

Power Spot

Jane Wells consults feng shui and geomancy master Alex Stark to uncover some hidden secrets about the lay of the land.



ON A BRILLIANT, CRISP DAY LAST DECEMBER I stood by a bonfire with a group of luminaries on the grounds of the Aspen Institute. We were watching a feng shui master named Alex Stark conduct a “despacho,” a shamanic ceremony that included the burning of an offering we had all lovingly created to bring good fortune.

In this case, we were blessing a piece of land. But the assembled crowd was no throng of aging Aspen hippies. It was corporate and 21st-century moneyed Aspen, taking a moment out of the busy Christmas season to honor forces and powers no empirical evidence could verify.

For me the despacho was the highlight of the season. It also conjured memories of magical moments from my childhood in England, when each Christmas I would go with my parents to see Peter Pan. A character would ask the audience, “Do you believe in fairies?” When a wag in the audience invariably shouted out, “No!” we were

Alive in the Mountains: the town of Aspen is surrounded by three feng shui dragons positioned in the landscape.

warned that each time someone says, “I don’t believe in fairies,” a fairy dies. Since then I have believed in both fairies and magic. Despachos fit perfectly.

Now I live in Aspen, a magical place in many ways, not to mention a boomtown these days. Ask any realtor in town—if you can get one on the phone. When I try, all agents are invariably out showing property or writing up contracts. “Aspen has it all,” one highly influential local told me. Natural beauty, culture, great food, brilliant skiing: You name it, we’ve got it. But I had long been wondering about the nature of this magic—was it literal as well as metaphorical?

I wanted to explore why I’m here and not rapping away on my computer in say, Dotsero. So I called Alex Stark, feng shui and geomancy master, and leader of the land-blessing ceremony I just had taken part in. I asked him to help me examine the success of Aspen through the prism of these ancient arts. Feng shui isn’t new to Aspen and some local architects, including Michael Lipkin and Jeff Berkus, even nod in the direction of its principles. Most

Views trends



The town of Aspen (above), under the shadow of the Maroon Bells.

Below, a map of the area.

Opposite: the "dragon's" that surround Aspen.

realtors, like Jill Shore, have tales of clients employing witching techniques to justify spending \$1,000 a square foot on their homes.

Many of us have made sure our beds face in the "right" direction or, in my case, placed a mirror on a roof gutter to deflect the negative energy of Shadow Mountain, but I wanted Stark to look at the bigger picture and he did, with amazing results.

Feng shui recognizes that certain land formations are in and of themselves favorable to humans. They are called dragons. The simplest of these is known as the Armchair Dragon, because it looks like an armchair, within which a site will sit, cradled by two arms and supported from behind by the black turtle (a higher mountain). A classic example of this is Rio de Janeiro.

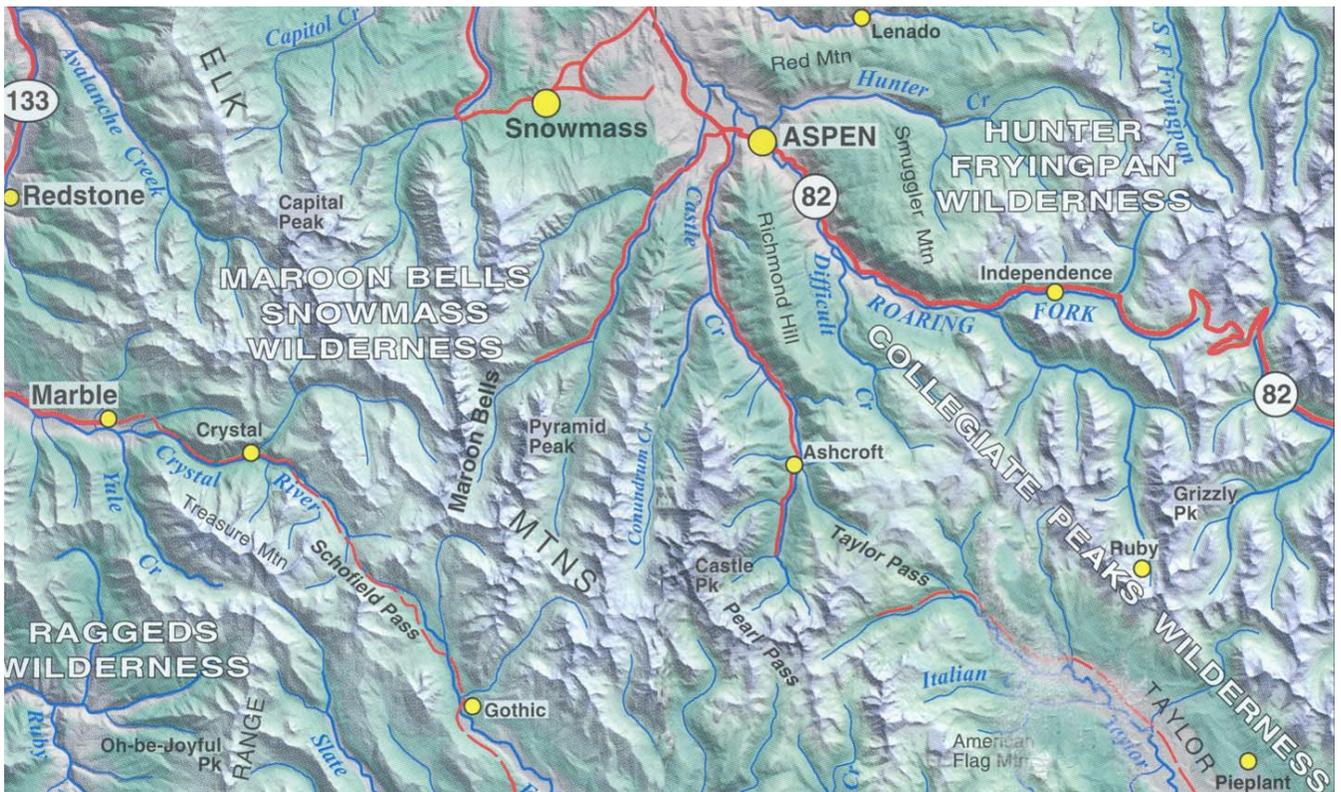
Here in this valley Stark identified three major dragons. The first has the fabulous name Golden Bull Pulls Royal Chariot. This can be seen in the circle of mountains that surrounds Independence Lake and has a spur that goes all the way down to Red Butte (see illustration). This type of formation is known in feng shui as a "kingmaker" site because it will produce

great wealth and power. We all know of a few kings (and queens) in Aspen.

The next dragon he identified is the dramatic Tiger Reaches for the Sky, which occurs in the range that runs from Pearl Pass through Highlands all the way into town. Stark explained that this formation is known to create places of great influence and for its reach to other, far-away places, implying an international political influence. This made perfect sense when I think of the Aspen Institute and its recent Ideas Festival.

The third is called Phoenix in Flight, which affects Snowmass, although its energy is felt all the way to Aspen. It signifies a more spiritual energy, and it is still very powerful here in town as well as in Snowmass. This may explain why The Anderson Ranch has for so long been a creative center and why winter tourists flock to Snowmass even though we locals sometimes scoff at its charms.

As if these "earth dragons" were not propitious enough, Aspen is also blessed with what feng shui calls powerful "water dragons" through its rivers. Stark told me, "This combination is so strong that the power of Aspen is only now beginning to be felt, and this location has the



potential to become, over the centuries, a place of even greater influence." So it is clear that from a feng shui perspective Aspen's success is a no-brainer.

I found a few naysayers and skeptics like Sid Schneider, a homebuilder both here and in Sun Valley, who eagerly told me, "Feng shui laughs in the face of an educated architect. I'd put it in the same category as voodoo,"

I have always had a lot of respect for the power of voodoo, but it wasn't the skeptics that made me raise my own questions about feng shui's five-star appraisal of Aspen's power, and as a Yale-educated architect, Alex Stark could certainly give Sid and his fellow skeptics a run for their money. I know enough about Eastern philosophy to realize there is always a need for balance, some yin for all Aspen's yang. So I asked Stark whether there was a negative to all this munificence, and sure enough, he explained that all the bounty of the land comes with a price, if not a dark side. Aspen's dark side is greed. Plus, he warned that all this power lurking in our mountains and rivers requires enlightened leadership. The formation called Tiger Reaches for the Sky runs a risk of misuse of power and an op-

portunity for authoritarianism.

Now the picture was beginning to resemble the Aspen I know, with all its blessings but its power-mongers too, who sometimes run amok through paradise. I checked all this out with an Aspen-based shaman and healer, and he concurred with Stark: "We all have an ethical and moral responsibility to be stewards of this land, to show positive leadership because our story is the land's story."

So the next time you are at a record-breaking closing, go ahead and thank your decorator, your architect, your developer, and your realtor. But don't forget to thank the land itself, and if you are feeling especially spiritual, you might also thank the Pachamama--earth mother--too.

Yesterday I went back to the site of the winter solstice bonfire at the Aspen Institute, to see how the land was doing, and to my amazement, I spotted a snake sunning itself on a rock. I called Stark immediately, and he reassured me that this was a very positive sign that all was well with the land. Then he asked if I had also seen a fairy.

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The "dragons" that surround Aspen: (from top) "Phoenix in Flight", "Tiger Reaches for the Sky", and "Golden Bull pulls Royal Chariot". Each corresponds to a mountain range that gives the land power.

