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## **SQUARE FEET; Using Feng Shui in Offices and Stores**

By **LISA CHAMBERLAIN**

FENG SHUI seemed destined to go the way of hippie communes, ridiculed as a bourgeois lifestyle fad. Instead, like yoga and organic food, the ancient Chinese practice of positioning objects, buildings and even whole communities to maximize the flow of energy, or chi, has penetrated the culture beyond the New Age world of crystals and chimes.

"Growing up in Brooklyn, the closest I came to feng shui was the Chinese laundry," said Robert A. Levine, president and chief executive of the RAL Companies, a real estate development and management firm. "I thought of feng shui as a lifestyle for certain people versus something to implement in terms of commercial development projects."

But his perspective changed when he met Alex Stark in 1999, after one of his joint-venture partners wanted to use feng shui on a commercial project. Mr. Stark, he said, "changed my thought process."

Mr. Stark, who has a private feng shui consulting practice based in Brooklyn, began studying feng shui in the late 1980's and has been riding the feng shui crest as it has flowed from an esoteric residential practice primarily used as a self-help tool to offices and retail spaces and to entire commercial projects. He has worked with Mr. Levine on several commercial and residential developments, including RAL's offices at 86 Chambers Street.

Walking through the offices, Mr. Levine said that even before he started consulting Mr. Stark, the firm's corporate-identity color was red, which he was pleased to learn is a feng shui symbol of authority and power. Red paint is used throughout the 10,000-square-foot office space on the seventh floor of a building that RAL bought in January 2001. To break up the long, monotonous corridors so common in offices, Mr. Stark recommended hanging some ceiling panels below the ceiling level and putting lighting fixtures at angles to the ceiling. To maximize the flow of light to interior spaces, dividing walls are made of frosted glass.

Mr. Stark, who charges \$300 an hour, recommends both minor solutions -- for instance, not letting a clock be the first thing one sees on entering a space, except a train station or an airport, because it raises stress levels -- and major design changes, like relocating a building's entrance.

"It's much better to be in on a project from the beginning, so you can do true site planning, rather than trying to come in after the fact and fix things," Mr. Stark said. "Beautiful ancient Chinese buildings aren't filled with kitsch. It's the problematic spaces that require chimes and crystals."

One client that brought Mr. Stark in from the beginning was the Institute of Integral Nutrition, a school that takes a holistic approach to teaching dietary theories. Founded in New York in 1994, the school tripled its enrollment in the last three years and needed to relocate its headquarters to a larger space. Mr. Stark visited potential office spaces and prepared reports on their pros and cons from a feng shui perspective.

The school's offices moved into 5,000 square feet on East 28th Street early last month, after spending about \$100 a square foot on construction. The arrangements closely follow Mr. Stark's diagram, called a bagua, which indicates how energy forces are distributed throughout the space.

According to feng shui principles, harmony is achieved when the use of a space is compatible with its energy sector. For instance, because of the school's curriculum, Mr. Stark positioned the kitchen in the fame and reputation sector, which was determined by the bagua, or floor diagram. He put the conference room in the networking and helpful-people corner.

To determine how individual offices should be arranged, he interviewed the entire staff. From those interviews, Mr. Stark also determined what color to repaint one wall in each office (preferably the wall behind the occupant's desk), to maximize its potential. For instance, green represents growth, a good color for a person handling daily business matters and revenue.

"There are so many camps of feng shui," said Nathan Patmor, the school's managing director. "It can get very detailed and miss the big picture. Alex gives practical, usable recommendations."

Of course, not everyone likes his advice. "I can't tell you how many dot-com companies fired me," Mr. Stark said. "Some didn't even want to have real desks in their offices, based on a 'thinking outside the box' kind of theory. But you have to have a command center. I kept telling them that the way they were doing things they weren't going to last, and they didn't want to hear that."

Mr. Stark, who grew up in Lima, Peru, with his Swiss father and Peruvian mother, was educated in American schools there before studying architecture at Yale, graduating in 1974. He stumbled into feng shui when he met a Cuban practitioner. While working as a designer, he began studying feng shui, and gave free consultations to friends and acquaintances.

Then, one day in the early 1990's, he was invited by Barbara Corcoran of the Corcoran Group to apply feng shui to the company's new Web site -- an odd request that other feng shui practitioners did not want to accommodate. Unknown to Mr. Stark, Ms. Corcoran alerted the news media, and the combination of this new technology and the esoteric practice of feng shui drew

them in droves.

"At that point, I had to quit my day job," Mr. Stark said. "My employer wasn't happy about all the publicity."

Fortunately for Mr. Stark, his practice has grown to the point where he can barely take on new business and still keep up with his longstanding clients, like John and Kinnari Panikar, who own the NoHo textile store Kinnu.

"We've used Alex several times since we opened in 1997," Mr. Panikar said. "Whenever business slows down, we bring in Alex for an adjustment. It's like going to the doctor for a checkup."

Kinnu's textiles, from women's clothing to bedspreads and wall coverings, are designed by Ms. Panikar and made by hand in India using a tie-dying process. The silks and cottons are pinched and dyed, creating textures and colors that the Panikars display in a way designed to entice shoppers to touch the fabrics.

To encourage this, Mr. Stark recommended placing products in a zigzag pattern rather than in straight rows. This slows shoppers down and encourages them to linger rather than speed through the space. "Think of an airport with long, straight corridors," Mr. Stark said. "That promotes rushing. Few retailers understand that. They all place their products on racks in aisles."

"We think of our space more like a gallery than a store," Ms. Panikar said.

While many of Mr. Stark's clients are only too happy to talk about their feng shui experience, some are still reluctant to do so. In fact, Mr. Stark performed feng shui on one of the most recognizable commercial properties in Manhattan, the Condé Nast Building, in Times Square, but the company has declined to discuss it.

This fall, Mr. Stark will be one of the teachers of what he believes is the first credit-bearing course on feng shui at a major architecture school, but the school also declined to comment. "I take clients only so far as they're willing to go," Mr. Stark said.