

Feng Shui Principles for Building and Remodeling

Adapted from an article by Lenore Weiss Baigelman, AIA, and Nancilee Wydra in the *AIA SPF Journal*

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SUMMARY

Feng shui is a useful design tool that complements an architect's foundational knowledge of an environment's impact on its occupants. Architects can use *feng shui* principles to help clients create satisfying home and work environments.

A RICH DESIGN TOOL

Forget what you have read about in New Age journals. Cancel the crystals. Extinguish the incense. This is not your grandmother's *feng shui*!

In recent years, *feng shui* has become a buzz word for an esoteric and mysterious Asian philosophy, taking its place as a popular trend portending "lucky spaces" with a Zen-like aesthetic. Leaf through some books at the local bookstore and read about how dogmatic *feng shui* rules can bring you health, wealth, a fabulous sex life, and a greater chance at winning the lottery. That is, if you put your bed in the southeast corner of a purple room. Unfortunately, this shallow and sometimes formulaic perspective depreciates the value of a potentially rich and supportive design tool.

When examined as a viable discipline beyond its Chinese roots, *feng shui* can provide us with meaningful guidelines for planning effective spaces. We believe that the reason for its recent popularity is that, more and more, the public is gaining an understanding of the person/place connection as a palpable, real phenomenon. As architects, we are well-versed in the physical, psychological, and sometimes emotional effects that the environment has on its occupants. However, without the benefit of a design vocabulary, the general public has gravitated toward *feng shui* (in any form) as a template for formulating satisfying spaces.

As design professionals, we have an obligation to articulate solutions physically for a client's lifestyle needs, creating spaces that enhance those requirements as well as expressed goals. And we can employ the use of *feng shui* concepts to help achieve those objectives.

TAO WITH THE FLOW

Consider the *feng shui* concept of "Tao" (pronounced dow). It traditionally is thought of as the way things naturally are, a process rather than a thing. In the context of buildings, Tao sheds light on our need for centeredness. From the electron's flight around a nucleus to planets orbiting our sun, every system needs a central core that is both definable and vital to the system's functioning.

In a social context, humans need the supportive feeling of being in a delineated, finite space with a clear-cut heart or center. Whether one lives with five others or alone, a home and the broader environment in which one lives needs a heart. As illustration, think of a pedestrian plaza in a town square or a space in the home that allows the residents to dine, relax, or socialize. Those are precisely what the Tao is all about.

Applied to how we live, the Tao draws us out of isolation into involvement or interaction. The Tao of home, then, emphasizes the importance of gathering spaces. A space where residents dine, socialize, and relax is the nucleus of a home, which is a physical expression of the Tao. Homes that do not provide any connective central areas engender a feeling of isolation in their inhabitants. With separated social functions, these homes discourage intimate associations and can ultimately produce a malaise that prods the inhabitants to fill much of their time with watching TV, working, or engaging in other solitary activities. If there are no visible connections to dining, socializing, and relaxing, a home will not have a recognizable, life-supporting heartbeat.

Feng shui theories such as this can be used to help clients effectively shape their surroundings to transmit specific messages, all of which can be controlled with the benefit of thoughtful design. Going beyond stylistic preferences, we believe it is necessary to include this additional layer of design considerations, those of the affective messages of space, to create completely satisfying and successful living and working environments. And just think, you can successfully do it without a fu dog at the front door.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 18.18.01 High Quality, Low Tech Construction
- 18.18.02 Green Roof Design
- 18.11.09 Steps Towards LEED Certification

Feedback

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