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DECORATING THE FENG SHUI WAY

By MEREDITH GOAD, Staff Writer
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SOUTH PORTLAND — Edwige Christensen bought a beautiful condo overlooking Portland Harbor and the city's skyline. But she had trouble sleeping there. She could not get comfortable. The "energy" of the bedroom just didn't feel right. After tossing and turning night after night, she decided to call in a Feng Shui consultant.

Feng Shui is the ancient Chinese art of examining the quality and flow of Qi (pronounced "chee") — life force or energy — that believers say flows through landscapes and buildings. Feng Shui followers say that it's the same energy that makes someone intuitively like or dislike a house. Plenty of good Qi gives a room that good feeling when you walk into it; a lack of good Qi makes you feel uncomfortable, though you may not know why.

Christensen's consultant told her that her bedroom indeed had some "energy problems," and that the electromagnetic fields from the big television and the adjustable bed in the room weren't helping matters. There was a lot of "bad Qi."



According to feng shui principles, hallways should be short, with the bedroom going off at an angle rather than at the end, says homeowner Lani Wharton. Wharton used Feng Shui to guide her in the design of her Brunswick home.

Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski

'REALLY HELPS YOU MOVE FORWARD'

So Christensen made some adjustments to the room — which has since become the guest room — and ultimately moved into a second, smaller bedroom with better energy. After "feng shui-ing" the rest of her condo, she's now happy with the harmony of the place and sleeping well every night. "It feels like this is my little heaven," said Christensen, who is a Realtor.

Feng Shui practitioners are designers in their own way. They say they can increase the Qi in a property by changing home and garden designs, moving or adding furniture and other objects, working with plants or light in a room, or using the right colors and materials in the decor.

While a decorator or interior designer places a big emphasis on the visual appearance of a room, a Feng Shui practitioner is just as concerned with how a room "feels," said Susan Pildis Samara of the New England School of Feng Shui in Chesire, Conn.

"It's really a way of making your environment reflect your goals," Samara said. "It really helps you move forward. It's kind of a metaphor for where you want to go."

For example, in the world of Feng Shui, opportunities symbolically come through the entry way of a home, Samara said, so that entry way should be unblocked, attractive and easily accessible. "You want to try to have your bed in a position that's empowering to you, and that's a position of being able to see the door but not being in line with it," she said. "And that goes for your desk as well. All of that comes from the very direct principles of Feng Shui."

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF FENG SHUI

Feng Shui is an ancient concept that literally means wind and water in Chinese. The roots of Feng Shui go back 5,000 years. Now, westerners have given it a new and more contemporary twist. Many architects, big corporations, and even the likes of Donald Trump don't build or move into a structure without first consulting a Feng Shui practitioner.

Learning about Feng Shui can be frustrating because there are so many different schools, or branches, and at times it appears as if they offer conflicting advice.

The form school, for example, describes energy flow through the folds of a landscape. The compass school uses compass directions to determine which way a bed should be oriented, or the location of a home's "wealth and prosperity corner."

In America, most people who follow Feng Shui focus on simple applications and easy changes — move a desk, paint a door red — that come with high expectations.

While that approach may work, it's better to step back and look at the larger picture first, said Werner Brandmaier, founder of the the Institute of Feng Shui & Geopathology in Portland. People "think that they have to move the furniture, and then they change the world," Brandmaier said. "They have to fix the energy of the place first before they do this finer work."

Brandmaier, a native of Austria, has a master's in electrical engineering and spent more than a decade working in high-tech medicine in a large university hospital in Vienna. He is a more traditional Feng Shui practitioner, having studied with Feng Shui masters such as Raymond Lo, Karen Kingston, Lillian Too, Roger Green, William Spear and many others.

Brandmaier advocates first doing an evaluation of the "earth energies" flowing through and around a home. If these energies are out of whack, the result is called Geopathic Stress, which drains Qi and creates a stressful environment that ultimately may affect a homeowner's health. "You can only get as much energy in the house as there is outside," Brandmaier said.

While some people may view this as so much New Age silliness, others swear by the practice. Some of it seems to intuitively make sense.



Feng shui expert Werner Brandmaier displays some of the tools of his trade, including divining rods and power discs. Brandmaier is founder of the Institute of Feng Shui and Geopathology in Portland.

Staff photo by Doug Jones

ELIMINATE GEOPATHIC STRESS

Brandmaier says, for example, that areas of Geopathic Stress can be seen in nature — trees and bushes that grow in these stressed areas often become diseased and sick, or won't grow at all. That's where Brandmaier starts when he does a consultation. Brandmaier charges \$100 an hour, and a typical consultation usually takes two hours.

"The first and most important thing is to make sure there is enough Qi in a place and no Geopathic Stress in places where you spend a lot of time," he said.

That's what Lani Wharton and her husband Sam decided to do when they built their dream home in Brunswick. A consultation from Brandmaier had helped them sell their previous home in Portland, so before they even broke ground on their new property they had him come out and inspect the land.

"If you cut down trees, you have to do this in a proper way, otherwise you disturb the energy of the land there," Brandmaier said.

As Brandmaier instructed, she walked the land, sat in the woods, and tried to "communicate" her intention of being respectful of the land. When construction displaced some nesting birds, she built birdhouses and moved nests. Wharton also planted more than 200 trees and shrubs, including fruit trees and highbush blueberries, on the property because plants create Qi.

The house itself, covered in red cedar shingles, is inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Arts and Crafts movement. There is a front screened porch, but no front door, and the 3-foot overhang of the roof gives the structure the look of a temple.

Inside, Lani Wharton used the principles of Feng Shui wherever she could, but also relied on her own sense of what would create a nice home environment.

The home's side entrance opens into a mudroom and hallway. The stairs were once positioned right in front of the door, but Wharton took Brandmaier's advice to shift the stairs to the right. Stairs that are aligned with the door make it difficult for the Qi to flow through the house properly.

"He had me move them over because you don't want your energy to just come downstairs and go out the door, or come in the door and go up the stairs," Wharton said.

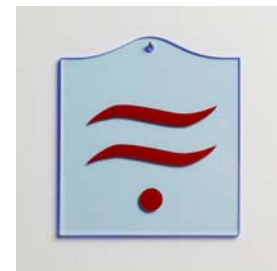
Brandmaier also helped the couple place their bed and bedroom in the best spot. And Wharton added a turn at the end of a hallway because straight lines are not good Feng Shui. The interior of the home is dominated by wood, stone and natural fibers. The floors are all wood, and televisions are hidden behind wooden doors.



A Feng Shui display of fire, water and earth sits atop the kitchen island in the home of Lani Wharton.

right: a power disc helps neutralize negative energy in a home, says Feng Shui consultant Werner Brandmaier.

Staff photo by Gordon Chibroski



CLUTTER-FREE HARMONY

Wharton suffers from seasonal affective disorder, so she wanted lots of windows and light. It just so happens that light creates good Qi as well.

Windows begin in the bedroom facing east, where the sun rises, and continue from room to room so the light will follow the couple's day all the way through the living room and screened porch on the western side of the house.

In the living room, Wharton placed the furniture in a circular arrangement, which is considered a good way to keep Qi flowing. The sofa is in the middle of the room, which doesn't dissipate the energy of the people who gather there.

Good Feng Shui requires as little clutter as possible, and Wharton's home is clutter-free.

One idea she came up with for helping to reduce clutter is using a shadow-box-style, glass coffee table in front of the sofa. She has filled the table with framed family photos, instead of allowing them to add clutter to the room. "We have a room upstairs that's for our mess," she said.

Through some French doors is a home office where Wharton's desk faces out into the living room, her back against a window. "Most people probably would have put that desk against the wall," Wharton said. "But from everything I have learned about Feng Shui, you want to be able to see people approaching you when you're working at your desk."

Wharton didn't do everything Brandmaier suggested. He said, for example, that a round dining room table would be best, but the couple chose instead a rectangular Stickley table and chairs.

To cover her bases, Wharton installed a geopathic "power disc" above the door between the living room and the screened porch. It's a plastic disc with a few red markings on it. "You put it on a wall and it neutralizes the whole building from stress," Brandmaier said. "For a scientific thinking person it's strange, at the least."

Edwige Christensen, the South Portland Realtor, also installed one of the discs in the hallway outside her kitchen. Her condo illustrates that the principles of Feng Shui can be used even in smaller spaces. Christensen has arranged her furniture to be Feng-Shui friendly. She has lots of houseplants and a Buddha to bring good Qi. There's not a bit of clutter to be seen. "You feel better, work better, think better, function better," she said. "It puts you in control in a way because it creates a certain harmony."

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WHAT IS FENG SHUI?

FENG SHUI is an ancient Chinese philosophy that describes the life energies, or Qi, of an environment. According to Feng Shui practitioners, arranging and manipulating your surroundings so that Qi flows smoothly can attract positive energies and promote harmony and health.

CREATING GOOD QI

DISEASED TREES or bushes are a sign of bad Qi on the landscape. Have a row of bushes with a gap in it because a shrub just won't grow in that spot? That's a typical sign of Geopathic Stress.

ANTS LIKE Geopathic Stress, so if you have ants in your house, that's a sign of bad energy.

CATS LIKE bad Earth energies, so a cat that lies all day in a particular spot in your house is pointing to a place with bad Qi. Dogs prefer good Qi.

PLANTS AND LIGHT create good qi. Clutter blocks Qi.

DOORS SHOULD NOT lead directly to stairs. Instead of circulating well, the energy rushes up the stairs or down out of the house.

SPACES IN FRONT of buildings hold energy, so don't site your house directly on the street. Build a porch, or create a round garden, fountain or flower arrangement there.

STRAIGHT LINES, straight pathways, and straight driveways are not good. A circular or winding design is best. If you must have a straight driveway, try placing it to the side rather than headed directly to the house.

WHEN A HOME'S entrance leads directly to a living room, it's a very abrupt change of space. Try breaking up the space by building a small entryway inside the door.

TO LEARN MORE www.InstituteofFengShui.com
