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FELINE LIM

Kinokuniya’s new look

The bookshop is bigger, with new Frontage, new interior design and a bigger selection of titles

Nabilah Said

Fans of the old Kinokuniya bookshop on level three of Takashimaya Shopping Centre can rejoice.

The store, which occupied a smaller space after moving to the fourth level of the mall three years ago, has now expanded to almost the size of its former premises.

The current 38,000 sq ft store, with new frontage and an additional 5,000 sq ft space, was unveiled yesterday. This expansion was made possible after the exit of Chinese restaurant Imperial Treasure Teochew last November.

From 1999 to 2013, the Japanese-owned bookstore had occupied a 42,000 sq ft space on level three. That flagship store had an in-house café and carried 500,000 titles.

In 2003, it was told by the landlord to move one floor up to make way for new retail offerings on the third floor. The fourth floor premises was smaller by about 25 percent and some sections – such as its Chinese and Japanese collections – had to be compressed.

Singapore store manager Kenny Chan, 65, says he was “elated” when he found out late last year that the store could take over the space in front of it and expand.

“Now customers have the opportunity to look for things through self-discovery, at a pace and space that is more breathable,” he says.

The additional space merges seamlessly with the rest of the store. For example, it has similar speckled granite flooring.

“We went back to the same mountain in Xiamen, China, to look for the same stone so that the front portion can tie in with the main store,” says Mr Tan Kay Ngee, principal architect of Kay Ngee Tan Architects.

Mr Tan, 60, is the man responsible for Kinokuniya designs not only in its flagship Singapore store, but also those in Dubai, Sydney and Sapporo, among others.

Other design features include new frontage with a “butterfly” timber ceiling that is inspired by the look of an open book.

Pillars in the store are cleverly hidden by shelves and counters which can be used to display books or items such as toys or to conduct workshops and demonstrations.

The store has expanded its selection of Chinese, Japanese and French titles. There is also a bigger stationery section, which is run by NBC, a stationery company owned by Kinokuniya, and the store stocks official Studio Ghibli merchandise from the popular Japanese animation film company. When The Straits Times visited the store on Thursday morning, Japanese pop culture fan Sean Goh, 36, was one of its first few visitors. He was spotted checking out an exhibition of Gundam robot figurines.

“Kinokuniya is a place of solace for me. When the store size shrank in 2014, I was devastated,” says the freelance writer.

In an exclusive interview with The Straits Times, Mr Masashi Takai, Kinokuniya’s chairman and chief executive, 69, says the Singapore store is important for the brand. “It has strategic importance, especially with regard to the Asia-Pacific expansion of the business,” he says.

The Singapore store, which first opened in Liang Court Shopping Centre in 1983, was the company’s first overseas outlet after the United States.

After its success here, the brand opened stores in Taiwan, Malaysia, Myanmar and Indonesia, among others. Kinokuniya has 100 stores, 30 of them outside Japan. A concept that was then unique to Singapore, with titles in multiple languages, was replicated in the other stores.

“The Singapore characteristic directly impacted our range of books,” says Mr Keijiro Mori, 62, its executive director of international business development.

It was the opening of American bookstore chain Borders in 1997 that prompted Kinokuniya to rethink its strategy. Before that, it catered primarily to the Japanese community here.

Mr Takai credits the company’s success to its wide selection of books, store design and quality customer service. He is also unfazed by the fact that people these days are more likely to be glued to their mobile phones than to books.

He says: “I acknowledge the impact of digital media and that more people are managing content through it, but I still believe in physical books and that it will survive. It has thousands of years of history. Real bookshops can still exist.

“I still believe in the power of the encounter between a reader and a good book. And books are written by people – so it’s an encounter between people and a meeting of minds.”

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