Innovating Educational Space:
How Deliberate Design Can Revitalize Our School Libraries and Learning

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The Problem

Why are students not using the school library for reading and learning?
**Morning:** The library is empty except for the librarian who is busy sorting out the books for the compulsory reading programme. It is mandatory for students who do not have class to report to the library. They usually do their work or chat with each other. Quite often, teachers bring their students to the library to work, often on written tasks requiring the use of the laptop.

**Recess:** Most students go to the canteen or stay in the classroom. Typically, no more than 10 students visit the library during this period. Some read, some do their work, some chat. I observe two or three students browsing and/or checking out some books. Those who are chatting tend to move to the corner with the sofas, out of the librarian’s line of sight.

**Afternoon:** After school, the library is usually quiet except for a few students who have either chosen to stay back at the library to work or have been made to stay back for detention. Three days out of five, the library may be closed to students. I observed the library being closed for a staff meeting once, to host foreign visitors another time, and to hold briefings for students.
“No one goes in and out of the library. There’s nothing there. It’s boring.”

(Edward, avid reader)

“You only go to the library if you have detention! I never go to the library!”

(Cass, reluctant reader)

“If I am free, I prefer to go to the Entertainment Room... it’s beside the canteen.”

(Yi Han, non-reader)
Table arrangements

Reading Corner, beside magazines

Careers Corner, Entrance
How can we redesign educational space to encourage the kinds of 21st century learning dispositions desired?
Design is “an activity that translates an idea into a blueprint for something useful, whether it’s a car, a building, a graphic, a service or a process. The important part is the translation of the idea, though design’s ability to spark the idea in the first place shouldn’t be overlooked.”

Design Council, UK
“In an increasingly ideas-driven economy, design has become an important enabler for transformational change to solve problems, balance our priorities and interests, and create new values and markets...

- transform products, services and experiences to enhance business competitiveness
- operational efficiency may be improved
- add value to business
- relevant to the ever changing demands of consumers and the market
- By putting users as the focus of consideration, design actually helps improve lives.”

Design Singapore Council

“Rather than viewing the school building – its various rooms, walls, doors and furniture, together with outdoor ‘nooks and crannies’, gardens and open spaces – as a neutral or passive ‘container’, architects and educators have considered it [school buildings] to be an active agent, shaping the experience of school and promoting and even pioneering a particular understanding of education. Certain aspects of what makes a school, such as halls, corridors, playgrounds and classrooms, have taken different forms through time. Such factors as the design of school furniture can be seen to reflect pervasive notions of pedagogy, but also to promote ideas and theories about the relationship between pupil and teacher and between body and mind in learning.”

Ian Grosvenor & Catherine Burke, 2008 *School (Objekt)*
“The shape and size of classrooms are dependent on a number of factors, including teaching methods, seating pattern and its effect on audibility, the angle of vision with the chalkboard and the size of the furniture. In Singapore, there is very little experimentation with shapes of classrooms. The rectangular classroom with permanent walls on all four sides is the accepted pattern, although lately, in an attempt to inject innovation in school architecture, hexagon-shaped classrooms were experimented with in one of the winning entries of the School Building Design Competition. As teaching methods of the conventional or traditional style (i.e. the teacher-centric approach) are prevalent in Singapore schools, and as the progressive or non-formal style of teaching have yet to prove their superiority, the design of classrooms closely follows the traditional model...

Teaching aids used in classrooms include chalkboards, overhead projectors, maps, charts and the like. The design of the classroom has to provide the appropriate facilities for these aids, including adequate storage space.

The educational specification of a standard secondary school sets out a space norm for 40-place classrooms of 64m2.”

What is Good Educational Design?

- Good design must be functional.
- Good design must be equitable.
- Good design requires mindset changes.
#1 Good Design Must Be Functional.
“Behaviour Settings” in Libraries: Library as Reading Space

“Behaviour Settings” in Libraries: Library as Research and Collaborative Space
#2 Good Design Must Be Equitable.

- National Library Board (NLB):
  - National Library = 1
  - Public Libraries = 26 (Regional Libraries: 3; Mid-Sized Libraries: 10; Shopping Mall Libraries: 13)

Cost of taking a bus from Owen Road to Toa Payoh Library = $1.30
A just distribution of resources require that “the mechanisms (institutional, organizational, political and economic) should be such that the prospects of the least advantage territory are as great as they possibly can be.

David Harvey (2009)
Social Justice and the City, pp. 116-117
Resource Centre

“The resource centre in the secondary school comprises two main components: the school library and the audio-visual aids room. The latter can accommodate two classes of 80 students and is used whenever audio-visual aids are needed in the lessons.

The minimum recommended standard is aimed at in the provision of books in the school library is five titles per secondary school student and two titles per primary school pupil with two or three copies per new title for all schools. Most schools have adequate funds to meet the standards, which also recommend a list of basic audio-visual equipment.”


“The media resource library (formerly the library) has assumed greater importance since the 1997 reappraisal of the pedagogy in Singapore schools and the radical increase in the number of computers is reflected in the increased area of this facility and the enhanced equipment.”

#3 Good Design Requires Mindset Shifts.

Open-Classroom Concept at Omaha’s Lothrop Magnet Centre

“Apart from the usual limitations that result from planning regulations and local requirements, and in a much more fundamental way, the group’s collective experience acts as a limitation on its capacity to imagine a different educational future. In this sense, each school site is a compound of imagination, reaction, sedimentation or radical intervention in education.”

Ian Grosvenor & Catherine Burke, 2008 *School (Objekt)*
Thoughts

• What kind of educational future do we need to imagine?

• What good learning practices can we enhance through educational spaces?

• What radical intervention do we require to amplify learning?