

**The Straits Times**  
**Jan 5, 2008**

**BARRIER-FREE ACCESS FOR THE DISABLED**  
**Blind spot in evacuation blueprint**  
**By Andy Ho**

AFTER church on Sundays, my family frequently lunches at the Ikea store in Tampines for various reasons, one of which, though it may not apply personally at present, is that it is thoughtfully barrier-free to the disabled.

Of late, some activists have been writing letters to the press asking the authorities to do more for folks with disabilities. The Building and Construction Authority (BCA), in its replies, has been highlighting how it has been helping the private sector to defray some of the costs of upgrading older facilities to accommodate the disabled. It has also been promoting good practices by recognising newer buildings that are doing the right things in this regard.

That particular Ikea store I like was the only winner in the gold category of the BCA Universal Design Award for the Built Environment contest last year. ('Universal design' principles promote designs that work for both the able-bodied and the disabled, including those with temporary disabilities, across all age groups.)

BCA notes that Ikea's 'toilets for those on wheelchairs are comfortably sized, (their doors have) clothing hooks at a height suitable for use (while there are also) wider aisles in the restaurant...and shopping carts designed to be attached to the wheelchair'.

I also like to frequent the new National Library, which was the only winner in the silver category. Among other things, BCA notes, its information counter, e-kiosk and payphones are 'positioned at heights accessible to the wheelchair-bound (while its) aisles are wide enough (so they can) enjoy browsing the collections'.

On weekdays, if I need bread or bug spray, I drop by the Lot 1 mall near where I live. Refurbished so that it is barrier-free, this bronze award winner has 'parking lots for (the disabled that) are well-designed to provide ease of parking. Access from these lots to the building entrance lobby is direct, short and smooth', BCA notes.

These are good examples for others to follow. To encourage the private sector to render pre-1990 buildings barrier-free so that the disabled can access them, BCA has set aside \$40 million for its Accessibility Fund which will be available until 2011 to help private owners defray some of the costs incurred in such upgrading work.

I think the fund needs to be expanded as the present target is quite rudimentary - that these buildings have 'at least basic accessibility' by 2011. If we can afford it, bells and whistles would be nicer. The funds should also be made available for a longer period.

More importantly, I think that we need to spend some money on a largely ignored aspect. Notice that none of the winners in BCA's contest was cited for having any special arrangements for the evacuation of the disabled in an emergency.

Last year, when the Sumatran quake rattled downtown skyscrapers here, pregnant women, the aged and the disabled had to be helped down fire stairwells, which inevitably slowed down everyone else.

I also recall watching many hours of US Congressional hearings on C-span while living in Boston after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. While the need to audit emergency preparedness systems was duly recognised, the heightened peril faced by the disabled was not. So when the same edifice was attacked in Sept 11, 2001, the evacuation of the disabled was disastrous. Many mobility-impaired people who could not negotiate their way down the fire stairwells waited unto death for rescuers who never got to them in time.

Take time off to talk to the wheelchair-bound who work in skyscrapers and they will tell you their daily fears of being imperilled in case of fire or a terrorist attack. For these folks, in fact, a two-storey building that is bombed or on fire would be just as deadly as a skyscraper, if there are no means of escape other than the lift. Power outages during a fire could leave the lift stuck between floors while the lift shaft itself could turn into a smoke chimney.

Yet we have no regulations that specifically address the issue of ensuring the safe evacuation of the disabled during emergencies. In fact, the committee that recently reviewed the BCA Code on Barrier-Free Accessibility in Buildings (first introduced in 1990 and revised three times now) comprised industry groups such as the Singapore Institute of Architects, charities such as the Handicaps Welfare Association, and six other public bodies including the Housing Board and the Urban Redevelopment Authority - but not the Singapore Civil Defence Force.

Barrier-free access should also mean equal access to emergency evacuation for the disabled who cannot negotiate what experts call the emergency 'means of egress' in ways the able-bodied can. The disabled need separate evacuation plans that are as effective as those for the able-bodied.

There are now helpful new technologies such as escape chutes, slides and controlled descent devices. Available too are emergency evacuation lifts that come with their own backup power source. Besides having smoke-proof doors and automatic sprinkler systems, they are pressurised and ventilated to prevent heat and smoke build-up.

All these things will up costs but they could save lives, not just of the wheelchair-bound but also of the pregnant mother or the grandmother who uses a cane, crutch or walker.

Actually, they might save you or me too for, as we get older, the likelihood of becoming disabled increases. Let us not wait for some disaster before deciding to invest in these things.

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**Jan 16, 2008**

## **EMERGENCY EVACUATION**

### **Panel set up to look into safety of the disabled**

WE REFER to the article, 'Blind spot in evacuation blueprint' (ST, Jan 5), on barrier-free access for the disabled, by Dr Andy Ho.

We agree with Dr Ho on the need to improve the emergency evacuation procedures for the disabled. In fact, a committee led by the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) was formed last July to review the emergency-evacuation and fire-safety provisions for the disabled. The Building and Construction Authority (BCA), the Singapore Institute of Architects and the Institution of Engineers, Singapore are also represented on this committee.

We also wish to clarify that the provisions in BCA's Code on Barrier-Free Accessibility in Buildings are meant to meet the daily needs of persons with disabilities under normal circumstances. They are not meant to cater to an emergency situation such as a fire outbreak or tremors caused by distant earthquakes. Such emergency-evacuation operations require additional considerations and are addressed under the SCDF's Fire Safety Act and its regulations.

Currently, there is a huge stock of older buildings that were built before the accessibility code came into effect in 1990. These buildings, which do not provide barrier-free access, will remain inaccessible to wheelchair users unless major renovation works are carried out. The challenge is to convince owners of private buildings, especially those that are frequented by the public, to voluntarily upgrade their buildings with basic barrier-free features, given the physical constraints of their buildings.

For this, the Government has set aside \$40 million to co-fund voluntary upgrading works carried out by owners for accessibility. BCA has also stepped up efforts to meet individual building owners and managers to encourage them to make their buildings friendly to the disabled community and the elderly.

Last but not least, we would like to thank Dr Ho for his encouraging remarks on the BCA Universal Design Award winners. We will continue to work closely with all building owners to enhance the friendliness of our built environment.

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