

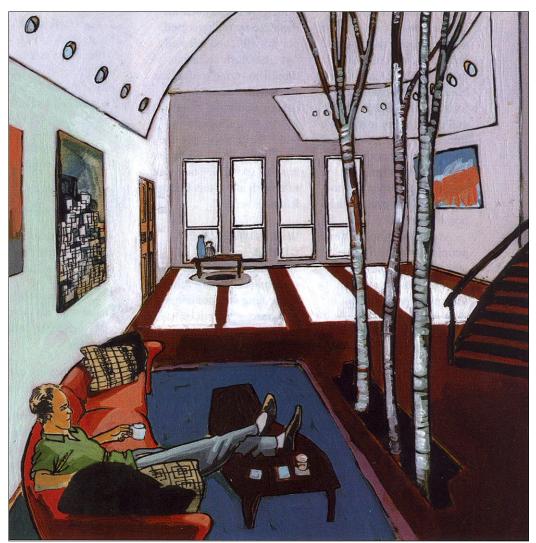
original yin

exploring the natural alliance of feng shui and architecture.

by cheryl weber

incent M. Smith came to feng shui by way of the theater. A graduate of Harvard College and the Yale Law School, he practiced real estate law for 25 years while spending nights and weekends perfecting his first loves: acting, directing plays, and designing stage sets. When he thought about it, he realized he was creating a home for the actors for two hours, designing sets that evoked the play's energy. "I was intrigued by the idea that you can create spaces that enhance the negative tension and anger to go with the plotline or do the opposite and create a positive space," he says. "And that's how I got into feng shui."

That's also how he came to publish a book, written with Barbara Lyons Stewart, AlA, called Feng Shui: A Practical Guide for Architects and Designers (Kaplan Publishing, 2006). It's significant that a book like this should be directed to architects, who traditionally have scorned feng shui as tilting toward the superstitious and new age. They've criticized it for the emphasis some practitioners place on decorative fixes such as wind chimes



and Chinese firecrackers rather than on sound space planning. The language of feng shui can seem mystical and magical to serious professionals, with all of its talk about energy flow and the five elements (earth, fire, metal, water, and wood). But Smith says

his intent is to de-Easternize those ideas, and that it's all about creating a harmonious environment that reflects the way people reel and behave. "Things like hanging crystals and placing firecrackers over the front door are really the superficial

aspects of feng shui and have nothing to do with its underlying philosophy." Smith says. "As far as I'm concerned, feng shui is just a form of environmental psychology. It's about how space reflects who we are and how it's constantly affecting us."

It's clear there's a connection between what makes people feel comfortable in a house and what feng shui, at various levels, is trying to achieve. Feng shui terms like chi -or life energy - and yin and yang are metaphors for the sense of orderliness, fluidity, and balance that architects are taught to design into their buildings. For example, Smith writes that porches and porticos are useful as a middle ground between outdoors and indoors because "the transition from the energy of the open sky to the closed-in space of the home is dramatic."

Another example: When people enter a front door and are immediately confronted with a wall six feet away, it stops them in their tracks-Smith calls it blocking their energy-and creates stress by requiring them to decide which way to go. A solution for a wall that can't be moved is to hang a mirror that gives the space a feeling of depth or to hang a painting that reads in the direction visitors should go. Likewise, a staircase placed directly at the front door immediately pulls one's energy upstairs, where the private rooms are usually located. "For guests, having the private part of the home thrust upon their subconscious is generally not the optimum greeting," he writes. All of these ideas seem fairly intuitive. Then there are the tenets that will surely lose a few architects: "Railings should be built on both sides of the stairs to

create a feeling of support," he writes, and "the risers should be closed so that energy does not 'leak' through."

Smith emphasizes that the principles in the book are meant to be reinterpreted, played with, and adapted. "At first blush architects think I'm trying to do their work - they know how to design a building and don't need a feng shui consultant," Smith says'. "On the other hand, many architects are like sponges. They want to absorb all of this because it makes sense."

widening the circle

Well, much of it does. To the uninitiated Western mind, many feng shui fundamentals warrant skepticism. In her preface, co-author Stewart notes that while architects often apply feng shui instinctively, there's an integral mystical aspect to it that does change the design process. Feng shui means wind and water, and it's a way of interpreting how people can live in tune with nature. "It begins by understanding our human need for 'nature' and ... creating the best environment for the mental and physical health of the person who will live and work in the space," she writes. (Like Smith, Stewart is a principal at Panergetics, a feng shui consultancy with offices in New York City and San Francisco.)

Practitioners routinely use a complex, esoteric



One Hudson Plaza, a feng shui-designed condo

tool called the bagua--an octagonal overlay on a site or floor plan that corresponds to various aspects of the occupant's life such as relationships, career, health, and reputation.

Geomancy, a form of divination, is also often used to read the energy currents in the land to determine propitious siting for a building. Brooklyn, N.Y., feng shui consultant Alex Stark, an architect, blends both the practical and transcendental aspects

in his practice. He says that although feng shui was introduced to America as a Chinese practice, here and in Europe it's been transformed into something more holistic. Many of his clients aren't interested in feng shui's Eastern aspects, but they are looking to include some physical and spiritual components that aren't accessible through normal design channels.

"A lot of residential clients are interested in green building and want



Trio, twin condo towers that incorporate feng shui practices in a culturally rich area.

to provide the design process of their home with a greater understanding of how it should sit on the land," Stark says. "Whether they're just being respectful to the environment or true to practices like a mystical path, they feel that the home is a container of that type of spirituality."

For others on the spectrum, feng shui simply symbolizes an intangible sense of balance and wellbeing. Recognizing this consumer awareness, developers often use feng shui consultants to add value to their multifamily housing. Manhattan-based Tarragon Corp. recently hired Stark to feng shui a 16-story, 168-unit con-

dominium project at One Hudson Park in Edgewater, N.J. "We realized we had the option of either doing or not doing his recommendations," says Hilary Thomas, vice president of Tarragon Development Corp., a Tarragon Corp. subsidiary. "We wanted to see how it would enhance our design, and we believe that it did." Stark came aboard during the design phase to advise on room relationships in the units and to provide input concerning the lobby layout and finishes. He also consulted on the design of an adjacent one-acre landscaped park, introducing water elements and suggesting optimal site lines. He even did a numerology

assessment - an effort that resulted in his suggestion that the developer not use the number "4" (hence no 4th or 14th floors).

At Trio-a second condo project in Palisades Park, N.J., in which Stark was involved-Tarragon asked him to conduct a "ground blessing" party to which public officials, consultants, and real estate brokers were invited. The developer also created a marketing piece describing the feng shui aspects of the building. "I'm not a designer, but I'd say there's a smoothness-a softness-to it,"Thomas says, adding that natural elements like water and stone lend a sense of calm in the lobby. "We hope it

will bring a peacefulness to the residents when they come home."

Whether it's distinctly marketable or not, designing for good feng shui is a logical approach in culturally rich urban areas. David Baker, FAIA, of David Baker + Partners, Architects, San Francisco, has taken an AlA Web course on the subject. As a result, he tries to invoke some basic siting principles -such as including a courtyard with green space and running water that's visible from the street-in his multifamily projects. On a recent project located across the street from a cemetery, for example. Baker consulted a feng shui master

on the site plan. "It's a diverse community with a lot of Asian folks, so we wanted to address it," he says. One of the elevations was facing the cemetery, but after consulting with the feng shui guru, Baker says he turned it away as much as he could.

When single-family clients request the input of a feng shui expert, many architects happily widen the consultant circle to include them. James Brew, AlA, a Duluth, Minn. -based architect with LHB, met Stark while doing LEED consulting on a \$60 million cancer center. When a client in Japan insisted on having an American feng shui master help to site a ski villa in Nagano, Japan, Brew turned to Stark.

Because he was unable to come to Japan, Stark did his analysis using video footage of the site, a plat sketch, and a high-altitude aerial photo. Meanwhile, Brew spent two days surveying the wooded site, marking the location of twisted trees and boulders half the size of a car. Then he sketched the land to scale, locating the footprint of the house. I'm pushing for solar orientation and doing traditional wind and terrain analysis, trying to see if I can make everything work with Alex," Brew recalls. When he laid Stark's final to-scale sketch over his own survey, he was surprised to see that the consultant had drawn a wide geopathic stress zone slashing through the site along the line of the boulders and had detected a ditch that fills with seasonal snow melt. "Japan



Feng shui in Japan: siting the house avoided a zone of geopathic stress.

has three seismic occurrences every day," Brew says, "so we avoided the geopathic stress zone and pushed the house higher on the hill"

By way of explanation, Stark says that this site was atypical in that stress zones usually aren't reflected on the surface. In this case, he used a remote dousing technique in which the site plan is cut up into a grid and individual blocks are "doused" using a pendulum to pinpoint the location of water, mineral deposits, and rock formations. "It's a standard check we do on all properties to see

what's underground," he

While Brew wouldn't suggest that every client go this route, he doesn't mind educating those who are interested in learning more, "Feng shui is a practice that's a little bit spiritual and takes a little faith," he explains, "In some respects, we've lost a bit of our connection to the earth, If you believe that there's energy in all materials-and I think science has proven that there are protons and electrons in constant movement and that water is a strong element on Earth-then it's not a big stretch to believe that the orientation and placement of materials can have an effect. I don't think it's super-mysterious"

asian fusion

Without necessarily subscribing to the whole philosophical framework, many architects have come to believe in its benefits. And when clients request feng shuithey view it as just another design constraint.

"The terminology is different, but there's a qualitative similarity between what I think makes people feel comfortable in a house and what feng

shui is aiming to secure for a resident," says Sarah Susanka, FAlA, Raleigh, N.C. A Vietnamese family once asked her to design a house based on good feng shui Since Susanka was familiar with the principles, she had no trouble communicating with them. But when they began working with a consultant who was using the family members' birth dates to determine the most favorable direction for the front door and other elements, she says she told them, "You be the governors of that, because I don't know it."

Although the project never progressed beyond schematics, Susanka envisioned some potential conflicts. "I'm sure there would be situations where I might take issue with where a kitchen was being placed if they were missing the boat on an opportunity for views," she says. "We use a kitchen very differently than in the houses that were defined by feng shui in the days of yore:' One feng shui no-no in the kitchen, for example, is to place fire (the range) and water (the sink) on the same wall. Susanka says she would design around this idea, just like she accommodates clients with extensive art collections. However, she adds, "I'd ask how important this is to the client. Often architects don't realize that what the client is really looking for is someone who will steer the project in the right direction. People will believe things hook, line, and sinker because they want the

right answer. I'm trying to satisfy the client that's the point."

Greg Watts, a project designer at Steven Conger Architects, Carbondale, Colo., has worked with feng shui consultants twice. Each time he says he learned things that made a lot of sense. And ultimately, it made for happy clients. On one project-a house oriented toward Mount Sopris, a sacred mountain in western Colorado-the feng shui master "clarified a lot of things in the clients' minds about how they think and made them feel that they were doing the right thing," Watts says. They were just as happy having a spiritual consultant, he adds, as they were having a mechanical engineer.

For architects like St. Paul, Minn.-based Margot Fehrenbacher, AlA, who began experimenting with feng shui 15 years ago, the discipline has had surprisingly powerful results. In fact, she uses it in every interior design she does--whether clients ask for it or not. "We're awfully practical here; that's why I don't always say I'm using it," she says.

Still, fundamentally, she views it as a good organizing element. "If you interpret feng shui's principles correctly, the results are much more interesting than straight functionality," she says. "It adds an element you can't quite describe - comfortable, serene, nurturing - and as a residential architect, that's what I'm after." ra

good vibes

ere are 12 tips for a schematic design checklist, adapted from Feng Shui: A Practical Guide for Architects and Designers by Vincent M. Smith and Barbara Lyons Stewart, AIA.

- I. Use regular and complete shapes for floors, departments, and rooms -- preferably the Golden Rectangle. Although non-orthagonal structures may look more interesting from the outside, they inevitably create problems for the occupants. The interest quotient can be supplied instead by porches, projecting entrance, landscaping, and other design elements.
- **2.** Place the main entrance of the building in the center to create a feeling of balance.
- **3.** Be aware of the impact of the first view upon entering a building.
- 4. Create entrances that are open and visually clear and that direct you to your destination, whether to a living room, a reception desk, or an elevator.
- **3.** Locate the public space of the residence or business in the front portion of the structure and the more private or intimate activities farthest from the entrance.
- Avoid having columns and other protruding or blocking elements inside entrances, corridors, or rooms.
- 7. Create corridors that are wider enough for two people to pass one another without any sense of contact but not long enough to make you feel you are in a tunnel, which creates a sense of speed and pressure.
- **8.** "Curve" straight corridors and features as much as possible with artwork, furniture, light sconces, and other architectural details.
- Use closed risers on all staircases.
- 10. Do not plan doors or workstations at the end of long corridors.
- **▮ ▮.** Provide right-handed doors wherever possible.
- 12. Use natural and sustainable materials. From a feng shui perspective, these materials will create an environment that contains fewer toxins and is more balanced and comfortable. --c.w.