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Access Audit on Universal Design: The Case of Kota Kinabalu Water Front

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Abstract: Most developed countries have enforced the use of "Universal Design" in any physical development of their cities, for the purpose of eliminating discrimination among the society members towards the unfortunate handicapped persons. Nevertheless, in many developing countries, the awareness and inclusion of Universal Design is still in its initial stage. Cities' authorities have not fully enforced the requirement of providing access to people with disability in their built environment; neither in public nor private spaces. The Department of Standard Malaysia (SIRIM) had initiated the publication of Malaysian Standards as guidelines for designers; architects, city planners, landscape architects, interior designers, and others who are involved in the construction of physical development with Universal Design. The Ministry also commissioned researchers to do access audit on various public spaces in several cities, to examine whether or not the cities' public spaces are built in compliance of the Universal Design or not. This research describes the procedures, process and findings of the access audit done in the city of Kota Kinabalu. Simulation of the access audit utilised five (5) people, each with different type of disability such as: fully impaired vision, partially impaired vision, hearing impaired, wheel-chair bound, and a crutch user. With guidance from the researchers, the disabled respondents simulated their movements at the water front area of the city stretching about one (1) kilometre in length and 200 metres wide. The access audit done in Kota Kinabalu concluded that the water front area was designed without consideration of Universal Design, and renovation of the built environment is urgently needed to comply with the Malaysian standard requirements.

Keywords: Access Audit, Universal Design, Inclusive Design, Barrier-free Environment, Accessibilities, People with Disabilities

Introduction

THE BIWAKO MILLENNIUM Framework for action 2003-2012 is a declaration "aims at creating an inclusive, barrier-free and right-based society for people with disabilities, thereby improving their living condition inside and outside buildings and enabling them to achieve their total development potential" (SIRIM, 2003). Thus, most developed countries have enforced the used of Universal Design in any physical development of their cities, for the purpose of eliminating discrimination among the society members towards the unfortunate handicapped persons (OLDP, 1992; ANUHD, 2009). Nevertheless, in many developing countries, the awareness and inclusion of Universal Design is still at the initial stage. For example, in Indonesia, although its regulatory body has formulated a physical access code, the implementation has not succeeded due to cultural hindrance (Komardjaja, 2001). Cities' authorities have not fully enforced the requirement of providing

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access to people with disability in their built environment; neither in public nor private spaces. Komardjaja (2001) states that "barrier-free design is not a priority in most planning and design and seems futile in its realization."

In Malaysia particularly, the Department of Standard Malaysia (DSM) has appointed SIRIM Berhad (SIRIM) to initiate the publication of Malaysian Standards (SIRIM 2002; SIRIM 2003; SIRIM 2006, SIRIM 2006a, SIRIM 2006b, SIRIM 2006c, SIRIM 2006d) as guidelines for designers; architects, city planners, landscape architects, interior designers, and others who are involved in the construction of physical development, to design built environment with utilising the Universal Design. In addition, Malaysia has amended section 34A of the *Uniform Building By-Laws (1984)*, to be used collaboratively with MS 1331 and MS 1184, as part of the commitment to provide barrier-free environment. Unfortunately, the standards states that the use of the Malaysian Standard in designing and building physical development of a city is voluntary (SIRIM, 2006c) unless if regulatory authority of a particular city regulates it as compulsory. As a consequence, the disabled people have always been discriminated in accessing their built environment as many designers choose not to provide facilities of the Universal Design. The designers' neglect of the Universal Design might be the result of the "lack of knowledge," (Heylighen, 2001) on how to design built environment in compliance with the requirement of the Universal Design. Indeed, Universal Design in this region is still perceived as a pedagogical process, rather than legally enforceable compliance practice.

Recently, the Ministry of Women, Families and Community Development in Malaysia (MWFC) has initiated research on Universal Design to create better awareness among designers on the importance of providing facilities for people with disabilities (PWD). The ministry also commissioned researchers to do access audit on various public spaces in several cities in Malaysia, to examine whether or not the cities' public spaces are built in compliance with of the Malaysian Standards of Universal Design. This paper is part of the access audit conducted in 2008, particularly it discusses on only one case study out of twelve (12) done by researchers who were from the various universities in Malaysia.

This research aims to audit the access and facilities provided for people with disabilities, in a selected case study which is of the water front area of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Among the objectives of this research are: to investigate whether or not the water front area of Kota Kinabalu provides barrier-free environment for people with disabilities; to conduct access audit on the interior and exterior buildings of that area; to identify problems encountered by the disabled people; to ascertain areas that needed major and minor improvement; and to suggest the types and access needed to provide people with disabilities in the area based on the requirements of the Malaysian Standards.

Manifold of Universal Design

A perusal of the current literature pertaining to PWD's accessibilities, results in a jumble of terminologies such as : Inclusive Design, Universal Design, Adaptive Environments, Barrier-free Environment, Design-for-all, Assistive Technology, Transgenerational Design, and Lifespan Design. In architecture discipline, among the most commonly used terminologies are Universal Design and Barrier-free Environment.

Universal Design (UD) is a concept from the field of architecture which constitutes that "physical environments should be proactively designed to meet the needs of the broadly di-

verse individuals" (McGuire, et. al., 2006). It was first introduced by Ronald Mace three decades ago to encourage designers of physical environment to take consideration of the diverse consumers especially in-terms of mobility of people with disabilities, young people, and the elderly (McGuire, et. al., 2006). Being a handicapped architect himself, Mace fought for acceptance of the concept in architectural disciplines for years. The concept has been gradually and universally accepted not only in the field of architecture, but also other physical domains such as landscape, interior, and product design and development. Indeed, recent development has shown that universal Design has been used in the field of human-computer interface (HCI) and curriculum instructional development (Orkwis & McLane, 1998, in 2McGuire, et. al., 2006). Thus, Institute of Human Centred Design (IHCD), which is based in United States, has given a new definition to the terminology simply as, "… human-centred design of everything with everyone in mind" (IHCD, 2009).

As UD addresses its conceptual ideas for a very broad definition of users, Barrier-free Environment targets for "retrofitting of buildings or facilities to accommodate physically impaired people; design that strives to make the built environment barrier free for all persons" (Audirac, 2008). Both terms have the same connotation of providing facilities to disabled people, yet Barrier-free Environment is a term specifically refers to physical development that enhances safety and mobility of people with disabilities. This term is architecturally more appropriate to be referred to when auditing the access for disabled people in their physical development within the scope of this research. Hence, the term Barrier-free Environment would be used interchangeably with UD as the latter often constitutes larger implication of equity and social justice by design.

The Case Study: Kota Kinabalu

Kota Kinabalu is a city with high tourists' attraction being the capital city of Sabah, and it is equipped with beautiful surroundings. The area selected for the access audit is commonly known as the Philipino Market among the locals, as many Philipino immigrants work as traders in the area. Besides, this water front area is considered the main tourists attraction in Kota Kinabalu as it has facilities for all levels of accommodations, eating outlets, markets for local and foreign goods, and recreational areas. Based on a report by the Kota Kinabalu city council; the area is divided into three (3) sub-areas: Segama Water Front, Public Market, and Esplanade Water Front. Figure 1 shows the subdivision of the Philipino Market.

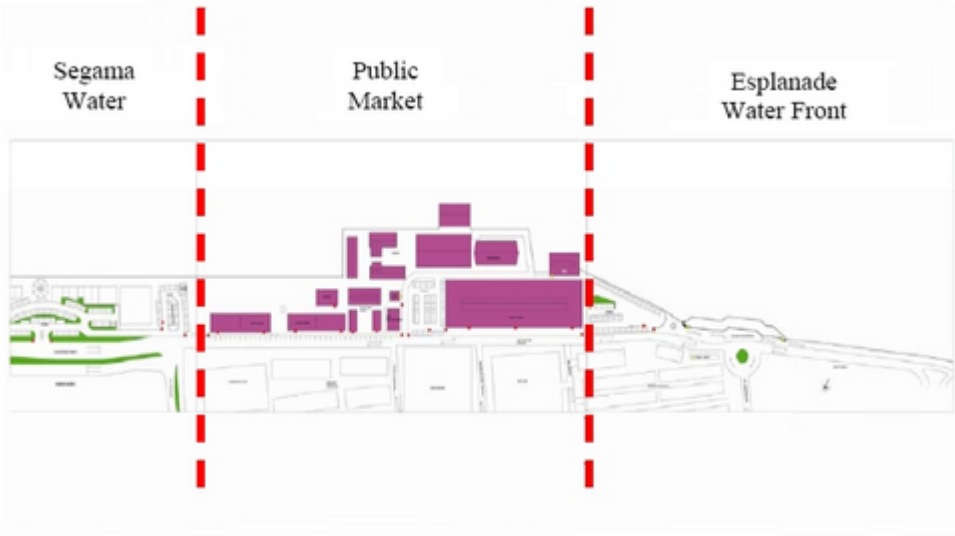

Figure 1: Subdivision of the Water Front

Segama Water Front was developed as a recreational area by the Kota Kinabalu city council in early 2008. Initial observation showed that the area was designed with limited consideration of people with disabilities. Although there is a provision of ramps for wheelchair-bound people, it was observed that this recreational area could not guarantee the safety and mobility of most people with disabilities.

The public markets, on the contrary, is progressively developed by "the people," since before. This particular area is considered as having heritage value. Initial observation of this public markets area showed that the UD was not considered when it was developed and any attempt by the authority to re-develop the area was opposed by the local traders for reasons that their lives depend on the authenticity of the area.

Esplanade Water Front is a modern eatery outlet development designed to attract local and international tourists. Although the city council commissioned the project to professional consultants, the area has no provision of access for mobility of people with disabilities. The existence of the multi-level platform fronting the water area offers no independence for the PWDs to go to this area.

The demand of access for people with disabilities has increased as more and more PWDs are aware of their rights in the community. Based on 2008 statistical data produced by the Department of Society's Welfare of Malaysia (*Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat Malaysia* or JKMM), Sabah has 13,987 registered people with disabilities, an increase of 65 % compared to statistical data in 2002 (JKMM, 2009). They actively participated in both government agencies and non-profit organizations (NGO), demanding their voices to be heard (Arokia, 2006).

Procedures of Access Audit

Embarking on re-development of any built environment requires certain level of feasibility studies. The research and activities of access audit demand several procedures of research

methodology. This research utilises methods of observation, simulation, and interview for data collection. The comprehensive data collection processes were analysed concurrently with the methods used.

The observation process includes examining the facilities provided for the disabled persons in the exterior and interior of buildings. Direct observations were carried out to identify the provision of parking for the disabled; accessible pathway into and from the water front area; safe location of curbs; provision of safe stairs, elevators and ramps; availability of handrails, and etc. Photographing and measuring the physical aspects of the areas observed were done with guidance of a checklist of the specified measurement of the facilities. The observation was done in three different stages. Preliminary observation was carried out prior to simulation of PWD's movement in the area, to identify the potential testing routes for mobility of all PWD's involved. Interim observation was done during the simulation process, to record the ease and difficulties encountered by PWD in managing their mobility in the area. A checklist containing the required PWD facilities and access to be audited was prepared prior to the simulation activity, whilst comments and sketches were recorded concurrently during the simulation activity. The final observation was carried out after the simulation process and discussion on the data collected was done, to check on any missing facilities that may require further investigations. Revisiting the field-work for several times would completed the observation process.

The simulation process was the most challenging. The simulation of the access audit utilised five (5) people, each with different type of disability such as: fully impaired vision, partially impaired vision, hearing impaired, wheel- chair bound, and a crutch user. The four (4) researchers identified the disabled and with their guidance the disabled simulated their movement at the focal point of the public space in the city, at the water front area stretching about one (1) kilometre in length and 200 metres wide. The whole process of simulation took two (2) days to be completed. Table 1 shows categories of problems and issues that needed to be examined during the simulation process.

Each researcher accompanied a disabled, except for the hearing impaired because she had her own support personnel to help out in case there was any danger encountered. The whole group went along to track the specified routes, taking periodic recess to record comments from PWDs via structured-interview sessions.

Data collection by interview was done at no specified time, targeting those involved directly and indirectly to the access audit activity. Researchers collected comments from PWDs involved in the simulation process, personnels from the Kota Kinabalu city council, and some tourists who happened to be on the site during the simulation and observation periods. Comments gathered during the interviews session were used as supportive data.

Table 1: Categories of Problems and Issues that Needed to be Examined During Simulation Process

No	Problems/Issues On sites	
	Exterior building	Interior building
1	Accessible Parking areas	Main Entrance
2	Accessible Taxi and bus stands	Doors
3	Safe Pathways	Corridors/ Pathways
4	Safe Curb cuts	Elevators/Lifts
5	Provision of safe pedestrian Crossing	Public telephone
6	General Obstructions	General Obstruction
7	Provision of safe steps/stairs	Provision of safe steps/stairs
8	Provision of safe ramps	Provision of safe ramps
9	Provision of safe handrails	Provision of safe handrails
10	Provision of accessible toilets	Provision of accessible toilets
11	Provision of accessible eating outlets	Provision of accessible eating outlets
12	Floor condition	Floor condition
13	Resting Facilities	Resting Facilities
14	Others	Reception & Information counter
15		Prayer room
16		Others

Findings and Recommendation

This research had produced a comprehensive report (KUDU, 2009) on the findings of access audit and interviews done in August 2008. However, this paper would only present the summary of the findings. The report presented the movements of PWDs on the areas accessed, with photos and sketches to explain the inadequacies of accessibilities of the Kota Kinabalu water front. In a matrix format, the report specified areas that needed to be improved and suggested measures of improvement in the form of architectural drawings were presented. The report of the Kota Kinabalu Access Audit also presented the perceptions of the PWDs involved in the simulation, and several members of the public on their satisfaction and dissatisfaction of the area.

Exterior Buildings

Parking areas of the area accessed have not been designed in accordance to requirement specified in MS 1331: 1993, Section 21.1. There is no provision of accessible parking lots at any of the several parking areas provided at the water front, no provision of ramps to connect drop-off point and its surrounding areas, and curb design is too high for the safety of people with disabilities. In addition, floors at the parking areas are not evenly surfaced,

risking the safe mobility of the PWDs. The authority needs to provide several parking lots for usage of PWDs, with safe pathways and ramps leading to the surrounding areas.

Although the area accessed is equipped with taxi drop-off areas and a bus stand, the location and access to both facilities are not in compliance with the requirement of PWD. There is only one (1) bus stand in a stretch of one (1) kilometre long water front, and the pathway leading to the surrounding areas is not accessible for PWDs. It is very dangerous for wheel chair users and vision impaired people to walk on uneven floor surfaces. Bus-stand and taxi drop-off areas need to be equipped with ramps and handrails for the safe mobility of PWDs.

Most of the architectural features in the accessed areas are also designed and allocated inappropriately and not in compliance to the requirement stated in MS 1331: 1993. Ramps are provided with dangerous gradients, there is not enough provision of handrails, and they are not in accordance to the required size, curb cuts are too high and uneven, pathway's surfaces are not continuous and uneven, and there is no provision of block tiles at any point of the area. Renovation of this area with designs that complied to the standard would help to improve these problems.

The PWDs also have difficulties to access common public facilities of the area. Eating outlets are generally accessible by normal or abled people only, with no allocation of ramps to the multi-levels eating outlets. Toilet facilities are not well located position wise, where even abled people have difficulties to locate the provision. There is no provision of accessible toilets for wheel chair users, whilst other PWDs use the same toilet cubicles as the normal people. There is not enough provision for resting area, as most PWDs need resting areas to move around which usually requires more energy and effort compared to abled people. Research also found that pedestrian crossing areas are available but not accessible for PWDs.

In general, the exterior building accessed has too many obstructions for the mobility of the PWDs. Stairs and steps are not provided with proper handrails, safe floor surfaces, warning tile-blocks, and clear head-room. All over the area accessed, there are too many open drainage. In addition, there are some decorative design features along the sides of the pathways and hanging objects from ceilings that pose obstructions for the mobility of the PWDs, especially those with vision-impaired disability. In this case, the local authority needs to ensure that the public space should always have pathways that are clear of mobility obstructions for the PWDs.

Interior Buildings

There are many entrances leading to the interior of markets, but none of them is accessible for the wheel chair users. Provision of high drops to segregate the exterior and interior of the buildings prevent the wheel chair users to get inside the markets. There are some ramps provided for the traders to transport their trolleys, but the gradient is too steep for wheel chair users to use the provision. Besides, corridors inside the markets are also too narrow for wheel chair users to manoeuvre their movements.

Doors inside and outside the building should be designed according to standard requirement where both the abled and disabled people could move freely. However, lack of public awareness has caused the access to be partly blocked by furniture and merchandise. Similar to the exterior building, the interior building of Kota Kinabalu Water Front also lacks the provision of safe steps, ramps, handrails, and pathways.

Common amenities like public telephones, payment and information counters, resting areas, and praying areas are also not accessible for the PWDs' usage. There is no allocation for elevators, so that reaching to the eating outlets at the upper floor of the main market building is impossible for wheel chair users.

Perceptions of People with Disabilities

The PWDs that participated in this research were generally very concerned with their rights to have equal opportunities on accessing their environment. They made some suggestions on facilities items needed to be improved based on their personal experiences participating in the simulation activities.

The hearing impaired person generally have not much problems accessing most of the facilities at the Kota Kinabalu Water front. The only loop-hole that she found important to be highlighted is that the area should be provided with more proper signage that may enable her to move around without the help and supports of others.

The main problem encountered by vision-impaired persons was the existence of too many obstructions on their pathways that endangered their safety. They suggested that design features in both interior and exterior buildings should include the followings: guided blocks, covered drains, steps and stairs with less than six inches height, audio and brailed signage, handrails, and ramps with accurate and appropriate gradients. Especially for the partially vision impaired, they requested for provision of contrast coloured signage. One of the vision impaired participants proposed that Kota Kinabalu should replicate the design of the barrier-free environment in Brickfields, a small commercial area located in the suburban area of Kuala Lumpur, where he could easily move around without help from abled people.

Both wheel chair and crutches users who participated in the simulation projects found that it was very challenging for them to move around Kota Kinabalu water front, for the reason that generally the area could not be considered as barrier-free environment. Comprehensive improvement of the area is needed to ensure equal opportunities for everyone.

Conclusion

The access audit done in Kota Kinabalu concluded that the water front area was designed without careful consideration of Universal Design, and renovation of the built environment is urgently needed to comply with the Malaysian Standard requirements. The City Council of Kota Kinabalu has been informally informed on problems encountered during the access audit, and the team of researchers had notified that proposal on redeveloping the area is now being formulated, taking into consideration of the comments addressed by the researchers.

Ensuring full implementation of Universal Design in Malaysia offers challenges and opportunities. For years, implementation has been hindered by lack of full enforcement by regulatory authorities. Overall costs of having dependency of people with disabilities on welfare and charities are actually higher than providing them the facilities. Calls for awareness and implementation have been heard all around, yet coordination among all parties involved should be made more effective. The time is overdue for all parties involved to translate the research agenda and collaborate fully in the implementation of the Malaysian Standards for PWDs' facilities in built environment, so that the history of failed practices does not repeat

itself. Hopefully, in years to come, there would be no more segregation between people with disabilities from the larger community.

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