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ARISE ELEVATORS
HOUSTON, TEXAS

FREE GUIDE

Modernize or Replace? The Decision Framework

How to make the honest call on aging commercial elevator equipment — including when to ignore the full-replacement sales pitch.

1 Why this decision is harder than it should b

Most property owners making the mod-or-replace decision for the first time get two quotes: one for a full replacement, one for a modernization. The full replacement is 2× to 3× the cost. The sales rep from the major OEM says the equipment is end-of-life. Your current maintenance provider, also a major, agrees. Both quote full replacement.

But here's what's happening underneath: the OEM makes substantially more margin on a full replacement than a modernization. The modernization is often the technically correct answer. The full replacement is the revenue-optimized answer. You're being told one thing; the technician who walks the machine room in private would often tell you another.

This guide is the framework a working elevator technician — not a salesperson — uses to make the call.

2 The decision tree

Let's walk through each question.

3 Question 1 — Is the hoistway sound?

What "sound" means: - Rails are properly aligned, no significant wear on contact surfaces - Pit is dry and structurally intact - Shaft walls have no significant damage, water intrusion, or settling - Shaft dimensions are within code for the equipment type

How to tell: A proper site walk — not a desk review — will answer this. The technician looks at the rails, measures hoistway alignment, inspects the pit, checks the machine room.

Why it matters: If the hoistway is compromised, modernization is still possible but expensive — you're rebuilding the hoistway in addition to the equipment, which often pushes you into full-replacement economics anyway. If the hoistway is sound, you've saved the most expensive part of the project before you start.

4 Question 2 — Is the car frame in good condi

What "good condition" means: - No significant corrosion on the frame structural members - No stress fractures or deformation - Platform is stable and level-capable - Car sling and safety gear are serviceable

How to tell: Visual inspection from the top of the car with the mechanic. Any competent elevator technician can assess this in 20 minutes.

Why it matters: Replacing the car frame is a major cost line. If the existing frame is serviceable, modernization wraps around it — new cab walls, fixtures, doors, controls — and saves 20–30% on the total project.

5 Question 3 — (Hydraulic only) Is the jack sti

What "sound" means: - No external corrosion on the cylinder - No leakage or pressure loss - Passes TDLR safety test

What makes a jack replacement mandatory: - External corrosion requires above-code remedy - Internal leakage (rare but definitive) - Code-required double-bottom retrofit that the existing jack can't accommodate

Why it matters: Jack replacement on a hydraulic elevator is often the single biggest cost line in the project. If your existing jack is sound, you've avoided $40k–$80k per elevator.

6 Question 4 — Is the equipment under 35 yea

This is a soft rule, not a hard one. The actual question is: how much of the equipment would you be replacing in a modernization?

Equipment age	Typical modernization scope	Mod vs replace economics
<15 years	Targeted repairs rarely	Almost always repair
15–25 years	Controller + drive + select fixtures	Modernization clearly wins
25–35 years	Full modernization: controller + drive + doors + cab + fixtures + fire service	Modernization usually wins
35–45 years	Everything above + jack or machine replacement	Modernization sometimes wins; replacement gets competitive
45+ years	Usually replace	Replacement often wins

The decision isn't about age per se — it's about how much of the equipment is still serviceable versus how much needs to be touched.

7 Question 5 — Are replacement parts sourcea

The parts-sourcing myth: OEMs and captive service providers often declare parts "obsolete" when they mean "we stopped stocking them." There is a functional difference between parts that don't exist and parts the OEM chose to stop selling.

The three sourcing channels: 1. **OEM first-party** — What the OEM sells. When they say "obsolete," this channel is closed. 2. **Aftermarket distributors** — Third-party suppliers (GAL, Vantage, Major

Mouldings, etc.) that produce compatible parts. Often available when OEM has discontinued. 3. **Local fabrication** — For simple mechanical parts (rollers, brackets, levers), a local machine shop can fabricate to spec in days.

For modernization projects specifically: most modernizations involve swapping whole subsystems (controller, drive, doors, fixtures) rather than sourcing individual replacement parts — so the parts-sourcing question mostly applies to bridging repairs during the modernization timeline.

What this means for the decision: If the only reason you're being told "replace" is parts obsolescence, get a second opinion from a non-captive contractor. Nine times out of ten, the parts exist.

8 The 20-year total-cost math

For a typical commercial building with 2–3 elevators, the 20-year TCO picture usually looks like this:

Scenario A — Modernize now

Year	Cost	Notes
Year 0 (project)	$90k – $200k per elevator	Modernization scope
Years 1–20	$4k–$10k per elevator per year	Maintenance + minor repair
20-year total	$170k – $400k per elevator	

Scenario B — Full replace now

Year	Cost	Notes
Year 0 (project)	$200k – $350k per elevator	Full replacement
Years 1–20	$4k–$10k per elevator per year	Maintenance + minor repair

Year	Cost	Notes
20-year total	$280k – $550k per elevator	

Scenario C — Defer modernization, band-aid repairs

Year	Cost	Notes
Years 1–3	$8k–$15k per elevator per year	Escalating repair frequency
Years 3–5	$15k–$25k per elevator per year	Bigger failures, longer downtime
Year 5–7 (forced project)	$200k – $350k per elevator	Full replacement (modernization window closes as more systems fail)
Years 7–20	$4k–$10k per elevator per year	Maintenance + minor repair
20-year total	$320k – $600k per elevator	

The trap with Scenario C: the "defer" path usually costs *more* than the "modernize now" path, and the longer you defer, the more likely you end up in Scenario B anyway. The cheapest path almost always involves making the call while the equipment is still a modernization candidate.

9 What to ask a contractor who quotes you ful

Question 1: Which of the five gating questions is failing, and what's your specific evidence?

(A real answer: "The car frame has corrosion at the sling attachment — here's a photo." A non-answer: "The equipment is end-of-life.")

Question 2: What would a modernization scope look like, and why isn't it the recommendation?

(A real answer explains which components would need to be replaced and what's preserved. Or it explains which component can't be sourced. A non-answer is "modernization isn't economical for this equipment.")

Question 3: Can I get a second opinion from a non-captive contractor?

(The answer should be "of course." If it's "we wouldn't recommend that" — that's your answer.)

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10 How Arise handles this

On every site walk, we apply the five gating questions in writing. You get: - **Which questions passed, which didn't, and the specific evidence for each** - **A modernization scope if it's a modernize candidate** — including what gets replaced, what's preserved, and estimated pricing range - **A full-replacement scope if that's the honest call** — no pretending otherwise if the evidence supports replacement - **The 20-year math** for each path you're considering

If we think modernization is the answer and another contractor quoted full replacement, we'll tell you directly. If we think replacement is the answer, we'll tell you that too — even though modernization is a cleaner sell for us.

The business is about trust, not maximizing any single project.

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11 About the author

Fares Al-Salim spent two decades at the majors before founding Arise Elevators in Houston. He's walked hundreds of commercial machine rooms, has seen the full spectrum of equipment age and condition, and knows the difference between a modernization candidate and a replacement candidate

on sight.

Arise Elevators — Commercial elevator service, repair, modernization, and installation across a 100-mile radius of Houston.

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Free site walk: Thinking about modernizing or replacing? We'll walk your building, apply the five gating questions, and return a written recommendation within a week. No cost, no commitment. **Request a site walk →**

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