EARTH
BY TOM BENDER

A PLACE FOR YOUR HOME

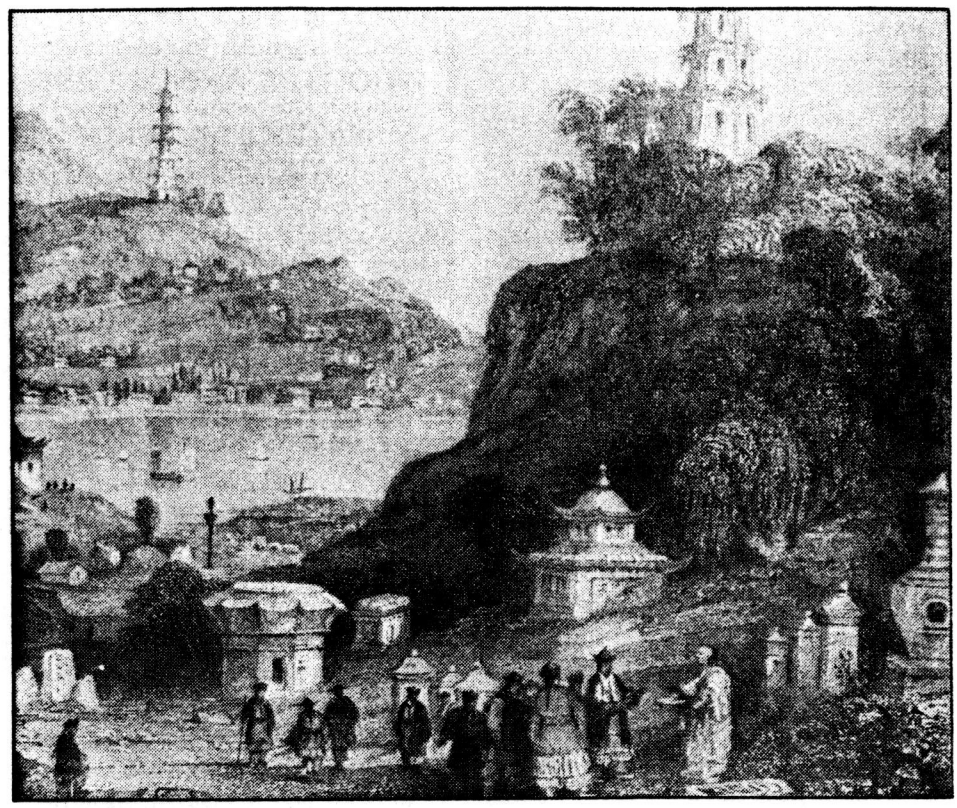
Build in harmony with the land by using feng-shui.

In the foothills on the east side of Kyoto stands a most unusual temple complex—Kiyomizu Temple is sited so close to the edge of a precipitous hillside that it must be supported by a forest of wooden posts almost a hundred feet high. It is most extraordinary, however, in its effect on those who view it. There are more beautiful temples and more beautiful hillsides in Kyoto, but no place has again and again left me with such a feeling of extraordinary happiness. In whatever mood or season one visits it, invariably the heart is lightened and the spirit soars.

I later researched the temple to try to discover the secret of its powerful influence and learned that most Japanese temples are located by divination—placed not where they are easiest to build, but where the *feng-shui* (pronounced "fung shway") or "energy" of the place is most powerful. I discovered that the sacred spring above which Kiyomizu is built supposedly has remarkable powers, and one day as I was wandering toward a remote precinct of the temple, I was stopped and cautioned that the sub-temple had special fertility powers. When I looked up the path and saw a pregnant woman, I decided to postpone my visit to another time.

What was this "feng-shui?" Were these energy fields actually worthy of such extraordinary attention in the construction of a building? I discovered that the story had its roots in China, where for several thousand years the Chinese evolved a landscape of unparalleled harmony and beauty through design and placement of their cities, residences, and tombs attuned to the elements and energy fields of their surroundings. Feng-shui, as the practice is called, literally means "wind and water." Rather than lakes, rivers, and ocean breezes, though, its language speaks of the flow of "ch'i" or "prana" energy through the veins of the earth.

TOM BENDER, a former editor of *Rain* magazine, carries on his architectural practice from Neahkahnie Mountain on the coast of Oregon.



Pagodas on the hilltops and tombs in the foreground create a harmonious flow of energy in a Chinese landscape.

Foreigners have always found feng-shui to be a puzzling blend of superstition and mythology, and have continued to be perplexed and frustrated by the high regard in which the Chinese have held it. Yet rapidly evolving Western research is beginning to uncover firm scientific foundations for both the practice of feng-shui and the biological effects of the forces it deals with.

The application of feng-shui is based on a belief that in every place there are special topographical features, either natural or artificial, which indicate or modify the pattern of the cosmic energy that is present, and that it is desirable to align our lives with it. The forms and arrangements of hills, the directions of watercourses, the heights and forms of buildings, the positions of forests, roads, and bridges are all important factors. The influence of the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars is also important.

These considerations have led to a particularly refined appreciation by the Chinese of the topographical features of any locality. Their efforts to achieve a favorable balance of forces has brought about a uniquely sensitive environment, with high cliffs setting off thickets of pine and bamboo, towering pagodas balancing the hills, and dwelling places quietly nestled in the contours of the landscape.

The practice of feng-shui differed considerably in northern and southern China, influenced by the different natures of their respective topographies. North China, with a much more uniform and regular landscape, developed a practice emphasizing the influence of astrological and astronomical considerations, involving the use of a complex

ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY TOM BENDER

geomantic compass to map the relative direction and influence of various forces. (Geomancy is the Western practice corresponding to feng-shui, and the term is now used to describe feng-shui practices.) In the south, with a complex and irregular topography, the influence of surrounding land and water forms was much greater. As a result, in the south the shapes and position of various landforms corresponding to certain energy concentrations were mostly considered. Dowsing, which is not restricted to finding water, was used to locate and map those energy fields. Feng-shui practices included important ecological and cultural aspects. The principles it employed for location of cities selected a site that was functionally and ecologically sound, ordered the arrangement and placement of the city to the energies of its situation and its cosmos, and reinforced and affirmed in the minds of the people the nature of their cosmos and their place within it.

Until about the 1700s, whenever a capital city was to be situated, its location was based symbolically on the position of four Gods—one dwelling in a stream to the east, one in a plain to the south, one in a highway to the west, and the fourth in a mountain to the north. A site with these surroundings was felt suitable. A rectangular plan was made in the symbol of the cosmos, reflecting the rhythms of the sun and the seasons which most strongly affected the land. The emperor was placed in the north, so he always faced the holy south—in alignment with the growth-granting forces of the earth and sun. Temples were built in the northeast to a guardian deity, as that direction was felt to be unlucky—devils dwell in the mountains (as well as enemy troops). Buddhist temples often were placed in the west, since it was felt that Buddhism had a tendency to proceed eastward. The entire geometry and detailed layout of the city reflected symbolically an understanding of the cosmos.

Thus sites were selected with mountains to protect the city from winter winds, and monasteries were founded in the mountains so the city could be warned of attack. Fresh water and air were provided for, and the commerce and food supply of the city assured. Every activity in the making of the city and of living within it and participating in its life reminded a person of the forces acting in the world. Being aligned with those forces, nourishment was gained from them.

Similar rules are given in feng-shui manuals for siting houses and tombs, and for dealing with interiors of dwellings. The objective is to improve the occupant's eventual happiness, health, and wealth. Windy sites disperse ch'i, and are considered unfavorable. Sites bounded by water halt the flow of ch'i, and sites with torpid or stagnant ch'i are considered bad. An ideal site is protected from high winds by hills or trees to the north, has streams meandering slowly through and not draining directly on or rapidly away from the site. A view to the south is optimal. It is favorable to nestle in the embrace of a ring of hills to the west, north, and east. "Straight arrows"—unfavorable straight lines of ridges, housetops, railroads, electric wires, or roads—conduct ch'i away from the site, but can be blocked by walls or trees.

Within a residence the assignment of rooms as a sign of unity and social prestige of the family as a whole is considered more important than favorable view, breeze, or circulation. Sections of walls set in front of entrances are used to deflect the entrance of demons. A large tree directly in front of the doorway is considered inauspicious, as it supposedly deflects entry of wealth. Equally bad is a house on a triangular piece of land. No tree or pond should be placed directly in the center of a courtyard, and the kitchen should face east.

The eldest household member's rooms should face southeast, while the most favorable rooms, facing south, should go to the current head of the household. A house without a rear door is bad, and bedrooms should not open directly into the kitchen, nor toilets be located directly facing the main entrance.

Within a residence, ill-aspected rooms should be decorated with strong colors, preferably red or gold, but no red walls should face west or black walls face south. Any particularly oppressive or small rooms should be painted a light color. Furniture should not block the circular flow of ch'i from room to room. Rooms with too many doors, bad window orientation, or cut off from other rooms are bad. Desks and beds should not be placed with their backs to the door.

Modern proponents of such practices claim that the advice of a feng-shui practitioner can radically improve the fortunes of a person, and cite endless stories of good luck following feng-shui advice and ill luck from ignoring it. While many suggestions echo good principles of sanitation, psychology, and planning, others seem closer to the well-tested axiom that *any* change or positive action can improve a person's attitudes and success.

Interesting theories, I thought, going far beyond the feeling of happiness engendered by Kiyomizu Temple. They have resulted in a beautiful environment, but is there any scientific basis to these "forces" and intricate practices? A clue turned up for me a few weeks later in a book on solar energy. It demonstrated the astonishing fluxes of energy in the earth's atmosphere induced by radiation from the sun, and how those energy fields in turn induce complex electromagnetic ("e-m") fields within the mantle of the earth itself.

The existence of atmospheric and terrestrial magnetic and electric fields and currents have been known by scientists for over a century. Physicists, however, have long denied any possible effects of such fields upon our lives, as the frequency and energy levels involved appeared less than that necessary to affect living cellular material. Evidence that those currents do affect living matter, and that they affect it significantly, is now beginning to bring a reconsideration of the whole question of such environmental forces and their action.

In addition to major solar influence, these energy fields are also influenced by the moon and other planetary and stellar activity. They fluctuate daily with the earth's rotation as well as in longer rhythms connected with the moon and with the earth's movement around the sun. Sunspots and other stellar conditions also produce dramatic changes in these atmospheric fields. In turn, the currents in the mantle and crust of the earth also fluctuate with changes in the earth's magnetic field and variations in the physical nature of the earth's crust. The currents are altered locally by electrical properties of rock and ore bodies, underground and surface water, topography, and other conditions.

Several means of detecting and mapping these energy fields are possible. Dowsing is the most simple and traditional means. Influence upon plants or animals can be observed, along with topography often associated with the fields. Special techniques of concentration or meditation may permit some individuals to sense the fields directly. Satellite mapping, on a larger scale, or other geotechnical instrumentation is now capable of precise and quantitative measurement of such forces.

Cellular biology has shown numerous effects of e-m fields upon living matter. Growth retardation and enhancement has been experienced in many experiments. Increase in rate of germination and growth has been measured, along with improved health of plants. Circadian rhythms and the navigation of migrating birds and fish have been strongly tied to the information the organism gains from these fields. Many animals locate their nests or give birth at energy concentrations called "blind springs," to take advantage of their health-giving properties. Gnats swarm over such blind springs. Animals follow "track lines" over energy "rivers" from place to place. Moles have been found to navigate underground by means of e-m fields. Healing of wounds has been found to be much faster in the presence of certain e-m fields.

Certain plants, such as mistletoe, rarely germinate or grow outside of such energy nodes. Some trees, such as willow, apple, hazel, and yew occur naturally only in the vicinity of such energy concentrations. Spiral or twisted growth of some trees and plants that are normally straight has been linked with their location over a spiral secondary phenomena of energy currents in the earth.

Other more esoteric forces have been claimed by some researchers to be involved in feng-shui, and attempts continue to be made to substantiate or refute such claims. Verification of informational interconnections between organisms; the morphogenetic fields hypothesized by Rupert Sheldrake, ordering the energy and material organization of physical, biological, and psychic systems; or any of the levels of "energy" or consciousness hinted at by various religions and traditional sciences would give greater significance to traditional practices such as feng-shui.

Awareness of energy fields and their influence upon human life was common in ancient civilizations. In widely varied cultures, they were used to locate and build spiritual places and

places concerned with health or nutrition. Studies made in Britain, Ireland, and France indicate the careful placing of neolithic sacred centers upon blind springs or upwellings of health-giving energy. Archeological excavations and reconstruction of neolithic temples have shown that many mounds and temples were constructed in special ways to accumulate and focus these energy fields. Christian churches in Britain up through the medieval period show the same siting characteristics—they usually were built upon earlier sacred places. The use of geomancers in selecting the location for a church is often recorded. Punishment stocks and places of execution, on the other hand, were located in places where energy fields were negative to bring about a feeling of repentance. Claims are also made that certain geometries— both simple ones such as pyramids exhibit and complex ones seen in Indian sculpture and temples—acted as means of focusing their effects on people. North American Indian sorcerers employed the fields to augment and build their own powers, to assist in survival in difficult conditions, and to give protective environments to themselves and their apprentices during dangerous and difficult meditations and exercises. Japanese and Indian temples, Khmer capital cities in Cambodia, traditional practices in Africa, and birthing centers in Hawaii all involved careful and conscious consideration of such forces in their placement, design, and construction.

We live far in time and place from ancient China. The charm of Kiyomizu and other places is tantalizing. Yet few of us have a Chinese feng-shui practitioner in our pocket, and where we live may be comfortable yet violate all the fundamental feng-shui criteria. The complexity of artificial e-m fields in urban areas overwhelms natural e-m fields and obliterates the traditional practice of feng-shui. The starting or stopping of an electrified train blocks the detection of environmental e-m fields over an area ten miles wide and extending the whole length of the electrified train system. The massive use of iron, electricity, radio, and TV in our urban areas absolutely overpowers environmental signals. Under such conditions, the best we can do is to follow our intuition—if a place feels bad, it probably is. If it feels good, it's probably okay. Further research is needed before we can adequately manage such fields through practices such as feng-shui. Application of feng-shui today requires that we evolve a practice appropriate to our own time and place. . . to learn from, but not dogmatically use, a product of the past.

The aspects of feng-shui that parallel good ecology, good design, and good psychology are laudable, but can probably more easily be picked up from reading John Simond's *Landscape Architecture* and Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language*. Probably the most important implication of feng-shui for ourselves is realizing the importance of aligning our actions and surroundings with our own beliefs and understanding of the cosmos. Being able to believe in ourselves is tremendously empowering, yet we have consistently acted at odds with what we profess to believe in, and even our beliefs have not kept pace with our expanding understanding of ourselves and our universe.

To select a city site, the feng-shui practitioner consults his geomantic compass while assistants map the energy currents with dowsing rods.

The stormy Oregon coast is almost always wet. It is geologically unstable, exposed to the west, and has watercourses that drain rapidly away. It breaks every rule of Chinese feng-shui, yet this coast is an incredibly powerful, beautiful, and dramatic place. The trail from Kiyomizu to China has led me to an architectural practice on this wild shore. Designing on this coast, and working to adapt and apply feng-shui principles has led me to feel that *balance* and *harmony* are the primary elements beyond good ecology, good design, and good psychology.

To add to the landscape, Stephen Skinner suggests, we must create not a thorn in its flesh but a form which flows and breathes with the rhythm of the earth in which it is planted. Wood and stone taken from nature are to be hewed and fitted back into nature. In a place where conventional architecture would accent the dramatic nature of the surroundings, a feng-shui approach suggests balancing the drama of violent storms, crashing waves, and giant trees with serene and peaceful buildings nestled into the landscape to give a haven of comfort and security. Conventional application of feng-shui would say to steer clear of windswept sites, but successful design here often places a well-built house in a windy spot that can't be used without protection, while leaving unbuilt the places that can be used without a structure. While the actual characteristics of a good feng-shui site will vary dramatically from mountain to desert to ocean shore, the principle of creating harmony with balancing the dominant natural forces applies equally to any site.

With practice, and the experiencing of sites with good feng-shui, it is possible to sense both the good and bad energy of a site and then to implement measures which might be taken to improve it.

To discover that our entire cosmos and ourselves are pervaded by and interconnected through energy fields which generate and sustain all life cannot help but change our lives and our interests. Feng-shui asserts a human response to such forces working in the cosmos—as their presence in the landscape affects us, we may affect them, and through our touch add our voice to the great song that is the universe. □

Resources

The Living Earth Manual of Feng-Shui by Stephen Skinner (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982). Best English source on feng-shui.

The Pattern of The Past by Guy Underwood (The Museum Press, 1969). Energy fields and old English buildings.

Science and Civilization in China by Joseph Needham, Vol. 2 and Vol. 4, Part I (Cambridge University Press). Excellent discussion of feng-shui, magnetic sciences, and geomantic compasses in China.