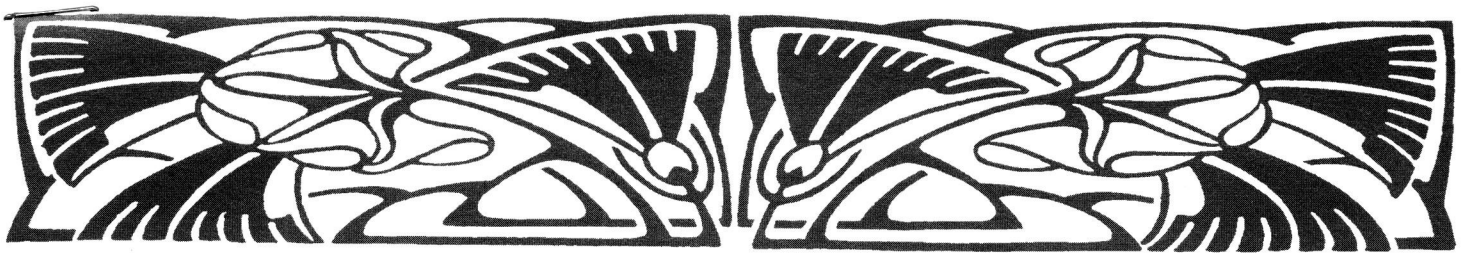

BUILDING WITH THE BREATH OF LIFE

BY TOM BENDER ©MAY 1997

A new operative vision is emerging today in health and healing, in the sciences, and in the arts of relationships among people, place and things. This vision is at once new and timelessly ancient. It is of the energy rather than the material basis of all creation, of the intimate interconnectedness of all life, and of the rhythmic iteration of sound, of song, of complex vibration, harmonics and overtones, that give rise to and maintain all the complex interfolding structure of the universe.[1]

Virtually every culture other than our own has experienced and incorporated an understanding of this breath of life into all aspects of their culture. Ours alone seems to have lost this understanding. *Chi, prana, kundalini, ki, vis medicatrix naturae, mana...* the names are many, but the consistency and accuracy of the description and understanding awesome. The personal experience of this breath of life through yoga, tai chi, qi-gong, martial arts, meditation, or spontaneous occurrences is acknowledged by increasing numbers in our own culture, with the same consistency and replicability.[2]

The moment in time has now come when our culture's values of greed, growth, and violence are becoming impossible to sustain and must be let go.[3] It is wonderfully apt that at this very moment a new, clear, and powerfully appropriate vision is emerging upon which to base the transformation of our lives to sustainability, giving, and love.[4] Our values have forced us to build walls around our hearts to isolate ourselves from the bitter pain and anguish resulting from what our culture dreams into being around us. That isolation, in turn, has created its own inner pain, as well as surroundings of inconceivable emptiness and meaninglessness.[5]

This new vision gives a guidance for transforming our placemaking arts—what we call today architecture and the allied arts of landscape, interior, urban and regional design—as our society moves from a period of growth into a period of mature sustainability. It gives an inner kernel of power to these arts out of which a deeper, richer, and more meaningful expression can unfold.

Design frame works based on chi, such as *feng-shui* or *sthapatya ved* suggest principles that underlie the practice of design in any sustainable society. These basic principles are found partially in the details of principles and practices recorded in their books and manuals. Equally important to us, though, are the frequently unstated assumptions that underlie a range of specific rules and practices, which are so integral a part of the culture that no one considered the need for stating them. Together, those principles are:

1. *Energy, not matter, is the basis of all creation.*

Matter is congealed energy, and our bodies and the physical world around us are the congealed patterns of matter that have formed around a matrix of energy. In a sense, our energy bodies are more primary than our physical ones. The processes and relationships there are more basic than in our physical bodies. They are profoundly interconnected.

Experience of this aspect of existence profoundly changes our view of our lives and our world. Nurturing energy flows that course through our bodies except when we block them off; existence as nodes in a continuous interconnecting field of energy rather than discrete, separate objects; spiritual healing; being so coherently interlinked with others that our thoughts and memories are one; walking in the fields of incipient form where things and events that shape—strange and unexpected new worlds open before us. The role of our familiar material world in all of this is very different from our former universe where it was all that existed. And design which acknowledges, responds to, and incorporates both of these worlds in their complex interaction is very different from merely creating pleasing spatial designs.

2. *The energy fields in the Earth's crust and atmosphere are a source of energy and information to all living matter.*

Far more energy than that of the visible light that fuels photosynthesis is induced into the earth's mantle and atmosphere. Like any available energy source it has been seized upon by the multitude of life forms that have emerged on this planet to fuel and inform their life.

3. *The breath of life, or "chi" exists in all people, places, and things, and is vital to their interaction.*

"Chi" is not just something in our bodies. It permeates our surroundings as well—intensely in what are called sacred places, in good and bad concentrations

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elsewhere. Our "chi" alters the "chi" of places we use, and their "chi" alters our own. The good or bad energy of users of a place lingers to affect subsequent users. Our interaction with place is additive and cumulative. We need to design aware of this dialog.

4. *The astrology of people, of places, and the timing, location, and nature of their interaction plays an active role in the outcome of those interactions.*

The energy fields of the earth are influenced by other heavenly bodies than the sun, as well as by all life in earth. In turn, they convey those influences onto our lives. (This is one area of *feng-shui* I am yet far from understanding, but which holds a central role in several branches of traditional *feng-shui* practice.)

5. *The health of all creation is essential to our well-being.*

Our skin is not a meaningful line of distinction between what is and is not "us." What is inside our skin depends on food, air, and nutures from outside our skin. What lies outside our skin depends on us as a source for CO_2 and for food. The health and well-being of what lies on either side of our skin cannot be separated from that of the other side. The ecological interconnectedness of all life means that the well-being of *all* life must be part of our designing in addition to factors in our surroundings that influence our specific health and well-being.

6. *Our minds, hearts, dreams, emotions, and beliefs are integral and powerful parts of our interaction with the world on both sides of our skins.*

The psychology of human and cultural nature—our values, our beliefs, our fears, our memories—all direct our actions or block them from certain paths, and determine much of the satisfaction or unhappiness that results from our interaction with places. The surroundings we create are like mirrors—inescapably reflecting and making manifest our deepest and most hidden values.

How we feel about a place or a pattern of people interaction with place is important. Yet we're never encouraged to trust our tummies and the consideration of the psychological dimension of people and place is virtually non-existent today. Christopher Alexander's *Pattern Language*, the strongest proponent and example of the value of following our noses and tummies, is shunned by mainstream design professionals.

7. *Our attitudes towards the past and the future—towards our ancestors and our descendants, what preceded us and what evolves out of our existence—are important to the outcome of interactions with our surroundings.*

Many cultures consider the impacts of their actions for as much as seven generations so as to not diminish the potentials of the future. One culture speaks of those seven generations as three past, the present, and three future ones.

Why consider the past? Consideration of the gifts from past generations generates humility, acknowledgement of the size of the shoulders upon which we stand, and gratitude for those gifts as a basis for our actions. It provides us a realization that our achievements do not belong to us alone, and requires acknowledgement of our responsibility to pass equivalent gifts on to our descendants. Many cultures posit continued interaction of past generations with those living today. Sustainability requires consideration of such perspectives on duration and relationship over time.

8. *Harmony with the cosmology perceived by our society needs to be expressed in the design of our surroundings and in our actions.*

The hierarchical order of a Chinese city, the sacred geometries of Islamic ornament, or the bold power of a 20th century skyscraper all reflect a special view of the universe, consistent with the beliefs and the world their builders dreamed into being. In doing so, such creations renew and strengthen the universe within which they are founded, and those who inhabit that universe.

9. *The functional dimension of design includes emotional, ecological, spiritual, psychological and cosmological function as well as merely the physical accommodation of human activities.*

Function needs to accommodate rituals, inner needs, and a fitting topology of uses as well as our physical needs. In the feng-shui process of locating a city, for example, the view of

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the cosmos upon which city location was based spoke symbolically in terms 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, as he always faced the holy south—in alignment with the growth-granting forces of the earth and sun. Temples were build in the northeast to a guardian deity, as that direction was felt to be unlucky—devils dwell in the mountains (as well as enemy troups). Buddhist temples often were placed in the west, as it was felt that Buddhism had a tendency to proceed eastward. The entire geometry and detailed layout of the city symbolically reflected and reinforced their 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. Southern orientation brought sunlight, warmth, cheer, and sanitation. Fresh water and air were provided for, and the commerce and food supply of the city assured. At the same time, every activity in the making of the city, of living within it, and participating in its life reminded a person of the forces they felt in the world. They became aligned with those forces, and gained nourishment from them.

10. *Sacredness is the central basis of meaningful lives and an enduring and sustainable society, and the act of designing our surroundings is, like any work, a spiritual path.*

Ours is a legalistic society—of limited commitments easy to break, and with great incentives for those finding new ways to take from others, to harm and destroy the rest of creation. The only true alternative is a basis for our lives which makes harmful action inconceivable rather than the rule. Nothing less than our holding sacred the health of our surroundings and the well-being of others will ensure that we act strongly enough or soon enough to ensure that health and well-being.

Anyone or anything we spend time with and come to understand, we come to love—warts, wrinkles and all. When we love something, we cannot be happy ourselves unless the health and well-being of what we love is ensured. Loving thus results in making the well-being of what is loved inviolate. That is the essence of holding something sacred, and the glue of life—not laws and government regulations.

The traditions of feng-shui and other chi-based design practices demonstrate how any kind of work can be pursued as a process of spiritual growth of the practitioners as well as being an integral part of a sacred society.[6] We can only design as we are, and a sacred society requires work processes that nurture our own spiritual health and growth.

We have discovered already that these new visions, values, and principles do produce a new architecture, a new landscape, and new communities. They do produce places with souls, ones that can move our hearts, and ones that honor and accommodate all of Creation. And they do this while enriching rather than destroying our planet and our souls in the process.

An expanded version of this article, other chapters from his book-in-process, BUILDING WITH THE BREATH OF LIFE, and related articles on sustainability and design can be found on Tom Bender's website <http://users.knsi.com/~tbender>.

Tom Bender has been an architect, strategic planner, and feng-shui practitioner for over twenty-five years, based on the Oregon Coast. His articles on feng-shui and design have appeared in In Context, Yoga Journal, East-West Journal, New Age, Utne Reader, Resurgence, Earth Ethics, and Environmental Building News.

Footnotes:

1 For an astrophysical perspective on this kind of a universe, see Paul LaViolette's BEYOND THE BIG BANG, 1995.

2 See, for example Barbara Brennan's HANDS OF LIGHT, 1988. A variety of new body work practices now make elimination of inner blocks preventing experience and flow of "chi" much more readily accomplished.

3 My "It's Oil Right, Folks! There's Good Times Ahead," *Solar '96 Solar Energy Association of Oregon Conference*, October, 1996, and "Eco-Building II," May 1996, reprinted in *Environmental Building News*, July 1996 and *In Context*, Issue 44, July, 1996 (www.context.org), give some of the reasons this is happening and the immense economic benefits of stabilizing growth.

4 My "Unexpected Gifts—The Real Rewards of Sustainable Communities," *Solar '96 Solar Energy Association of Oregon Conference*, October, 1996 gives a concise overview of the even more significant non-economic benefits inherent in sustainability.

5 See, for example, my "Shedding A Skin That No Longer Fits" Mar. 1996, reprinted in *IN CONTEXT* #44, July '96.

6 E.F. Schumacher's "Buddhist Economics," in SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL or my ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN PRIMER discusses this for work in genera. My THE HEART OF PLACE discusses it in terms of the process of design and building.