

*At the cutting edge of medicine is the recognition that space,  
just like a person, can be a healer.*

*But first, the space itself must be healed.*

*Enter the doctor: Alex Stark*

# IN THE MODERN TEMPLE OF HEALING

BY LOUISE DANIELLE PALMER



**B**eth Israel Medical Center has always been a trailblazing kind of hospital. It is known for pushing the envelope, which might explain why, when it hired Woodson Merrell, M.D., and handed him \$5 million to open a top-notch integrative medicine center, and he then hired Alex Stark, a shaman and feng shui consultant whose tool bag contains crystals, feathers, and, well, leopard-skinned pipes and turtle-shelled rattles, no one blinked. Merrell's mission was to create a sacred healing space, and Stark was recommended as the man for the job.

Stark is a Yale-trained architect who was born and raised in Peru. He is also a self-styled energy master and ceremonialist who for more than a decade has been “treating” the homes of New York City’s literati, consulting nationally with health-care facilities on designing and building healing environments, and lecturing and teaching internationally on sacred geometry and architecture. He is part of a quiet movement in progressive health care to ensure the space in which patients are treated matters as much as the treatment itself. Over the past decade, Stark has helped bring this once-marginalized body of knowledge into the mainstream. The new ICU at New York’s Bellevue Hospital as well as Beth Israel’s new nursing center bear his mark. So does Village Care of New York,

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALEX STARK







Architect shaman Alex Stark with the tools of his trade, (left) smudging a feather used during a house clearing for a client with health problems, and (above) preparing to bless an artist's space for creativity and success.





**In this medical center, doctors put a premium on creating the space and the energetics to promote optimal healing for their patients.**

a provider of care for AIDS patients and the elderly, and the Center for Discovery, a 500-acre state-of-the-art pediatric facility for severely impaired children. His work goes well beyond master planning, design, and architectural adjustments: he performs ceremonial blessings, healings of the land, and staff training in energy work as well.

When Stark was hired as a consultant to Beth Israel's Continuum Center for Health & Healing, Merrell had just signed the lease on a 13,000-square-foot space in a commercial building in Manhattan. A highly respected physician and professor of medicine at Columbia University, Merrell wanted to create a center integrating the best of Western medicine with traditional indigenous medicine and mind-body therapies. The center would be home to more than 40 hand-picked specialists in holistic family medicine, gynecology and obstetrics, acupuncture, homeopathy, herbal medicine, biofeedback, and mind-body psychology. He was convinced that in order to succeed, he had to create a space that would actually promote healing.

Merrell thought Stark would make some minor design suggestions, but Stark ended up convincing Merrell to scrap the early architectural plans and start from scratch. The building — and the plan — Stark encountered were, in his words, “barely suitable.”

“It had been empty for years and felt abandoned and dead, lacking vitality,” Stark explains. “Because it was a commercial office space, it also felt too hard and impersonal to meet its new purpose of compassionate healing.”

Stark said it also suffered from geopathic stress, which is damage to the earth surface upon which the building sat. This damage was caused when the building's foundations were blasted into Manhattan's granite bedrock. It was a common problem, but a serious one. Like battle scars on the face of an old warrior, he explained, this stress had become part of the space's identity: “The site was as sick as any patient, and in need of lots of healing.” If it sounds like Stark viewed the space much like we might view a person, he did.

## Stepping into the Invisible World

Stark was a self-described cynic and materialist in his early days as an ambitious architect. It was a ghost, of all things, that brought him out of his head and back to earth, forcing him to abandon his strict, linear, rational perspective on pretty much everything. As he tells it, the ghost appeared in his apartment shortly after he was married. “Neither my wife nor I believed in ghosts, or anything ‘New-Agey’ for that matter, but it was as real as the kitchen counter it favored,” he recalls. Unable to rest in the presence of this phantom, they sought out help from their friends, who recommended



**NORTHWEST**

"Leadership, Helpfulness, & Altruism"  
Main Patient Waiting Areas;  
Interactive Learning

**CENTER**

"Harmony & Balance"  
Entry Corridor with River  
of Life Ceiling Cloth;  
Egg-shaped Reception  
as Symbol of Rebirth

**WEST**

"Creativity & Pleasure"  
Patient Waiting Areas;  
Library; Internet Access

**SOUTHWEST**

"Relationships, Steady  
Growth, Progress"  
Main Conference Room

**NORTH**

"Healing & Tranquility"  
Main Consult & Therapy Rooms

**NORTHEAST**

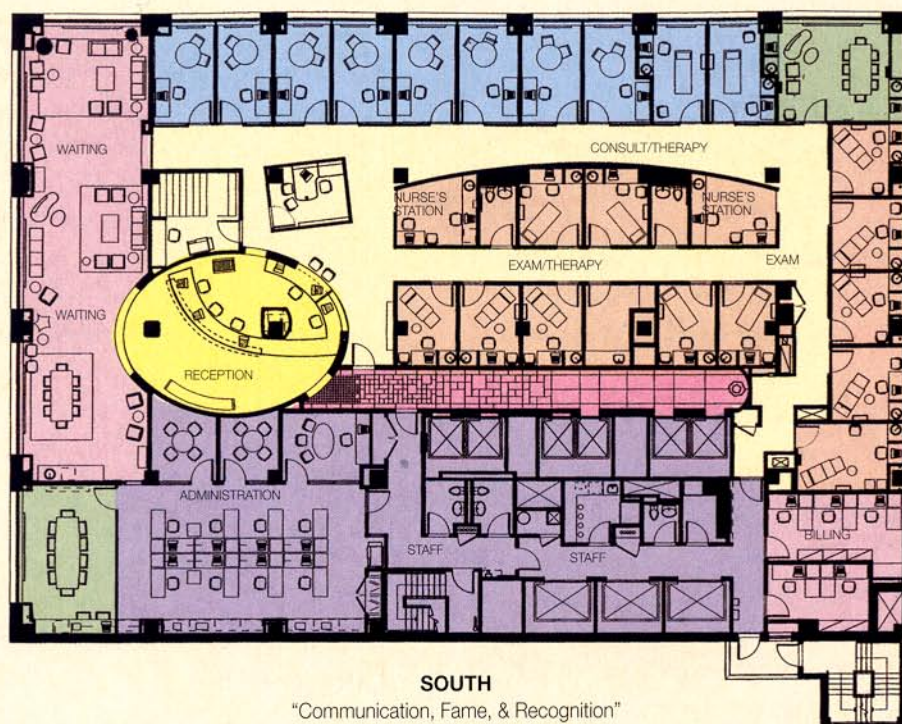
"Identity,  
Self-Knowledge,  
Competitiveness"  
Staff Meeting  
Room

**EAST**

"New Beginnings"  
Exam, OB-GYN

**SOUTHEAST**

"Wealth & Power,  
Prosperity, Fortune"  
Billing, Accounts,  
Research



**Maximizing energy: the feng shui floor plan of Beth Israel's integrative medicine center in downtown Manhattan.**

a feng shui expert. Stark had never heard of feng shui, but he decided to try it out of desperation.

After the guy he hired made a few alterations to the bathroom and the apartment layout, the ghost went away, leaving Stark with questions: How was this phenomenon solved so simply? How could a "spiritual" problem be addressed with an architectural remedy? Did that mean architecture had a spiritual dimension? Determined to find the answers, he threw himself into studying ancient traditions that addressed the spiritual or energetic dimension of space and matter: Greco-Roman architecture, feng shui, the Vastu Vedas (the Indian version of feng shui), and Native American, Celtic, and Peruvian shamanism.

Fifteen years of apprenticeship and study gave him a new understanding of energy, and the way it moves through and affects space, which he now combines with his architectural training. Although Stark practices a complex mix of shamanic ritual and classic feng shui, this understanding can be boiled down to a few basic principles, which he applies to his work at places like the center at Beth Israel. These principles also help us understand how to work optimally with our own spaces, in our offices and homes (see sidebar, page 63).

First, he says, everything we consider inanimate, including space and materials, is alive and has intelligence. As a result, we can interact with space and the energies it contains. This energy is known to the Chinese as *chi*, to Indians as *prana*, and to Peruvians as *kawsay*. Humans require the support of this energy to live and thrive.

Second, this invisible energetic or spiritual world influences a space. In other words, just because you can't see it, doesn't mean it isn't there. Spirits and energies (from the past or the present, from the surrounding rivers, land, and mountains) exist within the places that contain them. In the West, this was understood by the Greeks as the *genius loci*, a term for "the spirit of the place."

The third is that "energy maintenance" is important in a space to hold all aspects of life in balance. Energy moves along invisible pathways. This movement can be enhanced by rituals as well as by architecture itself; it can also be blocked by physical obstructions, mental patterns, and other factors. As a result, some places are better than others for humans to inhabit; some places can either damage or enhance health, wealth, and relationships (this is basic feng shui). And, just like a person who has been abused or

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is fatigued, a place might need healing and rehabilitation. This begins with honoring the spirits of the space and the earth itself. Which brings us back to Beth Israel.

## The Healing Begins

The first order of business for Stark was to review the rough architectural plans for the center. Merrell wanted to have the entrance on the first floor with a commercial area selling supplements and books, and stairs leading up to the front desk and waiting area. He also planned to have the office spaces facing west along a bank of windows. Merrell says Stark immediately revealed the folly of this plan to him.

“He told me that the energy for the entrance I planned was all wrong from a feng shui perspective, and that something had gone bust down there. I called the superintendent, and sure enough, a health food store had recently gone out of business on the first floor. He also asked me what the most important part of the center was, and I said the patient. In that case, he said, the spiritual power center of the place would have to be the waiting room — an area I had set aside for our offices. You could see the architect’s jaw dropping as Stark verbally ripped up our design, but by the end, we were all totally in sync.”

Next, Stark enlisted Barbara Glickstein, R.N., one of the center’s founders, to help him with the first stages of clearing and blessing the space and the earth upon which it lay. They met one night at the site where Stark went to work creating altars with offerings of flowers, liquor, and oranges in energetically-depleted spots. Stark began the ceremony, invoking his spiritual helpers and the powers of the four directions, using both feng shui and Peruvian shamanic ceremonial principles. Glickstein can’t remember all the tools he pulled out of his bag or how he used them, but she remembers the finale, when they walked around making noise, all the while

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envisioning that the ruckus they were making was forcing all negative energies out of the space.

“We walked around clapping loudly for a long time,” Glickstein says. “I remember that at one point, as we approached the corner which looked out onto Fifth Avenue, I noticed two men in the building across the way. They must have wondered what we were doing because they stood up and applauded us back. It was very comical. I was a novice, moving from cynicism to belief.”

Glickstein says she has learned a lot about her mission, and her relationship to the land, from Stark. The importance of honoring the earth, which Stark is especially attuned to, was striking to her. She became a convert, she recalls, during a later ceremony that Stark conducted to bless the space just before construction began. “It was very beautiful, and it really contributed to the sacredness of our work of helping people heal in their lives, and the honor we have in doing that each day,” she says. Stark also conducted a final ceremony with the entire staff just before opening.

## Making the Hospital Feel Like Home

It took months to complete the energetic fine-tuning of the space, during which time Stark did multiple rituals, including a kind of “earth acupuncture” designed to heal the geopathic stress created by the scarred rock upon which the building stood. He also worked closely with “green” architect Robin Guenther on minute details that have a subtle effect on the way a person feels in the space. I was particularly struck when I stepped off the elevator. I walked down a hallway made of tiles that got smaller and smaller as I approached the entrance, located underneath a piece of undulating crystal-embedded cloth hung from the ceiling. The idea is to slow down your energy, and it worked.

The door leading to the front desk area is set at an angle and opens into a circular, darkened room full of natural materials, with a calming, protective, womb-like feel to it. A beautiful hand-crafted meditation bench lines the walls, which are made of wood slats. The waiting room itself is light and airy, with couches set around hand-thrown rugs and a library where patients can read or surf the Web for information sites selected and organized by the center’s librarian. I felt like I was in my own living room.

The examining and treatment rooms are lined up in a row, and placed according to feng shui principles governing space, but there are far fewer hard angles and square rooms in the space than you might expect in a medical facility, giving

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## Healing Place

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it an open, winding, meandering feel. This enhances the energy flow, according to Stark, which is especially important in a place where people are ill. The patient rooms are in the north to promote healing, while the staff areas are south to promote harmonious communication, according to feng shui. The OB-GYN rooms are in the east, the place of new beginnings. Merrill and I pass under ceiling tiles made of seaweed, past walls lined with Thai bamboo, something that makes Merrell, who wants to tell Stark stories as we walk around, particularly proud.

"Here's my favorite," he says excitedly. "I brought Alex to my apartment to do a consultation and made all the changes he suggested. The next morning my daughter came running to my wife to tell her there was a bird in the living room. We called the doorman, who happened to know a lot about birds. He came up to take a look and said, 'Oh my God, that's a very rare form of white dove you never see in New York.' It had flown down the building chimney and into our apartment — on the eighth floor of a 14-story building. Truly remarkable things happen around Alex."

We pass a wall painted bright red in order to enliven the "dead" space facing a bank of elevators. "Another Alex thing," he says. The center's budget covers regular energetic "tune-ups" from Stark; Glickstein says it isn't unusual for a crystal to drop out of nowhere, or for a wind-chime to be found hanging in a forgotten corner of the center. It's no wonder they are big Stark fans. He won a feng shui award from the Boston Society of Architects for the center, now considered one of the best integrative medicine facilities in the country.

"Whatever success we're having," Glickstein humbly notes, "is about remembering we're part of this evolutionary model of changing the way we do things, beginning with honoring Mother Earth. ♦





# Make Your Own Home a Temple

Often, we locate the sacred outside ourselves: in a church, in a city, or in the temples of wilderness itself. There is no reason we need to place what is most special, most elevated and most loved, somewhere outside the place where we live out our lives. In fact, it is crucial to do the opposite by creating sacred space in your own home.

Every culture has its own tradition of cleansing and honoring the home. In feng shui, intention is the agent of energetic change. In Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, rice is used to feed the "hungry ghosts" of a place, as well as mantras, mudras, and mental power. Native Americans smudge (burn herbs). Celts use offerings and food.

Here's a ritual to help you clear, bless, and sanctify the place you live in. It's one I use in my own home. The instructions that follow are a combination of Balinese, Native American, and Celtic practices. When practiced regularly, this ritual can bring happiness, health, and good fortune into your life, even if you aren't sure it works. What is important is to do it with the intention to bless your house or apartment.

If you are ill, bleeding, menstruating, or pregnant, please don't perform the clearing. The ritual should be done at least twice a year, preferably on the winter and summer solstices, times that are charged with the energies of transformation in nature. It's also a good idea to do a clearing whenever there is sickness, misfortune, or conflict in the home. Remember to work with joy and create beauty, both of which are containers of the sacred.



## Items Needed

- Fresh cut flowers
- A platter with cookies, cakes, or other treats
- Quality incense (sticks or granules)
- Coarse sea salt
- Tea lights
- Platters or serving dishes and incense holders
- Rattles, drums, or other noisemakers
- Bells or chimes (any type will do; Balinese or Tibetan temple bells work especially well)

1. The day before the clearing, clean and vacuum your home thoroughly. Before you begin, take a bath and dress in nice, comfortable clothing. Pick a time when you are in good spirits to begin — when you won't be interrupted, preferably during the day.
2. Sprinkle sea salt across the thresholds of all exterior doors in your home to protect your space. Cover food, including bread, that is not sealed in a box, jar, or other container such as the refrigerator.
3. Place a platter with sweets and a platter with incense and candles in the center of a table in the center of your home. Cut the flower heads off the stems and arrange them around the sweets or on a separate plate. Be conscious of their color, aroma, and feeling, as you are trying to create an object of beauty as an offering to the spirit of your home. You can also set up a similar platter in each room of your home, which adds to the beauty of the ritual.
4. As you light the candle and the incense on the main flower offering, try to connect with whatever spiritual power or force you are familiar with. Ask to be blessed and assisted in the clearing.
5. Once you feel that you have connected to this spiritual force, make a silent prayer in which you thank the home for all the gifts it has provided to your family (shelter, warmth, friends, learning, love). Connect to the joy of living in this place. Then direct your attention to the land under and around your home and thank it also for the gifts it has provided you and you family.
6. Walk through your entire home and allow yourself to see it as if for the first time. Return to the table and, starting with this room, burn incense in all spaces in the house. Make sure you don't forget closets, cupboards, attics, or basements. Be careful not to start a fire!
7. Now go through the house and all closets, attics, and basements again, clapping or making noises with the rattle or drum as loudly as you can. Imagine that any negativity in the house is leaving, frightened by the loud noise. When you have finished, wash your hands in cold water and return to the table.
8. Picking up the bells or chimes, walk around the whole house and ring them in each room. Imagine that healing energy is entering the home. Ring as much as you feel is necessary.
9. Finally, return to the table and spend a few more minutes thanking your home for its gifts once again. Thank the spirit and the land. Finish with this final act of gratitude; spend a few moments in silence. The space clearing is now done.
10. Being cautious of any fire hazards, let the candles and the incense burn through. If possible, leave the flower offerings and the cookies out overnight and try not to partake. Discard in the morning.
11. Enjoy your home and the land it rests upon.

—L.D.P.