

THE ANCIENT ARTS OF VASTU SHASTRA AND FENGSHUI

Holistic approaches to building design

*An Interview conducted by architect Professor Balwant Saini (BS),
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BS: In many countries in the East and also in the West, there is increasing public interest in the ancient Chinese system of Feng Shui and the Indian art of Vastu Shastra. Both claim to enhance our quality of life, but most of us are fairly ignorant of how these two systems work. We don't even know if they are as effective as their practitioners profess or whether there is any real difference between the two. Firstly Kerry, what is Feng Shui?

KT: Feng Shui is the ancient Chinese art of conscious placement. It seeks to place people to their best advantage in space and time. As one of the limbs of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Feng Shui is a healing art. It works with the energy meridians of the earth and the flow of Qui [pronounced "tee"] in the landscape - just as acupuncture or Chinese herbs aim to balance the energy meridians of the body.

BS: What is Qui?

KT: Qi is a fairly new concept to our Western rational minds, and requires a new way of thinking about the energy around us. Qi is life force energy, vital essence, and cosmic breath. In India this is called “prana”. Qi is everywhere - present in everything. Feng Shui seeks to achieve just the right flow and quality of Qi appropriate to the situation and the time. Auspicious Qi (“Sheng Qi”) is maximised, and negative Qi (“Sha Qi”) is minimised or avoided.

BS: Feng Shui and Vasta Shastra have been used in Asia for thousands of years, but it is only recently that people have started talking about them here. Why this sudden interest? Is there a connection between the stressed times in which we live and people becoming more conscious of these two forms of ancient knowledge?

PP: There is a real demand from clients, not because the clients are becoming sensitive to these kinds of things but because of the problems they are facing in their lives and they believe that this could be a help to them and that, to which we as architects or designers may be able to provide help or be sensitive to their concerns.

Whether in India or anywhere else there is this need that the client is generating or asking for or insisting on, but we as architects find it very difficult to fulfill because we do not know

anything about it today. And therefore, this need for Feng Shui or Vastu Shastra to be understood in the proper way, would help the architects in their own development and growth enable them to communicate in a better manner and in a more holistic manner and provide for the full needs of the client.

KT: I think there are a number of reasons for Feng Shui's rise in popularity. One is that it is the inevitable next step. As people are becoming more and more interested in environmental matters and the quality of their living environments, together with a growing interest in total health and well-being, Feng Shui has much to offer in that it links people and their surroundings. It bridges the gap between our personal health and the state of the environment. In another sense I believe Feng Shui has become popular as East and West begin to merge, as many more Asians bring their culture and traditions into Australia, and Australians look to other cultures for a balancing of what has become quite an extreme Westernised approach to living.

BS:What do you mean by “an extreme Westernised approach”? Could you explain this a little?

KT: Well, Feng Shui works a lot with the concept of yin and yang - a balancing of the polarities. We could view this surge of interest in Feng Shui in yin and yang terms where the Western ways of relating to the world have become so extreme and out of balance that many of the things we do are actually harmful to ourselves and to the earth. One becomes a reflection of the

other. Feng Shui recognises that the state of our environment is a reflection of the state of our minds and our souls.

When something becomes extremely yin or extremely yang, then its opposite begins to emerge. So as our world becomes more damaged and polluted, so do we. Out of this extreme there is now a move to access and develop more spiritual, creative and healing qualities in our environments and in our bodies. In its pure sense, Feng Shui is very much about creating a total harmony between people and their surroundings, an approach that cultivates consciousness and a new respect and honoring of our bodies, our communities and the earth.

BS: Yes, I see, the development of awareness of some of the eastern concepts and philosophies. I wonder about the Vastu Shastra - the Indian approach. Not many people have heard of it here. Even in India it has been known as part of the ancient wisdom, but not practiced. What is this newcomer on the scene? And in what ways does it differ from Feng Shui? So let us start with “What is Vastu Shastra?”

PP: Vastu Shastra, as it is known today, is of Vedic origin. It is an ancient knowledge that was written down over the ages. It deals with the design, planning and building of a house or public structure, a palace or a temple, a village, town or city, in fact with all aspects of human activity. The Vastu Shastra provides guidelines and a methodology for construction, ritual, and so on.

The problem is that there are specific guidelines which may not perhaps reflect what we as architects know or have the freedom to express ourselves, according to our concepts of space, form, function, climate, wind direction and orientation. There seems to be a bit of difficulty for architects in acknowledging Vastu Shastra and its applications to their work. Vastu guidelines appear to be quite rigid, and we still don't know the degree to which these guidelines can be adapted to meet our modern needs.

These Vastu traditions of building and living have been created for lifestyles in the ancient past, and we still have more research to undertake to determine exactly how we translate them into our present day circumstances. We do find however, that Vastu Shastra is fairly flexible and can be adapted once we understand the deeper principles on which they are based. This is important for both Vastu and Feng Shui alike.

The secret or deeper knowledge of Vastu Shastra lies within the complex nature of the subtle energies of human beings, and our relationship with our environment and Creation. Today we have instrumentation to detect and validate scientifically some of these energies that were only previously known through the traditions.

The whole approach of Vastu Shastra today is improving, not so much because of an interest in the traditions, but because of its immediate results. The people who seem to be most interested are those involved with business activities that would

like to improve operations and minimise losses. Using Feng Shui or Vastu Shastra systems, they begin to experience results.

There seems to be an intrinsic relationship between the environment, health, wealth, relationships, etc. Through our deeper enquiry we are attempting to understand the ‘why’ of these arts.

BS: Kerry, what are the mechanics of Feng Shui and how do they work?

KT: Feng Shui operates with everything from the placement of furniture, with structure and design, form and shape of buildings, with having particular colours that are chosen according to the personal astrological details and lifestyle requirements of the client, as well as the building. There are different levels of Feng Shui. Some Feng Shui works with aspects of form and shape, the physical landscape and those various things in our environment that influence the quality of energy.

Feng Shui also works with the intangible aspects that are to do with changing time periods, and changing orientations in space, and that involves the usage of the Feng Shui compass “Lo-Pan”, and drawing up a horoscope or chart for a building that reflects its energetic dynamic in space and time, and how that dynamic is influenced by changing time-periods, by changing the decor, and various other aspects of the building.

In that sense it is very precise. Even in things like where you place windows and doors, positions of beds and desks, and things like that become very important. The surrounding landscape is also very important in determining whether that building is supported in its surroundings.

Prabhat: Well in Vastu Shastra it is a similar approach, and what is also added on is the scale of the individuals related to the building or project, and how this body scale matches or is affected, to what sense it is affected, and how the whole balance has to be achieved. There is also the matter of the materials used in the building. For example, if you are using wood as a vertical member it has to be placed in the structure so that the top is towards the top, the root towards the bottom, the interior surface towards the inside of the house and the exterior surface towards the exterior. Similarly when the stones are cut in a quarry, they should be marked at the site to indicate which is the upper layer and which the lower, which the mountainside and which are the exterior.

It is to respect the kind of energy, which is locked into these materials in their natural process of growth and evolution. Even if considered dead, energetically they continue to radiate energies that need to be understood and respected, today as in ancient times, and this in turn can help us understand or counter the negative effects of much of the Bio-Electro Magnetic radiations that surround us in our environment. It is in understanding these aspects that science is useful. Scientific study can help us understand scientifically why materi-

als have been used in a certain manner or orientation and as such, prove to a Western mind that this ancient wisdom is valuable.

For example, we find that when you have a double batten door it affects the energy field of the body symmetrically, even if you open and use only one batten. If you have a single batten, it affects the symmetry of the energy field of the body much more on the side of the missing batten. This is just a small example of one of the various reasons that we understand why people in ancient times followed certain principles of design and how they were able to relate these to the affect on the human body system or the interaction between buildings and human health and well-being. These principles helped in the manner of preventative cure, through achieving a more holistic and harmonious environment and life.

BS: What evidence is there that these systems achieve what they profess to do? Has anybody conducted surveys or research, or formally tried to find out exactly how effective they are?

PP: Officially through universities and other formal channels, nobody has taken it up seriously to date, but in Pondicherry we are using a scientific approach to investigate the various principles and methodologies of the Vastu Shastra. We have also been practicing all over India for the last five or six years, applying corrective measures rather than demolishing and rebuilding, and we are getting amazing results.

BS: What kind of results?

PP: For example, factories that have been on the verge of closing down have been totally turned around to experience business growth and expansion when corrective measures are taken. Our experience shows that when Vastu Shastra and Feng Shui principles are applied properly and judiciously, people's lives can be considerably improved. In fact one of the reasons these ancient systems are becoming popular in the west is because of the extremes to which we have isolated ourselves. In Germany some medical doctors came across particular health problems relating to particular buildings. They found that people living in certain houses developed particular symptoms of disease, and this stimulated an enquiry into the relationship between buildings and human health in the 1960s. This field of research became known as GeoBiology, and we have been quite involved with this over the last 12 years.

Our studies have shown us that there is a very real relationship between buildings, form, proportion, function, orientation, materials used and the health and well being of the occupants. The ancient sciences do have some answers for sick buildings and these various disharmonies.

BS: Well, Kerry, what about Feng Shui, has there been similar scientific studies and investigations?

KT: No, I don't think anybody has seriously been looking at a scientific validation of Feng Shui - except in a fairly super-

ficial sense. It is something that Prabhat and I are currently investigating. We're looking at how the sciences of Vastu Shastra and Feng Shui relate, and measuring the results of each under different circumstances, as well as studying how their applications vary according to the Northern or Southern Hemisphere.

BS: But folklore and superstition also seem to be a big part of Feng Shui.

KT: Yes, and this also raises an important issue about the nature of Feng Shui. Some aspects of Feng Shui are very practical and logical and relate to the physical domain, such as building design, structure and form, colour and placement. These influence qualities of Qi or energy, and can be seen and experienced in a very tangible sense. Other aspects are more intangible and mysterious and lie outside the realm of science as we know it. These include the influences of the heavens, cosmic forces, astrology and dimensions of time and space. These things cannot be understood with the rational western mind. We can't know everything through science alone.

BS: How do you find that Western professionals and clients react to this side of Feng Shui?

KT: There's a lot more skepticism in the West, and I find a lot more scepticism amongst men than with women. Usually the wives are more open to it and more willing to give it a go. But at the same time, I think in a lot of the Asian countries there

is the aspect of superstition and belief attached to it, but also in Asian countries, I think people grow up with this way of thinking so they are more connected with the more intangible aspects of Feng Shui . Whereas in the West, I find that people are adopting some of the little Feng Shui guidelines, like hanging up a mirror or pa-kua, or a pair of flutes, without any real understanding of why they might be doing it. They read somewhere that it brings good luck, or will make them happy, or make them rich, and it is like a quickfire in that sense without requiring any personal responsibility on the part of the client. For this reason, and given the more intangible aspects of both Vastu Shastra and Feng Shui, and that both of these applications work powerfully with all aspects of a person's life, it becomes very important that the practitioners of these skills are well-trained and responsible for their work. Traditionally both Vastu Shastra and Feng Shui were studied for many years in apprenticeship with a Master. Today we have a tendency to want to learn them more superficially. We don't have the time, patience and applications to learn skills and gain knowledge in any depth. This has enormous implications for the client, the results achieved, and the long term acceptance and success of these practices in the West.

BS: This is an interesting comment because most of the literature I have read both on Feng Shui and Vastu Shastra seems to be related to the environment and there hasn't been any emphasis on the clients' feelings and attitudes and professionals' knowledge of expression in terms of building form.

PP: For a professional's training, it was necessary in ancient times, that the master fully assessed students to determine whom he felt were capable of mastering the deeper knowledge. Not only intellectually, but in every other way. His attitude to his fellow beings, and to life, aspects of self-control, compassion, sensitivity, etc were all factors that mattered greatly and were prized, though only the major aspects of this knowledge, that required personal guidance from the master to the student selected, was imparted.

Otherwise the rest of the material or writing is like a reference book for the masses, a guideline is given when a building is designed to say that these are the things you should take care of, without giving explanations of why it would be done or how it should be done. It is like using software but not necessarily knowing how the hardware works.

BS: I guess that in a particular society most of the people were brought up to respect the opinions of the teachers and elders. That is no longer the case today.

PP: That is one of the factors, the other factor was that not everybody was educated as we are today. And therefore, it made no sense to give complex explanations in writing. All that was communicated by the ancients were simple do's and don'ts peppered with ritual, so people knew what was good for them and continued practicing these for ages, without questioning.

Today because of the scientific tool and system of education we are able to understand and master a lot of things and concepts such as vibration, electromagnetic radiations, etc and it is because of this deeper knowledge of existence and nature that for us there are few mysteries, and we are in a better position today as individuals to study and research this deeper knowledge that formed the basis of the ancient sciences, that were in no way less advanced than our knowledge are today.

BS: In the light of what we have said so far, now that there are practitioners in Feng Shui and Vastu Shastra, do you feel that they are complementary or in competition with each other?

KT: I think both of these sciences (speaking on behalf of Feng Shui) have a lot to contribute to modern architecture, and I think, getting back to your earlier question about Feng Shui, it is not just talking about improving someone's environment but that it very much requires that personal involvement, because Feng Shui is very much a dynamic between the person and the place and it works on the basis that the state of our environment is a reflection of our mind, or the state of our inner mind is reflected in our outer world and life. So I think that is what I can contribute to modern building design & architecture, because it seems to me that's what has largely been missing in a lot of architectural design and building construction, that connection with all aspects of the individual's needs from which we are practically totally detached.

BS: In order to hang a shingle saying you are qualified in these areas, what kind of training programmes exist, where are they, who teaches them?

PP: Unfortunately there are only weekend programmes and quick knowledge through workshops and through some simple study of this ancient knowledge and ancient sciences and in fact people have really never studied it as a science.

KT: People want a quick fix, don't they!

BS: Don't you think that there is an urgent need for scientific verification of these concepts for them to become legitimate?

PP: There is. It is very critical at this stage that we have more scientific information, more scientific studies done on this subject because there is a science. In fact, these people who have been practicing it for thousands of years, or have written about it, were not people who had no knowledge of climatic and social conditions. These ancient structures were perfectly integrated to suit all the climatic and social conditions of their times and places and we marvel at how these relationships worked and how much of a powerful impact they had. It was just more than the form and shape and orientation part of it, but that all of these were integrated to help the individual's growth and progress.

BS: Tools of science have a great advantage today. Research and development is obviously essential if these ideas are to gain credence with Western professionals.

PP: Traditional wisdom requires a lot of deeper probing through scientific methods. This is what we have been trying to work on for the last so few years and we do find a lot of feedback from many scientific sources from around the world to understand these things and in some places research work has begun on these lines, like that of Professor Hiroshi Motoyama of Japan, on energy centres or Chakras of the body, regarding their existence and effect upon human health and well-being.¹

And also Professor Vladislav Lugovenko of the Moscow Academy of Sciences who has been working on measuring the variations in the intensities of the magnetic field of the earth with reference to various kinds of gridlines and their affects on the human body.² There are a lot of things which we are learning through such studies to enable us to understand the wisdom of the ancients. What they were saying had a basis and a meaning and if more effort goes into it, it would help us to understand more deeply the influence of Vastu Shastra and Feng Shui. If these made up the basis of an architect's knowledge, it would enhance his contribution to his architecture and design practice.

KT: At the same time we have to be careful not to glorify science as providing all the only valid answers or the only way

of knowing things, because sometimes in the pursuit of scientific explanations of things we can lose the very essence or the mystery of something like Feng Shui or Vastu Shastra. Outside of science requires a deeper personal enquiry in to more spiritual aspects, it's a more experiential understanding of energy that requires some personal responsibility.

PP: What we could say is the developing of one's own sensitivity to these radiations and these energy principles, can be through a process of practice of certain disciplines, it can be through a practice of yoga, it can be through a practice of a spiritual discipline, it can be through a healthy life and healthy food and healthy emotions etc. There is a whole combination of things, which can develop our sensitivity to our own energies.

BS: Maybe that's the reason why we are not yet making progress. Our main problem is to overcome the Western tendency to compartmentalise knowledge, and to adopt a more holistic approach. If this is in fact a problem, then I am not clear as to how we can deal with it.

PP: That is true, that is one of the problems that the scientific method is in a sense directing the elements and looking at them in an isolated manner, whereas life involves an approach that integrates all the processes. Science, therefore, has to develop this holistic version, maybe like a systems approach where you isolate each area, study it by all means, but ultimately you have to understand the dynamics of the total

system and there is a growing awareness of this need for an integrated approach to scientific investigation within many areas of science today.

BS: This seems to be pointing to a way of working together; which of course was the case until the last few centuries when society began to separate disciplines; appropriate to understanding the world and our place in it. The training of an architect, even now in a limited sense, involves education in a number of disciplines. What architects have to do is to devise a system in which a number of specialists can come together and by working together can enhance the quality of their final product.

PP: Yes, and also in India, for example, for someone to become a *sthapati* or an architect it involved training in the knowledge of all the sciences, all the arts, all the mathematics, astronomy and health sciences, a total mastery of the entire knowledge of his times.

BS: It is interesting that in the Chinese system of medicine, the health practitioners are often trained in both the Eastern and the Western system, and the patients are given a choice or allowed to take advantage of both.

KT: A holistic approach, which brings in your own personal life instead of an either/or situation. It is more an integration of the disciplines, so that we can make decisions about our lives, and choices about our lifestyle based on a more holistic

understanding of our relationship in our environment.

BS: Coming down to t

he more nitty gritty things, for most people their first question is how does it affect their hip pocket?

KT: I think it is important to start with that question and to ask the client what it is worth to them to have various aspects of their lives improved. It really depends on what is at stake too, in terms of cost, what it might cost for you to actually remedy the situation. So that reinforces the need for the client to take some responsibility themselves for looking at how their lives are at the moment and what they are wanting to fix up using Vastu Shastra or Feng Shui.

In terms of cost that varies depending on the job of course, every job is different and it is a complex dynamic between the person and their environment. In terms of remedies, Feng Shui works with everything. From simply changing the position of a bed, or changing the colour of the walls, or moving a mirror to perhaps undergoing some more major renovations. If there is an opportunity to influence a building design from scratch, that is by far the most powerful way to create an environment that suits someone.

But in the end, the amount of change that is required depends to some degree on the problem that one is trying to address. And really I have clients coming to me with their wives dying of cancer or serious business problems. In those kinds of

situations, it would be well worth investing what it takes to get the proper results.

Prabhat: What we are discovering is happening in India, is that most of the time people don't know what corrective measures can be taken. Existing structures are being demolished and rebuilt and people are spending huge amounts of money. But there are certain ways and means by which this kind of wasteful expenditure can be prevented by simple corrective measures, if one knows and one understands the principles. And similarly, the same things apply to Feng Shui also, and what we are trying to look at, is, two to three levels of working.

One level is for a new project. When you are doing a new project it is easy to start, right at the initial, conceptual stage, discussing things with the client and the architects involved, and work out the design, the site selection, the location of the building, the form, the shape, the functions, the timing, everything we can harmonise and it is an ideal situation. But 90 % of the time, the problem is existing buildings, existing situations, and existing faults. That is where we have to look for economical solutions that best suit the client's nature, lifestyle, and bank balance. The idea is to minimise expenditure rather than maximise it, as is being done now.

BS: If I were a client and I had access to both Feng Shui and Vastu Shastra experts, do I have to make a choice, or can I get them both.

KT: It depends on who you can get.

PP: I would say that yes, it would be perhaps necessary to look at it from both points of view. There are certain advantages in Vastu Shastra as well as Feng Shui. The advantages in Vastu Shastra are that it is relating to the scale of the body of the individuals, to their buildings and their properties on a long-term basis. And what I find are the advantages of or complementarity of Feng Shui is that it is looking at the changes in the energy principles, which are there from month to month and through the years. It is the dynamic of that which comes into plays, so in fact, if we combine the two systems we are able to provide a more holistic approach.

BS: Yes, Feng Shui's concept of changes of energy makes sense when you realise its source in Buddhist philosophy of impermanence or anicca as it was called in the ancient language of Pali. Vastu, on the other hand, aims to anchor the energy (or the human body as solidified form of energy) to the earth. I have always been fascinated by Vastu Purusha Mandala where various Gods keep down Purusha the spirit or energy depicted as a demon, so that it is no longer able to rise and create disharmony in the world.

From the public's point of view, I think we need to look at two things. One is the cost of it. The second thing is a guarantee of the results. You do not want to spend a whole lot of money if there is a chance that it might not work. They may want some evidence of practical results.

KT: Also, in these fields, unlike the disciplines of architecture or accounting, for example, where you have recognised or certified bodies, that is not here in Feng Shui and Vastu Shashtra. So from the client's perspective it is very difficult to know when you have got a skilled practitioner. And I suppose I would be suggesting that they go with recommendations and word of mouth, go on the experiences of others, or reputation.

PP: This is a major problem for clients to know who is a good reliable consultant in whom they can have some proper confidence. In fact, this is somewhat what is happening. It is more by word of mouth that people come to know. And today, maybe by the Internet there is a chance that they come to see your write-up, which explains what you are doing. The idea is that we can have some kind of an organisation that deals with this kind of study. That is the reason we are establishing the Akash Foundation in Australia, in India and in Europe.

BS: Well; it's been a very useful discussion. It appears that although Feng Shui and Vastu Shastra systems have developed in isolation from each other and have found their usefulness in different cultures, there are many similarities. Both claim to help shield us from the so-called 'harmful energies' emanating from our poorly designed buildings, especially those that use vast quantities of synthetic materials and components. They also claim that by incorporating their basic principles into our surroundings we can not only insure physical comfort but also look after our mental and emotional needs.

The problem is how to convince practicing architects and engineers that this is so. It's good to see the beginnings of scientific enquiry and the setting up of a professional body. But, let's face it, most professionals will be happier when they can see some substantial scientific explanations of how the so-called 'subtle energies' affect us. Mere belief is not enough. Beliefs are only true for the believer. Non-believers want to know how it all works, they need to be convinced before they commit time and money to these ideas. They need to be reassured that their value is more than a placebo effect.

There is no doubt that these ancient sciences have evoked a strong public response, which has made it necessary to study them with an open mind. It is obvious that we must try and understand the underlying principles and philosophies that underpin Vastu Shastra and Fengshui so that we can examine them in the context of our increasingly dangerous and polluted environment.

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