Feng-Shui

by Tom Bender

For several thousand years the Chinese have practiced an art of placing and designing their cities, residences and tombs to harmonize with the local currents of the cosmic breath flowing through their surroundings. 'Feng-shui' literally means 'wind and water,' but is concerned with the flow of 'chi' or 'prahna' energy of the earth and atmosphere rather than the surface topographical and ecological considerations that we consider important.

The application of feng-shui to building location and design is based on a belief that at every place there are special topographical features, either natural or artificial, which indicate or modify the cosmic energies present there. The forms and arrangements of hills, the nature and directions of watercourses, the heights and forms of buildings, the location of forests, roads, and bridges are all key factors. The influence of the sun, moon, planets and stars are also considered important.

These considerations have led to a particularly refined appreciation of the topographical features of any locality. The efforts to achieve favorable balance of forces have brought about unique and sensitive environments in China, with high cliffs setting off thickets of bamboo, towering pagodas counterbalancing the contours of 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 quite different nature of their topography. North China, with a much more uniform and regular landscape, developed a practice emphasizing the influence of astrological and astronomical considerations.

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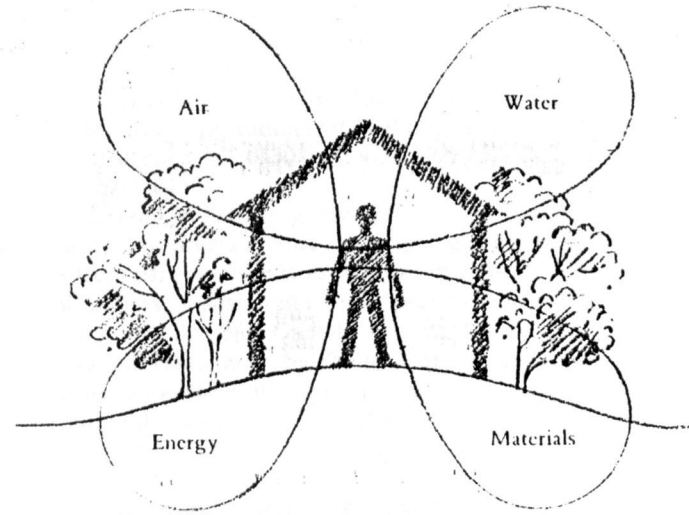
In the south, with a complex and irregular topography, the relative importance of the surrounding land and water forms was much greater. This brought about the development of dowsing techniques to map the location of various kinds of energy and practices to determine the shapes and position of various kinds of landforms which correspond with certain energy flows and concentrations.

The sensitivity to the landscape which developed through feng-shui held important ecological and cultural meaning as well as more esoteric significance. Sites for cities were selected near 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.

The intensive study and valuing of their surroundings led the Chinese to attach very different meanings to them. While we may see splendid vistas and have an objective aesthetic pleasure in seeing them, the Chinese appreciation is cosmological. To them the viewer and the viewed are interacting, both being part of some greater system. While we may find a place beautiful, the Chinese more likely might remark that they feel content or comfortable. Feng-shui asserts a human interaction with the forces working in the cosmos. Landscapes affect us, and we may affect them.



credit: Sally Launder/Natural House Book

Lasting impact on the energy of a place from the 'state of mind' of its users means a whole new consideration in the design of places. When our anger, indolence, reverence and passions are physically imparted to our surroundings, we have to become aware that our feelings can set up a chain reaction for good or ill. The design of our surroundings to balance such energy also becomes important.

Other aspects of feng-shui deal with how our minds respond to subtle psychological as well as physical configurations of our buildings. Entrances to homes opening directly into living spaces contain the potential for unwanted interruptions. Beds or desks located so the entrance to a room can't be seen by occupants prevent their psychological preparedness to deal with visitors. Heavy beams directly over a person where they work or sleep can become an oppressive presence in their mind. People in some cultures are uncomfortable sleeping with their feet towards a door, because it reminds them of corpses being carried out the door feet first.

Some of these factors are cultural, some physical, some psychological. Feng-shui acknowledges that our minds and spirits, dreams, fears and history all inhabit our buildings along with our bodies, and that their needs and gifts must be accommodated and nurtured in our design. It recognizes the full complexity and strength of our interaction with our surroundings, and establishes a framework for addressing them in our lives and our building.

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Being at Home with our Surroundings

by Tom Bender

Powerful meaning is found in how architecture ties us to the specialness of a particular place. No two places on our planet are entirely alike, and the communities of living things that each brings forth are as unique as the patterns of weather, terrain, geology, and surroundings.

When we live close to these natural surroundings, we come to know and love them deeply and to build in ways which reflect our joy in being a part of them. Our buildings come to draw us into the web of natural forces of the place, and take form from the special spirit of each place. They take on the special qualities of snow country, desert, prairie, piedmont or bayou.

There are ways of building that fit each of these regions and evoke the poetic power of that region in our lives. Paolo Soleri's Cosanti residence in Arizona fits into the desert itself. Earth covered concrete domes and vaults nestle into the ground, tempering the heat of the day and cold of the night, giving shade or sun when needed, while blocking the piercing winds. People like other inhabitants of the desert can retreat into the coolness of the ground in the day and come forth for the business of evening, night, and dawn.

Northwest homes of log and cedar shingles, with wide, sheltering roofs, nestle almost unseen among the great dripping conifers, protected from yet celebrating the endless rain, and snugly warm in the sunlight when it does appear.

The seed of Persian dwellings, and their image of Paradise, is not a building at all but a garden — a cool and verdant oasis in the desert. An enclosed garden, a tent or pavilion within, is a "house" in the spirit of the desert and the nomadic tradition of the culture.

In a traditional Japanese house, people insulate themselves in quilts rather than closing off their homes and sit on the verandah listening to the silent fall of snow around them. The screen-houses of Cape Hatteras provide shelter from the sun and are open to the summer breeze, but not to the mosquitoes and horseflies.

We have been slow to become comfortable with nature in the varied regions into which our culture has spread. We don't need a perfect site or the discipline of a Zen master to create a home that is "at home" in its surroundings. What we do need is an attentiveness to our actions and a willingness to take full advantage of the opportunities that present themselves. A new window can let in the moonrise or the daily rhythms and warmth of the sun. A skylight over our beds can bring us close again to night and the stars. Trees and vines can give shade and coolness. Materials, colors and furnishings can draw on sources native to our region. A tiny garden outside our window can keep us close to the dripping moss, ancient rocks, or sunlit leaves of our surroundings.

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