Lionel Leow from TA.LE Architects shares about the importance of conservation and navigating local laws in design

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

In ever-changing urban skylines like Singapore, commercial buildings are often deemed obsolete and earmarked for demolition around the 10-to 15-year mark. With this anticipated lifespan in mind, architects and related bodies are increasingly looking to refurbishment over demolition for a multitude of reasons.

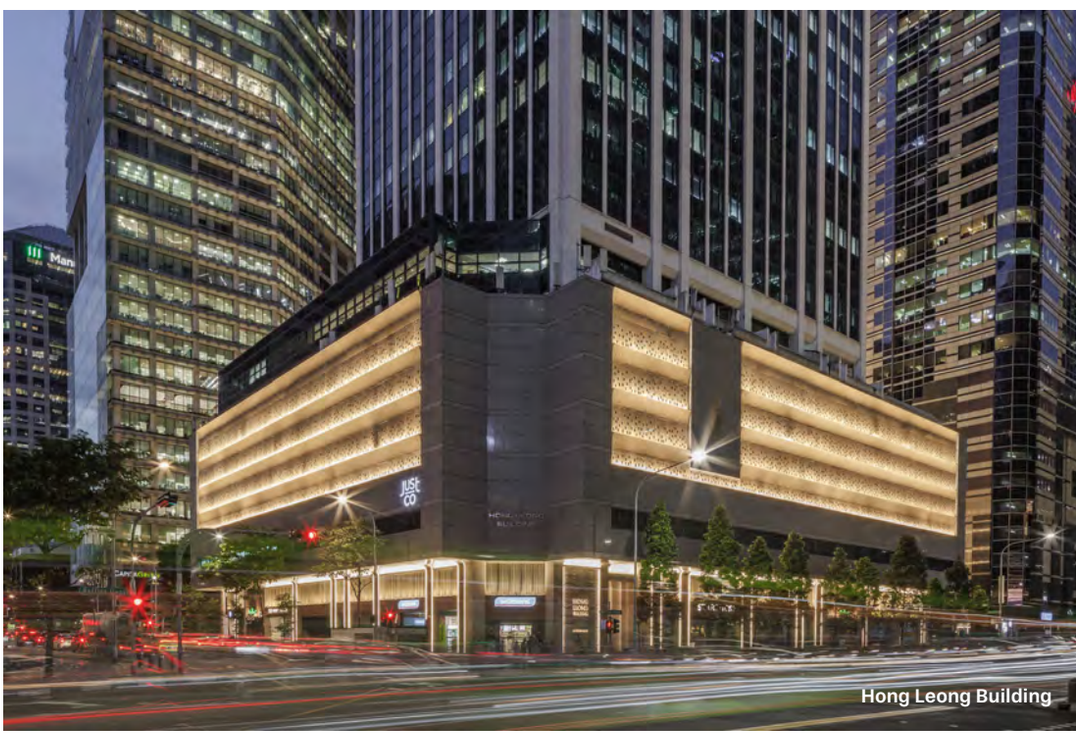
One such case study is the iconic Hong Leong Building, a landmark of Singapore's 1970s skyline in the heart of the CBD. The new renovation led by TA.LE Architects has extended the building's lifespan for at least another 20 years, offering a sustainable blueprint for Asia's future built environment.

By adopting an adaptive reuse strategy, the team retained over 95% of the original structure while upgrading it to meet modern office standards. This approach preserved a piece of CBD history while being environmentally successful, significantly cutting carbon emissions during construction activities and optimising the building's systems, reducing its daily operational environmental footprint.

In line with Singapore's Green Plan 2030, such projects are critical to meet the government's goals. Revitalised buildings can be high-performing, energy-efficient assets that anchor a low-carbon circular economy.

Southeast Asia Building spoke to Lionel Leow, Co-founder and Principal Architect of TA.LE Architects, about conservation projects in Singapore and their benefits. He also discussed navigating design within Singapore's conservation laws and how he foresees these regulations changing to support a more environmentally-friendly society.

Q: Please introduce TA.LE and the firm's experience in adaptive reuse.



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A: TA.LE Architects is a Singapore-based practice with a strong focus on architecture that is contextual, sustainable, and rooted in long-term urban thinking. Over the years, we have developed deep expertise in adaptive reuse and refurbishment across a wide range of building typologies, from conserved shophouses to large-scale commercial and mixed-use assets.

Our portfolio includes conservation projects such as shophouse restorations, as well as major asset enhancement initiatives like City Square Mall, ESR BizPark @ Changi, Nordic European Centre, and, most recently, the Hong Leong Building. These projects have allowed us to work at different scales while navigating regulatory frameworks, technical constraints, and operational requirements. We see adaptive reuse not as a limitation, but as an opportunity to extend the life of buildings through careful architectural intervention.

Q: Recently, TA.LE was in charge of refurbishing the Hong Leong Building in Singapore. Please tell us about the renovation. How did TA.LE approach this project, and what were the key considerations and intended outcomes?

A: The Hong Leong Building is a 40-year-old commercial building constructed during Singapore's national building years. Our approach was guided by the principle of renewal rather than replacement, which means extending the building's lifespan while upgrading its performance, experience, and relevance.

Key considerations included retaining as much of the existing structure and façade as possible, minimising embodied carbon, and keeping the building operational throughout construction. The existing granite façade was deliberately preserved, while the podium frontage and covered walkways were refreshed to improve urban engagement. A new decorative metal screen was introduced to the naturally ventilated car park façade, enhancing architectural expression without compromising passive ventilation.

The intended outcome was a building that performs better environmentally, offers a significantly improved user experience, and remains recognisable as part of Singapore's architectural continuum.

Q: Are there any particular conservation laws that architectural firms have to keep in mind when approaching adaptive reuse projects? Please elaborate on the ease or difficulties of navigating such laws and how they affect the design scope of the project.

A: In Singapore, architects must navigate guidelines from authorities such as the URA (Urban Redevelopment Authority), Building and Construction Authority (BCA), and the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF), particularly where existing buildings intersect with conservation principles, fire safety upgrades, and accessibility requirements. While the Hong Leong Building is not gazetted as a conserved building,

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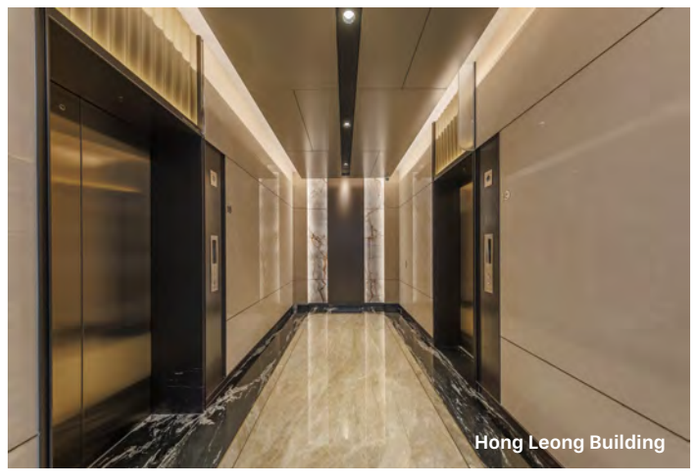
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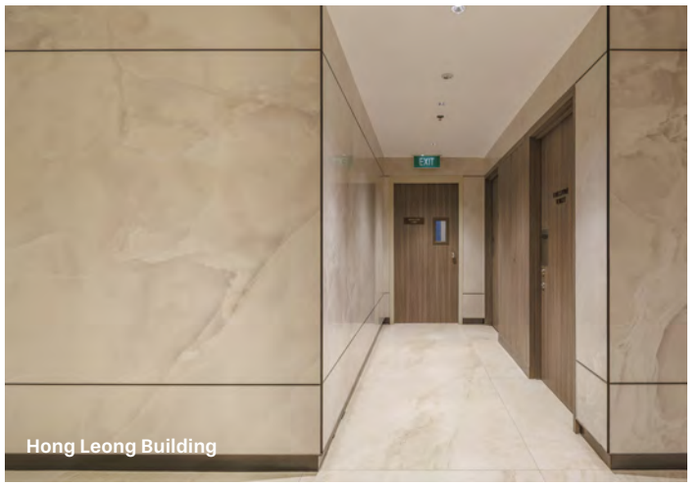
Hong Leong Building

it still falls within a regulatory environment that governs alterations to existing structures.

The challenge often lies in aligning modern performance standards, such as fire safety, barrier-free access, and building services, with legacy building configurations. These regulations shape the design scope, often requiring creative architectural and technical solutions rather than straightforward replacement.

Q: How have conservation laws changed over the years, and how has this impacted architecture firms in refurbishment projects?

A: Conservation and refurbishment regulations have evolved to become more performance-based rather than purely


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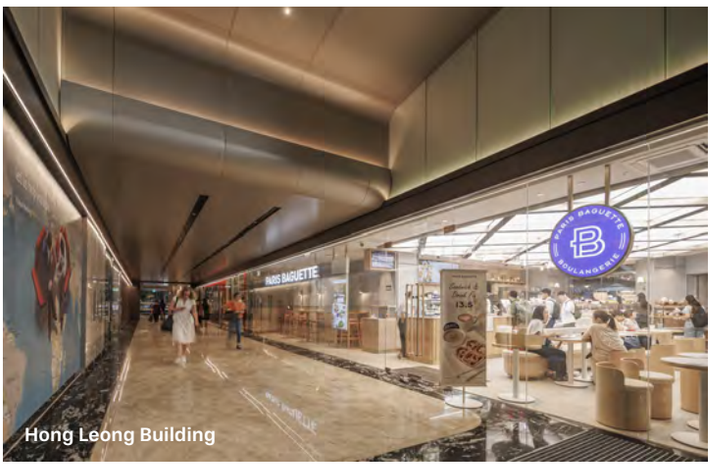
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prescriptive. This shift allows architects greater flexibility, provided that safety, functionality, and environmental performance objectives are met.

For architectural firms, this has opened up more room for design innovation, but it also demands a higher level of technical understanding and coordination. Adaptive reuse projects today require closer collaboration with engineers, consultants, and authorities from early stages to ensure compliance without diluting design intent.

Q: How do you anticipate local conservation laws changing in the future, and how will they influence Singapore's older buildings?

A: We expect conservation and refurbishment regulations

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to increasingly incorporate sustainability metrics, such as embodied carbon, lifecycle performance, and operational efficiency. Rather than focusing solely on physical preservation, future frameworks may place greater emphasis on environmental responsibility and longevity.

This will likely encourage more building owners to consider refurbishment as a viable alternative to demolition, particularly in land-scarce cities like Singapore.

Q: Considering the current fast-paced climate of Singapore's skyline, how can adaptive reuse and conservation fit into Singapore's modernization while upholding past legacies?

A: Adaptive reuse allows cities to evolve without erasing their architectural and social layers. In Singapore's fast-changing skyline, refurbishment provides continuity; it allows older buildings to be upgraded to contemporary standards while retaining their identity.

Rather than viewing conservation and modernisation as opposing forces, adaptive reuse demonstrates how both can coexist. It supports urban sustainability by reducing waste and carbon impact, while contributing to a richer and more layered cityscape.

Q: Future-proofing is a major part of building refurbishment. How does TA.LE tackle upgrading old infrastructure without compromising on historical identity? What are the challenges, and how can they be overcome?

A: Future-proofing begins with understanding what defines a building's character, which is usually the structure, materiality, and spatial logic. At the Hong Leong Building, this meant retaining the granite façade and structural framework while upgrading building services, common spaces, and circulation.

The challenge lies in integrating new systems, such as mechanical, electrical, and fire safety upgrades, into the existing fabric without visual or spatial disruption. This can be overcome through early coordination, precise detailing, and a design approach that respects the original architecture rather than overwriting it.


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What are the economic and environmental benefits of refurbishment over rebuilding? Please tell us how these positives enable Singapore's Green Plan 2030.

A: Environmentally, refurbishment significantly reduces embodied carbon by retaining existing structures and materials. Economically, it can allow buildings to remain operational during construction, preserving rental income and reducing downtime.

Structural works typically account for 20–30% of the cost of a new building, so retaining them results in meaningful savings. More importantly, refurbishment aligns with the objectives of Singapore's Green Plan 2030 by reducing construction waste, lowering carbon emissions, and promoting the long-term stewardship of existing assets.