Feng-Shui Down-Under

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If you feel off colour, if your best friend has suddenly turned against you, if your business is going to the dogs - perhaps you have bad *feng shui.* Certainly, these days more and more Australians are blaming their troubles on this ancient Chinese concept.

Many Chinese believe powerful spirits inhabit the landscape. It is usually fortunate to live near good spirits, and potentially disastrous to live near bad ones. By carefully observing the various conditions that seemed to "attract" good and bad spirits over many centuries, Chinese scholars developed a highly complex scientific and magical system of divination called feng-shui (wind and water) which is still used to find lucky sites for towns and buildings (dwellings for the living), and cemeteries and graves (dwellings for the dead).

In fact, over the past year, a couple of Melbourne property developers, out to woo potential Chinese investors, have asked me to assess the *feng shui* of some inner-city apartment blocks. While I was delighted to do this, unfortunately I became involved quite late in the design process. Consequently, about all I could do was highlight the most glaring problems, such as "secret arrows" (straight lines - specifically in those buildings assessed, long straight corridors and doors or windows that lined-up with each other), and suggest some simple ways of overcoming them.

But the developers' concerns are truly remarkable, given that only a couple of years ago - when I began to research my book, *Feng-Shui and Western Building Ceremonies* - only a few people in Melbourne had ever heard about

feng shui, let alone understood what it was; and almost nobody, and certainly not hard-headed property developers, imagined that one day they might have to take *feng shui* into consideration.

All of a sudden, *feng shui* has become a sort of craze. Even the widely read *Woman's Day* now has a regular *feng shui* column dealing with its readers' queries and problems. Perhaps what this interest reflects is a need to bring a spiritual dimension to an increasingly mechanistic world.

But, despite its current high-profile, the practice of *feng shui* in Australia is not a recent phenomenon. *Feng shui* influenced the design of the Bendigo Joss House, for example, which was built by Chinese gold-diggers during the 1860s.

The Bendigo Joss House consists of three buildings, arranged side-by-side in a row. The largest building - a temple dedicated to Kuan Ti (the Chinese God of War), is flanked by the other two - a caretaker's residence, and a hall for ancestor worship. Even though the Chinese gold-diggers had swapped hemispheres, the joss house was designed according to exactly the same *feng shui* principles they had known in China. For example, to attract as much "*qi*" (the breath of nature) as possible, the joss house faces south, it is decorated with auspicious figures and symbols, and its plan is shaped like the Chinese character "*shan*" (mountain), which symbolizes a place of worship. On the other hand, to repel any "*sha qi*" (noxious vapour), there is a cross-wall a short distance inside the front doors of the temple, none of the side doors lined up with each other, and the north facade is blank.

Arcane superstitions aside, such measures might seem innocuous enough architecturally. But in the process of avoiding straight lines, deflecting *sha qi* and concealing doorways, banal design solutions often give way to more subtle ones. As a result, a building may be invested with a degree of paradox, an air of mystery, and a tremendous amount of spirit or "personality". The Bendigo Joss House is a prime example, it is not the simple building it first appears, as I have already explained. Despite its value as a design tool, unfortunately *feng shui* is generally not taught to architecture students in most Asian countries, even though acupuncture, which is somewhat analogous to *feng shui*, is widely taught to medical students.

In 1988, I asked a group of architecture students from the Royal Melbourne Institution of Technology, to design a small town-house for a Chinese couple,

located at a T-junction with "Bad Luck Street". Instead of relying on charms above doors and windows, I stipulated the building itself had to turn away *sha qi*. The students experimented with armour plating, gargoyles, jagged edges, mirrored glass, obscured doorways, pools of water, sharp sticks, small windows, screen walls, and twisted metal. A number of these things also happened to address some of the more mundane problems associated with living in a house facing oncoming traffic, such as intrusive car headlights and excessive traffic noise. Good *feng shui* and good design are by no means incompatible. Indeed, as far as the students' designs are concerned, I think most people would be able to appreciate them, even without knowing anything about *feng shui*.

Laying a foundation stone is perhaps the closest thing to *feng shui* still commonly practiced in the West. Traditionally, a foundation-stone marked the centre of the world - a very special, highly subjective spot, which was by no means the same for everyone. In many respects, the centre of the world is akin to a place with perfect *feng shui*. Certainly, anyone fortunate enough to live in either place could reasonably expect to be happy, healthy, wealthy and wise.

The foundation stone of the Capitol building designed by the American architect Walter Burley Griffin, for example, was laid at the centre of the world in Australia. The inscription on top of the foundation-tone reads: "His Royal Highness, Edward, Prince of Wales, laid this stone 21 June 1920". A dot placed in the middle of the letter "o" in the word "of" indicated the centre of Canberra Australia's capital city and arguably the centre of the world in Australia. The foundation-stone was eventually removed after plans to build the Capitol stalled. Instead, Australia's new Parliament House was built on the site many years later. Thus the hugh flagpole on top of Parliament House now marks the centre of the world in Australia. Certainly, it is appropriate for a pole - traditionally a symbol of the axis mundi - to mark the centre of the world. In fact, the geographical centre of Australia (latitude 25° 36' 36.4 south, longitude 134° 21' 17.3" east), an otherwise seemingly unremarkable patch of scrub in the Northern Territory, is marked by a miniature replica of the flagpole on top of Parliament House.

I can also see certain similarities between some Chinese charms (used to create good *feng shui*), and some Australian letterboxes. For example, an Imperial China, palaces and temples were protected from fire by a "chi-wen" (dragon-like roof decoration). In the Taiwanese village of Bao-an, farm houses were protected from "generalized evil influences" by supernatural forts

(bamboo stakes at the four corners of the house), manned by supernatural soldiers. And when I last visited Kuching in East Malaysia, I observed that many Chinese shop-houses were protected from evil spirits by various charms - including daggers, fans, mirrors, and scissors - placed above the doors and windows.

In Australia, letterboxes are usually located on the street frontage, either next to the driveway or the garden gate. In other words, they tend to occupy rather ambiguous, extremely vulnerable territory - the boundary between private and public spaces. Some people appear to have turned their letterbox into a Chinese-style protective charm. For example, was the letterbox like a rocket launcher designed to deter burglars? And were those like fire alarms, fire extinguishers and fire hydrants meant to prevent fire?

I believe *feng shui* is important - both in its own right and, perhaps more importantly from a Western point of view, as a model - for the following reasons it helps to foster a bond between people and places; it permits people to actively participate in the building process; it reflects people's values and aspirations; it has a magical side and a rational side; it is practised very widely in one form or another; and its a powerful design tool.

But, of course, *feng shui* is only one example of what the West can learn from the long-lived cultures and traditions of the East.