

# UNIVERSAL DESIGN FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE: MALAYSIAN MASJID

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## ABSTRACT

In general, Masjid 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 Masjid. From Islamic perspective, providing accessibility and applying Universal Design principal in Masjid design in considering the need to provide for Persons with Disabilities (Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)) and the elderly has deliberately making Masjid a place of ease and convenient for all people to come to Masjid. The methodology considers conducting access audit at case studies, observations on existing built environment and design recommendation on the analysed data with reference to Malaysian Standards and related Acts/By-Laws. Existing Masjid 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 and it is also even better when architects apply a 'design for all' concept. In conclusion, accessibility is important to be provided for all Muslim regardless of ability or disability to pray at Masjid comfortably and safe.

**Keywords:** Masjid design, accessibility, Universal Design, Persons with Disabilities (Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)), Malaysian Standards.

## INTRODUCTION

During the prophet's time, Masjid 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 Masjid 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 Masjids that offer other

complementary functions such as nursery/day care, religious school (*madrasah*) and bazaar (*souq*) for business purposes and accommodation. Therefore, a Masjid 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. The following Qur'anic verse indicates that Masjid is maintained by the true believers (devoted Muslim) and focuses on the ones that worship *Allâh* and not by their physical appearance (either abled-bodied or disabled);

*“{17} It is not for the Mushrikûn (polytheists, idolaters, pagans, disbelievers in the Oneness of Allâh), to maintain the Mosques of Allâh (i.e. to pray and worship Allâh therein, to look after their cleanliness and their building, etc.), while they witness against their ownelves of disbelief. The works of such are in vain and in Fire shall they abide. {18} The Mosques of Allâh shall be maintained only by those who believe in Allâh and the Last Day; perform As-Salât (Iqâmat-as-Salât), and give Zakât and fear none but Allâh. It is they who are expected to be on true guidance.”*

*{Surah At-Taubah: 17-18}*

*“{107}And as for those who put up a mosque by way of harming and disbelief, and to disunite the believers, and as an outpost for those who warred against Allâh and His Messenger (Muhammad SAW) aforetime, they will indeed swear that their intention is nothing but good. Allâh bears witness that they are certainly liars.”*

*{Surah At-Taubah: 107}*

### **Accessible Masjid'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 (Abdul

Rahim & Abd. Samad, 2010). 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 (Ismail, 2003).

Masjid and Surau 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 Masjid and Surau remained as a place of worship for devoted Muslims to perform the five daily prayers. In an article reported by Bernama, the Raja Muda of Perlis, Tuanku Syed Faizuddin Putra Jamalullail, insisted that all new buildings to be equipped with a surau and also said that some building owners provide prayer room merely to meet the criteria for building approval. Furthermore, Tuanku Syed Faizuddin added that 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 (NST, July 2013).

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 Masjid for prayers and other activities related to the Masjid and the Masjid 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 Masjid 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. It is further state in the Qur'an and also in Hadith 36; about the significance of fulfilling the needs of a Muslim:

*“{8} O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allâh and be just witnesses and let not the enmity and hatred of others make you avoid justice. Be just: that is nearer to piety, and fear Allâh. Verily, Allâh is WellAcquainted with what you do.”*

*{Surah Al-Mâ'idah: 8}*

*Abu Hurayrah (radi Allahu anhu) reported: The Prophet (sal Allahu alaihi wa sallam) said, "I saw a man going about in Jannah (and enjoying himself) as a reward for cutting from the middle of the road, a tree which was causing inconvenience to the Muslims."*

*[Hadith Sahih Muslim]*

*Abu Hurayrah (radi Allahu anhu) reported: The Prophet (sal Allahu alaihi wa sallam) said, "Whosoever relieves from a believer some grief pertaining to this world, Allah will relieve from him some grief pertaining to the Hereafter. Whosoever alleviates the difficulties of a needy person who cannot pay his debt, Allah will alleviate his difficulties in both this world and the Hereafter. Whosoever conceals the faults of a Muslim, Allah will conceal his faults in this world and the Hereafter. Allah will aid a servant (of His) so long as the servant aids his brother. Whosoever follows a path to seek knowledge therein, Allah will make easy for him a path to Paradise. No people gather together in one of the houses of Allah, reciting the Book of Allah and studying it among themselves, except that tranquility descends upon them, mercy covers them, the angels surround them, and Allah makes mention of them amongst those who are in His presence. Whosoever is slowed down by his deeds will not be hastened forward by his lineage."*

*[Hadith Sahih Muslim]*

The act of saving or protecting people from harm and loss is greatly pleased by Allah, 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 Masjid.

### **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 the statistics provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO), it is

estimated that 5–10% (1.3–2.6 million) of the world's population are Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). As reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the total population of Malaysia in 2006 was 26.64 million people. Of the total population, 1.3–2.6 million are Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). However, as of December 2007, only 220 to 250 Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) were registered with the Social Welfare Department. This number is predicted to rise along with the increasing population, lifespan and the total number of road and industrial accidents. The total number of the elderly population in Malaysia is expected to increase from 1.73 million (6.6%) in 2005 to 3.8 million (11.3%) in 2020 (Social Welfare Department, 2007). The statistic of disabled persons registered under Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM) in 2012 has the total of 436, 317 people and will increase as more are willing to register.

According to Kose (2001, p.17), 'The Impact of Aging on Japanese Accessibility Design Standards' 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 Masjid 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 Masjid 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 (Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)) that also require certain needs and support in helping their everyday life. The following Qur'anic verse gives us valuable philosophical insight into the process of ageing and aging is something that is definite;

*“{70} And Allâh has created you and then He will cause you to die, and of you there are some who are sent back to senility (a feeble age), so that they know nothing after having known (much). Truly! Allâh is All-Knowing, All-Powerful.”*

*{Surah An-Nahl: 70}*

*“Islam reminds the young of this basic truth of the human condition, through a narration of the Prophet in which he stated “If a young man honors an elderly on account of his age, God appoints someone to honor him in his old age.”*

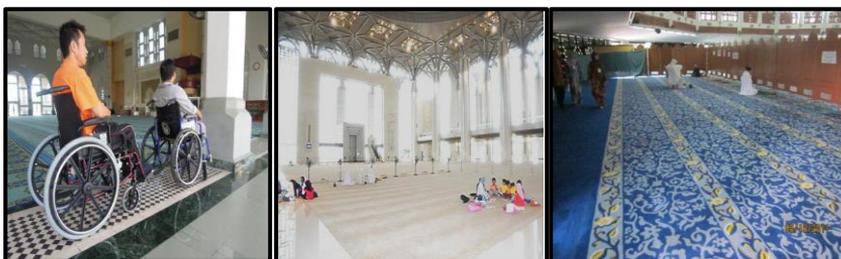
*[Hadith from At-Tirmidhi]*

Many Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) Muslims has expressed their frustration and dilemma in visiting main Masjid 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 Masjid to perform their congregational prayer together with other Muslims but when the Masjid 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 Masjid difficult and depressing (Utusan Malaysia, May 2013).



**Figure 1, 2 & 3:** The entrance of Masjid 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 Masjid and even to perform the obligatory Friday prayer. They usually refuse physical help as they would like to be independent.

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.



**Figure 4, 5 & 6:** The Prayer Hall is always carpeted and this is an issue for wheelchair users as masjid 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 Masjid and could not perform their prayers

## **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 Masjid and its surroundings in Malaysia. As mentioned by Holmes-Siedle (1996, p.9), 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. An access audit examines an existing building against predetermined criteria designed to measure the “usability” of the building for disabled people. Usability ranges from getting in and around to exiting the building. Depending on the measurement criteria, the assessment examines the percentage of the facilities that can be used independently by disabled people.

Holmes-Siedle (1996) also further indicated that audits should be performed by experienced auditors who have been involved with and working with disabled persons. To produce an adaptive survey, the surveying and reporting team should be experienced in the design of buildings for disabled people and the process required for their implementation. Therefore, it is likely that these types of groups will include disabled people and architects experienced in adaptive work. 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 Masjid Route**

A provision of creating and suggesting an accessible route for existing Masjid could keep costing renovation and upgrading to a minimum. The problems and suggestions in improving the Masjid built environment are categorize 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 Masjid 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.



**Figure 7, 8 & 9:** Entrances 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.

## Toilets and Ablution areas

*"{108} Never stand you therein. Verily, the mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety is more worthy that you stand therein (to pray). In it are men who love to clean and to purify themselves. And Allâh loves those who make themselves clean and pure (i.e. who clean their private parts with dust [i.e. to be considered as soap) and water from urine and stools, after answering the call of nature]."*

*{Surah At-Taubah: 108}*

The importance of providing accessible toilets and accessible ablution areas in Masjid 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 'mussaffir', making Masjid 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 Masjid have provided sufficient large areas for ablution and toilets. It is understandable for architects to design Masjid' 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.



**Figure 10 & 11:** 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.

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.



**Figure 12 & 13:** Entrance to the ablution area and toilet has split levels and some Mosque has design of threshold that is a total barrier.

Provision of accessible toilet has developed awareness among architects and designers into providing an accessible toilet at masjid / masjid area but the detailing and specification are wrongly designed and furthermore, some fittings are simply irrelevant and useless to be used by the Persons with Disabilities (PwDs).



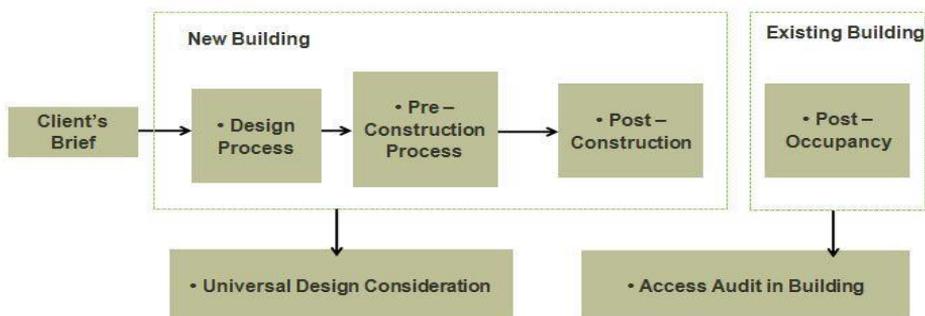
**Figure 14 & 15:** Accessible toilet is provided but the design and specifications are not according to MS 2015: PART 1: 2006 making the purpose of providing accessible toilet is useless.

## 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.



**Figure 16, 17, 18, 19 & 20:** A proper and usable designed accessible toilet and legible signage is recommended to be pictorial for easy understanding instead of lettering or wording signs.



**Figure 21:** A diagram of the application of Universal Design in new building and existing building. (Source: Abdul Rahim A.).

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.

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