

Space Centered

Feng Shui: restoring balance at an office near you.

September 2003

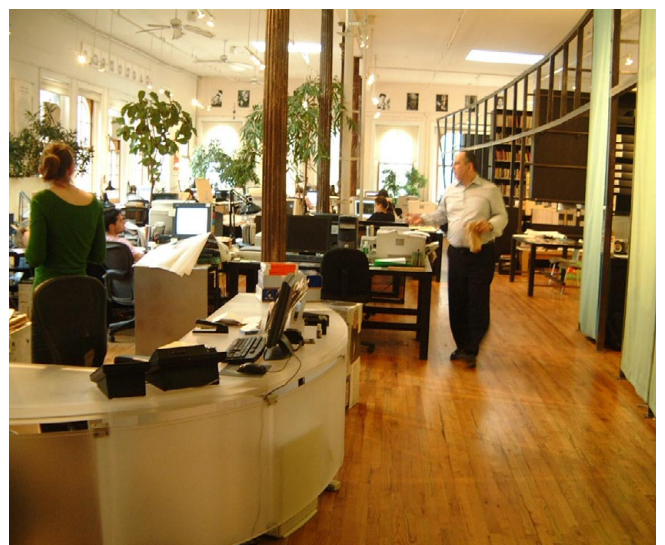
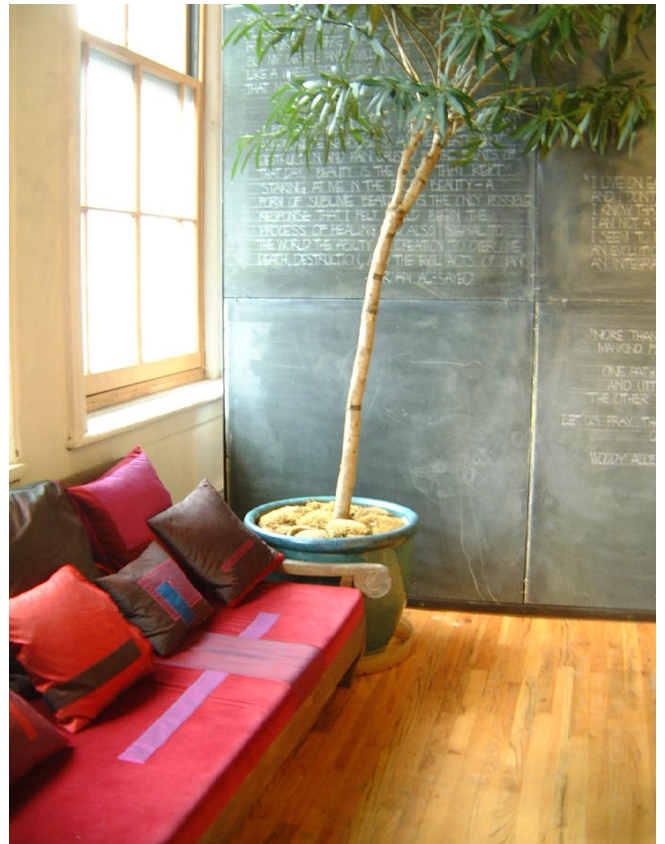
By: Brett Martin

There comes a point in a discussion of the precepts of feng shui -- the ancient Chinese discipline of environmental design -- when the eyes of a nonbeliever tend to glaze over: "CEOs shouldn't sit next to the front door." Okay, that makes sense. "Your desk should be near a window." Yes, yes. We're with you. "Don't use toxic materials." Well, of course. "Place a red cloth under your phone, and money will come in." Come again?

It would be tempting to write the whole thing off as a wacky New Age trend that elicits snickers were it not for the fact that so many un-wacky people seem to be taking it seriously. British Airways and Virgin Atlantic, as well as a number of smaller businesses, have spent thousands of dollars beyond design expenses on a consultation.

Boston-based ad agency Modernista (of Hummer campaign fame) imported a consultant from Taiwan to assess its two 5,000-square-foot lofts. Now wind chimes tinkle gently from several corners, fish tanks and clocks occupy various spots, and employees sit in quadrants based on their times and dates of birth and the points of the compass. "There was some prime real estate lost," says co-founder and creative director Lance Jensen. "The finance guy was stuck in the middle of the room, which didn't make him too happy." Nevertheless, Jensen considers the consulting fee of \$1,000 money well spent. "It was a bonding experience for the agency," he says, presumably leaving out the stranded finance guy. "When you're inside, it's sometimes hard to see the big picture. And I don't know if it was feng shui or the economy, but things certainly didn't get worse because of it."

Before you decide whether it's for you and your business, understand that feng shui involves more than rearranging furniture and buying goldfish. "It's as broad as engineering or architecture," says Alex Stark, a feng shui practitioner in Brooklyn, N.Y. "You could take 12 different practitioners and get 12 different versions of what it is." Practitioners do agree that feng shui involves connecting a space with natural forces such as light, sound, temperature, even topography to enhance energy



"It's no New Age fairy tale," says Ron Pompei. "People were always interrupting me with problems. I was a nervous wreck. The consultant suggested putting an office manager there. Now I get more work done, and I'm more relaxed."



Instant Feng Shui

Too cheap or skeptical to spring for a consultation? Here are a few things you can do to right wayward energy, as suggested by R.D. Chin, architect, interior designer, feng shui practitioner, and author of *Feng Shui Revealed* (Clarkson Potter).

Location, location, location: Desks should be placed in an “arm-chair configuration”: Your back should be to the wall, with plants or cabinets on either side of you to create a safe, protective environment.

Let the outside in: A feng shui principle equates water with money -- a fountain or aquarium in your office fosters prosperity and wealth. Plants symbolize life and growth.

Assume the position: Never sit in front of or with your back to a door or window, which leaves you exposed and vulnerable. Have a clear view of both, but without being in direct line of either. If your back is to the door, place a small mirror to reflect anyone entering your office. If your back is to a window, place something on the ledge or sit in a high-backed chair. No windows? Mirrors help, even if they’ll never beat a view.

Color me skeptical? Offices should maintain a palette of colors from the elements of fire (red), earth (orange or yellow), water (blue), wood (green or brown), and metal (white or gray). A rainbow of Pendaflex files won’t cut it, but walls and furniture in these colors will.

Look up: Avoid desks located under beams, uneven or slanted ceilings. Or hang something that hides a beam, but “you have to have the right intention.” So putting up, say, a disco ball wouldn’t fix the problem? “Absolutely not.”

flow in one’s environment. The quality of the flow, or chi, can manifest itself in anything from profitability to productivity.

“A beam over a desk carries tension and compression, making you vulnerable to headaches,” says Stark. “One Black Hat sect [the small but high-profile subset with a crystal-clutching image problem] cure is hanging bamboo flutes from the beam. In a corporate office you’d be laughed at. Instead, hang fabric panels from them, like Starbucks does.” Whether they do so because they’re shielding milk frothers from bad vibes is debatable (it might just be that exposed beams are unsightly). But feng shui isn’t short of fans.

“It’s no New Age fairy tale,” says Ron Pompei, owner of New York City architecture firm Pompei A.D., whose desk once occupied the center of his company’s space. “People were always interrupting me with problems. I was a nervous wreck. The consultant suggested putting an office manager there. Now I get more work done, and I’m more relaxed.”

Feng shui isn’t short of skeptics, either, who say that such suggestions by any other name are simply good design or common sense. “The design community is prone to fads on occasion,” says Terry McDermott, of McDermott Planning & Design Inc. in Greenwood Village, Colo. “I’m old enough to remember when pyramid power was big. People were building pyramids in their homes out of sticks and sitting under them to ‘glean the power.’ This reminds me exactly of that. The tenets of feng shui say, ‘Never put a cash register in line with the front door because money will flow out,’ which is just another way of saying someone can run out with the cash.”

A stricter system of accreditation would help, acknowledges Nurit Schwarzbaum, Northeast regional director of the International Feng Shui Guild. Anybody can hang out a shingle as a feng shui consultant (and there are those moonlighting as tarot card readers who do). But, she suggests, time may prove the discipline’s best ally. “Other Eastern disciplines, like yoga or tai chi, seemed crazy when they first came to the West,” Schwarzbaum says. “Now they’re completely mainstream.” ■