

# PROVIDING ACCESSIBILITY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (PwDs) IN MALAYSIAN EXISTING MOSQUES

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**Abstract.** The objective of this paper is to emphasise the importance of accessibility in Malaysian Mosques. In general, Mosque is known as the spiritual sanctuary for Muslims, acting as a centre for worship, religious activity centre, teaching and learning of Al-Quran, Hadith and Sunnah as well as organizing public events and seminars such as talks and weddings. Muslims are encouraged to attend congregational prayers at all five praying times and to participate in communal activities as well as intellectual discourses conducted at mosques. Existing Mosques in Malaysia varies in design concepts, design requirement, design guidelines, scale and also function but it is according to the architects in implementing good design practice. There are mosques that offer other complementary functions such as nursery/day care, religious school (madrasah) and bazaar (souq) for business purposes. Therefore, a mosque must be universally designed to cater all kinds of users, including the PwDs, the elderly and children. The importance of providing accessibility is to give the PwDs an equal opportunity for them to perform congregational prayers together with other devoted Muslims in the prayer hall. The lack of access creates physical barriers that burden the PwDs which eventually discourage them to visit mosques especially at parking area, the entrance, ablution area, toilets and prayer hall. Other issues related are hygienic considerations of using wheelchair into the prayer hall, management and maintenance issues. The methodology considers conducting access audit at case studies, observations, interviews and design recommendation on the analysed data with reference to Malaysian Standards and related Acts/By-Laws. Recommendation on good universal design practices for refurbishment is the main aspect to be considered to improve Mosque's facilities. In conclusion, accessibility is important to be provided for all Muslim regardless of ability or disability to pray at Mosque comfortably.

**Keywords.** Malaysian Mosque, Accessibility, Congregational Prayers, Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), Malaysian Standards.

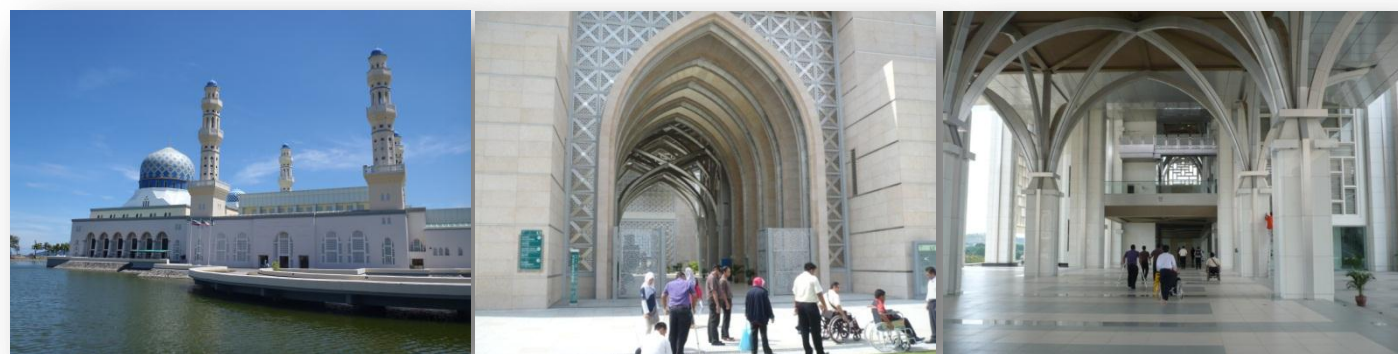
## 1. Introduction

During the prophet's time, Mosque Nabawi in Madinah was the heart of all activities within the community. Nowadays, it is generally confined for worship, main religious activity centre, teaching and learning of Al-Quran, Hadith and Sunnah. Widely in Malaysia today, many main Mosque has opened up their doors into organizing public events such as religious talks and seminars, weddings receptions and solemnization events that requires the public' participation. There are some Mosques that offer other complementary functions such as nursery/day care, religious school (madrasah) and bazaar (souq) for business purposes and accommodation. Therefore, a Mosque should be universally designed to cater all kinds of users, including the Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), the elderly and children. The importance of providing accessibility is to give the Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) an equal opportunity for them to perform congregational prayers together with other devoted Muslims in respect of helping them perform their obligation.



## 2. Accessible Mosque's Built Environment in Malaysia

Malaysia achieved independence in 1957 and has committed itself to improve both economic growth and the human aspects of development. This is aligned with Malaysia's Vision 2020, which aims to attain the status of a fully developed nation with equal emphasis on enhancing the well-being and social stability of the people and the establishment of a fully caring society. Malaysia's policies and programmes for the disabled citizens of the country are guided by the strategic goals of the National Welfare Policy, which emphasises on the attainment of self-reliance, equalisation of opportunities for the less fortunate and fostering of the spirit of mutual help and support towards enhancing a culture of caring.



Mosque and prayer room has been among popular building typology and facility that are often visited by the Muslim Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and the elderly other than the general public, as Mosque and prayer room remained as a place of worship for devoted Muslims to perform the five daily prayers. It is insisted that all new buildings to be equipped with a prayer room and not just merely to meet the criteria for building approval. The prayer room should have a place for ablution, adequate lighting, fans or air-conditioning, facilities for the disabled and segregation area for both men and women.

The lack of access creates physical barriers that burden the Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), the temporary ambulant disabled and the elderly. These barriers which eventually have discouraged them to visit Mosque for prayers and other activities related to the Mosque and the Mosque compound as they lack of accessibility continuity especially from the parking area, the entrance, the ablution area, toilets and finally to reach the prayer hall. Architects, designers, management and caretakers of Mosque should offer equitably and protective treatment of the rights of every individual regardless of their physical ability or disability as it is the cornerstone of equality within the Muslim society. The act of saving or protecting people from harm and loss is greatly pleased by God, no matter how small the contribution is towards other people. It is the act of considering about the difficulties faced by others and also the act of providing easy and safe access for the general public in this case, to the Mosque.



**The entrance of Mosque has many designs and most of the designs are with split level, steps, having series of staircases and some designed with wrong specifications. These are barriers and difficulties faced by the Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and elderly every single day to go to Mosque and even to perform the obligatory Friday prayer. They usually refuse physical help as they would like to be independent.**

### 3. The Disabled and The Elderly

Disability, in relation to the physical environment and products is often defined as a disparity between an individual's ability to function and the demands of the surroundings. According to World Health Organization (2011), it is estimated that 15% of the world's population has a disability and this constitutes more than one billion people with special needs worldwide. This estimation also states that almost 80% of the disabled population lived in developing countries. A developing country like Malaysia, the statistic of disabled persons registered under Malaysian Department of Social Welfare (DSM/JKM) has the total of 436, 317 people in 2012.



According to Kose (2001, p.17), 'The Impact of Aging on Japanese Accessibility Design Standard, states that Japan has the fastest growing ageing population. By 2015, more than 25% of the country will be over 65 years of age and the Japanese government has developed design guidelines to accommodate these changes. As Malaysia is also entering the ageing population category, the government must also enforce guidelines to prepare for the changes, in this case, the Government sector that should take note of managing Mosque development and administrative are Jabatan Agama Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) where all State Islamic Departments are administered by them. Given the statistics in Malaysia, it gives a proven fact that the disabled and elderly are increasing and the built environment especially Mosque where most elderly would like to spend their retirement free time with learning and reciting the Qur'an, performing 'sunat' prayers or understanding Islamic revealed knowledge.

From an Islamic perspective, aging is a process of growing old or developing the appearance and characteristics of old age or being an elderly and this process of aging are given a philosophical explanation in the Qur'an but it is not an essential pre-requisite of death. Death is unknown and it will come no matter of the age and physical condition. Also in the cycle of life, youth and aging are only a matter of time as for one who is young would definitely grow old and not everybody will aged healthily and well as sickness will affect ones well-being. This, categorize elderlies as partly related to Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) that also require certain needs and support in helping their everyday life.

Many Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) Muslims has expressed their frustration and dilemma in visiting main Mosque throughout Malaysia and in Kuala Lumpur. From a local newspaper, they reported that Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) also has the intention and desire of wanting to go to Mosque to perform their congregational prayer together with other Muslims but when the Mosque or the destination facility does not provide good infrastructure or more or less an accessible environment for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), has made their trip to the Mosque difficult and depressing (Utusan Malaysia, May 2013).

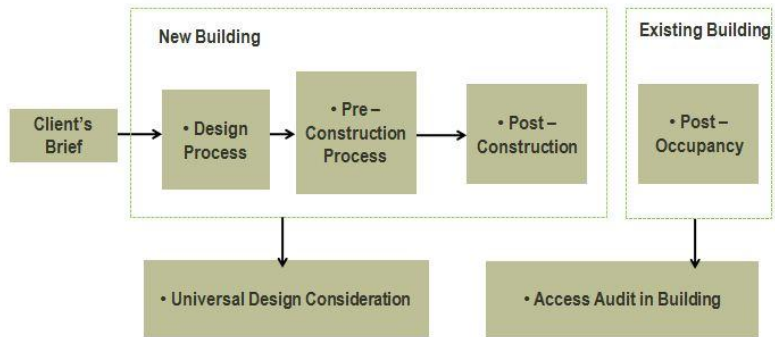


This incongruity, or gap, may be reduced or conquered through a universal design in terms of products or furniture design, the built environments settings, and measures of adaption and upgrading according to Persons With Disabilities Act 2008, Uniform Buildings By-Laws and related Malaysian Standards documents such as MS 1184: 2002 Code of Practice on Access for Disabled Persons to Public Buildings (First Revision); MS 1331: 2003 Code of Practice for Access of Disabled Persons Outside Buildings (First Revision); MS1183: Specification for Fire Precautions in The Design and Construction of Buildings PART 8 : Code of Practice for Means of Escape for Disable People; and MS 2015: Public Toilet, PART 1 (2006): Minimum Design Criteria.

#### **4. Methodology**

The methodology applied including table research, observation and access audit. The methodology of determining the frequently used area, route or encounters by Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) is by, conducting access audits at several case studies of main Mosque and its surroundings in Malaysia. As mentioned by Holmes-Siedle, access audit gives a “snapshot” of an existing building at a given point in time. The snapshots are a useful starting point in assessing the current state of accessibility and usability of existing buildings.

Access audit falls into two different categories; (1) audits that access the presence of facilities for disabled persons; and (2) audits that are designed to assess how well the facilities in the building will work for disabled people. The problematic areas are identified and recommendations are developed through precedent studies on good design practice and design recommendation from related Malaysian Standards.



### Accessible and Legible Mosque Route

A provision of creating and suggesting an accessible route for existing Mosque could keep costing renovation and upgrading to a minimum. The problems and suggestions in improving the Mosque built environment are categorized by area and will focus only at important areas that is highly accessible. The areas are; parking area and entrance, the prayer hall, toilets and ablution areas. The legibility and way finding in Mosque has to be linked with proper and visible signage for easy direction not only for the Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and elderly but also the general public.



1980's



1990's

Mosque's Entrances and passageway are usually massive and wide, making legibility and way findings a problem as visual signage are not properly located or hard to read and understand.



2000





**The Prayer Hall is always carpeted and this is an issue for wheelchair users as Mosque caretakers claim that that wheelchair brought in from outside are dirty and filthy as it would have dirt and probably animal stool. It is still an issue that has not been resolve and the Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) are depressed as they are constantly being ask to leave the Mosque and could not perform their prayers.**

### **Toilets and Ablution areas**

The importance of providing accessible toilets and accessible ablution areas in Mosque is also a part of Islamic virtue as these areas are provision places of purifying one self. As Muslims are encouraged to attend congregational prayers for all five praying times besides doing '*iktiqaf*' and '*musaffir*', making Mosque are one of the most visited and used places at any time of the day and people tend to use the toilets and ablution area. To support the overflowing of worshippers during congregational prayers especially Friday prayers, most Mosque have provided sufficient large areas for ablution and toilets. It is understandable for architects to design Mosque's ablution area and toilets to be situated at ground level or one level under the prayer hall, and this is because to cater large usage capacity, space zoning and ease of cleaning purposes for the prayer hall.

Problems in basement type of ablutions and toilets design is that mostly serve aesthetically but lack of accessibility as well as creating physical barriers that burdens the elderly and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) (Person with Disabilities) to perform ablution as well as provide accessibility to toilets. Most large state Masjid in Malaysia has stairs design for accessing their ablution and toilet area and they should at least consider lift for the elderly and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). Some designs of ablution and toilets are not accessible in terms of design that has many split levels and threshold in order to prevent water from overflowing.

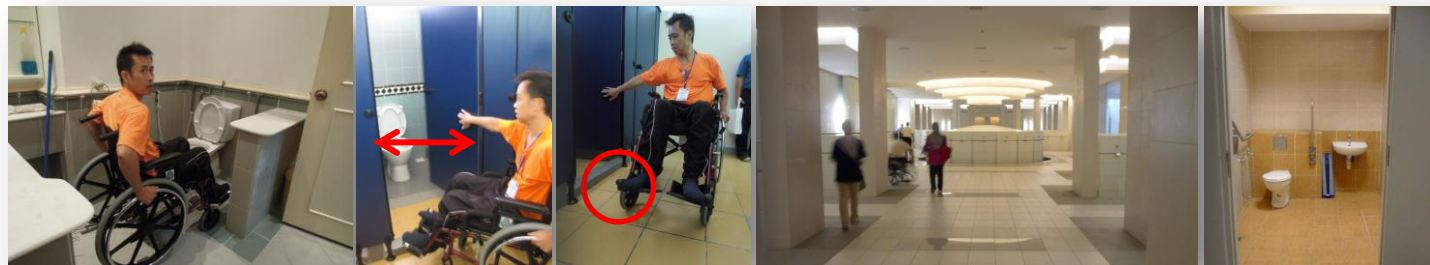
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**Ablution area should be design to consider the Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) on wheelchairs and elderly as well as to take note of the safety measures of vision impaired or low vision people. Entrance to the ablution area and toilet has split levels and some Mosque has design of threshold that is a total barrier.**

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## Conclusion and Recommendation

As a conclusion, existing Masjid should observe their accessibility as to provide a better built environment for all stages of life. The recommendation will be with reference to Malaysian Standards, MS 2015: 2006, Public Toilet and related international and local building Acts/By-Laws. In conclusion, providing accessibility for all Muslims in ablution area and toilets should be practical to use and not only serve the purpose of aesthetic only on the design.



**A proper and usable designed accessible toilet and legible signage is recommended to be pictorial for easy understanding instead of lettering or wording signs.**

It is advisable to consider application of universal design at earlier stage of designing a Masjid. Recommendation on good universal design practices for refurbishment is the main aspect to be considered to improve Masjid's facilities especially for existing Masjid. In conclusion, accessibility is important to be provided for all Muslim regardless of ability or disability to pray at Masjid comfortably.