

ChanTan LLC

Said to be the only Singaporean specialist construction law firm, ChanTan LLC has been going strong for 15 years. Its partners took time out to explain to Thin Lei Win why there will always be room for such a niche practice.



non-contentious construction law but is one of the few firms that does not practise conveyancing. Both Tan and Chan are accredited arbitrators and, with Neo, make the board of directors at ChanTan LLC, which has five lawyers. Being also chairman of the multidisciplinary practice (MDP) committee of the Law Society, Tan is hoping for positive and concrete developments over the MDP debate, in order to supplement ChanTan's headcount of lawyers and technical staff.

Along with embracing the opportunities that come your way being the new kid on any given block comes a set of responsibilities as well. Tan, Chan and Neo have been active participants in the development and promotion of construction law, either through lecturing on the area or through the contribution of numerous articles.

Tan, Chan and Neo also acknowledge that clients can be very demanding and that lawyers who wish to practise construction law may find themselves faced with a very steep learning curve to climb.

The relative lack of resources – both in human and monetary terms – that are found at a specialist firm have meant that they have had to be deployed efficiently

and cost-effectively. ChanTan has in its camp two engineers and a quantity surveyor and this has ensured an in-depth analysis of cases.

Evidence of their success can be seen in their involvement in numerous high profile construction projects, ranging from the Esplanade, Jurong Island reclamation works, Singapore Post Centre and One Raffles Quay. And for the majority of contentious and non-contentious cases, the name of ChanTan can often be found.

The firm joined the International Council for Building Research Studies (CIB) in 1995 and was invited to become one of the founding members of the International Construction Law Alliance (ICLA) in 2000. ICLA's five other founding members originate from Hong Kong, the PRC, Australia, Europe and the US. Common to each is the recognition within their own jurisdiction for operating impressive construction law practices.

Neo says the idea behind the alliance is to service clients worldwide. Although the firm is yet to witness a flood of cases as a result of its ICLA membership, Neo says the experience has helped develop their regional and international perspectives.

ChanTan also runs an informal relationship with UK construction and IT specialist firm Masons, following the dissolution

of its alliance with Cooma Lau & Loh in 2001. Chan says: "So far as construction matters are concerned, Masons recognises what we do. Basically, there is the understanding that we'll support them and they'll support us."

With its commitment to the ICLA, ChanTan has no future plans to formalize its Masons ties although the non-exclusivity of ICLA would allow it to do so.

Being committed to a particular industry means the firm's fortune can be more or less tied to it. And that means having the clients' interests at heart.

"Our concern for the clients is that the cost of litigation or arbitration can be quite prohibitive. It takes a company with sufficient resources to pursue the claim. So if there are alternative ways to resolving the dispute, we'll do it – be it mediation or even negotiated settlements," says Tan.

He adds that his firm has good reason to feel confident of its place in the construction sector in Singapore, even though it has suffered a downturn of late.

"We always feel that even if the construction industry shrinks drastically – which we don't think will happen – we will have a place somewhere," he says. "In that sense, it allows us to maintain our independence. Our growth might fluctuate, but we're here to stay."

Chan Tan & Partners – now known as ChanTan LLC after incorporation in 2001 – was established in 1987. Although the partners didn't intentionally set out to launch a boutique practice, let alone one focusing on construction, the firm found it difficult to develop a general practice. Says George Tan: "[General practice] requires quite a lot of public relations and we are not really cut out for that. So we had to go for complex work that does not need all these additional duties."

The ball really started rolling when Raymond Chan began giving advice to the Real Estate Developers' Association (REDAS) and the Singapore Institute of Architects (SIA) at the same time as Tan was advising the Singapore Contractors Association. The two, together with a third partner Monica Neo, decided to boldly go where few had gone before – to practise construction law exclusively. And they haven't looked back.

Tan says: "Maybe it is not fashionable to talk about integrity or singularity of purpose anymore, but we made up our minds that we wanted to run a firm that is principle-based rather than the pursuit of profits. That sort of knocked us off from general work. And gradually, the kind of people who want to see us based on those terms are in the construction industry, where we've built up a certain expertise."

Selective over the types of work it pursues, the firm's mission statement includes the following sentence: 'This firm will always select our clients, not the other way around.'

ChanTan practises both contentious and

