

ARCHITECTURE • INTERIOR DESIGN • LANDSCAPING • M.E.P. SYSTEMS

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SEAB

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Holistic Sustainability in Design

How TA.LE Architects tackles environmental challenges with a whole-life perspective

As countries around the world accelerate their climate goals, the built environment is under mounting pressure to reduce its carbon footprint—not only during construction, but throughout a building's entire lifespan. Though buildings account for nearly 40 per cent of global carbon emissions, much of the design conversation still centres on the final product, neglecting the construction process itself and the building's long-term performance.

TA.LE Architects, a Singapore-based firm, addresses these challenges with a whole-life approach to sustainable design. From selecting energy-efficient materials and low-impact construction methods to integrating natural ventilation, TA.LE Architects takes a holistic view of environmental performance.

Southeast Asia Building had the privilege of discussing TA.LE Architects' green approach with Lionel Leow, Co-founder and Principal Architect of TA.LE Architects, who provided commentary on TA.LE Architects' design philosophy, sustainable design trends, and the context of design within Southeast Asia.

Q. Please introduce yourself and TA.LE Architects. How does your practice differ from other firms in Singapore?

A: I'm Lionel Leow, Co-founder and Principal Architect of TA.LE. Our firm

was founded on a human-centric philosophy, where every space we design prioritises the needs and experiences of its occupants. This core belief naturally evolved to place sustainability at its heart. For us, a truly human-centric approach must also consider the world we inhabit, as caring for the planet is a direct extension of caring for people.

What's distinct about our practice is that we don't treat sustainability

Lionel Leow, Co-founder and Principal Architect of TA.LE Architects

as an add-on or a box to tick; it's deeply integrated into our design ethos. This leads us to an inventive and resourceful approach, where we explore unconventional, upcycled materials, such as bamboo chopsticks and PET bottles, and prioritise adaptive reuse.



3-CDL Eco Train.png: CDL Eco Train



The Singapore Sustainability Academy (SSA) Annex

This blend of humanism and creative resourcefulness is central to our work, whether we're designing for smaller, private projects or large-scale public spaces.

Q. Please tell us about TA.LE's sustainable approach to design. What methods does TA.LE implement during the process that ensures a holistic strategy to sustainability?

A: Our holistic approach to sustainability is guided by a circular design mindset that considers a building's entire lifespan. Our strategy focuses on two key areas. First, we address embodied carbon from the outset. This involves prioritising the adaptive reuse of existing structures to minimise demolition waste. When new materials are needed, we opt for lower-carbon options like Mass Engineered Timber (MET) and creatively incorporate upcycled materials recovered from waste streams, such as recycled bubble wrap and tennis balls.

Second, we design for long-term operational performance, which responds directly to our tropical climate. We implement passive design strategies, like high ceilings, cross-ventilation, and façade shading, to naturally reduce energy demand. We

then integrate active systems like solar panels and hybrid cooling to further enhance that efficiency.

This two-pronged approach ensures our buildings are not only built responsibly but also perform efficiently and adaptably for years to come, minimising environmental impact to the best of our abilities.

Q. How has the shift towards green regulation impacted the way firms, such as yourself, approach design? How have the general population's sentiments changed as a result of green policy?

A: Green regulations, such as Singapore's goal of greening 80% of buildings by 2030, have established an essential new baseline for the industry. For TA.LE, these regulations are more than a ceiling to reach; they are also an opportunity to go above and beyond compliance and to push the boundaries of what a sustainable building can be.

As for the general population, there's been a definite shift. We see this in our clients, who are more educated and aware than ever before about the environment. There's a growing understanding¹ that sustainability is a long-term,



¹ Teh Shi Ning, "Green Buildings: Reaching beyond Energy Efficiency to Tackle Embodied Carbon," *The Straits Times*, August 8, 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/environment/green-buildings-reaching-beyond-energy-efficiency-to-tackle-embodied-carbon>.



The Loft House

added value that enhances wellbeing, functionality, and resilience for society and our physical environment. This is reflected in the market as well, where many believe a green-certified building holds higher value. People are confirming our belief that good design is, by definition, sustainable design.

Q. The Singapore Sustainability Academy (SSA) Annex is a prime example of TA.LE's innovations in sustainable design. Please tell us more about how the SSA Annex is designed to be sustainable throughout its entire life cycle.

A: The SSA Annex was conceived with the purpose of being a dedicated space for public, private, and people-sector collaboration on climate action. As the architect, our challenge was to design a building that didn't just house these important conversations but embodied the very values of sustainability and innovation it promotes. Hence, its entire lifecycle was considered from day one.

To minimise its embodied carbon, we used Mass-Engineered Timber for the main structure and sourced innovative, low-impact materials. This included "poliber" bricks made from recycled PET bottles and rice husks, flooring from upcycled carpets, and façade screens made from bamboo.

For its operational life, we designed a suite of systems to ensure it performs as a positive-energy building. Passive strategies like high ceilings, cross-ventilation, and a green wall reduce the cooling load. This is supported by active systems

like rooftop solar panels that power a hybrid cooling system, which efficiently combines air-conditioning with ceiling fans. The result is a facility that generates more renewable energy than it consumes, all while remaining a comfortable space.

This philosophy of lifecycle, sustainable thinking, is a common thread throughout our work. For the CDL EcoTrain, we adapted a decommissioned MRT cabin into a zero-energy gallery, eliminating demolition waste while minimising construction emissions.

We are currently revamping City Square Mall, a project with a unique legacy as Singapore's first eco-mall, established over ten years ago. Our goal is to elevate its original vision, bringing the eco-mall concept to a new level by using a wide range of upcycled materials. We actively repurpose existing elements as well, such as turning the old wooden panels into benches, which preserve the

building's character while reducing waste.

Q. In the context of Southeast Asia, how does the climate and culture impact TA.LE's design principles?

A: Our design principles are fundamentally shaped by the context of Southeast Asia, both its unique climate and its rich culture.

In response to the climate, we design to work with our hot and humid environment, not against it. We prioritise vernacular strategies like high ceilings to allow heat to rise, cross-ventilation for constant airflow, and effective shading devices like deep eaves or bamboo screens. At The Loft House, for example, we reimagined the traditional pitched roof to optimise passive cooling, creating a home that is both energy-efficient and comfortable.

From a cultural standpoint, our human-centric approach must always be locally aware. Design priorities in Asia often differ from those in Europe, for example, with a greater emphasis on communal gathering spaces and privacy. We integrate these needs into all our designs, from private homes to public spaces. In our newest project, which is the revamp of Changi Airport Terminal 1's Transit Zone, we drew inspiration from Singapore's "City in Nature" identity and used biophilic design to create a sense of calm and connection that resonates deeply with the local context. At the end of the day, our goal is to design spaces that serve people, culture, and the planet.

