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**Art of Feng Shui Makes Mainstream Move**  
Does this ancient practice have relevance in designing hotels?  
You bet it does!

Wednesday, April 22, 2009  
By Beth Kormanik

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Have you ever walked into a hotel where everything about the space just felt right? That feeling could have been the result of impeccable design or beautiful architecture. Or it could be the space's feng shui. Feng shui is a traditional Chinese art that directs a space's chi, or energy, in positive ways. It can also be described as the psychology of space. What once was a fringe or misunderstood practice is now taught at major architecture schools and becoming more popular among hoteliers.

The Trump International Hotel New York opened only after consulting with feng shui specialist Master Pun-Yin, a Trump spokesman confirmed to Buyer Interactive. Trump used the advice to change the building's color from gold to bronze, among other building decisions.

In another high-profile project, Disney used feng shui techniques when constructing its Hong Kong Disneyland, which led the company to make such changes as reorienting the main gate and incorporating feng shui's five elements: earth, fire, water, metal and wood.

The Pala Band of Mission Indians is among the latest to use the practice in its \$100 million expansion of the Pala Casino Spa & Resort in California's Northern San Diego County. Management there consulted with a feng shui expert for the expansion of the AAA four-diamond property that will result in 90,000 square feet of gaming space, a 15,000 square-foot spa and 10 dining options. The expansion at the 507-room resort opens Memorial Day weekend.

Pala pursued feng shui out of respect for its Asian guests, said CEO Bill Bembenek. A "tremendous amount of our clientele" is Asian, mostly Korean, Vietnamese and Chinese, he said, and many of them are sensitive to the aspects of feng shui. The resort does not have an Asian design concept -- nor does one need to for feng shui -- but Bembenek knew that all guests would feel and appreciate the changes.

"My suspicion is there are restaurants and hoteliers that are consulting with feng shui experts. They just don't make it public," he said. "Feng shui just doesn't have appeal to Asian cultures. There are certain spaces people walk into that feel more comfortable than other spaces. It's an issue of what's appealing to the eye, what's comfortable."

Pala didn't want to change the feel of the resort, Bembenek said, but it was clear guests needed more space.

"We started with the premise we didn't want to reinvent ourself, but we were at the point where we needed more space," he said. "People were elbow to elbow, and on holidays and promotional nights we had lost some comfort. We wanted to not detract from what made us successful, but at the same time add to it and keep it up to date. With the help of a lot of designers and our feng shui consultant, we've accomplished that. It still feels intimate and warm and inviting."

Pala hired Angi Ma Wong, a traditional feng shui expert who had appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" to discuss the practice. She began working with Pala shortly after the schematic design was completed and reviewed the layout of the whole property.

"She took a macro view of the entire resort, starting with the orientation of the physical building, the direction that it points in," Bembenek said. "She broke the whole property down into quadrants and analyzed it from a traditional feng shui viewpoint to help us under how changes would impact the feel of the property."

Wong's initial analysis was favorable but she did have specific critiques. One in particular was the shape of the expanded building. Wong expressed concerns over certain angles that she said were not conducive to positive feng shui. Pala made the changes.

"We made sure early on in the design that we eliminated those issues," Bembenek said. "Some of the big things



you can't refine after the building is built. We eliminated those instances that wouldn't be conducive to positive feng shui. If you partner with a feng shui expert early on, you can eliminate a lot of those potential pitfalls throughout the process."

The best thing to do is hire an expert at the start of a project, agreed Alex Stark, a private feng shui consultant in Brooklyn, NY. Stark, a graduate of the Yale School of Architecture, said his background is essential to his work.

"People connect to feng shui because it feels groovy, touchy-feely. Some people get spiritual with it," he said. "Feng shui has that dimension, but it's also about building and mortar and bricks and getting people to make money. If you don't understand architecture, planning, hard business practices, the likelihood of you succeeding as a consultant is not very great."

A commercial space must be designed with the goals and objectives of the organization in mind, Stark said. He gave the example of a spa and related it to the feng shui concepts of yin and yang, polar opposites representing femininity and masculinity that must find balance in a space. A spa should have more of the feminine yin and less of the masculine yang, he said, to give a soft and welcoming feel yet still retain a bit of an edge.

"If you get too much yin it can start to impinge on profitability," he said. "A good feng shui consultant will help the architect and interior designer so that the ratio balances. It can feel too cushy. There are places that are so nice that you want to stay forever, but you're not paying by the hour."

At Pala, Wong also discussed which building materials made more sense. For example, the resort's main entrance was in the northwest quadrant, an area that Wong said should feature metal elements. She advised them to avoid rushing water in that space because it would feel too frenetic. Later, as the design was refined, Wong made suggestions about finishes and colors in spaces such as the high-limit poker room.

In its gaming spaces, Pala avoided furniture with corners that point to people sitting at the tables because anything pointing at somebody can make a room less feng shui compatible, Bembenek explained. Simona Mainini, founder and owner of Los Angeles-based Feng Shui for Architecture, said each room of a commercial space may have a different purpose, and good feng shui advice will reflect that. A poorly designed space gives off a bad or confusing vibe, she said, like walking into a waiting room when you thought you were entering a living room. She added that a client must be comfortable with the changes.

"If the feng shui master asks them to do something that sounds weird, it probably isn't right," she said. "The goal is to create something in harmony. It should not stick out. The real feng shui has to do with a love of nature and the basics of physics. You don't need to know someone feng shui-ed a room to feel comfortable."

Bembenek said the process was worth the effort because it sets Pala apart from its competition. "Every casino in our market has similar product in the gaming space, if not exactly the same," he said. "What differentiates casinos is the level of comfort and attention to detail and being focused on making the experience for their guests the best it can possibly be. It's critically important, and we wouldn't change a thing in the process. We hope the end result in that effort is visible to our guests."

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## Credit

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**Bio:** Beth Kormanik is managing editor of Buyer Interactive and editor of Hotel Interactive. She previously covered politics, government and higher education for the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville, Fla. While at the Times-Union she won several state and regional awards, including the 2008 Freedom of Information award from the Florida Society of News Editors and the top honor in the 2007 Florida Bar media awards for large newspapers.



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