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Yoga Journal

For Health and Conscious Living

April 1996

Issue 127

\$4.95/Canada \$6.75

UK £3.50

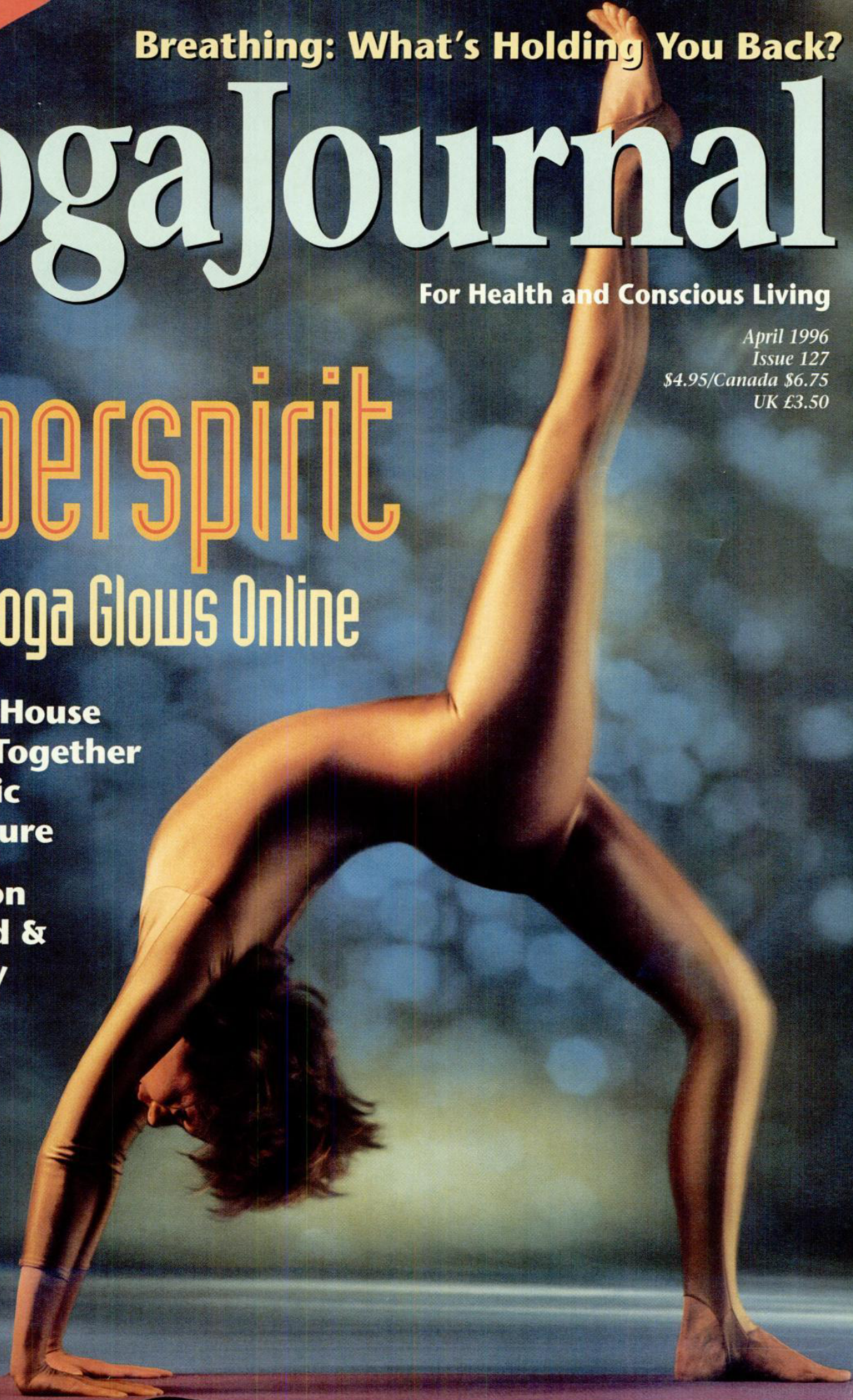
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Dwellings of Humans and Gods

With vastu shastra, you can put your house and life together using ancient instructions from the Vedas.

BY PARVEEN CHOPRA

In Bangalore, India, recently to attend a symposium on *vastu shastra*, the vedic system of sacred architecture, I struck up a conversation one evening with a young man sitting next to me in a pub. The moment I mentioned the purpose of my visit to his city, he recounted his own encounter with vastu: “Some years ago, a total stranger who, we later came to know, was a vastu expert, happened to visit our home. He took a good look around and reeled off my family’s entire history for three generations. Correctly.”

V. Ganapati Sthapati, traditional keeper of the vastu tradition, stands before a stone memorial he sculpted in Madras.

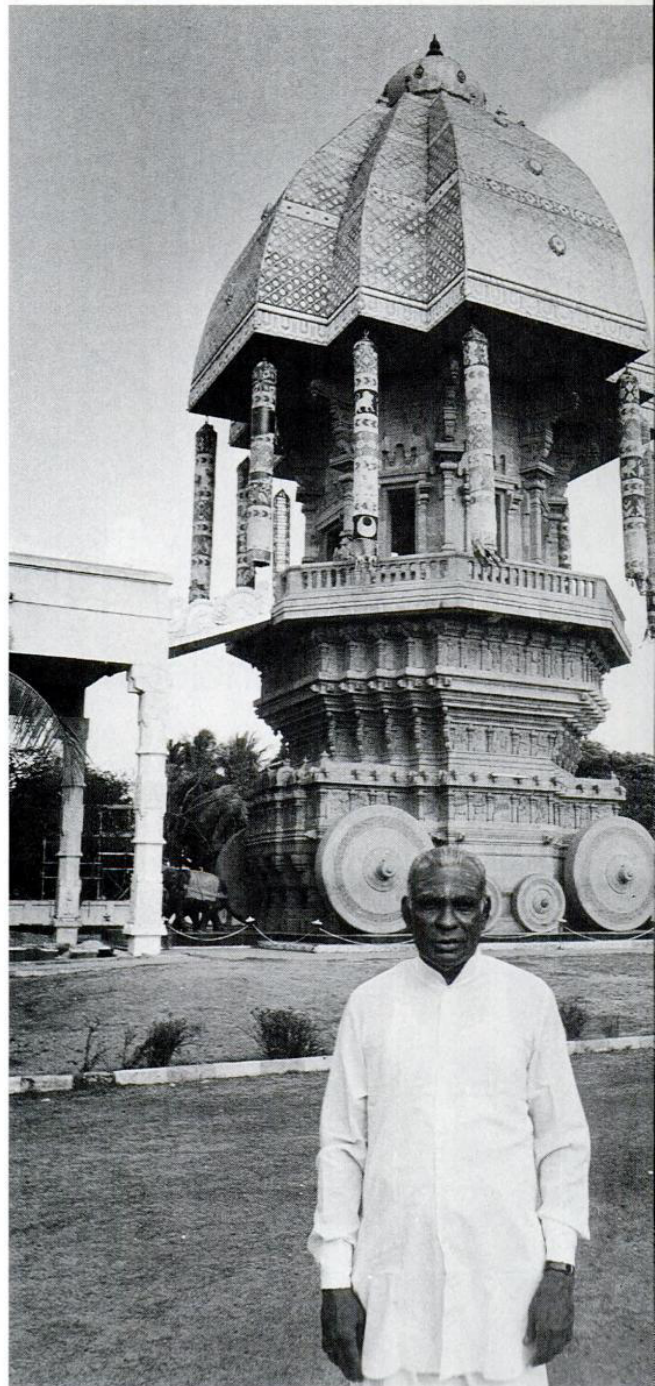
It sounds like a pub yarn—but, vastu believers say, it's well within the scope of this ancient geomantic art. Manmade and natural environments, according to vastu shastra, subtly but powerfully shape the lives of human beings, positively or adversely. Like its Chinese counterpart, *feng shui*, vastu prescribes rules and guidelines for building health, happiness, and prosperity into our lives through the way we design, arrange, and decorate the places we inhabit.

Over the past few years, vastu shastra has enjoyed a dramatic revival in India. Real estate ads flaunt vastu-correctness. The Bangalore vastu conference, organized by the famed astrologer B.V. Raman, attracted over a thousand delegates, including professional architects and engineers. The system is fanning out of south India, where it has been a living tradition for thousands of years. Its new worshippers, interestingly, are urban, educated, and well-heeled people, including such diverse clients as the Taj hotel chain and the Indian headquarters of TM guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

Refreshingly, this revival has bucked an earlier trend, in which an indigenous system like yoga or meditation had to get the stamp of approval from the West before getting accepted in India. Though feng shui is increasingly popular in the U.S. and Europe, vastu is just beginning to be heard of.


Vastu shastra is a mixture of science, engineering, art, astronomy, and astrology. It charts the influence on human beings of the sun and moon, light and heat, the earth's atmosphere, wind direction, magnetic field, and gravitational force. It gives practical and meticulous directions on site selection, orientation of the plot and building, arrangement of rooms, proportions, and rituals for successive stages of house building. The system also tries to ensure that the new structure is in consonance with the surroundings and the environment. For example, there is an unwritten law in the traditional architecture of the coastal state of Kerala that no house or temple or palace should be taller than a coconut tree.

Although vastu's current revival is confined to residential and commercial buildings, its wide domain is apparent in the meaning of the word *vastu*: "dwellings of humans and gods." (The word *shastra*, meaning "science," is used to refer to any comprehensive, authoritative, time-tested corpus of knowledge.) Vastu shastra, then, also deals with town planning, temple design, iconography, and idol making. Scholars, both Indian and Western, believe that it may have been developed between 6000 B.C. and 3000 B.C. At some later stage—perhaps as late as the sixth century C.E.—the system



was codified in the Sthapatya Veda, a scripture that supplements the Atharva Veda. Knowledge of the system, however, is not found in any single source. It is referred to in many vedic texts and dealt with in several vastu treatises.

Like much of vedic literature, vastu shastra is considered of divine origin. Its treatises list a long lineage



Vastu shastra charts the influence on human beings of the sun and moon, light and heat, the earth's atmosphere, wind direction, magnetic field, and gravitational force.

of rishi-engineers who received and passed on this art or science.

Ancient Origins

Two of the classic vastu texts from the sixth century, *Mayamata* and *Manasara*, written in Sanskrit, are both available in English translation. *Mayamata* includes chapters on examination of the site and the soil, items to be buried in a pit in the foundation, joinery, and instructions for making vehicles like chariots and palanquins. It also recommends different kinds of houses for people belonging to each of the four castes. The chapter on iconography deals with the idols of Gautama Buddha and the Jain proponent Mahavira, as well as the deities of the Hindu pantheon, indicating that vastu shastra is nonsectarian. Indeed, Buddhists and Jains also followed the shastra in their traditional architecture. In Kerala, even some mosques and churches have been built in the state's traditional architectural style.

Some scholars speculate that Maya or Mayan, the author credited with writing *Mayamata* and *Surya Sidhanta*, a key astrology text, was the progenitor of vastu shastra. A part historical, part mythical character, Mayan pops up in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* as an architect who builds a palace for the five Pandava brothers (including Arjuna, the recipient of Krishna's Gita sermon). The palace has in-built visual tricks, which trip up the Pandavas' cousin and arch-rival, Duryodhana, when he comes on a visit. The incident adds to the animosity between the two families,

leading to the great fratricidal war.

Madras-based V. Ganapati Sthapati, the most illustrious living representative of the Sthapati clan, the traditional keepers of the vastu tradition, claims that this Mayan is the same architect/town-planner/astronomer who appears in the lore of the Mayan people of Central America. On a recent visit to the Mayan and Inca sites, he found striking similarities between their architecture concepts and those of vastu. In particular, the facades of Mexico and Peru's pyramids resemble the *gopurams* (canopies) of south Indian temples.

Not just temple-building but house-building, too, was a sacred act in ancient India. According to vedic philosophy, house-building, like every other human activity, should fulfill the four-fold life purpose of *dharma* (duty or law), *artha* (material well-being), *kama* (fulfillment of desires), and *moksha* (liberation). Further, life in ancient times was centered on the home—not the workplace, as today. With so much at stake, no wonder the ancients labored over vastu shastra.

Harmonizing Human Life with Nature

Vastu is based on the Indian philosophy's tenet that all matter arises from the five elements—space, air, fire, water, and earth. Since the human body is also made of the same elements, what is around us affects us profoundly. Many of the rules and guidelines of vastu are derived from a figure called the *vastu purusha mandala*. This diagram harks back to Sankhya, one of the six systems of Indian philosophy, which considers the phenomenal world a union of *purusha* (human), or the spirit principle, and *prakriti* (nature), or the cosmic primordial energy. Vastu shastra considers the site as *prakriti* and the structure as *purusha*. The vastu purusha mandala is a personification of the forces and spirits that dwell in the site. The mandala is drawn in the like-

Do-It-Yourself Vastu

Following are some practicable rules of thumb, ferreted out of vastu texts, scholars, and practitioners. The cardinal directions and eight sectors (like northeast and southwest) are easily determined by using an ordinary compass.

EXTERIOR DESIGN TIPS

☉ Square and rectangular plots are good. Avoid triangular, polygonal, or odd-shaped ones. (A possible reason? At the Bangalore conference, one speaker cited a physics experiment which found that the shape of a room determined in which eddy or pattern the enclosed air atoms would move. He speculated that one kind of resulting kinetic energy might be positive for humans, another negative.)

☉ The best plot or building faces north or east. A house not aligned with the four main directions forebodes evil.

☉ Roads on all sides are ideal; one in the north or the east is beneficent. Roads or lanes arrowing into the plot are inauspicious.

☉ A house should not be built next to a place of worship, a cremation ground, or a burial place. If there is a body of water nearby, it should be to the east or northeast of the plot. Tem-

ples and ashrams in India were built next to rivers (in the northeast) whenever possible. The world-renowned Sathya Sai Baba's Puttaparthi ashram in Andhra Pradesh has water flowing in the northeastern direction and some hillocks are situated in the southwest. (A recent issue of *Osho Times*, published by the Pune commune, says that running water negatively ionizes the air, which, studies have found, vitalizes nervous and respiratory systems, making the vicinity conducive to meditation).

☉ Since God (i.e., beneficent energies) comes from the northeast, leave north and east unencumbered as far as possible. Have more windows, doors, balconies, verandahs there.

☉ Yama (the god of death) enters from the south-southwest, a demon's quarter. So shut this area off by either building high or putting a heavy component like machinery on these sides.

☉ The central space is better left open or used for rituals and congregations. The modern atrium concept is good.

☉ The master bedroom should be placed in the south or southwest. The Lord of the south is Mars. Mars, governing the husband, and Venus, governing the wife, are friendly planets. A person whose bedroom is in the southeast tends to become quarrelsome and may even take to crime. Harshad Mehta, a stockbroker accused of masterminding a multimillion-dollar stocks scam, used to sleep in a southeast room in his swank penthouse in Worli, Bom-

bay. He has moved out since, on a vastu expert's advice.

☉ Northwest, the air zone, is good for transients, like guests and (in India) daughters. The TV set goes into the northwest corner of a room.

☉ The main entrance should be on the north or northeast.

☉ Each door or window should have a corresponding one on the opposite side for proper energy flow, not merely cross-ventilation. If this is not possible, a mirror can serve this purpose. Doors should open clockwise; staircases, too, should follow the clock's hands.

☉ Any extension to the house should be carried out in the northeast, leaving some space empty; vertical additions should be in the south and west.

☉ The cellar (light element) is best in the north; the garage (heavy) in the southeast or northwest.

☉ If attached to a room, the bathroom should be on the north or east side.

☉ Sloping roofs are better than flat ones, maybe because they mimic a pyramid shape, which funnels in cosmic energies. Remember the legendary powers of pyramids? A more prosaic reason could be easy rainwater drainage.

☉ Too many walls inside the house block energy flow, says Sthapati. He

Shastra

gives high marks to houses that demarcate areas, such as the bedroom and kitchen, without separating them by walls.

◆ Granite and quartz emit negative energies; sandstone and marble, positive.

INTERIOR DESIGN TIPS

◆ Arvind Vaze, a Bombay lawyer-turned-vastu practitioner and author who has studied the vastu of interiors, warns that a family having a round or oblong dining table is likely to suffer disharmony and end up not eating together. He also dislikes furniture with sharp angles. The color scheme in a couple's bedroom, according to him, should be pink for some years after marriage, off-white later, to go with the cooling of passion.

◆ Rajesh Arya advocates the liberal use of mirrors, bells, and art objects. In his Delhi studio in a basement (traditionally a bad location), he has strategically placed three mirrors along the stairs leading down. Mirrors also create space, however illusory, in a desirable direction. Generally they should be fixed to the north and east walls and should be tilted upward, to reflect the higher parts of the building. If there is an obstructing pillar, pole, or tree in front of the main entrance or door, a mirror should be placed opposite it. Mirrors are a common rem-

edy in Chinese feng shui to deflect negative chi.

◆ Sleep with your head pointing east or south, never north. This is because the head, which is the north pole in the human body, will repel the earth's north pole, affecting blood circulation and causing disturbed sleep. The husband should sleep to the right of his wife.

◆ If you are the boss at the workplace, your office or desk should be in the southwest corner. Also, sit close to the south and west wall, looking north and east. Mars, which rules the south, stands for authority.

◆ In all rooms, more walking space should be provided in the north and east directions than in the south and west.

◆ While cooking food, face east.

◆ Move heavy wardrobes and cupboards to the southwest part of the house. Within a room, they should not stand touching the north or east wall.

◆ Avoid arched doors and windows unless you want to indulge in debauchery. Mughal emperors, known epicures, were fond of arches; the dynasty didn't last long. Arches are considered an incomplete form, uniting a circle and a rectangle and locking in the energies of both.

◆ Remember the old tale that an expectant mother should have a picture of a bonny baby in her bedroom to

beget a healthy, happy child? The Mayamata recommends that "representations of joyous scenes and religious images are proper . . . battle scenes and images of death and misfortune should not appear . . . neither pictures of naked mendicants, of the love play of ascetics, nor of suffering people."

◆ Use natural, organic materials as far as possible for furniture, furnishings, and fixtures. Plastics and synthetic fibers are "dead." Watch for a new line of paints and varnishes, still in the R&D stage, that will have positive radiations.

Some of these rules apply equally, with some modifications, to apartment buildings, offices, factories, and even towns. It is no coincidence, say vastu experts, that some major Indian cities like Delhi, Agra, and Benares, have a river in the east. In Jaipur, built in the early 18th century, the palace is in the east, the main Krishna temple in the middle, the sewage system in the south, and 11 roads going from east to west—all in keeping with town vastu.

Vastu-wise, the United States is a lucky country: a near rectangular shape, the great lakes in the northeast, plus the St. Lawrence river flowing out of the country in the same direction, and the Rocky Mountains in the west, which are four times the altitude of the Appalachians in the east: in short, water in the northeast and the west blocked. Poor India, in contrast, has the Himalayas in the north, where the water should be, and the sea in the south—all wrong.

The interior of a *natukettu* (four-sided house) in Kerala, south India, built according to principles of vastu shastra.



ness of a person lying coiled with his head pointing northeast in a grid of 64 squares. The eight directions and the different sectors in the grid are assigned to different gods and guardians. This diagram guides the arrangement of various elements of the house. For example, the northeast is presided over by God, so it is suitable for the puja/meditation room. The southeast, being Agni the fire god's, is appropriate for the kitchen. The central space is Brahma the creator's, and should be left open to the heavens, as should the head and limbs.

In this light, a specimen of vastu-perfect house is Kerala's traditional *natukettu* (four-sided house), which has verandas on all sides, inside and outside, and a courtyard in the middle. The central courtyard concept, which ensures proper ventilation and ample light, is popular in the rest of the country, too.

Astrology yields more dos and don'ts. Each cardinal direction is governed by a particular planet which, in turn, is the master of a specific area of life. For example, north is ruled by Mercury, the lord of intellect and health, so one should face north while working and keep cash chests in the northern corner. Traditionally, a vastu expert would study the client's horoscope before designing a house for her.

Applying Scientific Principles

Since vastu shastra, like the Vedas, is considered revealed knowledge, its old texts, and even modern commentaries, reel off rules as dictates without much explanation. Nonetheless, some vastu practitioners try to find the whys based on current scientific knowledge. Says U.S.-educated and Hyderabad-based B.N. Reddy, an architect who has published a basic guide to vastu: "We now know why the east and the north of the house should be left unencumbered and the south and the west blocked. It is to let in the benign ultraviolet sun-rays (the only reliable source of vitamin D) in the morning and to block the harmful infrared rays in the afternoon. Secondly, it allows a proper flow of, and alignment with, the magnetic field of the earth. The rule is followed by leaving more open spaces and keeping balconies in the north and east and building higher on the south and west."

Delhi-based Rajesh Arya, an architect with a transcontinental practice, simply trusts his own intuition. "If you are open to them, you can sense energy fields," he says. Arguing that vastu shastra in isolation will not work in present times, Arya calls his work "cosmic architecture" and liberally draws on feng shui, numerology, colors, shapes, and energy fields.

An obvious reason for vastu's growing popularity is its tempting promise of a convivial lifetime, while modern architecture confines itself to function, comfort, and aesthetics.

Many of the latter-day practitioners of vastu shashtra are guided by pragmatism—if they find that a vastu rule works consistently, they stick to it. The redoubtable Laurie Baker, a Trivandrum-based British architect known for championing low-cost mud architecture, favors this approach. “Vastu is the result of thousands of years of R&D, of observing that one thing makes you ill, another does not,” he says, and gives an example: “Vastu assigns the kitchen to a certain corner on the basis of wind directions to prevent the smoke and cooking fumes from blowing into the living area and affecting the health of the residents.” He implies that the local lay of the land was always worked into the system. It is for this reason that each region in India has its own authentic vastu text in the local language.

There is much in vastu that defies rational explanation, but some validation for the system is coming from an equally esoteric sounding new science—geobiology. About 20 years ago, German physician Dr. Ernst Hartmann developed an instrument called the lobe antenna (a more accurate Lecher antenna has been developed since then) to measure energy fields around us and discovered a grid of energy lines emanating from the earth's surface and forming a grid around the globe. This energy is oriented magnetically in the north-south direction at two-meter intervals and in the east-west direction at 2.5-meter intervals. These energy fields are termed bio-electro-magnetic (BEM) fields. Some of them affect humans, since each body cell acts like a radio re-

ceiver with its own vibratory levels. We are most affected by these subtle energies at our places of work and sleep where the body is stationary for a long period.

Significantly, some old Himalayan monasteries are found to have oriented the cells for monks within the BEM grids, a neutral zone. But menhirs (prehistoric stone monoliths) that dot the surface of the earth are located on the most negative energy points, the Hartmann Grid intersections, presumably to transform the energy into positive fields and then transmit it to the surrounding area.

Many other researchers have followed Hartmann. One of their findings, relevant for vastu, is that form, shape, and proportions create a concentration or dispersion of cosmic and earth energies. Predictably, energy levels are found to be high inside traditionally designed places of worship. In this context, the power of pyramids doesn't sound too mysterious.


Experimenting with Kirlian photography, Prabhat Poddar, an architect associated with the Sri Aurobindo Institute of Applied Scientific Research in Pondicherry and a member of the prestigious New York Academy of Sciences, found that a square, rectangle, or triangle shape made the aura of a finger diminish progressively, indicating energy loss, which was restored by a circle.

This doesn't jibe with vastu experts disfavoring all round shapes. Explaining the discrepancy, Poddar says: “The circle focuses human energy like a concave lens, and one has to be a yogi to live with this crackling high energy in the body.”

Riding the Vastu Wave

Scientifically validated or not, a vastu wave is sweeping India and beyond. It has been featured prominently by the Indian print media, and vastu consultants are often called in to assess commercial properties, where the stakes are high. The large Taj hotel chain has retained Delhi architect and vastu convert Jitendra Arya to advise on their existing and future constructions. Arya also claims that he will advise Pierre Cardin on a

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The Science of Breath by Rama, Ballentine and Hymes (Himalayan International Institute, Honesdale, Pa., 1979)

Breathe! You Are Alive: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing by Thich Nhat Hanh (Parallax Press, Berkeley, Calif., 1988)

The 20 Minute Break: Using the New Science of Ultradian Rhythms by Ernest Lawrence Rossi, Ph.D. (Jeremy Tarcher, Inc., 1991)

Dwellings of Humans and Gods

Continued from page 89

manufacturing plant the fashion czar is setting up in Milan.

Demand for vastu-friendly design is forcing modern architects to comply. Hafeez Contractor, one of the leading Bombay architects, is one of them. B.V. Doshi, founder of an architecture school in Ahmedabad, is embarking on a five-year study on vastu. And noted Delhi architect-author Gautam Bhatia, though still a skeptic, no longer turns down clients convinced of the benign effects of the shastra.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who has taken it upon himself to promote all vedic systems, has now turned his attention to sthapatya veda. His Indian headquarters has invited vastu scholars to work on the temples and vedic science centers being built under his guidance, and—with an exaggeration characteristic of his organization—on “reconstruction of homes, villages, cities, capitals, and countries...throughout the world.” His consultation service, located in the Netherlands, gives advice to homeowners, architects, and builders worldwide. Clients fax information on both existing structures they plan to rectify and new ones they want to build. Then, for a fee, they receive advice on how to proceed with their designs in accordance with natural law.

An obvious reason for Vastu's growing popularity is its tempting promise of a convivial lifetime, while modern architecture confines itself to function, com-

fort, and aesthetics. The system has also been adapted to suit the times and to make it palatable to modern homebuilders. The astrological or ritualistic aspects are almost ignored by contemporary vastu architects. Old engineering principles aimed at ensuring the strength and viability of the structure have been superseded by modern techniques and materials. The accent today is on the selection of plots and the ordering of rooms. Vastu practitioners are also aware of the limited options available to urbanites—many of whom live in rented flats where they can at most rearrange the interiors—and say that benefits can accrue to whatever extent the shastra is adhered to.

Stories abound of people claiming reversal of fortune after following vastu shastra. Henry Ogden Clark, an architect in Fairfield, Iowa, finds people enjoy states of heightened consciousness and peace of mind in buildings constructed with the vedic principles. “In one case, there was a high-pressure group of brokers who spent a lot of time screaming on the phone every day. Then they moved into a building constructed in line with the natural law and began operating more from the vantage point of silence.” He adds that the demand for building and remodeling advice in North America increases yearly, mostly due to word-of-mouth recommendations. “When people feel the tremendous effects of living and working in a structure built with these laws in mind, they tell others.”

Neerja Shah is an events coordinator based in Bombay. Her large flat in the upscale Worli area was under renovation when Rajesh Arya told her it was all wrong. “He told me to put an eight-sided gazebo in the southwest, which was empty,” she tells me. “The bathroom was in the agni corner and had to be shifted. There was a beam forming a T at the entrance, which was making me travel pointlessly. Then, my son slept with his legs pointing to the bathroom, which, Arya said, was making him stay away, in a hostel.” Within months of making the necessary changes, results are evident: “There is a certain stability and quietness about my life now. The



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projects I am getting are more satisfying. My health, too, has improved. And my son is now living with me at the house."

Arya also claims that he was consulted by Sanjay Dutt, a Hindi film matinee idol. The macho Dutt had acquired some guns from the mafia and was implicated in a Bombay serial bomb case. "At the entrance to his house there was a wrongly placed tree and a few caged birds. They had to go. Next to Dutt's bed was a square pillar whose sharp edges were scattering energy. I put some mirrors around it," says Arya, adding smugly, "And look at the result." The film star was released on bail after 15 months in jail.

Architect B.N. Reddy relates the case of the Siva Sivani Public School in Hyderabad, which was losing pupils in droves to rival schools. After visiting the school's premises, he recommended these changes: Fence off the protruding leg of the plot to get a rectangular shape, shift one wing of the building from the northeast corner to the empty southwest, and dismantle the water tank in front of the school. The school is today running to full capacity.

Modifications are a controversial part of vastu practice. Purists cite the Manasara, which prohibits any post-construction alterations, while vastu consultants routinely recommend changes. Conservative vedic scholars point out that good vastu cannot obliterate bad karma. A prominent example comes to mind. When elected chief minister of Andhra Pradesh about a year ago, film-star-turned-politician, N.T. Rama Rao started functioning from the state secretariat only after certain changes were carried out to improve its vastu. Yet, alas, within months he was booted out of office.

Meanwhile, even as we contemplate embracing the vastu gods, technology is unleashing its own negative energy demons. For example, there is a raging controversy in the U.S. and Europe linking the electromagnetic force fields surrounding power transmission cables, television antennae and tubes, and electric devices like computers, microwave ovens, and cellular phones, with cancer. The Indian seers of yore may have been om-

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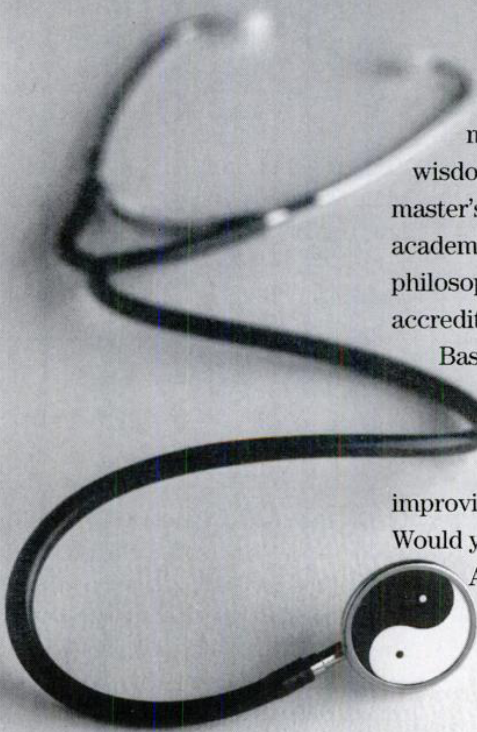
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niscient, but they have left no instructions on how to deal with these modern demons. ♦

Delhi-based Parveen Chopra is currently writing a body-mind-spirit guide to India for Penguin India and is the editor-publisher of Life Positive, an Indian new age magazine to be launched in May 1996.

RESOURCES

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Vastu Shastra, Vols. 1 and 2 by D. N. Shukla (available through SAB, P.O. Box 502, Columbia, MO 65205; (314) 474-0116; fax (314) 474-8124; or Nataraj Books, 7073 Brookfield Plaza, Springfield, VA 22150; (703) 455-4996; fax (703) 912-9052.

Vastu Shilpa Shastra and Indian Traditions by D. Muralidhar Rao (Motilal Banarsidass, Bungalow Rd., Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 007, India; phone (011) 291-1985; fax (011) 293-0689.

The Agony and the Ecstasy

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One of the central tenets of Hinduism is the belief in the avatar, the direct descent of the godhead in human form. Do you think that this actually happens?

There are a few avatars in every lifetime. Nityananda and my Baba were both avatars. Shirdi Sai Baba was an avatar, and he's insane! Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna, both brilliant. They are all avatars.

Buddha?

Without a doubt! The guy had the best shtick of anyone. Sit there and focus and breathe. I copy it all the time.

And Meher Baba?

I love "Don't worry, be happy." What was wrong with him?

He believed that he was the only avatar of our age, and that avatars only come every few hundred years.

Look, we all have our opinions. He took care of the *masts* [god-intoxicated sadhus], washed their butts, kept them clean, and I love him for it. If he wants to think they come once every 25,000 years, fine. The way I see it, holy people are a dime a dozen, but they're one in a million. You should learn from *everybody*. Learn from within and let everyone learn from you. Consume it all or be consumed, whatever you are. It's all the same. One guy says to go to work, the other guy says serve, the other guy says go sit up in the mountains. They're all saying the same thing. Love, don't hate.

"Consume or be consumed." What does that mean?

Just what it says. Eat everything whole. Don't go around nibbling on life a little bit. Just go right in there and eat life.

I was given the power of Kali in 1977 on the banks of the Ganga by my guru, and I was taught to consume. When I look into people's eyes, I'm literally eating what they do not need, sifting it out as Mother Kali does and giving it back. I also teach my students to use me as fuel. Devour me.

How do you see the role of the guru in today's world?

The point is that if a human being is liberated, they can do no harm, though you may not understand the mechanism of how they operate. As a student, you need to follow your heart and question with the deepest respect. Discrimination is very important. Then woe to me if I'm not real and sit a little higher than you, honey.

What about obedience to the guru?

I don't like the word obedience—that