



Feng Shui at Work: A Practice for the Office?

by John Southerst

New York real estate mogul Donald Trump regularly hires a feng shui consultant for his office tower projects. Is it marketing or is it magic?

Chase Manhattan's merchant bank in Hong Kong and the Hyatt® Hotel in Singapore both floundered until a feng shui expert reconfigured them. Was it "qi" (the life force that feng shui purports to harness) or was it the local equivalent of a board of health permit?

Manufacturers such as Pfizer® Global Pharmaceuticals Canada and Solectron® Microsystems in California have called upon feng shui to make their workplaces healthier and more productive. Is it sound science or good employee relations?

Or is it all of these things?



John Southerst is a Toronto-area writer who believes the everyday stories of business hold a fascinating cultural record. He started his career as a teacher in West Africa and a reporter in India. He now writes for major business publications and acts as a consultant and wordsmith to manufacturing, financial services and high-tech clients. His other passions are his family, his vegetable garden, cooking (eating it) and squash (playing it).

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Feng shui practitioners would say that it depends upon who did the individual assignments. Followers of classical feng shui take issue with the prescriptions of many modern commercial types of feng shui as nothing more than clever catering to stereotypes and misconceptions. But traditional principles of feng shui (pronounced FUNG SHWAY) have been handed down in China from

refurbish their workplaces—whether it's in the trend-setting technology and architectural offices of California, the office towers of Manhattan or the manufacturing plants of Quebec.

So how does it work?

Feng shui means, literally, wind and water, which embody the complementary opposites of “yang” and “yin”

aquariums, and much more. The date of construction is important as well as the date of moving in.

Not unlike a forward approaching workplace analysis technique known as network analysis, the feng shui practitioner must learn the hierarchical position, location and birth dates of all the building's occupants. They pay special attention to mapping the desk

master to master for over 3,000 years and, in Oriental countries and their ex-patriate communities around the world, they are taken as unassailable, both in the home and the workplace.

And while feng shui may be viewed by some as a fad that's long gone, Asians (and now more and more Westerners) view it as a normal practice in which to approach space. As Mr. Trump himself told the New York Times: “You just do it in Hong Kong. It's like an engineering survey.”

However, with the arrival in the West of many Chinese and Hong Kong companies in the 1980s and 1990s, feng shui practices are reaching numerous North American workplaces with great interest. Often, many organizations engage a feng shui practitioner whenever they build or

of feng shui philosophy. A science of placement and space design, feng shui is all about protecting and channeling positive “qi” (pronounced CHEE) or energy. “Qi rides with the wind and is retained by water,” says Dianne Bullied, a practitioner in Niagara Falls, Ontario, who studied under the legendary feng shui teaching master Joseph Yu of Hong Kong. “But if anyone thinks it's just a matter of intuition, forget it. That's definitely not the case.”

It is a surprisingly precise set of calculations, she explains, combining geophysics, astronomy, astrology and hard data. The study begins with a floor plan with directional compass readings that note the positioning of doors and windows, lighting, exterior hydro wires and internal wiring, water features such as fountains or

positions of those who make decisions and handle money: the managers, the accountants, the sales staff. Both location and the direction they face are relevant because, according to feng shui principles, each person has four lucky directions—and four unlucky ones.

External surroundings come into play as well. Neighboring structures or even trees, for instance, assume the characteristics of auspicious symbols of Chinese lore. When choosing a building, for instance, the structure to the left as you face outward from the entrance is the “dragon”, which protects your building from the elements, and should be higher than the building on the right, which is the powerful, protective “white tiger”. Principles of feng shui also suggest that the structure should have a solid



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backing, such as a fence or another building, a “black turtle” that offers longevity, support and protection. Finally, a low-lying landform, fountain, planter or tree in front acts as the “crimson bird” that buffers against incoming negative forces. Together, they form the “dragon’s lair” and the ideal place for a home or workplace.

With all the information in hand, the feng shui practitioner uses mathematical formulas and charts to develop recommendations for your interior design and layout and the positioning of the individuals who use it. “Every building is unique,” says Bullied, “because the orientation, construction and the people in it are different.”

All the talk of birthdates, charts, dragons and qi make many westerners skeptical. But a great deal of what feng shui prescribes rings true. After all, it’s all about balance and harmony of the five phases of qi—fire, earth, metal, water and wood—including

practitioners criticize long corridors with facing doors, for instance, because they invite negative energy—sha qi—to fly like poison arrows, causing infighting and jealousy. The same corridors are roundly disliked by workers because they are cold, uninviting and lack features of interest.

“Office environments are usually far out of balance,” says Elizabeth Moran of Los Angeles, co-author with Joseph Yu (the Hong Kong master) and Val Biktashev (the world’s only practicing master) of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Feng Shui*. “They have far too much ‘yang’ in them.”

How so? Yang elements are strong, features—heat, movement, aggression, bright colors and uniformity, for example. Yin elements suggest a quieter environment—shade, music, earth colors, soft features and creativity.

One of the best antidotes for excess yang, says Moran, is the yin element,

Moran has several other observations that may sound like familiar complaints to many. “Workstation walls are higher than the people,” she says. “There’s no connection, and it creates an environment without unity or togetherness. The walls have to come down below shoulder level.”

One of the worst offenses, she says, is the tendency to position desks with their backs or sides to the door. “It blocks the flow of qi,” says Moran. “It creates stagnation. They must face out or at an angle, with a clear view of the doorway.” The same applies to twin workstations, where workers are sharing a space. “Often, they’re back to back,” says Moran. “Flip them around and put the desks face to face with a low screen between them for privacy.”

The feng shui analyst will also sort out how to position the accounting department for the best cash flow, where the sales staff should sit to raise revenues, where the marketing

people and their work environment. So it’s not surprising that when experienced practitioners see disruptions of qi in everyday workplaces, they identify many features and layouts that are intuitively discomfiting. Feng shui

water. “It’s very good for the workplace,” she says. “Water holds onto qi. It has a soothing quality that attracts people and stops the revolving door syndrome. There has to be space for a water feature.”

department will do its best creative work and, of course, where the boss should sit for the best power position. How? For the answer, your feng shui practitioner needs to consult the eight trigrams, the Eight Houses and the



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Flying Star system. As you can see, there's a lot to it, if you are prepared to learn.

And so, this is perhaps one opportunity for one culture to learn from another. As is true of many things, it all boils down to down to balance. What it comes down to is an open mind, a belief in the importance of balance and, perhaps, faith. "It's all part of the cosmic dance," says Moran. "Everything is connected."



The Myths of Feng Shui

Some say configuring your workplace according to the principles of feng shui may help you run a better business, from raising motivation and being more creative to preventing accidents. But practitioners are always careful about making newcomers to the art aware of what feng shui is not.

1. "It is not new age magic," says Leonard Tam, a Toronto feng shui practitioner. "It is not a guarantee of everlasting wealth, happiness or relationships." Every building and every person, he says, has strengths and weaknesses. The art of feng shui is to identify the weaknesses of that location for the individuals who occupy it and design the space to compensate. "Remember," says Tam, "feng shui maintains that each person is unique. Feng shui is used to design an environment that addresses the individual, not the other way around."

2. Tam offers a list of common false prescriptions made under the guise of feng shui. A bowl of water, for instance, will bring wealth and prosperity. Toilets must be covered to prevent the escape of bad luck. ("What about sinks and air vents?" asks Tam.) A mirror at the front door entrance will deflect bad luck. A square office space is balanced while one that is not square will lead to some deficiency in the business.

3. "Some feng shui practitioners urge people to buy Chinese-looking items—dragon or turtle sculptures, Buddhas, wind chimes and that sort of thing," says Dianne Bullied, a feng shui practitioner in Niagara Falls. "It doesn't look professional and it doesn't suit the décor. It's also not necessary."

4. "There is no such thing as dividing a building into sections of wealth, career and marriage," says Elizabeth Moran, Los Angeles-based co-author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Feng Shui*. "Each building is different."

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