has been encouraging, with patrons saying that they wanted to learn more about Rajaratnam after using ChatBook. This has shown us the potential of ChatBook to inspire further discovery and interaction with other NLB resources.



ChatBook Featuring S. Rajaratnam at the National Library Building, 2024.

STORYGEN

This Gen AI prototype showcases the technology's image generation capabilities and helps users discover great stories and writers by experiencing them in new ways.



StoryGen at Central Library when it reopened in 2024.

In 2024, StoryGen was launched when the Central Library reopened after a revamp. Working with AWS, we selected a few well-loved stories that were out of copyright – including folktales about early Singapore such as those from the *Sejarah Melayu* – and created an interface for users to mix them up with prompts such as location, characters, ending and genre. Their stories would then come alive in an immersive visual experience generated on the large, curved screens of the library's Immersive Room, enhanced with the addition of music.

Another version of StoryGen was the Horror Edition at Haw Par Villa, launched in late 2024. Singapore writer Pugalenth Sr was invited to create horror stories exclusively for this.

All StoryGen showcases also feature explainers and resources about the potential and issues surrounding Gen AI. Our Gen AI prototypes and their iterations to help users discover content in fresh ways have had, to date, more than 430,000 visits since their launch in 2024.



StoryGen (Horror Edition) at Haw Par Villa, 2024.

“THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIES IS A GENERATIVE LIBRARY THAT IS PLACE-BASED. THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE IN OUR GEN AI PROJECTS. IT PUTS THE DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL TOGETHER.”

— Gene Tan, Chief Librarian and Chief Innovation Officer



LEARNING MARKETPLACE

BRAIN FOOD

CHILDREN BOOKS

THRILLER

SCIENCE FICTION

MYSTERY

TRAVEL

COME JOIN A LEARNX COMMUNITY!

GET YOUR CURATED LEARNING PATHWAY WITH US TODAY!

LEARNX & MUNCH

BUILD YOUR OWN SANDWICH
CHOOSE ONE:
1. ARTS
2. CAREER
3. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
4. DIGITAL
5. WELLNESS
6. READING
7. SINGAPORE
8. SUSTAINABILITY

DIGI HARVEST

Products
• E-BOOKS
• E-MAGAZINES
• AUDIOBOOKS
• VIDEOS
• E-LEARNING

Building a Vibrant Learning Marketplace

From babies to adults, the libraries and archives offer learning opportunities for everyone to learn. In addition to books, there are programmes, learning communities, content in varying formats and even e-learning. But at the start of LAB25, we realised that our offerings for adults did not necessarily align with key personal and professional priorities at different life stages (for instance, new entrants to the workforce versus mid-career job-switchers).

So, we started to build offerings that could strengthen our role as an informal learning place to support Continuing Education and Training (CET). That meant low-to-no cost and quality bite-sized learning that was accessible to everyone, with low barriers to entry – no qualifications needed and no intimidating assessments.

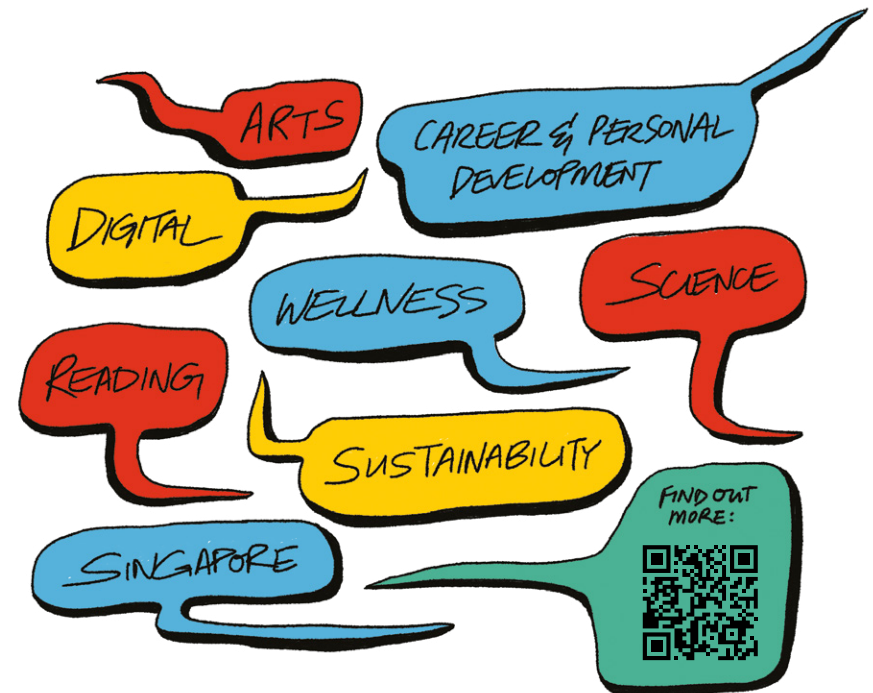
Once patrons took a bite of our easy, breezy programmes, we could then connect them to more learning opportunities if they wanted to explore a certain topic in greater depth. But first, we had to figure out what exactly adults wanted to learn.

“ WE WANTED TO PITCH OUR OFFERINGS SO THAT PEOPLE WOULDN'T HAVE TO THINK VERY HARD BEFORE THEY DECIDE TO TRY SOMETHING. ”

— Catherine Lau, Deputy Chief Executive

LEARNING FOCUS AREAS

We conducted a survey of adult patrons to ask what they would like to learn through the library. Broadly, they were interested in:



Clarity and Collaboration

We called these learning focus areas. They became our compass as we re-designed our programmes for adults and selected our partners. They also gave us clarity as we built our collections and ensured that our many different offerings could be packaged, mixed and matched for more tailored experiences.

HOW PARTNERSHIPS POWER OUR PROGRAMMES

Institutes of Higher Learning

Institutes of Higher Learning offer condensed versions of their CET courses at our public libraries, which have a broad reach and are in accessible locations. If patrons like these “tasters”, they can sign up for the full courses at the respective institutes.

SkillsFuture Singapore

Our marquee THRIVE@libraries event is organised together with SkillsFuture Singapore as part of the annual SkillsFuture Festival. It aims to motivate working adults to embrace lifelong learning using NLB's offerings.

Active Ageing Centres

We also proactively bring patrons to our libraries. One of the ways we do this is through Active Ageing Centres. These are spread out across Singapore, which makes them important touchpoints for connecting with seniors. We provide transport to and from these centres so seniors can visit our libraries and attend programmes.



THRIVE@libraries 2024 at Paya Lebar Quarter Plaza.

The Great Make-Over Project



A participant of The Great Make-Over Project sharing about her project, 2023.

We also experimented with co-creation projects for patrons who wanted to proactively engage their communities. One example was The Great Make-Over Project, where participants took part in workshops to look at improving the physical environment of a neighbourhood. Their ideas were then presented to that neighbourhood's Town Council, to get feedback on the feasibility of their pitches.

Such programmes require commitment from participants and are more resource-intensive for NLB. “But we recognise their value for deeper and more meaningful engagement,” said Lai Poi Shan, Senior Deputy Director, Programmes & Services. “It is a platform for users to put learning into action and benefit a larger community. We are thinking about different programming approaches that enable more co-creation for social impact.”

Many of these programmes are what we call blockbuster programmes. These are designed to reach people who normally do not visit our libraries. The next challenge is to keep them coming back after they attend such an event. “That’s something we are working harder

on, so that we can continue encouraging them to discover more using NLB's offerings," said Lai Poi Shan, Senior Deputy Director, Programmes & Services.

Growing and Diversifying Our Digital Offerings

Our digital collection – easily accessible via your phone, in the comfort of your home or even on the MRT – is also an important avenue through which you can discover something new.

Content consumption is increasingly skewing digital, a trend that accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020 alone, the checkouts from our OverDrive² collection of e-books, audiobooks and e-magazines reached over 6 million, up from 600,000 in 2015.

HERE'S HOW SOME USERS
MADE USE OF OUR E-COLLECTION
DURING THE PANDEMIC:

"AS A GENERAL PAPER TEACHER, I TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY TO INTRODUCE MY STUDENTS TO GOOD BOOKS... YOU KNOW HOW IMPRESSED AND GRATEFUL I WAS WHEN TITLE AFTER TITLE WAS AVAILABLE IN NLB? I TOLD MY STUDENTS HOW LUCKY THEY WERE TO HAVE SUCH A WONDERFUL NATIONAL LIBRARY."

"MY MOTHER AGED 78 AND WHEELCHAIR-BOUND... STARTED BORROWING BOOKS, LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTRE, READING ALL THE TIME AND RETURNING THE BOOKS ON HER OWN. SEE THE POWER OF AN ONLINE LIBRARY FOR AN OLD WOMAN LIKE MY MOTHER? SHE IS SO HAPPY TO BORROW SEVERAL TAMIL TITLES AND READ THEM."

"People couldn't borrow print books because libraries were closed during lockdown, so they turned to e-books," said Khor Su Min, Deputy Director, Collection Planning & Development. This is now part of a larger trend of growing e-book consumption.

By 2024, our OverDrive checkouts had exceeded 11 million, making NLB the third-ranking library system in the world for this metric. But we knew that we could do better.

Video streaming platforms, for instance, were becoming an increasingly popular way to consume content. The library as a gateway to content and knowledge could no longer ignore video as a format.

We had been trying to introduce a digital video service even before the pandemic. But there were major obstacles, one of which was the lack of a sustainable pricing model. Many vendors used a pay-per-use model, charging each time a user accessed a video. "We could not cross these hurdles for a long time, but we were persistent in looking for solutions," said Chow Wun Han, Director, Collection Planning & Development. After all, the numbers were clear – video was where people were spending their time.

As more vendors started to offer new pricing models that were more feasible for libraries, we were able to introduce five video streaming platforms in 2024 – Kanopy for adults and children, Access Video on Demand for adults and children, and medici.tv, which features performing arts content. Now, our patrons can watch films and documentaries, which are suitable for all audiences as they are rated PG13 and below.

2 OverDrive is one of the main e-resource platforms used by NLB, offering a digital collection of e-books, audiobooks and e-magazines.

Making Digital Literacy Fun

The world of technology moves fast. Hence, the constant refrain of digital literacy efforts tends to boil down to a warning: You are falling behind! Keep up! Keep up! “That’s not always an uplifting narrative,” NLB’s Chief Executive Ng Cher Pong said. Besides being stressful, this gap-centred approach also usually focuses on basic digital literacy skills.

“But what is deemed to be basic knowledge today will definitely be outdated in a year or two,” he said. “It is therefore more important to motivate people to be interested in technology, and get them excited about new tech, so they are open to learning about it.”

“THIS APPROACH TO DIGITAL LITERACY WAS PROBABLY THE BREAKTHROUGH FOR US IN LAB25, BECAUSE NLB HAD NOT PREVIOUSLY SEEN THIS AS PART OF OUR MANDATE.”

—Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive

With this new mandate in our sights, a Digital Readiness Office was established to set these efforts in motion.

Meet The Digital Readiness Office

In 2018, a three-person digital readiness team was created; five years later, in 2023, it officially became the Digital Readiness Office. Today, its team members have varied backgrounds in engineering, maker disciplines, education and content development. Their mission: to get patrons excited about trying out emerging technology, and help Singaporeans become future-ready.

As it stands, Singaporeans are generally quite adept at using technology. Many had levelled up during the pandemic, when figuring out QR codes and e-commerce became a matter of necessity.

“But digital readiness is not just about technical skills. It requires soft skills as well, such as an agile mindset and a curiosity towards technology that empowers you to use it to support the things you want to do. I think that is where the battle is going to be,” said Darren Chia, who



heads the Digital Readiness Office. “And so we’re trying to do more in these areas – we’re showing Singaporeans that technology empowers you to do the things you want to do.”

Showcasing New Technologies Effectively

EXPERIENCEIT

These are immersive showcases that introduce the public to emerging technologies and innovations.

How could we help anyone and everyone learn about seemingly nebulous tech concepts such as machine learning? Our first attempt at an ExperienceIT showcase back in 2023, in partnership with AWS at the Punggol Library, focused on everyday experiences that the man on the street would likely be able to understand.

For example, through an arcade-like racing game complete with a steering wheel and pedals, you could race against an AI that had been trained to perform at its best through repeated reinforcement learning, which is a machine learning technique.



ExperienceIT at Punggol Library, 2023.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Looks Matter An important aspect of encouraging a first touch is piquing curiosity, and the ability to attract and engage patrons passing by was essential to the design.

Communication Is Key Co-designing the showcase with the partnering tech giant was a big learning experience, where the challenge was finding the sweet spot across everyone’s wish lists and level of investment.

Location, Location, Location The showcase was located on Level 4 of Punggol Library, which meant that only patrons who ventured to the library’s higher floors would have encountered it. Placing it in a higher-traffic space within the library would have helped to draw in bigger crowds.



ExperienceIT at the Digital for Life Festival 2023, which was held at three locations: Kampung Admiralty Community Plaza, Heartbeat@Bedok and Toa Payoh Hub.

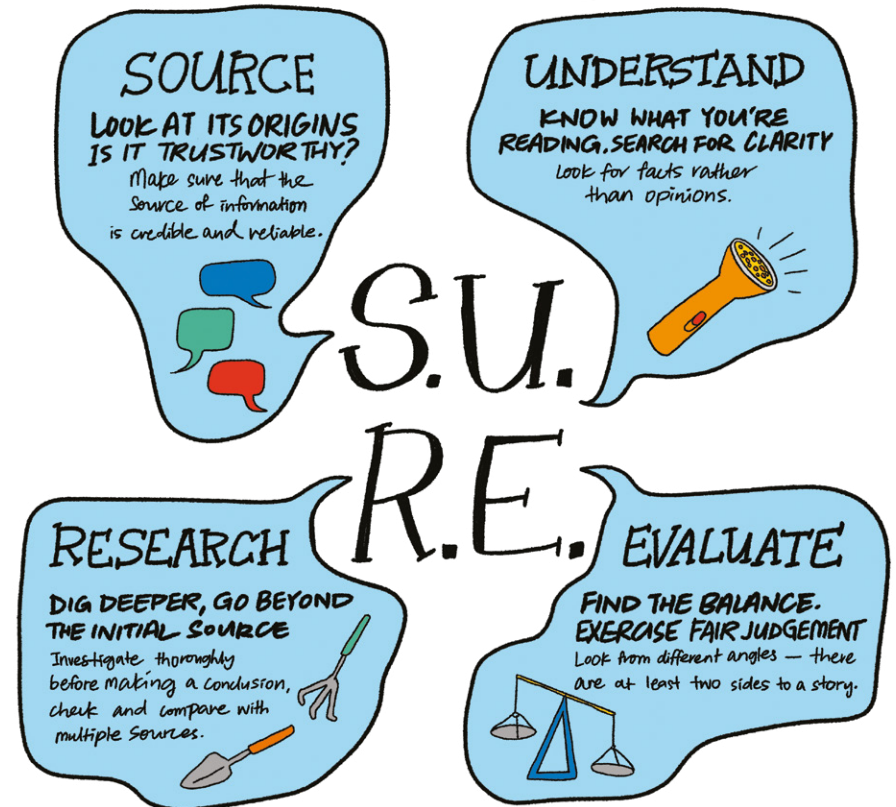
Our next iteration was a roving version for the Digital for Life Festival organised by Singapore's Infocomm Media Development Authority. We added more interactive elements, such as little cubby holes that patrons could open and close, as well as emoji stickers and quizzes.

Since then, the showcase has travelled to various library and community events, and was even loaned to Coca Cola. "They were trying to help their staff understand AI, and they saw this as a fun and easy way to do that," said Chia.

Fresh Ways to Hone Information Literacy

S.U.R.E.

This acronym is the name of our information literacy programme. It stands for Source, Understand, Research, Evaluate – the four concepts to keep in mind when assessing the reliability of information.



An octopus that lives in a tree. “Bonsai kittens” that can take the shape of whatever container they are raised in. Back in the more innocent days of the World Wide Web, these were the kinds of Internet hoaxes that tried to trick people into believing in alternate realities.

Today, it’s become much more insidious. From scams to deepfakes and other AI-generated fake news, disinformation is rife. S.U.R.E started as the National Information Literacy Programme in 2012, focusing mainly on schools. We then rebranded the programme to S.U.R.E. in 2013 to promote the importance of information searching and discernment to the general public, through free workshops, talks and outreach events.

LAB25 gave us yet another opportunity to examine how to better connect with a broader audience. Could we spark their interest through fresher ways of encouraging critical thinking? How could we coax people out of information silos by making the exploration of different perspectives more engaging?

#INSPO

HERE ARE SOME INITIATIVES THAT INSPIRED US:

- The Perspective (theperspective.com): A website that tries to counter growing polarisation by displaying different views on current events.
- Munk Debates: A Canada-based initiative that gathers thinkers to weigh in on different issues through debate.

Tackling Trending Topics

READ TO BE SURE

This is an initiative for educating and informing the public on trending topics through curated content and programmes.

One idea we came up with was to draw people in using trending topics, such as fast fashion, deepfakes and gender equality.

Read to Be SURE’s curated content on such topics includes reading lists and videos of panel discussions and street interviews, all made easily available on a dedicated webpage. We present diverse perspectives on these topics in the hopes of luring readers out of their echo chambers. Our debate events, which feature student debaters and subject matter experts respectively, also fed into these efforts.



Read to Be SURE’s panel discussions and street interviews are available on NLB’s website.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Planning for Spontaneity

“Trying to predict trending topics in advance doesn’t leave much room for addressing unexpected topics that may emerge over the year,” said Damien Wang, Assistant Director, Programmes & Services. That’s why we decided to reserve some bandwidth for hot topics, which has a shorter turnaround time for content creation and can be released online more promptly.

New Skills

The S.U.R.E. team now needs members who have a keen sense of current affairs, can curate events, liaise with vendors (for instance, for video production), and moderate discussions.

Boosting Engagement

We work with content partners to amplify the reach of our content. But more in-depth user engagement remains a challenge.

Turning Up The Heat

The debaters in our Mainstage Debates are quite polite and non-confrontational, which can turn the event into more of a panel discussion. We actually hope for a spirited debate which is more exciting, and we are always thinking of different ways to encourage more lively and robust debates, as well as audience involvement.

Breadth, Balance and Depth

We’ve also been bringing S.U.R.E. straight into the community by holding roadshows focused on showcasing diverse perspectives at public spaces like Heartbeat@Bedok and One Punggol. For example, in an exhibit about Gen AI, one side of the display panel presented the benefits of this new technology, while the other portrayed its risks and potential hazards.



A S.U.R.E. Roadshow in 2024

But sustaining engagement beyond roadshows remains a challenge. “We want to provide a long-term plan for these patrons,” said Wang. “Otherwise they might soon forget that they ever encountered all this information.” To that end, we launched our first S.U.R.E. Learning Community in 2024, together with CheckMate, a volunteer-run ground-up initiative that combats misinformation and scams.

The focus is to provide opportunities to apply information literacy skills. “You need to continuously reinforce these skills because technology evolves, and you have to stay updated,” said Sara Pek, Assistant Director, Programmes & Services.

CHAPTER 2

Everything Everywhere All at Once



Here, There, Everywhere

It is 2020. Yet another mind-numbing day during the Covid-19 pandemic. A day of shuttered stores, near-empty streets, with nothing else to do but stay home and doomscroll.

Once, not too long ago, these halcyon days could be spent at the neighbourhood library, browsing the displays of new books, and deciding which ones to check out. But now, all your days seem... strangely empty. The library had been closed since the Covid crisis began. But there is one silver lining. E-Books.

Fast forward to 2023 – Covid-19 is now seen as endemic and perhaps reading digitally has become your new normal. But there is something about that very tangible quality of a physical space that you miss, and so you decide to go out, just for a while, to stretch your legs.

As you stroll into your neighbourhood mall, a bright new sign catches your eye. MANGA LIBRARY, it says. Inside that unit, you can see shelves of comic books, and the familiar sight of readers utterly absorbed in their pages.

And just like that, your day starts to look up.



Manga Library at City Square Mall, 2023.

With LAB25, we wanted to reimagine what our Learning Marketplace could look like, beyond our physical spaces. How could we reach people anywhere and everywhere they were? We had a few ideas

in mind: building a network of Nodes in everyday places as entry points into our collections and services, changing up our digital offerings to improve content discovery, and even offering book delivery services.

We wanted to show that library spaces are not just about books, they are spaces to be inspired, to discover, to meet other like-minded individuals. This is our tale of making these ideas become reality – sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, but always learning.

Creating More Novel Entry Points

NODES

These are located outside our libraries and serve as new entry points into our services and collections, providing an opportunity to showcase our materials, such as those from the National Archives of Singapore.

As a first step, we started in busy, bustling malls – everyday places that people would visit often. Launched in October 2021 at various malls across the island, our first iteration of Nodes came in varying forms: immersive wallpapers, lift decals, life-sized installations and even *gachapon* machines (capsule toy-vending machines). These all featured our e-resources, which people could access by scanning QR codes.

As expected, some worked better than others, such as installations and wallpapers. We also learnt that people were less likely to engage with Nodes placed in transient areas like lift lobbies and corridors. So we continued experimenting.

We reached out to potential partners who had plenty of customers who might have some time to kill – for instance, commuters in transport nodes or patients in hospitals. In these spaces, we put up wallpapers with QR codes which allowed them to access our digital collection. These didn't take up too much space, and people who had a bit of free time on their hands could explore interesting reads while they waited.

(Opposite page, clockwise): 1. A Node at a bus interchange in 2023; 2. Nodes at Parks, launched in 2022, which roved to parks and gardens across Singapore, including Gardens by the Bay and Jurong Lake Gardens; 3. A *gachapon* machine at the food court at BreadTalk IHQ, 2022; 4. Node at First Story Café by Foreword Coffee Roasters, 2023.



As the pandemic restrictions began to relax, our ambitions grew. Was it possible to include physical books in our Nodes?

THINKING IT THROUGH

What collection should we showcase?

For a pop-up, we needed something to draw people in, so we decided to start by showcasing titles from one of our most heavily borrowed genres – comics.

Where should we go?

We needed to be in high-traffic areas to reach more people. Coming out of the pandemic, there was a clear opportunity as “retail had not picked up yet, and many malls’ atrium spaces and retail units had no tenants,” said Wan Wee Pin, Director, Planning & Development. “So, when we approached [the malls] with the idea of using these spaces for pop-ups, the operators were ready to work with us.”

Our proposition was that in exchange for a rent-free occupancy period of about six months, our pop-ups would bring in the crowds. With this, our first pop-up, a Manga Library, opened at City Square Mall in 2023.

From here, more doors opened. Leading global media, streaming and entertainment company Paramount Global, which owns the character *Garfield*, noticed the Manga Library and the following year, together with Paramount Global, we launched our first character-themed pop-up library at The Centrepont, featuring *Garfield* and local comic character Mr Kiasu.



Garfield x Mr Kiasu pop-up library at The Centrepont in 2023.



Manga Library at City Square Mall, 2023.

How could we manage an additional space?

Nodes are not fully-staffed libraries. We simply do not have enough manpower to manage them. So, we piloted a self-checkout system called Grab-n-Go at the National Library Building in 2022, featuring gantries and enabled by Ultra-High Frequency Radio Identification technology. This also allowed us to test the feasibility of managing a full self-service library.

Based on the pilot, we concluded that a full-sized library would still need staff due to the additional value they add in supporting a variety of operational needs. But for a smaller pop-up library, Grab-n-Go was the perfect solution. This system was launched at the Manga Library and refined in subsequent pop-up libraries.



Grab-n-Go pilot at the National Library Building in 2022.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Proximity Matters

Being near NLB's content and resources via Nodes helped to jumpstart visitors' relationship with the library. 20 percent of visitors to our pop-up libraries were entirely new library patrons or were dormant users whose last interaction with us was a long time ago.

Curation Boosts Interest

Curation likely helped people discover NLB's content more effectively. The rate at which titles in our pop-up library are borrowed is three times higher than that of the same titles in our libraries.

Some Spaces Are Better Than Others

High-traffic areas where people were either passing through or visiting for specific purposes were not as effective in getting people to browse and read. For instance, in food courts, people want a quick bite and grabbing a book would not be on their minds. Cafés worked a lot better, because their customers were often more relaxed and had time to browse.

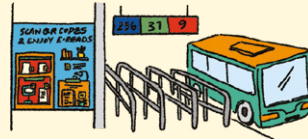
Unfortunately, it is not easy to find the right space, which is a valuable commodity for businesses in a small country like Singapore. And as business picks up for malls, empty units are also increasingly less and less available. "We have to keep exploring alternative spaces that we think will work for us," said Wan.

NOTES FROM NODES

* **LESSON LEARNT:** Locations where people visit with specific purposes in mind (like eating at food courts or exercising in parks) are not the most ideal, as visitors are typically focused on their main activity and less likely to engage with the Nodes.



NODES AT PARKS



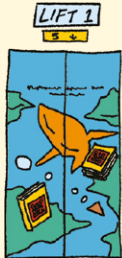
SMART NODES

COMMUNITY NODES

We continued experimenting with Nodes in an array of different locations, to bring them into the community.

★ MALL NODES

2021



GRAB-N-GO LIBRARIES

Beyond QR codes, we also wanted to explore bringing physical books to our Nodes. So we experimented with pop-up libraries that use a self-checkout system called Grab-n-Go.

These were in the form of wallpapers and lift decals in malls.

* **LESSONS LEARNT:** People are less likely to engage with Nodes in transient areas like lift lobbies and corridors where they are typically passing through. So we started our search for locations that would work for our Nodes.

2022

NODES AT FOOD COURTS



2023

HEALTHCARE NODES



We found that visitors at specialist hospital clinics, where they have longer dwell times, interacted more with our Nodes placed there as compared to those at busy hospital corridors.

2022

GRAB-N-GO LIBRARY



SUCCESS: This first pilot at the National Library building showed us the effectiveness of the Grab-n-Go system in helping people conveniently borrow books by simply exiting through the gantry.

THEORY TESTED: Nodes placed at bus interchanges did better than those placed at the ends of train platforms, where traffic is more transient.



REDISCOVER REDIFFUSION

EXPERIMENTING: We also tried presenting NLB's archival content — on Singapore's cable car system and Rediffusion, Singapore's first commercial and cable-transmitted radio station — through themed activations at malls. This showed us that Nodes have great potential in turning historical content into relatable, bite-sized encounters that resonate with the public.



CABLE CARS: A RIDE THROUGH TIME

2024

EXPERIMENTING: We brought StoryGen out of the library through a Node at Haw Par Villa. A Horror Edition of StoryGen was showcased, which visitors could use to put their own spin on local horror and classic stories. This pilot showed us how an interactive AI-powered service can create new ways for people to discover great stories and writers.

STORYGEN (HORROR EDITION)



2025

CHINESE CLASSICS: REIMAGINED



We also introduced the first iteration of ChatBook in Chinese through Nodes and Changi Airport T3. These provided engaging ways for users to explore Chinese literature by conversing with story characters from the classic "Journey to the West", making language and literary content more accessible and interesting.

2023

MANGA LIBRARY, COMICS LIBRARY, GARDIEN x MR KIASU LIBRARY



Using the Grab-n-Go System, we opened other self-service, pop-up libraries — this time in malls. * **LESSON LEARNT:** Themed concept Nodes work well, with higher interactions and loans compared to when a variety of content is provided.

2025

FANTASY & SCI-FI LIBRARY



COMICS & GAMES LIBRARY

We've been experimenting with other themed Nodes, to appeal to different audiences. We will continue experimenting with different themes and locations!

A Whole New World

When we first started experimenting with Nodes, we envisioned them as temporary outreach spaces that would perhaps become a feature within our libraries over time.

But the success of Nodes surprised us. As of end-2024, some 60.2 million visitors had come across our Nodes in various locations around Singapore since they were first launched in October 2021. Our Nodes have also generated close to a million digital interactions, including QR code scans and clicks on NLB content sites.

This left us wondering: Could a network of semi-permanent pop-up libraries, each with a different theme and collection, be set up to complement our public libraries instead? As we explore this new possibility, we are considering new ways to make borrowing at pop-up libraries more seamless, without the need for staff. Shelving books, for instance, could be done by robots.

Whatever it is, Nodes offer us possibilities and a flexibility that a permanent built library does not. It's an exciting journey that continues to unfold as we experiment with new models.

NATIONAL READING MOVEMENT

Launched in 2016, this movement seeks to promote the joy of reading in Singapore and nurture a vibrant reading culture among the community.

Get snacks, try on a T-shirt, pick up some pens... and read a haiku?

Shoppers dropping in at the MUJI stores at Jewel Changi Airport and Plaza Singapura in 2021 and 2022 got a pleasant surprise – right there, amid all the minimalist household items and stationery the Japanese brand was known for, was a wall of bookmarks that had been lovingly designed by the National Reading Movement. On each bookmark was a haiku, inspired by a book in our collection, as well as a QR code that linked to that book. And thanks to these poetic nudges, many of these shoppers added reading to their to-do list.

Reading has a reputation – it is perceived to be important but not everyone agrees that it is pleasurable. Promoting reading in all its forms

is something that NLB has been doing. But the National Reading Movement does more than just promote reading, it's about inspiration, about surprise and serendipity, and galvanising people around the written word.

That means going beyond organising a reading festival. We needed to reach out to new partners and find new ways to connect with non-readers and lapsed readers. "We tried to go out to places where our target audience would be," said Chris Koh, National Reading Movement's Programme Director. "So, we looked for brands that people liked, and who also believed in the importance of reading."

One of these brands was MUJI. The free bookmarks that we introduced at two MUJI stores back in 2021 and 2022 were all snapped up by shoppers, recalls Koh. And about 40 percent of those bookmarks led to someone borrowing the e-book.



The Wall of Haikus at MUJI in Jewel Changi Airport, 2021.

In 2024, we also embarked on a collaboration with clothing retailer UNIQLO to design a library showcasing 30 titles at their 51@AMK outlet. In line with the store's sustainability focus, we selected books that spanned environmental, wellness and lifestyle themes, which shoppers could borrow from NLB by scanning the QR codes.



UNIQLO Library at the UNIQLO store in 51@AMK in 2024 (top), UNIQLO's UTme! collection featuring eight designs by NLB (bottom).

As part of UNIQLO's UTme! collection, we also designed eight T-shirts inspired by the love for reading and four Singapore literature titles, including *Sugarbread* by Balli Kaur Jaswal and *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals* by Wong May. These were sold at the brand's stores at Orchard

Central, Jewel Changi Airport and VivoCity. "As these locations also attract a significant number of tourists, we saw that as an opportunity to introduce Singapore literature to foreign visitors," said Koh.

The T-shirts sold well under the UTme! collection, but what Koh found particularly heartening was seeing NLB staff wearing them. "UNIQLO was happy with the collaboration, but you know, sometimes when you have your own people liking your work, that is an even higher benchmark."

WHAT WE LEARNED

Understanding Partners

Unanswered cold calls and blunt questions about how collaboration would improve their sales – that's all par the course when we seek out new partnerships. Besides developing a thicker skin, we also learned how to see things from potential partners' points of view, which allowed us to communicate and collaborate better.

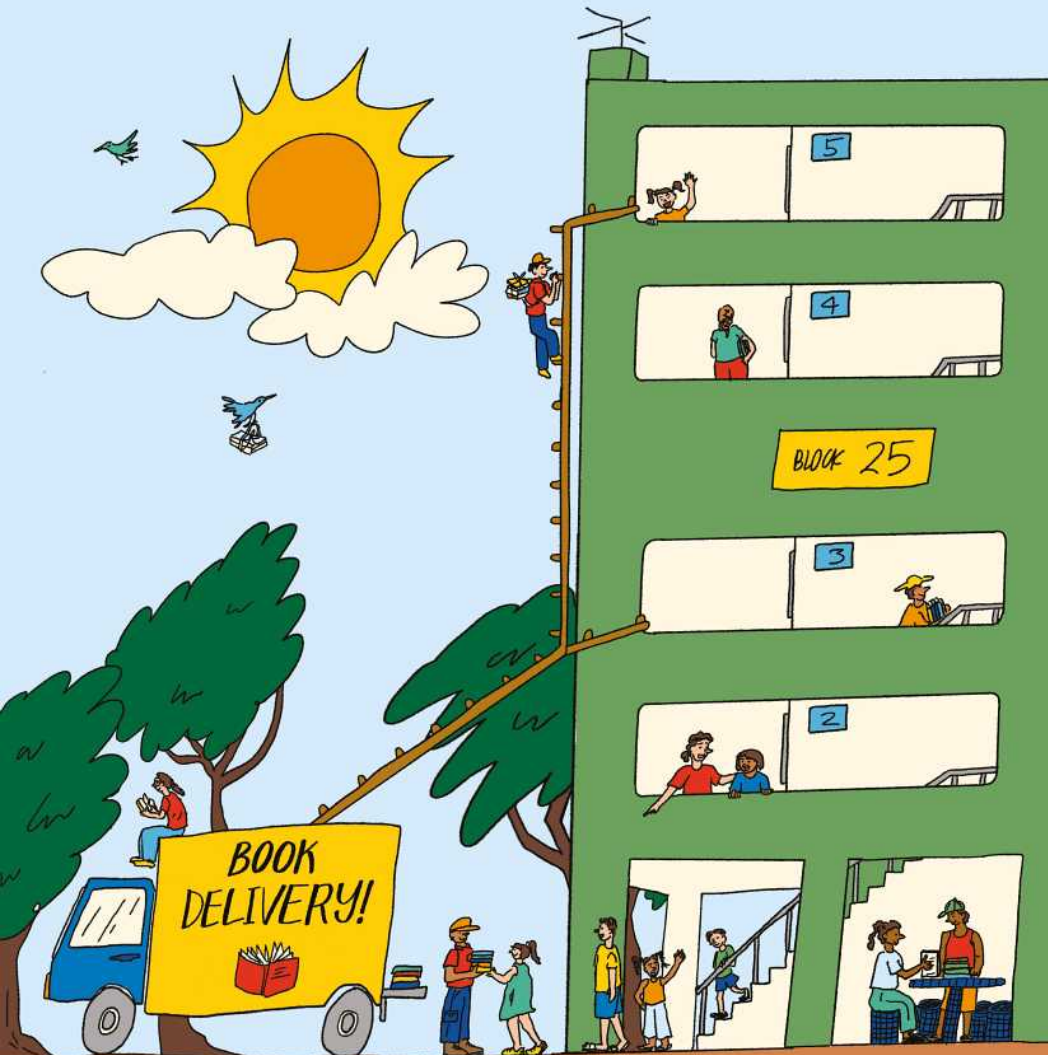
Paying Attention to Behavioural Nuances

In a library setting, people are already interested in books. In more commercial and transient settings such as retail outlets, we need to observe the different ways customers behave, so we can come up with effective ways to attract and retain their attention.

Playing to Our Strengths

Our partners have generally been very open to letting us select the titles to feature in our collaborations. They know we are the content specialists, and that is the value that we deliver because partners recognise our strengths.

Library at Your Doorstep



THE LITTLE BOOK BOX

Every month, each subscriber to this service receives eight children's books curated by our librarians, which are delivered right to their homes or designated lockers.

It's another day in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic. The doorbell rings, and it's the fifth delivery of the day. That's because you've been ordering a whole bunch of things online so you don't have to deal with crowds and the general anxiety of running errands in a post-lockdown world. But there's something different about this delivery. You feel the heft of the box and you know for sure - these are books! As soon as you tell your child that this month's Little Book Box delivery has arrived, she's right at your side, raring to find out what new titles the box holds.

Say hello to The Little Book Box. It was an experiment born out of the pandemic years that found its way into the hearts of subscribers. But this subscription service offering curated children's books did not happen without a steep learning curve.



The Little Book Box was first launched in 2020. We started out using cardboard boxes and have since switched to more eco-friendly packaging.

We were in the business of promoting reading and learning, not delivery. “This kind of service was something completely unknown to us,” recalled Lim Lee Ping, Region Head, Public Libraries, but you never know until you try. Lee Ping’s team decided to start on familiar ground – children. “We knew that parents often asked our librarians for recommendations of books that were suitable for their children,” so to add value to our delivery service, we decided to throw in expertise.

In the pilot phase, we focused on books for children aged four to six and seven to nine. “Some children in these age ranges may not have picked up reading yet, so they would benefit from more support,” Lim explained. “Parents may not know exactly what their children should be reading at this stage, and we have the expertise to help them.”

FIGURING IT OUT

Ringfencing Collections

We did not want to invest in a large volume of new books for The Little Book Box before knowing if there would be a demand for it. It was a logistical challenge to balance setting aside titles for the service and ensuring copies of the same title were available for regular patrons. The stock for The Little Book Box also had to take into consideration that subscribers might return books to us late, resulting in unpredictable delivery timelines. We also had to find a way to keep track of books that were sent to subscribers, so they would receive different books each cycle.

Integrating Systems

Our earliest sign-up sheet was a simple online form. It did not support the immediate completion of the payment process which meant that our staff often had to call potential subscribers to remind them to make payment. At this point, some would decide not to subscribe. It was costly in terms of hours and frustrating for both subscribers and our staff. We knew that removing this friction would boost the subscription rate, so we reworked the whole process. Now, the sign-up system is via the NLB Mobile app that integrates both subscription and payment.

Crunching The Numbers

We surveyed over 2,000 patrons and one question asked was how much they were willing to pay for this service. Our challenge was that books were heavy and for a pilot programme, we did not have the economies of scale that online shops had. Eventually, we settled on a subscription fee of \$32.10 for home deliveries which averaged out to a monthly fee of \$10.70, including the prevailing GST rate at that time.

At that time, we only had enough books for a thousand subscribers, so that became our threshold. Imagine our surprise when the demand exceeded our capacity. “I was genuinely surprised by the take-up,” said Lim. “I was not expecting so many patrons to be so keen on this service.”

WHAT WE LEARNED

Adding Variety	Subscribers' feedback indicates that the service offers more than just convenience. We understand from parents that this service helped to expand the range of books that their children were exposed to.
Reaching More Users	30 percent of our subscribers had not been active library patrons before signing up for The Little Book Box, and this service had introduced them to our libraries.
Providing More Options	We started out offering only English-language books, but parents told us they would love to get books in the mother tongue languages too. So, we introduced the bilingual option in 2023, comprising four English-language books and four mother tongue language books. This has been very popular. We have also tried to cater to varying literacy levels by providing a diverse mix of books.

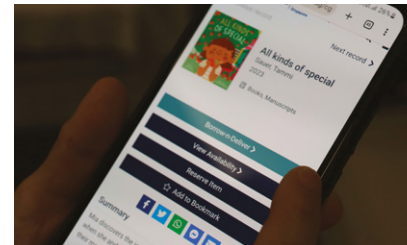
The take-up of this service was encouraging, and so in 2025 we expanded our target demographic to include younger children aged 18 months to three years. The Little Book Box also prompted some patrons to ask if we could introduce a delivery service for adults too. That led us to our next experiment.

BORROW-N-DELIVER

Patrons select up to four available items from our collection to be delivered to them for a fee.

For this service, we wanted to focus on time-strapped patrons. Not just those with no time to visit our libraries, but also those who wanted to borrow available items across the various libraries. The nature of this service meant that Borrow-n-Deliver had to have a system that accurately facilitated the order process.

"We worked with our colleagues in technology to build a whole new system that would allow patrons to select their books online, add them to their cart and place an order, much like how many of the online shopping platforms work," said Brenda Gomez, Senior Manager, Public Libraries.



Borrow-n-Deliver allows patrons to select books from our e-Catalogue and have them delivered to their doorsteps.

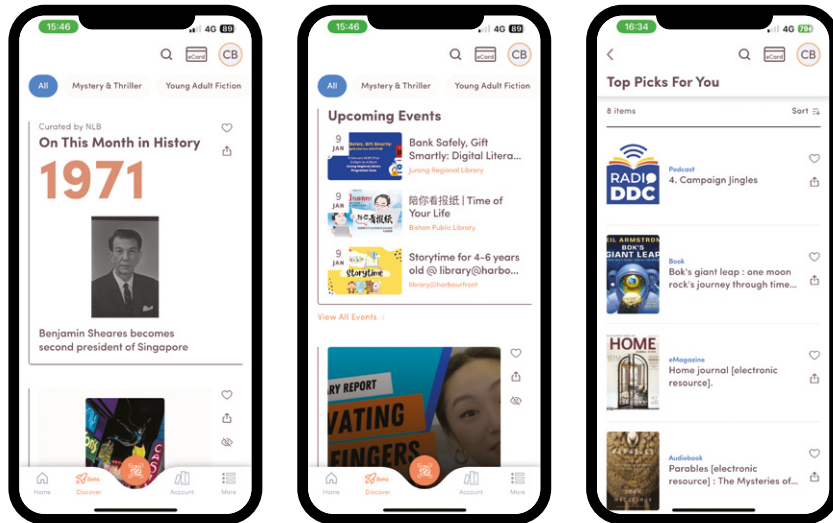
Through Borrow-n-Deliver, members can browse our e-Catalogue and place their orders via their myLibrary account. The service costs \$8.72 (with GST) for delivery of up to four library items. Assuming that all books are successfully retrieved, patrons can expect to receive their items in about a week. Most users of this service are already active library patrons, and this provides them with additional convenience.

Delivery is still relatively new to us, and we still have much to figure out and tweak along the way, especially if we envision it to move the same volume of books as a traditional branch library which can deliver over a million loans. But that's the spirit of LAB25 – to try new things and while we may not get it right on the first try, we will keep on trying.

Bringing the Library and Archives to Your Screen

In our quest to be everywhere our patrons are, we knew there was one precious piece of real estate we had to think about – the digital screen. That's a crowded space too, packed full of the Internet's infinite content. How could we improve content discovery in this high-stakes arena?

We started with the idea of a recommendation-driven platform that would help patrons to deepen and broaden their interest areas through self-discovery. After the conclusion of an initial proof-of-concept, we wanted to develop a more comprehensive system. However, that proved to be beyond our ability to resource. To develop a complex system that was as intuitive as something like Netflix would be too costly and require considerable time to build, test and refine. We needed to focus and identify what was truly critical to us when it came to content recommendation.



Some of the content recommended includes archival content (left), programmes (centre), audiobooks, e-magazines and podcasts (right).

The next iteration was called the content discovery platform prototype. We decided to focus on enabling content discovery by using a commercially available recommendation engine and integrating it into the NLB Mobile app. The engine would surface multi-format content from our libraries and archives, and also utilise machine learning to adapt and improve as it understood patrons' in-app usage behaviour.

Besides the technical aspects of the recommendation engine, we also closely considered other facets such as user interface and user experience, taking design cues from e-commerce and social media apps. The eventual experience we were aiming for was akin to the infinite news feed in apps such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

There were issues to navigate. For instance, some of the e-books in our collection do not have image thumbnails, and these would not look presentable on an app by today's standards. "Imagine if you search for an item on an e-commerce website, and there is no image of the product. That would not be acceptable," said Chief Information Officer Richard Lee. So, we removed such materials from the content base for the prototype. And we are making notes of all these little issues that may compromise the user experience, so that we can solve some of them should we expand this in future.

Thinking about patrons' expectations for such platforms is important to us, because these would be the same expectations they would have for ours. "If you try our app and the content is not appealing, we will lose customer interest, and it will be very hard to get it back. So, there were a lot of key decisions about content strategy, user interface and platform experience that we needed to make," said Lee.

While the content discovery platform pilot is currently underway, we are also thinking about other ways to generate personalised recommendations. Remember those Grab-n-Go gantries? Perhaps in the future, scanning one's identity or library card to enter these gates could also generate recommendations via the NLB Mobile app based on past reading habits and loan history.

Or, "when you're returning a book, perhaps we could show you a whole bunch of items that are similar in subject to that book", offered Chief Executive Officer Ng Cher Pong. "It's not unthinkable. We're still learning, but I think we certainly made some inroads. We're fairly confident that we now have a much better sense of what it takes to make our materials more discoverable."

A Home for Communities



A Library of Communities

A couple and their child are part of a Dungeons & Dragon (D&D) group in the library, engrossed in collectively spinning out a storyline where monsters are vanquished with valour, and magical totems acquired with wit and skill. The father in this young family is clearly the most well-versed in the gameplay, but his bemused partner and wide-eyed child are having the time of their lives, learning the ropes of this new universe.

Nearby, a group of retirees are presenting a book they've all just read, and their fellow reading club members are captivated by the presentation video that was created using the latest AI tools. The discussion that follows this razzle-dazzle opening is spirited and full of the rapport you find among people with a shared passion.

And out in the open-air courtyard of the library, yet another group has gathered to take stock of the composting project that they've been working on. Tech-savvy seniors, unlikely gamers, eco-warriors – these are some of the communities who gather, connect and learn in our libraries.

Being a hub for communities isn't new to us. Since NLB's inception in the 1990s, learning communities, such as reading clubs, have always found a home in our libraries. But with the launch of LAB25 and its emphasis on supporting lifelong learning, we've undertaken the task of refreshing and growing the communities that gather at our libraries with renewed zeal.

There is a wide spectrum of patrons who enter our libraries and not everyone will have the same level of commitment and interest in community. So, we came up with a range of ways that patrons can participate in our spaces – in some cases, it's as simple as leaving a response on a wall, and in others, actively volunteering or conducting a programme to give back to the community. Ultimately, what matters is that the community feels ownership over the library because it is, after all, a space for them.

Communities Who Discover

LEARNX

We had a vision that the libraries would be a space where patrons would be able to broaden and deepen their learning across different topics. And through a virtuous cycle of like-minded people each bringing and sharing their own experiences, everyone's learning would be amplified. And so, we called this whole effort LearnX, where X (like the symbol for multiplication) stands for amplification.

Joseph Tay stepped into the world of D&D, a fantasy tabletop role-playing game, for the first time when he was 14, and eventually started a community that runs D&D games in Singapore. He strongly believes that these games should be inclusive, "that everybody can participate in D&D and enjoy themselves."

After all, the game is more creative and interesting when there are diverse players involved. And that search for diversity was what propelled Tay and his team to start a LearnX community at Choa Chu Kang Library in 2022. Unlike games played at dedicated D&D locations that tend to attract experienced players, games at the library would attract players such as families, thanks to the broad spectrum of library patrons.

D&D gamers are just one of many LearnX Communities that can be regularly found in our libraries. This diversity wasn't created overnight. It started with the intention to create opportunities for social learning – a form of learning where patrons come together to exchange knowledge, generate new projects and build networks. With this ambition in mind, LearnX was born.



Some of our LearnX Communities include the Tampines Uke Jammers and the Digital Café @ Harbourfront.

So How Do Libraries Help LearnX Communities Flourish?

- We are trainers. Never facilitated a community interest group before? Don't fret, the library can provide some basic training, tips and tricks.
- We are a bridge. We can link different communities with overlapping interests together.
- We are a resource. Where possible, we can bring in speakers for sharing sessions.
- We are your advocate. We can help you showcase what you have learnt, and amplify your discoverability through our Library of Communities online directory. Patrons can discover communities they want to join through this platform.

“ I THINK NOTHING IS MORE POWERFUL THAN LEARNING THAT IS DRIVEN BY COMMUNITIES. ”
 — Zulfikri Amin, Assistant Director, Programmes & Services

WHAT WE LEARNED

Each Learning Community Is Unique

When it comes to communities, there is no one size fits all. We had to respect the autonomy and preferences of learning communities and had to rethink how best to support them while encouraging them to be self-sustaining. That meant adopting a more relational model, checking in on them regularly but not being overly prescriptive.

The Limits of Popularity

Some communities are really popular but not all can keep growing. For instance, a community where members had been gathering regularly to work on crochet projects together could not always accommodate patrons new to crocheting, as the facilitator could not move on to more complex projects. The group has since started another monthly session for new members.

Looking Beyond

Resources will always be limited and it is important for us to find sustainable ways to support learning communities and realise our vision of creating a Library of Communities. To that end, we see ourselves as a bridge and are reaching out to learning communities that already exist beyond NLB, to offer them the use of our LearnX platform to help patrons discover them as well.

While we grow new learning communities, reading clubs focused on literature, including mother tongue language books, remain a big part of our libraries.

We have been supporting them in various ways to keep them vibrant and sustainable.

- **TRAINING:** We are always looking for ways to upskill our reading clubs' facilitators. For example, we provided some basic training in marketing for facilitators of our Chinese-language reading clubs as they were interested in boosting the membership of their clubs.



Kavimaalai Singapore Monthly Meet up (top), Ilham Pustaka Malay Reading Club (bottom).

- **EXPOSURE & NETWORKS:** We invite authors to our Malay-language reading club for adults to keep the sessions vibrant. We also linked up some facilitators from our Chinese-language reading clubs with a local Mandarin radio station, where they now regularly share the books and topics of their upcoming reading club sessions.
- **CONNECTING WITH NEW IMMIGRANTS:** Many in this group are voracious readers and very active library patrons. Ten Tamil-language reading clubs have been started so far and we also encourage these clubs to explore local Tamil-language literature.

INTERACTIVE BOOK CLUB 交流点读书会

About 10 years ago, retired teacher Tan Seng Thye stumbled upon this Chinese-language reading club while he was walking around Bukit Panjang Library. He took such a liking to it that when the library staff decided to transition from a staff-led facilitation format to a member-led one, Tan was one of the first club members to sign up for training courses designed to support this transition.

In these courses, he learned how to facilitate more structured discussions, while tapping on his own experience as a teacher to bring the quieter members out of their shells. He also took up the library's invitation to share more about the club's activities on local radio and has been experimenting with new AI tools to create engaging videos for the club's meetings, Facebook page, and WhatsApp group.

"It's time-consuming, but we do see some new faces who come for our sessions because they find these videos interesting," he said. Indeed, the club's members have been growing steadily, and they have recently shifted their monthly sessions to a bigger room at Choa Chu Kang Library.

From providing meeting venues and audio-visual equipment, to linking up the club with local authors, the library's support has been unwavering through the years even as the members have taken more ownership over their activities. Another constant is the joy the members get from reading together. "We always try to have a gathering at a nearby coffee shop after our library session," said Tan. "It's a good time to bond."



Communities in the Making

COMMUNITIES@LIBRARIES

How can we better engage communities within the libraries? This initiative is how we are thinking through this question.

Our public libraries are important community spaces. In today's fast-paced society where many of us don't know our neighbours, the value of libraries as a hub to discover what's happening in the community becomes ever more important.

Knowing that the library is uniquely placed to support such endeavours given our ability to provide content and widen perspectives, "we started with the idea of facilitating community conversations," said Stephanie Tan, Region Head (West), Public Libraries. "If people feel passionate about an issue in their community, can the library come in to facilitate a conversation to look for solutions together?"

For our pilot in 2021, we gathered topics of interest among patrons across our libraries in Woodlands, Tampines and Jurong, and then invited relevant subject-matter experts to take part in discussions with our patrons. Unfortunately, the response was tepid: participants often did not show up for the sessions, and many were quite passive during the discussions.

We realised that it was challenging for patrons to commit to multiple discussions. Hence, we pivoted to focus on light-touch participatory opportunities, where the community can engage with the library such as through community walls.

These walls are curated together with community partners. They can be used to highlight unique locations within their neighbourhoods or even invite community participation by putting up topics for discussions.



Geylang East Library featured a heritage trail of the neighbourhood on its community wall (left) and Bishan Library worked with the Down Syndrome Association to use its community wall to raise awareness about the condition (right).

These community walls can also be focal points for engagement. For instance, in 2024, a class of landscape architecture students from the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Department of Architecture worked with Queenstown Library to engage the Queenstown community and get them to reflect on their relationship with the neighbourhood. The students facilitated engagement sessions at the library, and the community wall was used gather patrons' responses to questions like what their favourite places in Queenstown were and what Queenstown meant to them. Additionally, the students curated an exhibition to highlight their individual design explorations of this sentimental community space. The final designs were also exhibited at Queenstown Library.

"We have now tried several different things for the community walls, but now we are asking ourselves, what exactly do we want the wall to do and what does the ideal state look like?"

For Deputy Chief Executive Catherine Lau, it is important that the wall helps to foster a sense of a community, which in turn will strengthen the library's relevance in the community. "We want to keep growing that understanding of exactly what we want to achieve when it comes to communities and the spaces that they need to interact and grow."



As part of the collaboration, students from the NUS Department of Architecture curated a community wall (top) and displayed their designs in Queenstown Library (bottom).

Communities Who Give Back



Volunteers in our libraries.

"I always think that the highest level of the customer journey is where our patrons give back by becoming our volunteers," said Chief Innovation Officer and Chief Librarian Gene Tan.

This framing of volunteerism reminds us that our volunteers are ultimately still our patrons. And the product we are offering them is a diverse slate of volunteer opportunities that cater to different preferences, as well as a chance to contribute to the ecosystem that serves them.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, volunteer numbers dropped by almost half to about 2,000 in 2020 as many in-person volunteering opportunities were suspended. So for LAB25, we set ourselves the goal of increasing our number of volunteers. This meant that we had to work extra hard to get the numbers up to pre-pandemic levels, then grow them further. As of March 2022, the number of active volunteers had more than doubled to 4,230.

HERE'S HOW WE DID IT

Clarion Call

To reinforce the message that NLB is an organisation that wants and needs volunteers, we rode on events such as International Volunteers' Day to create awareness about our volunteers, showcased our volunteers' work on our platforms, and nominated them for national awards to highlight their contributions.

Diversifying Opportunities

There's a lot more volunteers can do at NLB beyond shelving books. So we have been working hard to publicise the wide array of volunteering roles, while tapping on high-profile events such as the opening of new libraries to share more about these diverse opportunities.

Showing Appreciation

When our volunteers have good experiences with us and feel appreciated, it's easier to keep them on board. To that end, we are introducing tiers of rewards for them. These include exclusive invitations to library events and being able to borrow more books from the library.



Volunteers' Appreciation Evening at the Singapore Zoo in 2024.

Volunteers helping us to reach the underserved

KIDSREAD@HOME

Launched in 2004, kidsREAD is a nationwide reading programme that aims to promote the love of reading among young children from lower-income families. In 2024, we expanded this initiative by launching kidsREAD@Home, where volunteers conduct reading sessions for children in the public rental flats where these children live.



Volunteers conducting reading sessions at kidsREAD clubs.

With LAB25's focus on being an *Equaliser*, we set out to plug some of the gaps that we observed in our longstanding kidsREAD initiative. For instance, some parents who were working multiple jobs or engaged in shift work found it difficult to bring their children to kidsREAD reading sessions, which take place weekly at reading clubs located at various locations such as community clubs, social service agencies and self-help groups.

We wanted to reach these children, and so we thought: let's meet them where they are by reading to them in their homes.

In 2024, kidsREAD@Home was launched. Like kidsREAD, this new initiative relies on committed volunteers, but with an even higher level of commitment. For every family, at least two volunteers are needed for

each reading session. Most families for kidsREAD@Home prefer these sessions to take place on weekday or weekend evenings, which can be challenging for our volunteers who may have their own commitments.

LEARNING TO BE FLEXIBLE

- The scheduling requirements for kidsREAD@Home made it challenging for these reading sessions to be conducted weekly. So monthly sessions were organised instead to kickstart the initiative, with the possibility of ramping up the frequency once volunteers had formed rapport with the families.
- Instead of the usual hour-long kidsREAD sessions, kidsREAD@Home sessions last about 30 minutes with the option of going longer if the parents' and volunteers' schedules allow for it.

A VOLUNTEER'S STORY

Before Anjali Kumar signed up as a kidsREAD@Home volunteer, she was already an experienced volunteer who had worked with underprivileged families, a mother of two who enjoyed reading to her children, and an IT professional used to conducting training sessions.

Even so, she was a little nervous. "I was not very sure whether the kidsREAD@Home children would be comfortable with me. Would I be able to engage them?"

But, armed with some tips and tricks from a training session held for kidsREAD@Home volunteers and conviction in the value of the initiative, Anjali took the plunge. It wasn't easy – one child for instance, was so hesitant about reading that Anjali decided to experiment

with different ways to help the child build a stronger foundation in reading. And over time, this child grew more confident.

Being nimble is key to engaging these children, Anjali believes. "You can't really go with the same experience for every child, because they have different attention spans, interests and strengths." Besides selecting books that cater to each child, she feels that engaging the children in their own homes also helps them to be more open. The home setting also allows her to easily communicate with parents on how they can support their children's reading.

"What's rewarding for me as a volunteer is seeing the children look forward to reading," she said. Moving forward, she suggests creating opportunities for all the volunteers to meet up and share their experiences with one another. "We are all trying to engage the children in different ways, and I think we can learn more from one another."



MEET THE EQUALISER OFFICE

kidsREAD and kidsREAD@Home are currently run by our Equaliser Office, which was set up in 2024 to champion the causes under LAB25's Equaliser pillar. The Equaliser Office pulled together the pre-existing kidsREAD team, as well as the team that had been working on programmes and services for persons with disabilities. "There has been more synergy and opportunities," said Yvonne Ng, Deputy Director of the Equaliser Office.

"For example, a small number of kidsREAD clubs involve reading to children with special needs. When the two teams came under the same office, we realised that there was also strong interest for a reading programme from special education schools." As a result, the Equaliser Office has started working with educators in these schools on storytelling training.

HOW THE COMMUNITY HELPS SHAPE OUR ACCESSIBILITY APPROACH

In 2023, Punggol Library became the first public library in Singapore to pilot a suite of services for persons with disabilities.



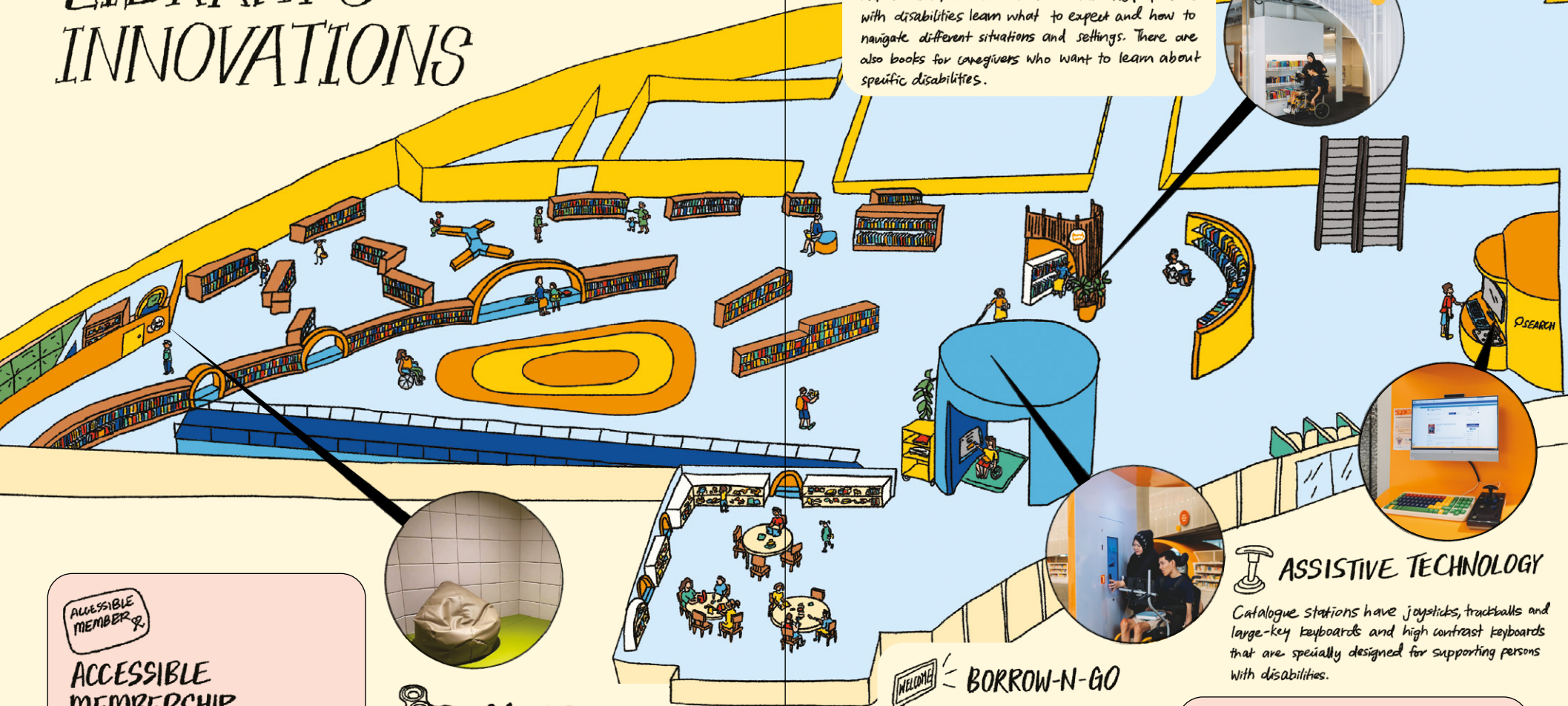
Punggol Library, located in One Punggol, opened to the public in 2023.

PUNGGOL LIBRARY'S INNOVATIONS



ACCESSIBLE COLLECTION

This is a special collection of about 3,000 English books for children and adults with disabilities, their caregivers and their communities. For instance, there are braille books for those with visual impairment, and social stories that help persons with disabilities learn what to expect and how to navigate different situations and settings. There are also books for caregivers who want to learn about specific disabilities.



ACCESSIBLE MEMBER

ACCESSIBLE MEMBERSHIP

Persons with disabilities who sign up for this get an expanded scope of library services, such as a longer borrowing and renewal period, free reservation of items, and priority access to the calm pod.



CALM POD

A space for persons with disabilities when they need a private and calming sensory experience. It comprises a waiting area with sensory aids, and a more private space with padded walls and flooring.

BORROW-N-GO

Featuring ultra-high frequency radio identification technology and a wide passageway, this feature makes book borrowing easier for wheelchair users. There are also book borrowing stations with wheelchair-accessible tables, as well as increased font size on their interfaces for persons with partial vision loss.



ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Catalogue stations have joysticks, trackballs and large-key keyboards and high contrast keyboards that are specially designed for supporting persons with disabilities.



IRIS

IRIS, which stands for "Inclusive LibRARieS", is a purple heart icon that we use to represent accessible programmes and services for persons with disabilities and reflects the inclusive offerings available throughout NLB libraries. Have you spotted IRIS at any of our libraries?

These innovations were the result of a process of engagement that started back in 2018, when a small group of our staff started experimenting with programmes for persons with disabilities.

Since then, we've spoken to over 500 persons with disabilities and their caregivers to explore how libraries can better serve their needs.



An NLB engagement session with persons with disabilities in 2022.

The topics in the Accessible Collection, for example, were selected based on feedback from persons with disabilities, and wheelchair users helped to shape the design of the borrowing stations.

Feedback from the community has continued to shape our approach to accessibility. When optimising our e-resources for accessibility, for example, we conducted focus group sessions with visually impaired patrons. "Then you truly understand the struggles that they go through just to sign in," said Kavita Ilangovan, Senior Manager, Punggol Library.

Another key learning point came from a library patron with autism, who shared with us her belief that programmes about persons with disabilities should feature persons with disabilities, so they can advocate for themselves. "That was very valuable feedback," said Ilangovan. Today, as a means of empowerment, we invite persons with disabilities to conduct programmes as well as to be featured in them.

For instance, singer-songwriter Sky Shen, who has muscular dystrophy, captivated library patrons during his performance at Punggol Library in 2025 as part of Out of the Ordinary, an event aimed to celebrate the talents of persons with disabilities through performances and interactive experiences.

Shen shared: "I think that spaces and platforms for persons with disabilities to showcase themselves are quite rare, and libraries are a great place because they connect not just persons with disabilities but the mainstream population as well, creating a space for us to interact and intersect."



Sky Shen performing at Punggol Library in 2025.

Moving forward, we hope to introduce more of these features and programmes in other libraries. "We still have room to grow," said Ilangovan. "It would be great if all our libraries had more offerings for persons with different disabilities."

Communities Who Grow With Us

Even as we build connections with new communities, we continue to nurture our special bond with one of the library's most enduring communities – children. After all, they are the library patrons of the future.

Here's some of the things we have been experimenting with to engage our young patrons, particularly at Punggol Library:

- **Toy Library:** The first of its kind among libraries in Singapore, this space offers toys, educational aids, puppets and costumes to cater to different types of play.
- **World and Us Zone:** Features stories from around the world, so that children can learn more about world cultures and concepts such as globalisation and migration.
- **Spark!Lab™:** A tinkering space set up in partnership with the Smithsonian Institution from the United States to nurture a culture of invention. Children can participate in hands-on activities and create innovative solutions to challenges.



Toy Library.



World and Us Zone (top), Spark!Lab™ (bottom).

These are just a few ways that we can help build a strong foundation and encourage curiosity and learning in our children. We hope that they will continue to grow with us, and that libraries will always have a special place in their hearts.

CHAPTER 4

Inspiring Through Storytelling



Telling Singapore Stories

Once upon a time – from the early 1900s to the 1980s to be precise – Singapore was an important regional centre for music recording. But, by 2004, when Australian sound archivist and record collector Ross Laird was exploring second-hand record shops here for fun, much of this local history had been forgotten.

“I saw a lot of records here that I had never seen before, so I was very curious – who were the people and record companies making these records?” he asked himself. He asked around, but discovered that even locals didn’t seem to know very much. His interest piqued, Laird started visiting the National Library to do some research using its newspaper archives. It was during one of these visits that a reference librarian suggested he apply for NLB’s Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship, which would give him access to more structured support as he continued his research.

Laird became a Research Fellow in 2010. Over the next six months, he was able to unearth more information about this chapter of Singapore’s history. In the NewspaperSG archives, for instance, he found a 1946 ad placed by T. Hemsley, an Englishman who was one of the pioneers of the local recording industry. Hemsley had just returned to Singapore after the Japanese Occupation and was asking for any information about the whereabouts of the books and papers of his record companies – a vivid hint of Singapore’s post-war disarray.

“I was very excited and fascinated,” Laird said of this discovery. “But at the same time, it was kind of frustrating, because I don’t know whether he ever got a response to the ad.” Piecing together Hemsley’s story, much like the larger story of this once-thriving local industry, has indeed been like “putting a jigsaw puzzle together with a lot of missing pieces”, he described. “Even today, I don’t know everything.”

What he does know is now in a book, *From Keroncong to Xinyao: The Record Industry in Singapore, 1903–1985*, which was published by the National Archives of Singapore in 2023.



Written by Ross Laird, *From Keroncong to Xinyao: The Record Industry in Singapore, 1903-1985* was published in 2023 by the National Archives of Singapore.

Preserving Singapore's history and enabling storytellers like Laird to use historical resources to share this history is at the heart of the mission of the National Library and the National Archives of Singapore. The National Library focuses on Singapore's published heritage and collects donated private archives comprising items such as documents and photographs, while the National Archives of Singapore is the official custodian of Singapore's public and private archival records.



Author Ross Laird at the launch of *From Keroncong to Xinyao: The Record Industry in Singapore, 1903-1985* in 2023.

But this is not common knowledge, especially to the public, and one of LAB25's goals was to profile these institutions and widen their reach by highlighting their value through the stories they have enabled.

"It is very tempting to see our collections as repositories of things," said Alicia Yeo, Director of the National Library. "But actually, behind all these things, there are many stories waiting to be uncovered, stories that people lived through and therefore form Singapore's collective memory. We are trying to not only be that storehouse that preserves these stories and memories, but also continually make heritage alive and relevant. Heritage needs to be expressed."

To step up our storytelling efforts and inspire more storytellers, content creation has become a new area of focus for us. For instance, archivists now share about their work through videos on social media, while conservators do roadshows, give talks and conduct tours.

"I've been very impressed that they have been so open to this," said Julia Chee, Director of the National Archives of Singapore. "It has enabled us to really showcase all the work that goes on behind the scenes."

Diversifying Our Digital Content

Experimenting with videos

Stories From BiblioAsia

Launched in 2005, *BiblioAsia* is our quarterly print magazine that has built a strong following, along with a rich archive of well-researched articles mostly based off the National Library's collections. We decided to tap on these stories as we ventured into producing videos in search of a bigger audience.

We selected four stories from our *BiblioAsia* archives and worked with vendors to turn them into video documentaries. We experimented with form – one of the videos was more of a docu-drama, for instance.

This experiment in storytelling yielded some great content. For instance, we had two *BiblioAsia* articles about how researcher Eriko Ogihara-Schuck discovered the identity of Singapore poet Teo Poh Leng, who wrote Singapore's first book-length poem under a pseudonym. This was a tale of literary detective work, with an assist from a call-out in a local newspaper for more information about this obscure poet that eventually gave Ogihara-Schuck a link to Teo's family.

We used animation to tell this story, which shed light on how Teo died during the Japanese Occupation. "It's an amazing piece of history about Singapore, but it's also very personal," said Jimmy Yap, Editor-in-Chief of *BiblioAsia*. "And it was told in a wonderful way through animation in a woodblock print style. Overall, we are very proud of how this story was translated into a new medium."

That said, these videos, which range from nine to 30 minutes, were resource-intensive to produce. Since then, we have iterated by introducing BiblioAsia Reels, a series of shorter videos that are produced in-house.

To do that, we've added a new member to the BiblioAsia team, Woo Pei Qi, who scripts, shoots and edits these videos. Her job is vastly different from the traditional role of a reference librarian in the National Library, and a testament of how drastically the work of those in the library has evolved in the last three decades.



TOP: An animated scene from the video featuring the story of how Teo Poh Leng's real name was uncovered. BOTTOM: One of the videos from The Time Travelling Trio series featured Wilfred Cheah, a local miniature artist.

The Time Travelling Trio

The Time Travelling Trio is a children's video series on what life in Singapore used to be like. This was our effort to reach a younger audience and interest them in Singapore's past. We worked with a vendor, who cast three child actors in the series. We roped in one of our librarians, Liana Gurung – now a Senior Manager in our Innovation Office – to guide the children in their interactions with different guests, who shared their

childhood experiences of *kampung* games and the entertainment attractions of yesteryear.

“Liana was a great host, and I think we found some interesting guests and some of the things that we did were quite fun and memorable,” said Yap. However, the videos were not as well-received as hoped, and history presented this way was perhaps unappealing to children. This was a good lesson learnt and with this in mind, we paused this series after five episodes.

From Book to Cook

This series explores Singapore's food history. Using recipes in the National Library collection as our starting point, we invited different food experts to recreate these recipes and share their histories with librarian (and series host) Paddy Ong.

“We had an interesting concept that was well executed. And Paddy was a natural on-camera so it all came together nicely,” said Yap. Over time, we homed in on the cooking process, and allowed the conversation about food history to unfold during that process, to make the videos more engaging. Eventually, we decided to shift the more in-depth discussion about food history to a different platform we were trying out – our podcast.



Hosted by Paddy Ong (right), food historian Khair Johari (left) makes *mee maidin* and shares more about its origins in an episode of From Book to Cook.



Piloting podcasts

In 2023, we kicked off our first podcast, BiblioAsia+, to explore how we could ride on this format's growing popularity. Besides From Book to Cook guests, Yap, who hosts BiblioAsia+, also speaks to writers behind *BiblioAsia*'s stories, so they can share more about their research.

Some of his favourite interviews so far include talking to Shirlene Noordin about her grandfather's experience as a labourer forced by the Imperial Japanese Army to work on the Thai-Burma Railway; and hearing librarian Dahlia Shamsuddin speak about her father, who was one of the artists who created the murals at the former Paya Lebar Airport. “That personal connection can make the topic so much more interesting,” he said.

“Singapore's identity is not monolithic, it's a tapestry of different threads,” he said. “It's stories about our forefathers, our neighbourhoods, our celebrities. All these help shape us and make us a unique culture and nation. It is my hope that these stories we are creating will inspire people to do their own research, and use our resources as raw materials to create something that is meaningful to them.”

WHAT WE LEARNED

Short and Sweet

“We are constantly thinking of new ways to reach out to our audiences. We have to meet them where they are,” said Yap. “That means always keeping an eye out for new formats.”

Striking a Balance

Our audience for the *BiblioAsia* print magazine is well-educated and skews a little older than our audience for the new mediums we have been trying out. “We don’t want to lose our original audience,” said Yap. “But we also want to make our content more accessible to new audiences.”

Taking to TikTok

When you think of NLB, what comes to mind?

More often than not, people associate us with our libraries or the National Library, but rarely the archives. As much as we want to inspire others to tell Singapore stories, we realised that we had to also pay attention to telling *our own* stories – including that of the National Archives.

And so, in 2022, a team of archivists and audiovisual specialists came together to think of how to raise the profile of the National Archives and its collection through TikTok. With its skyrocketing popularity, wide audience and short-form video format, TikTok was a potentially powerful storytelling tool.

But what did archivists and audiovisual specialists know about social media and making TikTok videos? With the help of our marketing arm, the NASTI team (as they call themselves) had to learn everything from engagement and reach to setting reasonable targets from scratch.

Then came the fun part: experimenting with different types of videos, styles and even trend-jacking. Over a period of six months, we

produced two to three videos a week, which were posted on NLB’s TikTok account with the hashtag #wearethearchivesg.

People loved the sneak peeks into the hidden lives of archivists, specialists, conservators and colleagues at the Former Ford Factory through the “Work with Me” videos that showcased their work. Other popular videos include the “Throwback to” series, which highlights fascinating stories from our archival collections.

“What surprised us was that everyone featured in the videos was able to share about their work in a language that was easy for people to understand, which was exactly what we wanted to achieve with this project,” said June Pok, one of the archivists on the NASTI team. It was authentic and candid, “a collective effort and something we’re all proud of.”



Screenshots from one of the “Work with Me” videos, featuring an archivist from Declassification.

WHAT WE LEARNED

They Like Us,
They Really,
Really Like Us

The NASTI team exceeded their targets, increased the number of followers for NLB's TikTok account, and has even been approached for advice by colleagues from other divisions who wanted to start their own TikTok series.

Divining
the Data

It was helpful to see which formats performed better, but the data shed little light on why certain posts did better than others. Virality is hard to predict, so we just have to keep on testing and learning.

Seeing
Potential

#wearethearchivessg has achieved some traction, and its use could be expanded, for instance in physical exhibits and events, to continue providing branding for the National Archives.

Expanding the Reach of Our Exhibitions

A lot of work goes into each of our exhibitions. For a marquee exhibition, which is typically held at the National Library Building, our curators unearth interesting stories by poring over historical documents and talking to communities. Our librarians and archivists select the artefacts that bring the exhibition themes to life, and our conservators make sure these items are in tip-top condition when they are brought out for the public.

All this work can take around two years, but it definitely pays off. Our exhibitions draw many unique patrons and over the years we have developed a good sense of what stories resonate with them.

With LAB25's new focus on Singapore storytelling, we decided to try bringing our exhibitions to new and newly revamped public libraries. We hoped that more patrons, including those less familiar with this aspect of our work, would encounter the Singapore stories we were telling. What followed was a frenzy of activity.

EXPERIMENTS IN EXHIBITIONS

Punggol
Stories

This exhibition by the National Library was launched in 2023 at the then-new Punggol Library. Located at the Singaporium space on Level 4, patrons can find out more about Punggol's early history and communities, the leisure activities it was known for in the 1960s, the area's agricultural heritage, and the story of its development. An interactive Memory Map features more community memories about Punggol's history. The exhibition is part of the *Punggol Stories* trail which also comprises *Words That*

Move (Level 1), an animated and interactive projection of poems, and *The Lens of Literature* (Level 3), an interactive table of curated poems, novels and short story excerpts by Singapore writers.

Lepak Landscapes: Life and Leisure in Singapore

In 2024, we launched this exhibition by the National Library at the revamped Central Library's Singapore Alcove, a space specially designed to spotlight our Singapore Collection. The exhibition showcases Singapore's leisure culture, from public recreation during the colonial era, to the evolution of retail therapy in this shopping-crazy city. *Lepak Landscapes* offers patrons a personalised journey where they can interact with digital storybooks crafted from the rich resources of the National Library and National Archives of Singapore, curated artefact displays, book recommendations and a quiz to discover their *lepak* personality

Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation

Launched in 2024, this exhibition by the National Archives of Singapore is located at the former Chief Justice's Chamber and Office in the Supreme Court Wing of National Gallery Singapore. It features artefacts and reproductions from our collections that relate to the passing of the Citizenship Ordinance, the Women's Charter, and the Employment Act – three laws pivotal to our nationhood – and traces their historical antecedents.



TOP: Punggol Stories, MIDDLE: Lepak Landscapes: Life and Leisure in Singapore, BOTTOM: Laws of Our Land: Foundations of a New Nation.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Drawing on Synergies

The expertise of the National Library's exhibitions team has proven to be helpful to the National Archives team, particularly when it comes to the design and build of the exhibition, as in the case of *Laws of Our Land*.

Calibrating a Sustainable Pace

Bulking up the number of our exhibitions within a relatively short time frame was no easy feat, even when we outsourced some of the research work. To sustain this expanded scope of work, we needed more people to work on exhibitions.

Understanding Our New Audience

Punggol Stories and *Lepak Landscapes* marked the first time the National Library team was curating for a broader audience that included children, so that was a learning curve for them.

Both exhibitions were very well-received. For instance, "the residents in Punggol loved how their community stories were unearthed and showcased, and many realised that there was a lot about Punggol that they didn't know," said Yeo.

However, while our typical exhibitions at the National Library Building attract patrons who come just to check out these exhibitions, we realised that the exhibitions at Punggol Library and Central Library had a

different audience – they tended to be the libraries' regular patrons, who would return to the same branch every few weeks to check books out. For this crowd, the exhibitions aged rather quickly.

This last lesson made us realise that we had to approach exhibitions held in public libraries a bit differently. For instance, marketing these showcases to audiences who live in adjacent neighbourhoods, or even farther afield, so that these exhibitions can also attract unique patrons.

The National Library and public libraries serve different audiences, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. We realised that the National Library's resources and expertise are better suited to curate larger scale national exhibitions, while the public libraries excel at smaller and dynamic exhibitions relevant to their communities that can be refreshed regularly.

With this in mind, we have decided to iterate in this way – for the next round of new and revamped libraries, the National Library team will provide support by surfacing interesting stories about the neighbourhoods these libraries are located in. The branch librarians will then tailor the resources in a way that works best for the community.

Showcasing Place Histories with Curiosity

Our patrons love learning the histories, personalities and quirks of Singapore's diverse neighbourhoods. In 2022, we decided to showcase more place histories through an initiative called Curiosity. Its earliest iterations included installations created by local artists and were part of the Light to Night Festival and Singapore Night Festival.

We also organised Curiosity events such as treasure hunts, and refreshed the website to showcase resources from our collections



Paddy Fields, an artwork presented during Curiosity Encounters: Singapore Night Festival 2022, traced the story of Bras Basah (which means “wet rice” in Malay) from its agricultural roots to its history of redevelopment over the years.

and archives that helped to paint a more vivid picture of Singapore’s neighbourhood histories.

It also got us thinking: how else could we iterate Curiosity to reach a wider audience? Could we gamify place histories? How else could technology be used to make this content more engaging? For instance, could we develop a mobile app that would be able to tell users the history of whatever location they were in, wherever they went?

To do this, we partnered with Open Government Products (OGP), a tech team that operates within the Singapore Government. We called this iteration Glue: Curiosity, because that’s what we were trying to do – to glue different stories about different Singapore spaces across time, into a gamified experience.

We picked the neighbourhoods of Jurong and Harbourfront to kick off Glue: Curiosity because they have very rich histories. We also wanted some aspect of Glue: Curiosity to be based in our public libraries, to create new hyperlocal experiences for our patrons.

Then came a roadblock. We had initially thought of using content in the public domain, such as social media posts, to populate this app. But

we soon realised that social media platforms now have relatively strict controls over what content was available for use in this way. We were also wary of the factual accuracy of the content that had been posted.

“That’s when we pulled back from the initial concept,” said Yeo. “We thought, maybe it wasn’t the right time for this idea yet.”

In the end, Glue: Curiosity launched in 2024 at Jurong Library and Harbourfront Library as an on-site experience with interactive touchscreens, where patrons explored the histories of Jurong and Harbourfront through resources from the National Library and National Archives.

This content was manually curated by the Glue: Curiosity team, which comprised librarians, archivists and OGP officers. We offered more contemporary content as well, such as where to find good eats. To access these hidden gems, patrons took a quiz to generate a personalised itinerary for that neighbourhood, which they could then save to their mobile phones.



Glue: Curiosity at Harbourfront Library, 2024.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Listening To Our Audience

Due to the this project's tight timeframe, and the assumption that patrons encountering Glue: Curiosity would be short on time, we decided to feature snapshot factoids.

Some of the feedback we received challenged these initial assumptions. For instance, some patrons said they already knew these factoids, and asked for new stories with more depth. This reminded us that even if we were delivering bite-sized content, it had to be curated more extensively.

It was also clear that patrons were interested in what we were presenting. We saw multi-generational families clustered around the screens, sharing their own neighbourhood stories with one another.

Catching Your Eye

The showcases featured big location markers, bold fonts and bright shades of red, blue and yellow – the result of the level of detail that the team had put into the build of Glue: Curiosity. To create a visual juxtaposition between Singapore of the past and present, the backdrop featured an 1885 map of Singapore from the National Archives' collection. This resulted in an eye-catching showpiece that caught the attention of patrons who might have come to the library for other purposes, such as to attend a programme or borrow books.

Staying Agile

We learned not to be too fixated on our initial ideas and instead to stay open to other possibilities. That's an important part of the prototyping mindset, especially when the costs of a first-draft concept start to weigh up unfavourably against its benefits.

We haven't given up on our dream of using technology to up the ante for Glue: Curiosity in the future. One day, perhaps soon, an app will be able to seamlessly offer up an endless stream of place-based stories based on a user's location and questions. Perhaps technology will be able to help us collect community stories about different neighbourhoods.

But for now, that dream is still a dream. "Right now, it's still a human librarian or archivist doing all the work behind the scenes to curate these stories very painstakingly, and stringing everything together," said Yeo.

Strengthening the Systems Behind the Stories

How can we get a little closer to that dream?

To answer that question, we need to turn our focus to the systems that are powering the work of the National Library and National Archives of Singapore. And much of that work needs to happen before we can offer the public access to our resources and engage them through publications, exhibitions and digital content.



WE COLLECT

In the National Library and National Archives' collections, in addition to books and official government records, we have materials such as maps and building plans, photographs and newspapers, private documents such as receipts, correspondences and diaries, menus and brochures, oral history interviews, soundscapes, audio-visual recordings and even websites. These materials document and leave a record of what we were like as a place and as a people.

The National Library develops its collections through multiple channels, ranging from purchases, Legal Deposit, donations, digital acquisitions, web-archiving of .sg domains, to gifts and exchanges with other countries. Under the Legal Deposit framework, publishers are required to submit copies of all materials published in Singapore to the National Library. These acquisition strategies support two key collections:

1. The National Collection comprehensively acquires Singapore-related materials and selected Southeast Asian content in Singapore's four official languages.
2. The General Reference Collection selectively acquires materials across diverse disciplines to meet research needs.

Meanwhile, the National Archives of Singapore collects nationally and historically significant government records, broadcast archives and private records as part of its remit. It also conducts and stores oral history interviews, and its Sound and Moving Image lab takes care of the conservation and preservation of audio-visual and oral history content. Both institutions are guided by the NLB's collection development policy.

We also work with volunteers and partners. For instance, volunteers help us with our Singapore Memories: Documenting Our Stories Together platform, launched in 2023 to call for materials under the themes of local food heritage and youth culture, and crowdsource for information on existing records to improve their searchability.



In the Sound and Moving Image Lab, our specialists carry out cleaning, repair, and treatment of analogue audio-visual collections in film, magnetic tape or disc formats.

WE PROCESS

When a physical item enters our collections, it has to be catalogued and described. For instance, what are the characteristics of the item, such as its title, author, topics and physical dimensions? What is the history and provenance of the item? What are some of its unique features? All these details are important to be entered into the catalogue, to aid discovery and retrieval. NLB's catalogue contains print and non-print items such as maps and photographs, audiovisual materials, as well as digital content such as e-books and digitised materials.

Items (or their containers) are given physical identifiers for the ease of retrieval, stocktaking and browsing onsite. As each physical item travels through our systems, our Resource Discovery & Management team tracks each item to make sure nothing falls between the cracks.

WE CONSERVE

Decisions have to be made about whether physical items need to be conserved. That depends on several factors, such as their condition, risk of content loss, rarity, historical significance and intended use (such as digitisation, display etc.). The Archives Conservation Lab manages and treats items identified for conservation.

In the lab, a conservator is assigned to each item, which is photographed for documentation and described in a condition report. This helps to ensure accountability and transparency in handling and proper chain of custody.

An item may go through some tests before being treated. Hazardous substances, such as mould, also need to be safely identified and cleaned.

When the treatment is complete, each item is placed in a custom-made folder or box, and sent to the repository.



Each item that comes into the Archives Conservation Lab is photographed as a form of documentation.



The anoxic chamber is where materials are placed in a very low oxygen environment for at least two weeks to get rid of any pests, such as silverfish, that may be present in the items.



Photographs stored in sticky albums tend to discolour and deteriorate over time. We use micro-spatulas to remove them from the sticky backing, then store them properly in archival sleeves and folders.



The analytical room is where we identify and analyse potentially hazardous substances in our materials, such as mercury, lead and arsenic. For such materials, we treat them safely in a controlled and isolated space.



Japanese kozo paper, which is made from mulberry plants, is used to mend torn documents as it has long fibres that can overlap tears.

WE PRESERVE

Physical items in our collections are preserved in controlled environments to ensure they remain in good condition or do not deteriorate further.

With digital content making up a growing proportion of our collections, the digital content collected are digitally preserved in the Digital Preservation System to ensure that digitised and born-digital files that we collect may be accessed and used by future generations, even when their original formats become obsolete over time.

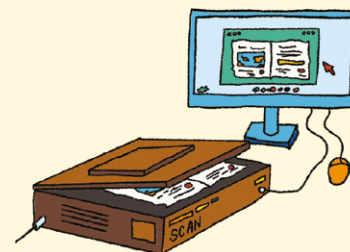
WE PROVIDE ACCESS

After processing, a physical item may be selected for preservation and online access depending on whether there are appropriate rights for the digitised files to be made available online. After digitisation, the digitised files are described, catalogued and subsequently made available online via National Library Online or Archives Online.

Besides physical items, the National Library also collects born-digital materials such as images, video recordings and documents. These materials are also ingested into NLB's Content Management System, catalogued and made available online via National Library Online if there are appropriate rights to do so.



We select items...



Digitise them...



And make them accessible online for you!

Before an item in our collections surfaces in our database search engine, makes its way into an exhibition, or pops up in the NLB Mobile app, they have to be tracked, recorded and made retrievable in our systems.

And we are looking to upgrade these systems, wherever possible. Yeo puts it this way: “For certain items, we are still using Excel sheets. It’s like when you cook, you need to prepare your ingredients. At the moment, half of our ingredients are still hanging from a tree, and we have to pluck it from the tree and chop it, before we can cook with it.”

Chee concurred, adding: “Beyond experimenting with how we are reaching out to more people, we must also experiment with our internal systems, such as the possibility of making use of technology to improve our back-end work.”

In fact, as part of LAB25, we created a wish list of initiatives that could make our collections more discoverable. For instance, technology that can convert our audio materials into text, which would enable their contents to be summarised. We anticipate that integration of AI into our systems would also enable the creation of automated summaries, image recognition, image georeferencing and handwritten text recognition.

These technologies are available but would be costly to implement based on our current systems and how vast our collections are. Yeo added: “Maybe we were too ambitious with our wish list, so we are slowly coming back to it in bite-sized pieces through pilots with the tech.”

Storytelling for and About Ourselves

“LAB25 came with so much change,” Yeo reflected. Because of that intense pace of change, it’s important to sustain engagement with staff. As the results of LAB25’s various experiments start to emerge, “they start getting used to change, and they can see the possibilities. When we engage them, it gives them a space to talk about their worries, and take ownership of whatever they’re working on. This process of thinking and reflecting each time we meet helps them see the progress, and how the

things we have been doing have benefited the public. There can never be enough engagement.”

“One of the great things that has come out of this period of change is a greater amount of collaboration, not just with external partners but also within NLB as well,” said Chee. “If you look at a lot of these experiments and prototypes that we did, it wasn’t just one team that was working on them, it was really cross-divisional. I think that is a way of working that taps on different expertise, and helps to build a stronger NLB.”

Beyond clarifying what the LAB25 journey has meant to us, there’s also a need to keep on improving how we tell the story of the National Library and National Archives to Singaporeans.

“People who work with historical heritage materials, they know what we do,” said Chee. “It’s really the man in the street, especially the younger generation, who are not so familiar with our work.”

Better branding for our events and initiatives can help with that, and that’s just one of many ways we can explore as we seek to drive home the functions and importance of these institutions. After all, before inspiration can strike, one must know where to look for the muse.

“LAB25 has to continue to articulate these roles, because we are supposed to be the key memory institution,” said Chee. “I think that’s the challenge.”

Conclusion



What Happens Next?

In the blink of an eye, four years have passed since the launch of LAB25. In that time, we have reinvented ourselves by experimenting and working with our patrons and partners to figure out what NLB would be like in a post-Covid normal.

“ I AM CONVINCED THAT THE FOUR ROLES WE SET OUT FOR OURSELVES AT THE BEGINNING OF LAB25 ARE MORE RELEVANT THAN EVER BEFORE. UNDERPINNING THESE IS DISCOVERY—NLB OF THE FUTURE CAN HELP PEOPLE DISCOVER WHO THEY ARE, HOW TO REALISE THEIR ASPIRATIONS, AND WHAT TO MAKE OF THE WORLD.” ”

— Ng Cher Pong, Chief Executive

As part of Learning Marketplace, our Nodes have brought the libraries and archives to everyday spaces where our patrons are. We've told more stories about Singapore in refreshing ways through efforts like Curiocity and our exhibitions, videos and podcasts. We, too, rediscovered some of these stories as we dug into our resources.

While we've always championed information literacy in schools, we've started thinking bigger, aiming to build an informed society instead of just informed library patrons. And while libraries have always been Equalisers, we took this to a different level with our most inclusive library to date – Punggol Regional Library.

The numbers show that we're going in the right direction. Our patrons checked out 38.8 million physical and digital items in 2024, up from 37.9 million in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital usage¹ also shot up to 89.2 million in 2024, compared to 80.6 million in 2021. And our reach² is on an uptick too, with seven in 10 Singapore residents accessing our services, programmes and spaces in 2024.

¹ Digital usage refers to the number of pageviews to NLB's website and usage of subscribed e-books and e-databases.

² The NLB Reach Index measures the proportion of unique Singapore residents who have visited NLB's libraries and archives and/or accessed NLB's content through our programmes, exhibitions and services within a 12-month period.

Celebrating our progress is important. After all, each triumph helps to galvanise our teams and build momentum as we venture further into uncharted territory. “Many people, and rightly so, were perhaps a bit sceptical at the beginning of LAB25,” said Chief Executive Ng Cher Pong. “But once you have successes, then more people will be persuaded that new ideas and approaches can work. And I think we’ve crossed that tipping point.”

At the same time, expanding our ambitions has led to an intensification of workload for everyone. “We’ve been going at such a fast pace and launching quite a number of new initiatives. While we have achieved good results, we need to land on a sustainable way of doing it,” said Deputy Chief Executive, Catherine Lau.

The Road Ahead

So, what’s next? On one hand, what’s been successful on a smaller scale needs to be expanded, and lessons learnt must be factored into future projects. On the other hand, we must take a hard look at what we have been doing and decide what is truly important to us and worth continuing.

As we navigate these decisions, the questions that remain are ones that generations of librarians and archivists before us have been trying to answer. How can libraries and archives be present in the everyday lives of Singaporeans? In this age of distraction, what can we offer to encourage people to continue reading, learning and discovering?

Experiences

The immediate future seems clear. We are relooking at how our platforms can create experiences that add value. “The physical library has traditionally been a place where people come to use the space and borrow books. But increasingly, it needs to be about experiences that will draw people in,” said Ng.

Some of these experiences will integrate the physical with the digital to help patrons discover more and with greater ease. Others will leverage technologies to expand our service hours and offerings to serve our patrons better. And we will not do it alone – we will continue to invite partners to work with us to create new and exciting experiences.

Experimentation

As we continue innovating, we also want to keep the spirit of experimentation. “The biggest change that I’ve seen in NLB is that we’re a lot more open to prototyping, with some hypothesis to be tested and validated or disproved, before taking the next step,” said Ng. “We’re more open to failure and pivoting when things don’t work out as planned.”

This is key because we want to build a future where libraries and archives thrive as beacons of knowledge and discovery, in a world where the information landscape is dominated by content that is optimised for shallow engagement aimed at monetising increasingly limited attention spans.

What sets us apart is our content, which is reputable, substantial and of guaranteed quality. And this is possible because we are powered by three different national institutions: the public libraries, the National Library and the National Archives.

Above all, our primary purpose is to help people discover, learn and grow. We want to be present in the tangible and digital spaces where conversations are happening, not to dominate, but to engage.

And we dream of a service that is everywhere and transcends its physical boundaries. “This means that wherever you are, there is no interruption to your experience of the libraries and archives,” said




Gene Tan, Chief Librarian and Innovation Officer. "I can enter a Node somewhere in the MRT, and then from there, access NLB's services, find something or someone interesting and delve further."

Just LAB

The world of libraries, archives and those we serve will continue to be disrupted. More than just planning what we want to do, we must be ready to adjust and change, seizing new opportunities as they come and challenging our own assumptions. The willingness to dream big, experiment, make tough choices and embrace uncertainty is the perpetual engine that will drive our continued innovation.

But perhaps the greatest innovation must happen within – not just our services and products, or what makes our libraries and archives – it is to fundamentally transform who we are and our way of life at NLB. Thus, LAB25 will now be just LAB. For there will no longer be an end-date to the way we experiment and innovate, and it will be how we drive Discovery, a continued quest to seek breakthroughs, always adapting, always pushing boundaries.

Come and discover the new and unexpected with us.



The LAB Story tells of NLB's journey of reimagining libraries and archives from the voices of those involved. Walk with them as they recount their aspirations, ideas, trials and experimentations, what they learnt and what kept them going. As a recipient of this book, you have been a big part of NLB through the years and we invite you to continue on the journey with us.