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Tel: 03-2598 0590 Fax: 03-2692 5017
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Housing for Persons with Disabilities

By Dr Naziaty Mohd Yaacob, Senior Lecturer, University of Malaya and Dr Nor Rasidah Hashim, Senior Lecturer, International University of Malaya-Wales

Housing for persons with disabilities in the low income bracket is a serious issue. On a visit to a public housing project, the writers discover certain amenities missing and some facilities are not accessible to the disabled or are poorly maintained.

When we, as disabled persons have the financial means, we buy a desirable house or a condominium right in the middle of the city close to the best amenities and hotspots that the city provides. Many of us do spend a lot of money to live near our workplace or near a Government hospital because of the longterm health issues that we are anticipating in retirement. Also it is not a coincidence that many of us are in the civil service and have signed up for a Government pension scheme to lessen the burden on our loved ones when we are in need of hospitalisation. But for those of us with low income and at the poverty level, the problem of getting affordable and comfortable housing is very acute indeed. Housing for persons with disabilities in the low income bracket is an even greater issue as transportation to work is problematic as well, especially when the public transportation system is still inaccessible.

The problem with lack of accessibility is widely acknowledged at various levels nationally. In fact, the National Housing Policy Negara states, “In general, housing development by the private sector has fulfilled the needs of high-income earners. However, the housing needs of the low-income and medium-income earners, including those of persons with disabilities, the elderly, single mothers and squatters have not been met” (KPKT, 2013). Furthermore, the NGO, Beautiful Gate, finds that many disabled persons and their families face serious problems in obtaining affordable and appropriate housing due to poverty, non-enforcement of building by-laws requiring access and facilities for disabled persons as well as local authority requirements that work against disabled persons, e.g. applicants have to be married but many disabled persons are unable to find marriage partners.

The Government is committed to provide for the needs of disabled persons. The Ministry of Local Government and Housing Act (1990 amendment) notes that a building where the public can access should provide facilities like ramps, parking for disabled persons and toilets. The Ministry also provides 6% of special flat units under Public Housing Projects (Projek Perumahan Rakyat or PPR in Malay) to persons with disabilities, with an option to choose the ground floor in the case of walk-up flats and the first floor where lifts are provided (UNESCOP, 2003).

On top of that, the Persons with Disabilities Act, which came into effect in 2008 is a clear signal of the Malaysian Government’s commitment to providing accessibility.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Universal Design1, originally a term expounded by The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, comprises seven principles as follows: (1) Equitable use; (2) Flexibility in use; (3) Simple and intuitive; (4) Perceptible information; (5) Tolerance for error; (6) Low physical effort; and (7) Size and space for approach and use. Before Universal Design, the terms usually used are Barrier-Free Design and Accessible Design, where the three factors of (1) Accessibility; (2) Usability and (3) Safety are emphasized, especially to define the former.
Specifically, the accessibility principles that we need to implement are required to follow those of Universal Design, which means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all persons, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaption or specialized design and shall include assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed.

However, it is estimated that 1,000 single mothers and disabled persons are now living in Public Housing (Perumahan Awam or PA in Malay) and PPR. Clearly, much more needs to be done in order to cater to the needs of disabled persons in this country as it is currently estimated that there are as many as 301,346 disabled persons in Malaysia (Yeoh, 2011). At the same time, it is also important to monitor housing prices and housing loans for disabled persons so that the Government efforts to provide housing for disabled persons are not in vain (SUHAKAM, 2012).

To find out what is happening on the ground, we visited PPR Selayang Taman Wahyu, near Jalan Ipoh, which was designed and built to comply with the Government’s policy to integrate disabled persons’ needs in low cost housing in Kuala Lumpur. The low cost housing was developed and maintained by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall to address the accessibility needs of disabled persons by allocating a few units at the first floor level (there are no units at ground level) near the lift lobby.

During our visit, we surveyed one block in which we found there were four flats allocated for disabled persons on the first floor. These units differed from other units as the entrance had ramps (Figure 1). The size of the doors for the units was also quite wide for wheelchair access and a cursory glance inside showed the unit to have bigger corridor space. For an accessible three-bedroom housing unit, one bathroom should include the pedestal-type toilet and be wider and more spacious to enable maneuvering.

There was one parking lot allocated for disabled persons, located on the ground floor of the same block (Figure 2). Interestingly, there was a chain-linked barrier placed across the back of the accessible open parking lot, presumably to obstruct the misuse of the parking space by other users. Although only one accessible lot was visible as the floor is
painted with the international symbol of access, this does not complement with the fact that one housing block has four accessible housing units. It is assumed that the other three units housed either elderly persons or disabled persons who are not physically disabled. The identification of the lot with the chain barrier provided by Kuala Lumpur City Hall was installed after permission was sought by the disabled person living there and was not provided in the beginning.

In order to get to the accessible parking lot from the lift (or vice-versa), a disabled user would have to travel about 20 meters either on an uneven pavement or on the road, whilst having to negotiate the motorcycles parked in his path (Figure 3). After office hours and in the evenings the disabled person might have the accessible route blocked by illegally parked cars or double-parking that are often found in low cost housing areas. This is because the ratio of housing unit per car park lot is 1:1, not reflecting the reality of parking needs.

Other findings that we wish to share with our readers are as follows:
1. The ramp outside the building (next to the lift) is equipped with a handrail at one side of the ramp (Figure 4). Handrails need to be fixed on both sides to allow physically disabled persons to use either side as required.
2. The staircase had only one set of rails which is not fully accessible for persons with physical disabilities, similar to point 1 (Figure 5).
3. The lift call buttons were embossed with Braille letterings but might be difficult for a blind person to feel as an anti-vandal box was encased around the buttons (Figure 6).

4. The drops at the main routes were minimized and replaced with ramps, which were well designed (Figure 7). Usually housing units that are not accessible have too many drops including main routes.

5. The lift was spacious – even for someone on a motorbike to use (Figure 8).

6. In the surveyed block, two entrances (one on each side of the block) on the ground floor had ramps with a gradual gradient but other access had drops and steps (Figure 9).

These findings call to mind common issues plaguing accessibility in the built environment in this country (see for example: Yaacob and Hashim (2007, 2009) and Yaacob et al. (2009).

Firstly, accessible features are regarded as added-ons rather than being planned as integral. The usual way of design is to have steps usually about 50, 75 or 100 mm high, which does not make sense, as it is easier access for everyone to have no change of levels. The steps usually crack and chip in the long run and become unsafe to use. For low cost housing, the finish is the bare minimum with no colour contrast making it unsafe and easy to trip over or mis-step.

Low cost housing design is fraught with the practice of reducing the accessible features
or cutting costs such as having only one rail at the side rather on both sides. This is a basic safety and accessible feature, where a person with physical impairments needs to use both sets of railings, one side to go up and another side to go down the stairs. These features are for all people and not only for disabled persons.

Secondly, abuses of accessible facilities are a real challenge. For example, locking or placing a chain at the entrance of parking lot may prevent non-designated user from using the parking lot but this only signals a deeper problem, i.e. lack of awareness of the community about the needs of disabled persons. Creating awareness and providing the knowledge about disabled persons’ rights to the community should be in tandem with providing facilities and amenities. NGOs, disabled persons organisations, housing developers’ agencies such as REHDA and local authorities should work together in this case.

Lastly, it is important to maintain the facilities and amenities so as to ensure that these features are working well and are maintained properly. The users should be provided with clear instructions as to who to contact in times of need.

And in cases where accessible facilities are added on to existing buildings, which might not have been originally designed for the use of persons with disabilities, the renovation may not solve the problem fully. Therefore, to implement Universal Design principles, it is imperative that accessible facilities, amenities and services are planned at the earliest possible stage.

REFERENCES

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Date: 18 October 2013

Dr. Naziyat binti Mchd Yaacob
Senior Lecturer
Department of Architecture
Faculty of Built Environment
University of Malaya
50603 Kuala Lumpur

Dear Dr. Naziyat,

CONTRIBUTION OF ARTICLES IN THE INGENIEUR

Your article “Housing for Persons with Disabilities” was published in *The Ingenieur*, Vol. 56 September 2013 as Cover Feature on page 14.

2. The Board would like to thank you and your organisation for the contribution. We encourage more contribution from your good organisation, especially on topics such as policies, submission and approval guidelines, project summary and best management practices.

3. Enclosed are four (4) complimentary copies of *The Ingenieur*, Vol. 56 September 2013 issue for your kind perusal and safekeeping.

Thank you.

Yours faithfully,

(Pl. RUSLAN BIN ABDUL AZIZ)
Secretary
BOARD OF ENGINEERS MALAYSIA

[Signature]

Telephone: 603-2610799/86.9798 ext 603-2610888 extn 7095/96.9798 Faks: 603-26925117
E-mail: bem1@jkr.gov.my stau.enquiry@bem.org.my Laman Web: www.bem.org.my