

A photograph of a bamboo plant in a glass vase with decorative stones, next to a red artwork featuring a bull. The bamboo plant has three stalks: one tall and straight, one shorter and slightly curved, and one long and curved. The stalks are green with yellowish-brown nodes. The leaves are green and pointed. The vase is filled with smooth, rounded stones in various colors like grey, white, and brown. The background is a light blue wall. To the right, there is a framed artwork with a red background and a dark, stylized bull or ox figure.

IN FENG SHUI, A BALANCE OF ELEMENTS
THROUGHOUT THE HOME IS IDEAL. IN THIS PART
OF THE LIVING ROOM, THE BALANCE OF BAMBOO
(WOOD) AND THE RED ARTWORK (FIRE)
INCREASES THE OVERALL ENERGY.



IN SEARCH OF BALANCE

BY CATHERINE APPLEFELD OLSON

FENG SHUI IS BASED ON THE CONCEPT OF CHI OR QI, DESCRIBED AS
AN OBJECT'S ENERGY OR LIFE FORCE.

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY
JEFFREY PREHN

PHOTOGRAPHED AT
THE HOME OF
LINDA NUGENT

During a recent appointment with the kitchen designer for our new home addition, she pointed to one of the floor plans that had a pantry corner jutting out precariously into the space.

"I don't mean to sound too feng shui," she said, "but that corner is definitely not warm and welcoming."

Indeed, as we seek to infuse our often chaotic lives with a little balance, the ancient Chinese practice of feng shui (pronounced fung schway) is seeping into home planning and design, even in our traditionally conservative area.



WOOD ELEMENTS ABOUND IN THE LIVING ROOM, REPRESENTED BY THE TABLE AND THE STRIPES ON THE WALLS, SYMBOLIC OF TREES. THE GREEN COLOR PROVIDES A CALMING EFFECT. MIA SEEMS TO AGREE.



METAL ELEMENTS AND CIRCULAR EDGES ARE INCORPORATED IN THE NORTHWEST BEDROOM, AT RIGHT.

"It's kind of a mysterious concept but more people are definitely becoming aware of it," says Linda Nugent, a real estate agent who became so taken with the concept she hired feng shui consultant Joëlle Brucher to help appoint her new home in Sterling. "Knowledge of feng shui is calming," Nugent adds. "I think more clearly in an environment that works for me, that doesn't have that frenetic, cluttered or blocked kind of feeling and is set up to enhance the energy."

Feng shui dates back several thousand years in ancient China, where it was used by royalty to determine propitious locations for burial sites, temples and palaces. It is based on the concept of chi or qi, described as an object's energy or life force. At the outset, feng shui practitioners focused on landforms such as mountains and rivers, whose energies were thought to influence the fate of kingdoms. Over the centuries, different schools of thought expanded the practice of feng shui to residential and commercial buildings.

Today, there are many branches of feng shui, from classical Chinese schools to modern Westernized versions. Northern Virginia alone is teeming with feng shui courses and seminars for those who want to pick up a few tips. Classes are available through the Loudoun County Public Schools adult education program and continuing education tracks in Alexandria, Arlington and Fairfax, to name a few.

Beyond personal dabbling, you can hire a trained consultant to come to your home and analyze its energy patterns. The consultant will review the physical layout of the home and from there, use various tools to analyze your home's energy flow. Those tools range from the occupants' birth dates to a compass called a lo pan to a map of energy centers called a bagua.

The traditional bagua shape is an octagon whose sides correspond to a specific aspect of life, such as relationships, prosperity, career, etc. The center of the octagon represents the area of health. A modern version of the bagua appears as a square grid of nine boxes, with each area representing the same categories as the traditional Chinese map (see page 70).

Based on these tools, a consultant will make various suggestions—such as room placement, selection of colors and arrangement of furniture and artwork—to improve the energy in the home. The feng shui recommendations can be as small and specific as organizing a mudroom or as sweeping as selecting a piece of land on which to build a home and guiding architectural plans.

"A lot of feng shui is just common sense," says Annie Pane, who opened Woodbridge-based con-



sultancy East Coast Feng Shui in 2000 and gives seminars and presentations at conferences. "Simply put, it's a tool to live your life better. It's just not culturally embedded upon us."

Breaking the culture barrier has not been easy. "In the beginning I was compared to witchcraft," deadpans Pane. "No one knew what feng shui was; they thought I was a little nuts. I'm an East Coast kind of gal in a navy blue suit talking about an ancient Chinese aspect of physics and it was like, 'Where did she come from?'"

So who is seeking out feng shui in our community?

According to a survey of area consultants, they are people who feel "stuck" in some aspect of their lives: a stagnant job, an unfulfilling love life, strained relations with parents, children or peers. Others are transitioning to a new stage of life: expectant parents, employees facing career change, families readjusting after a move.

Interior decorator Rose Mary Orsini reached out to consultant Sara Schroerlucke of Alexandria-based Wind&Water Feng Shui when she and her husband set out to build a home at Lake Manassas that would take them through their golden years.

"I didn't know whether I really believed in feng shui or not, but I figured we are starting from scratch so we may as well give it a try," Orsini says. "Once Sara created a bagua and we started developing a plan for what I was trying to accomplish, it was just too exciting."

Orsini says implementing feng shui principles not only fostered a new depth in family relations but bolstered her career. Today, she regularly integrates basic principles into her own work. "There are a lot of skeptics out there," she says. "But when I am decorating I try to always use feng shui solutions if I see potential problems. If the client is skeptical, I incorporate them without naming them as such."

Many people who turn to feng shui simply are not feeling completely comfortable in their own home and can't quite put their finger on why. Consultants share stories about a woman who moved into a new house and was haunted by insomnia, a couple who became "disconnected" after moving into a large home, and a family that experienced unhappiness after moving into a home where similar misfortune had plagued the former owners.

Most stories, though, are more subtle. "They've heard something about feng shui and they feel they could be more comfortable in their house, that their home could take better care of them," says Lynne Greene, who left her high-tech job to open McLean-based Feng Shui Eyes in 2001. "Before they do some redecorating, buy new things or rearrange things, they want to make sure they are doing it right."

For this reason, Greene and other consultants begin by asking questions about their clients' feelings and goals to determine the usage of their space. For example, if money were no object, what would you be doing? Why are you in the relationship you're in? Do you feel blessed?

"I want my clients to be doing things for a reason, to be mindful of why they have the things in their house they do, and how they are connected to their quality of life," Greene says.

As they conduct their readings of homes, consultants pay attention to the placement of lighting, mirrors, plants and, notably, of doors and windows. When possible, for example, exterior doors should not line up



THIS MODERN VERSION OF THE BAGUA WOULD BE USED BY SOME CONSULTANTS TO DETERMINE THE ENERGY FLOW IN YOUR HOME.

in a floor plan lest the energy that comes in the space exit out.

Other concepts would seem to make plain old practical sense. For example, bigger is not necessarily better when it comes to house size.

"Bigger can actually cause you to get divorced," Pane says. "People go from living in small houses where their energy fills up the space to these huge monsters. All of a sudden they don't see each other and their space is not being filled up with their own energy and their energy did not expand to match the house."

Feng shui also casts a skeptical eye on the increasing pressure to

IN SOME SCHOOLS OF FENG SHUI, CLUTTER REPRESENTS STAGNANT ENERGY, POSTPONED DECISIONS AND FAILURE TO MOVE FORWARD.

multitask.

"There are a lot of people who are making their bedrooms multi-functional, and they forget the two basic reasons for a bedroom—loving and resting," Schroerlucke says. "People put in a home office, a big TV, exercise equipment and all kinds of other stuff, and they wonder why they can't sleep."

Its focus on function has given rise to modern feng shui's most renowned association, that of clutter-buster. In some schools of feng shui, clutter represents stagnant energy, postponed decisions and failure to move forward.

"You need to make room for what you want to manifest in life, and

clutter stops you from doing that," Schroerlucke says. "We all have clutter, but if you have so much stuff that you can't close the closet door, you really can feel the energy draining away."

"There is an extra dimension with feng shui," Brucher adds. "Interior design really looks at making sure the space is beautiful. Feng shui wants beauty, but we work to make sure there's harmony and alignments with the natural elements and energies."

Catherine Applefeld Olson writes about interior design and architecture from her home in Alexandria.



CHOOSING A CONSULTANT

"Just like you would choose an interior designer with whom you feel comfortable, the selection of a feng shui consultant is based on competence and personality," says Joëlle Brucher, a feng shui consultant based in Annandale. "Some consultants have specialties, such as architecture, organization, landscape design, families and children's spaces."

But being a good consumer when it comes to shopping for a consultant is difficult when there is no standardized licensing or certification, says Lorraine Wilcox, a senior instructor at the American Feng Shui Institute in Monterey Park, Calif. Wilcox also is the assistant to Master Larry Sang, who established the institute in 1991 to provide students with the "proper theories and techniques" of classical feng shui, according to the group's Web site.

The institute is one of many schools in the United States that teach the principles of classical feng shui. Consultants may subscribe to a different school, but advice for choosing a consultant remains the same. To help homeowners interested in hiring a consultant, Wilcox offers the following advice:

1. Ask questions. Where did the person study? How long? Who was the teacher? Does the teacher or school have a Web page? If so, read it. Sometimes a teacher's Web page lists qualified practitioners. Are they on the list? Often, you can contact the school or teacher to see if they consider this person qualified. But be careful. In many Asian cultures, the tendency is to avoid saying "no" directly. So read between the lines if there is some hesitation.

2. If the practitioner makes claims that are unbelievable, don't believe it. Feng shui cannot cure all problems and cannot make everyone a millionaire.

3. If the practitioner charges a very high rate for a single-family dwelling or an apartment, weigh the benefits against your budget. On the other hand, if they charge very little, maybe they are not yet at a very high level. Prices do vary in different areas, so sometimes this is difficult to judge. In our area, consultation fees range from as little as \$250 for a 2,000-square-foot space to \$125 per hour to upward of \$1,000 for a commercial space.

4. Feng shui is not a religious doctrine. If the practitioner mixes religion with

feng shui, determine if their practices are suitable according to your beliefs.

5. Feng shui is not superstition. If the practitioner recommends three-legged toads, statues of elephants, etc., you are only importing folklore and superstition from other countries. It will not change your luck. It is placebo.

6. If your practitioner sells all kinds of remedies, remember, it is in their financial interest to sell you more remedies.

7. There are different styles or schools of feng shui. Ask the practitioner what style they practice. Do they use a compass? What types of remedies do they prescribe? Be sure that you feel comfortable with their philosophy.

8. Use common sense. Don't believe everything you hear. Be a little skeptical. Ask questions.

Just as you would research any home improvement product or service before making a purchase, you should educate yourself on the principles and philosophy of feng shui. Below are some resources to help get you started:

• www.qi-whiz.com

Feng Shui Ultimate Resource: Provides a critical view of what the author calls "McFengshui" practices; it also offers vital consumer information that focuses on how to avoid getting scammed. Among the books recommended on the site are: *Complete Idiot's Guide to Feng Shui* by Elizabeth Moran, Joseph Yu and Val Biktashev; *Feng Shui, The Perfect Arrangement* by Gayle Atherton; and *The Art & Science of Feng Shui* by Henry B. Lin.

• www.amfengshui.com

The American Feng Shui Institute: Site offers online classes for students interested in learning more about the ancient Chinese philosophy. Established by Master Larry Sang, author of *The Principles of Feng Shui*.

• www.shambhala.com/fengshui/fundamentals/whatls.cfm

Shambhala Publications: Get a basic overview of feng shui, from the traditional Chinese schools to its principles to how to choose a consultant. Written by Eva Wong, author of *Feng-Shui* and *A Master Course in Feng-Shui*.

—Therese P. Howe