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Disabled access: Malls face Catch-22 situation
Joseph Chin Shi Hao

I WOULD like to respond to the article, 'Obstacles at every turn for disabled' (ST, Dec 18), regarding the lack of accessibility for the disabled in malls and other buildings in prime areas such as Orchard Road and Shenton Way.

I agree that 'barrier-free' buildings can ensure better access for both able and disabled shoppers, and the efforts of the Building and Construction Authority (BCA), in giving subsidies to mall operators, should be applauded. However, there are genuine grievances on the part of mall operators that explain the lukewarm response to subsidies for infrastructure as mentioned in the article.

I feel these operators were forced to maintain the status quo, especially if they did not feel the need to upgrade because 'business is good', due to the fact that installing the most rudimentary infrastructure and facilities necessary for disabled access would mean a massive gamble on the operators' part. This is because they have to shoulder the cost of installing new wheelchair-friendly facilities (previously non-existent in older malls), as well as accept the loss of valuable human traffic during the construction period.

In the competitive business environment of retail malls, loss of access in the short term may deter able-bodied shoppers who prefer to avoid the congested smaller malls under construction and head to others such as VivoCity. The sheer logistical challenges of making facilities such as toilets and lifts accessible to wheelchair-bound shoppers on every floor is also a put-off for many landlords. With regard to the Orchard and Shenton areas, adding facilities is also a delicate operation as prime shop space must be cordoned off for smooth construction, decreasing effective use of space.

Operators are thus caught in a Catch-22 situation where they lose business and human traffic if they do not upgrade their facilities to be disabled-friendly, yet they also risk diseconomies of scale in operations if dwindling numbers of shoppers patronise their malls due to inconveniences caused by construction.

So I feel the BCA and mall operators should actively cooperate to reach better compromises when upgrading and installing disabled-friendly facilities in malls, in addition to the passive measure of offering subsidies.

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Access for disabled: Building authority working with malls

I REFER to the letter, 'Disabled access: Malls face Catch-22 situation', by Mr Joseph Chin (ST, Dec 25).

We agree that active cooperation with stakeholders, including mall operators, will enable us to build an environment accessible to all. It is one of the Building and Construction Authority's (BCA) strategic goals to foster a more inclusive society by creating a user-friendly built environment that caters to the needs of people of different ages and abilities.

BCA has mapped out a Barrier-Free Accessibility Masterplan to steer public- and private-sector buildings towards barrier-free accessibility. Last year, the new Code on Accessibility in the Built Environment was launched to put in place new requirements to improve interconnections between buildings and infrastructures.

To build a friendly, pro-family, disabled-enabling built environment, BCA promotes Universal Design (UD) principles among building owners by publishing UD guidebooks and organising talks. The BCA Universal Design Award was introduced last year to recognise buildings that demonstrate a high level of accessibility by adopting UD elements.

The greatest challenge is to get existing private buildings, especially those in the extensively built-up area of Orchard Road, to upgrade facilities to barrier-free accessibility standards. For this, the Government has set aside \$40 million to co-fund voluntary upgrading on barrier-free accessibility.

Depending on private building owners' priorities and timing considerations, BCA recommends they upgrade barrier-free facilities fully and adopt UD in their design. Building owners who are not ready to undergo extensive retrofitting are encouraged to take the upgrading process step by step, by providing basic barrier-free access first. This ensures disruption is minimised.

In addition to making incentive funds available for upgrading work to provide barrier-free accessibility, BCA has met mall owners and operators to explore with them, individually, areas for improvement in accessibility on their properties and address concerns on hindrances. For example, where mall operators face inter-connectivity issues in upgrading works, BCA has formed an inter-agency coordination committee to smoothen and expedite the upgrading process to provide barrier-free accessibility between buildings and surrounding facilities.

Mall operators are encouraged to take a longer-term view of upgrading their facilities, which will enhance accessibility and hence attract more shoppers. BCA will continually strive to work closely with all building owners to enhance the barrier-free accessibility of our built environment.

**Reply by Wong Wai Ching
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