



Developer finds balance with Eastern Ways

BY IAN T. SHEARN

April 4, 2008. On any given day in America, there is a panel of real estate experts somewhere exploring the nuances of sustainable development or green certification or smart growth and the new urbanism.

These are the hot buzz words for today's trend-conscious real estate developers.

But Tarragon, a high-density urban home builder, has taken it up a metaphysical notch.

When planning a \$90 million luxury residential development project in Ber-

gen County, where most of the buyers would be of Asian descent, the New York City firm hired Alex Stark, a nationally renowned expert in feng shui, the ancient Chinese practice that uses design to achieve harmony with one's environment.

Ultimately, many of Stark's recommendations became part of the building-serving notice that in a state where the Asian population continues to grow, the little things can become important marketing tools.

When first broached with idea by one of his employees, Tarragon President William Rosato had some pause.

FENG SHUI
THE BUSINESS OF



Alex Stark, right above, a feng shui consultant, and William Rosato, president of real estate developer Tarragon, tour one of the model apartments at the One Hudson Park development in Edgewater. Below, from left, Stark explains the pool's feng shui; a model bedroom in the development.

"I was a skeptic," Rosato said. "It was a new thing for me."

Stark, normally brought in on the tail end of projects, was made a Day 1 member of the design team for One Hudson Park in Edgewater.

It didn't take long for Rosato to buy in when Stark started "tweaking" some of the design elements of the IS-story high-rise. The consultant told him he needed to move the front entrance to the north side, from the south side, of the building. Stark also reconfigured the lobby to make it two stories high, instead of one, and he moved the back door so it wasn't lined up with the front door. He even banned the bad-fortune numeral 4 from the building.

And Rosato didn't blink when Stark performed a traditional feng shui blessing during the ground-breaking ceremony in 2005 -- scattering a concoction of rice, herbs and high-grain alcohol -- to ensure the health of the workers and keep the project on budget and bring prosperity (money, health and longevity) to the future inhabitants.

With only 18 of the building's 96 units yet to be sold, Rosato is pleased -- especially since Tarragon sales associate Honey Hwang said more than half the owners decided to buy there because of the feng shui applications. The units sell for as much as \$1.7 million.

"I'm not a skeptic anymore," Rosato said.

astrology and shamanism, the ancient tradition based on reverence to the earth and reciprocity between all living beings.

He has taught feng shui around the world and has consulted on buildings from Amman to Nashville. His client list ranges from Morgan Stanley Dean Witter to the Colombian Coffee Federation. He is currently helping to design feng shui communities in California, Minnesota and West Virginia.

He once turned down an offer to consult for a casino, a company, he said, that was more concerned with human manipulation than harmony.

"They use many architectural devices to trick the customer, make them feel insecure," Stark said.

BUSINESS SAVVY

Stark wouldn't disclose which casino it was, but did say it wasn't one of Donald Trump's, who imports his own feng shui experts directly from China to help with his Asian-financed luxury high-rises.

"It was really recommended by the Asian buyers, and I said, 'I'll tell you what folks, we're going to start looking into this because so many people started asking,'" Trump said in recent NBC Dateline interview. "It's important to adhere to the principles of a large group of people that truly believe these principles, and if they believe them, then that's good enough for me."



AN INTEGRATIVE RESUME

Stark wasn't always a consultant of Eastern principles. A graduate of the Yale University School of Architecture, the Peruvian native started studying feng shui in earnest about 25 years ago under the tutelage of a Cuban herbalist in London. He soon abandoned his architecture practice, and became a consultant in feng shui.

"It's too much fun telling architects what to do," he said.

While feng shui's acceptance is growing in the United States, Stark said, it has yet to be incorporated in the curricula of higher education, as is common in universities of Asia and Europe. Many Americans incorrectly think feng shui is a spiritual practice; it's more mathematical and analytical, Stark added.

But Stark is no one-trick pony. He also is a student of

This helps to explain why Patrick Connelly, vice president of asset management Matrix Development Group, was cooling his heels for an hour and a half one Friday evening in the summer of 2003. He was waiting for a potential tenant's feng shui expert to show up at a warehouse site in Monroe Township that was leased to a Chinese company.

After an hour long walk-through, the site passed feng shui muster: The building was facing southeast and there were no high-tension wires or trees to impede "a positive energy flow," Connelly was told. With a little landscaping, the firm could store car headlights there.

The Chinese company later built a trellised meditation area for the warehouse workers.

Ian T. Shearn May be reached at ishearn@starledger.com or (973) 392-1671