

For people with disabilities the city is full of uncertainties, anxieties and dangers. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

At the Singapore Zoo and Kota Damansara forest reserve, a person who cannot walk can hire a battery-driven vehicle.

Sara says living in Singapore made her realise how important it is for everyone to start including disabled-friendly features in the planning stage rather than later when it can be costly.

"If we ignore the issue of accessibility today, we will reap the fruits of our apathy when we get locked out of society in our old age," Sara concludes.

## Chicago: Buildings optimise disabled access

The front door at Access Living's old headquarters on Roosevelt Road closed way too fast for Nita Patel. She would hit the button to automatically open the door, but then it would close on her and her wheelchair halfway through.

No longer.

The new building in River North has automatic sliding doors that whoosh open -- and stay open – as Patel, a housing counselor, approaches in her chair.

At first glance, the 50,000-square-foot Access Living headquarters at 115 W. Chicago Avenue looks like a modern, light-filled office building. But a closer look reveals many subtle, important differences. At the entrance, there's a wheelchair ramp cut into the curb in front of the building. A thick, dark, grooved line leads from a drop-off spot on the sidewalk through automatic double doors to the reception desk to help people with visual impairments and developmental disabilities find their way easily.

Throughout the building are scores of other features chosen for their universal user-friendliness. The refrigerator in the kitchen is a side-by-side design, which is easier for people in wheelchairs to use. The hallways are wide enough to accommodate two people in wheelchairs and a person walking by. The sinks in the restrooms are shallow, leaving more legroom underneath for people in wheelchairs. The restrooms have no entry doors (the stalls do, of course), making entering and exiting easier.

Affordable universal design concepts are needed for a low-income country like Bangladesh. Universities should take initiatives to conduct research to develop and test for effective solutions that are inexpensive and appropriate in the local context. "If a little care is taken while designing a building, the accessibility can be increased. It is not expensive," says Dr Hafiz. "If there is a ramp in every building, accessibility will increase. Our doors are usually 40 inches wide. If we make it just 2 inches wider, a wheel chair can enter. Instead of tiles or granite floors, tactile floors can be used as they are less slippery. The building code and the Disability Act have provision for these facilities. But it is not implemented."

While compliance with the laws is essential, the society ought to treat people with disability with more respect. "In many countries, when a blind person boards a bus, the driver gets out to assist the person. We must remember that a lot of us will get disabled when we are old," says Professor Hafiz.