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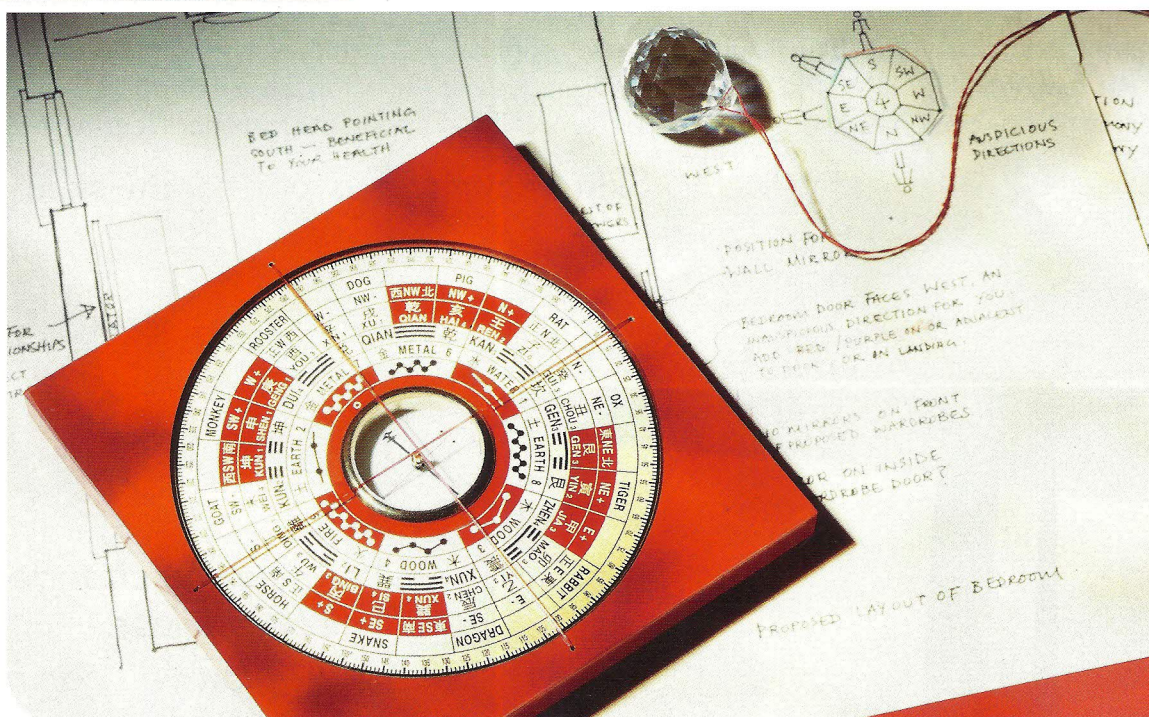
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Optimal Flow

We may no longer find it hard to pronounce, but it's still easy to underestimate the power and complexity of feng shui. *By Andrea Renskoff*

Feng shui has made its way into everyday speech. We sometimes hear it used casually as a verb, e.g., "We really need to feng shui our kitchen." Or as an adjective, as in "This relaxation room has a feng shui vibe." Such vague remarks tend to reduce this ancient Chinese art/science to the shuffling of a few sticks of furniture—and do it a great disservice. Applied properly, the philosophy and practices of feng shui can nurture health, happiness and success.

To understand feng shui, start with the name. "Feng" ("wind") and "shui" ("water") are two elements associated with good health and fortune in Chinese culture. The Chinese recognize the inherent energy that exists in land and space, and ancient societies believed that the fate of their people depended upon it. Therefore, feng shui was used to determine settlement sites, taking into account everything from water flow to mountain formations.

Today, a growing number of developers, architects and designers use feng shui to create external environments capable of effecting powerful internal changes in human beings. It's no surprise therefore that feng shui is considered a crucial component in the practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

THE ROAD MAP

Feng shui is a deepening of the understanding that internal and external environments are not two separate

things, but rather are always connected via the flow of *chi*, or life energy. This balance and flow of *chi* is at the core of feng shui, much like it's at the core of acupuncture practice, wherein vital energy is directed to areas inside the body that need healing or unblocking. In feng shui, an environment's shape, light, design, color, materials and setting are all deliberately selected to manipulate *chi*.

Overarching factors, such as the importance of yin and yang (or polarity) balance, and the use of the five elements—wood, water, earth, fire and metal—must also be considered when seeking to optimize a space using feng shui.

If it sounds complicated, that's because it is. What's more, one size doesn't fit all. To be effective, feng shui applications must be customized to individual need. As Judith Wendell, founder of New York-based feng shui consultancy Sacred Currents (sacredcurrents.com) explains, "Unless it's specific, it can just become generic nonsense."

Feng shui consultants draw on wisdom handed down for generations. An environment is oriented using two tools: the **compass** and the **bagua**.

The compass, or *lo pan* ("lo" meaning "everything" and "pan" meaning "bowl") uses direction, such as which way a building faces, to empower energy patterns. This idea can be used figuratively as well: "We may also look at someone's *ming gua*, a personal direction based on their birthday," says Wendell.



The bagua separates space into nine areas, each associated with a life concern. Although interpretations vary, they are, loosely:

Southeast: Wealth, prosperity and abundance

South: Fame, reputation and recognition

Southwest: Love and relationships

East: Family and community

Center: Health and spirituality

West: Children and creativity

Northeast: Knowledge and wisdom

North: Career and life journey

Northwest: Helpful people and travel

Every aspect of a space's bagua area, from its colors to its furniture placement to its materials, is thought to influence its correlating life concern. For instance, the element of wood is associated with growth and new beginnings. Wood and bamboo might be effectively used in an educational environment to foster growth, strength and expansion. (Inside the body, wood is connected to liver energy and cleansing, linking external and internal systems.)

The scope of the space isn't a factor: feng shui can be used for one person's bedroom, an office building holding thousands of workers, a public space or even an entire vil-



A CLEAR PATH

Experts say that one basic way to bring good feng shui into a space is to de-clutter it. Items that no longer serve a purpose or are in the wrong place sap energy from the space itself. Encourage flow by making use of natural light and welcoming in fresh air. Create an environment that feels healthy and harmonic, and the effect will be felt internally as well.

lage. However, setting intentions is vital. For example, according to Wendell, if you want the feng shui in your spa to foster health and well-being, look toward the earth element, which is associated with health. "You might choose materials made with stone or clay for the central area, which feeds all of the other areas," she adds. Wendell doesn't recommend a water feature [associated with prosperity] in the same space, however, because "water makes earth muddy."

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A number of components besides materials are factored into a feng shui space. Furniture that blocks the flow from a room's entrance might be repositioned. Strategic lighting can bring energy to a dark hallway. Symbolism is also important. For instance, one might place a bed or office desk in what's called the "command position", which relates to its view of the space and relationship to the door, for maximum power. The nuances are seemingly endless, as are the varying schools and philosophies of feng shui.

KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

Books, videos and online resources can provide anyone with a general overview of feng shui, but masters study for entire lifetimes. There's no official licensing yet; however, the International Feng Shui Guild (ifsguild.org) is considered the governing organization. For someone to be considered a professional (known as "red ribbon"), he or she must have graduated from a Guild-designated Gold training program.

The International Feng Shui School (internationalfengshuischool.com) in San Diego is one of a handful of so-called "Gold schools". Founder Amanda Collins welcomes both those who seek professional status and individuals who want to improve their own lives or businesses. "A lot of interior designers, architects and acupuncturists enroll in the training program," Collins says, "but we also have people who are simply intuitive about space and environment and want to make a difference in others' lives."

Participants who complete a full training program with Collins will have performed case studies in home, business and landscaping feng shui. Short courses, classes for those just beginning or who are more advanced, and online options are available. Those looking to hire an expert must do their homework. As Collins warns,

"Someone can read one book and then call themselves a consultant."

True feng shui requires many layers of analysis. "On an individual level, our space is an outward reflection of who we are," Collins says. "A business owner might come to me because she moved to a new location and is no

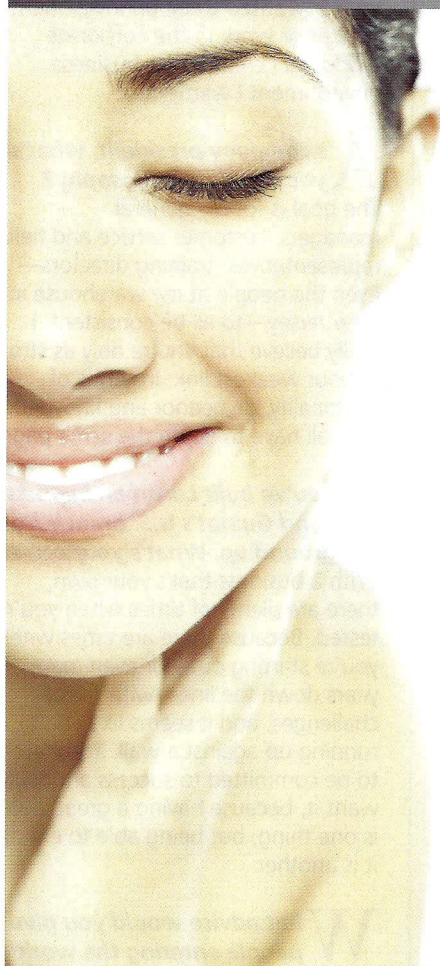
longer prospering, but doesn't know why. Or I might visit a person whose home is filled with clutter, indicating that the person is blocked. Feng shui is about your whole life." ■

Andrea Renshoff is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.



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