QUESTIONS and ANSWERS

For Monica Amato Marquez’s radio program

‘Dragon de Aqua’ - Feng Shui y Astrologia China.

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Spanish translation by Alex Sole Costa

*1) When you make a project work, which schools take you into account to start designing?*

A: As a feng shui architect I would not plan or design anything until I have a holistic understanding of the San Cai Qi of Tian, Di and Ren, or the Heaven, Earth and Human Qi, of a project.

Because the Earth Qi is has a physical form and it is tangible, I would start with the Form School of feng shui to look at the environment, but before that I would need to understand the Human Qi first, that is what are my clients’ needs, their fears and their longings. I do this because the Human Qi is the Qi that can link the Heaven Qi above and the Earth Qi below, that is what is visible and has form with what is hidden and formless.

Only after I have a good grasp of the Human Qi and the Earth Qi that I would bring in the Compass School of feng shui to look at the intangible influence of space and time. What school of Compass Feng Shui I would use depends on the situation and the circumstance.

For example, if the project is located in a densely popular urban setting, where the choice for physical adjustments is limited, I would use Flying Star, because the system is more flexible and dynamic and is suited for city living. If the project is located in the country side with more rooms to maneuver and options for site adjustment and orientation, hen I would use the San He school of feng shui and if there are physical water nearby I would look at using the water methods like the ‘Longmen Baju’, also known as the Early and Later Heaven Water Methods. If the project were more to do with interior design and furniture placement then I would go for the Bazhai or the Eight Mansions school of feng shui. Sometimes I also use the Xuan Kong Da Gua methods if the client wishes for more precise and more theoretical measurements and also for date selection.

Since most of my clients live in the cities and at the end I have to do some detail planning, I tend to use the Flying Star and the Bazhai methods more than others. But no matter what Compass School I ended up using I will always start with the Human Qi, then follow by Earth Qi before doing any compass calculations.

Over the year we have developed a San Cai Methodology for feng shui analysis and planning to make sure that the feng shui process we do is as holistic and as comprehensive as possible, utilizing both the Form and Compass Schools of feng shui to serve the needs of our clients.

*2) Which is the main benefit when a city or village is designed with Feng Shui.?*

When a city or a village is designed with feng shui, the benefits are many, because on one hand we have a very clear set of feng shui principles, based on balance and harmony, to guide us; and on the other hand, we would go with the flow, working with the ‘benxing’ or the ‘original characters’ of the place, so each outcome is unique and being its true self. That is a city or a village that has good feng shui will come alive and be a vibrant place to live.

If you want to know what is the main benefit, then I would say an optimal use of the available resources to take advantage of what is auspicious or desirable and to avoid what is harmful or undesirable. So over time, the city or the village will grow, will prosper and will survive.

Look at all the great cities and villages in China and elsewhere in the world, they have been around for hundreds and hundreds of years and they survived and continue to grow because they have good feng shui, otherwise they would have disappeared long ago. A place will disappear if we don’t constantly adjust its feng shui according to changing space and time.

*3) What you want to convey when he argues that the next step in the revolution will be architectural architecture of circumstance, this revolution include Feng Shui?*

What I want to convey with the concept of ‘architecture of circumstance’ is the Taoist idea of ‘Wuwei’ , which literally means ‘without (undue) action’, ‘without (undue) effort’ and ‘without control’. That is to say to do things by going with the flow or the circumstance instead of going against it and fighting with it, for a preconceived idea of what a building should look like, according to some preconceived ‘ism’ or design theories.

The next step in the architectural revolution that we (my wife Gyda and I) can envisage is not only include feng shui but it is based on feng shui – how to find a balance between the complementary opposites of a situation, or a circumstance, so we can do things without excessive and undue efforts to achieve a desirable built form.

In feng shui aesthetics we try to avoid things that are too extreme, out of balance and artificial. We prefer things that are balanced and appropriate to the circumstance in a natural way. The Chinese use the term ‘ziran’ to convey the idea of being what a building should be and not something it is not and pretends to be.

So to us, architecture of circumstance is the same as architecture done with feng shui – it is done with ‘wuwei’, being ‘ziran’ and harmonious; not unduly pretentious, unnatural and out of balance.

You might think this is boring architecture but in fact it is very difficult to achieve – being simple but not simplistic, and being elegant but not minimal. It is difficult to find the subtle balance between Mies van der Rohe's modernist dictum: "Less is more" and Robert Venturi’s post-modernist saying, ‘less is a bore’, but that is what feng shui architecture or architecture of circumstance is all about – ‘in-between the extremes’.

To use a musical metaphor, we are more interested in the soundless in-between the notes rather than the loud notes themselves, and that is also the major difference between Chinese music and European music.

*4) How important is the Yin and Yang in a home?*

We would say in feng shui, a home without Yin and Yang balance is just a utilities shed it is not a home. The term feng shui (wind and water) already implied a balance between the active (wind) and the passive (water), the dispersed (wind) and the contained (water), the insubstantial (wind) and the substantial (water) and so forth.

Yin and Yang balance is very important for a home but most people don’t understand that Yin and Yang balance is not static and it is seldom 50:50. As we can see in the Taiji diagram, within the Yin there is always the seed of Yang and within the Yang there is always the seed of Yin (the two little dots).

Since we don’t stay the same all the time, the Yin and the Yang in a home needs to change, to adjust constantly to suit the changing needs of the occupants over time. For example, the Yin and Yang in a home is very different for a couple without children, and when they have children and when the children all left home.

*5) What is your ideal home model?*

My ideal home model is again based on the Yin and Yang balance of the San Cai Qi of Heaven, Earth and Human, so it has to be practically efficient, emotionally satisfying and ritually correct at the same time. By being ritually correct, I mean it is spiritually enlightening but not in a religious sense, but in a sense that all the parts are interconnected and they are in balance and harmony with each other.

This is an idealistic picture of what an ideal home should be, but in a more practical sense, it should have a Si-Ling or the Four Mythical Animals configuration so an idal home model is like an armchair facing the warm sun and an open space with the back protected and the two sides of the house would embrace the Qi of the land to gather it for the occupants.

There should be a clear hierarchy between the public and the private part of the house, between the flow and the containment in the use of the space and a clear differentiation between the facing and the sitting, so the active and the passive, the substantial and the insubstantial can complement each other.

The idea of my ideal home model is very simple, it should be connected to me, it should talk to me and it should resonate with me, so there is ‘ganying’ and ‘qing’ , or ‘mutual resonance’ and ‘love and affection’ between me and my home, as they say in Chinese.

*6) If a project is given to you, and you are completely free to design it as you please. You would design a garden that serves the building structure, or a building that serves garden or landscape design?*

I would do both, I would have a garden that would serve a building and a building that would serve a garden at the same time, so the garden and the architecture can complement each other.

This is typical Chinese thinking that is different to western thinking. In the west we would say ‘If A is A then A cannot be B’. The Chinese would say it differently, they would say, ‘if A is A then A can be B also’, because A and B need each other to form an alphabet!

I know, it is a funny metaphor, but it gives an idea of how the Chinese would prefer to think holistically to integrate all the parts into a whole, instead of thinking in a rational and logical way to separate all the part so we can examine them individually.

To the Chinese Man and Nature are inseparable, so they would never think of doing a garden on its own without a building and a building all on its own without a garden. Hence the courtyard house type is the most preferable structure in traditional China, where the garden is inside a house and not like in the west, where the garden is outside and, very often, separated from the house.

*7) Throughout your long career, which countries, not Eastern, you saw that have into account the Feng Shui when building?*

In my nearly 40 years of doing feng shui, I have done quite a bit of travelling, because that is the best way to learn feng shui, I have came to the conclusion that every culture, no matter East or West, has some sort of feng shui, even though they don’t call it feng shui.

Look at the old Italian towns and cities with their piazza or town squares, they were designed to embrace the Qi of the land so there is plenty of ‘qing’ (love and affection) when you are in them.

Look at the French chateaux or castles, they were often designed with the Si-Ling model configuration, with a U shape like an armchair, near some water and open to the warm sun and views. They are well protected an imposing but at the same time has a human scale that makes your feel welcome.

Look at the traditional Spanish villas or country homes, the garden and the architecture are fully integrated so they would sit harmoniously with each other in the landscape. I think they all have good feng shui in mind when they built them, even though they don’t have a name for what they were doing.

The difference is often in the preference of how to site a building. For example, the Europeans would prefer to locate their buildings in a more prominent location, on top of a hill of in the middle of an open space, whereas in feng shui the Chinese would prefer their buildings to be hidden and be part of nature rather than standing out in the middle, taking a dominant position over nature.

We could say in this context and generally speaking of course, the European feng shui is more Yang compared to Chinese feng shui is more Yin, in preference. But the very fact that we find these buildings attractive and enticing, it means they have taken feng shui into consideration when they build them, I have no doubts about this.

*8) Do you know any Architecture University that have Feng Shui as a subject?*

Right now I don’t know any university that has a full time course or degree on feng shui, but I did teach feng shui as an elective in the Architecture Faculty in University of New South Wales when I was living in Sydney Australia. When I moved to Berlin, I also did some teaching of feng shui in the Technical University in Leipzig, also as an elective supplementing a full technical degree course unrelated to feng shui.

My teacher and mentor, Prof Wang Yude also teach feng shui in his Central China Normal University in Wuhan China, but they are not allowed to call it feng shui, instead they call it the study of the Mysterious Culture of China or the study of the Yijing and traditional Chinese architecture.

The problem is that there are many misunderstanding and misinformation about feng shui and the academics, in general, don’t want to be seen as teaching something superstitious and un-scientific. But I believe given time and better exposure of feng shui, this situation will change.

Feng Shui to me can fit in quite well with the studies in environmental design of all kinds, in particular architecture and interior design. At least it should be an acceptable and legitimate supporting subject of study connected to a wider course or degree in a university.

*9) Are you giving a seminar for architects to manage the space according to Feng Shui?*

I do give workshops and seminars to architects when I am invited to do so. I have don it for the Royal Australian Institute of Architects in Sydney in the past and when I moved to Berlin I also taught feng shui for the architects belonging to the Brandenburg Regional Chamber of Architects.

Also quite a number of students who come to my feng shui courses and workshops are architects. I started to take an interest in feng shui after I graduated with a B.Arch. degree because I feel feng shui can help me become a better environmental designer and it has proven to be the case.

Architectural design has become a natural process for me instead of a constant struggle to come up with some new ideas in the past. My take is that when we can understand the Yin and Yang forces, or the feng shui at work in a particular given environment, then we can fit in easily with something new and complementary without forcing the issues.

We can produce a more appropriate and a more balanced architecture for the occupants with a limited budget and environmental constraints. We can do good design with feng shui and at the same, to satisfy the self-worth of the designer, to make him or her feel that a good job is done without pretense and artificiality.

I think that is one of the most valuable benefits architects can get from studying feng shui and apply to their work.

*10) Advised to use the tong shu for the process of progress of the works, when digging, when constructing drains, when you can build walls or roofs or practical purposes is left out?*

To be in the right place, at the right time and doing the right thing is the ultimate aim of good feng shui, so to be timely is an important factor in feng shui and the use of the Tong Shu (The Chinese Almanac) is very helpful for feng shui.

But the decision on when to dig or when to build has to comply with the rest of other feng shui considerations and the convenience of different time frames for doing things as well, so I will not be dictated by the Tong Shu, which only gives me one method out of many to calculating an auspicious time.

I would shop around with other date selection methods, like the Xuan King Da Gua method, to select an appropriate time to do something. For me, to be auspicious it needs to be fitting and appropriate, otherwise I am forcing the issues. For example, there is no point in selecting a public holiday, when everyone is out of town, to open a new business; or to select a cold winter’s day to get marry in the open and so forth.

The best decision is made when the choice of space, time and human action can resonant and reverberates with each other, and not just on their own.

*11) What is the building that has better Feng Shui you have visited or studied?*

Over the years I have seen many buildings that have good feng shui and quite a few not so good. If I have to single out a couple of good ones that I have studied, then I would chose the work of I. M. Pei, the Chinese American architect who is famous for doing the Bank of China building in Hong Kong.

The extension he did for the German Historical Museum here in Berlin has really good feng shui, in the sense that he knows and uses the feng shui concept of “host and guest”. His new and modern extension did not try to overshadow the old Arsenal built between 1695 and 1730 in the classic Baroque style, the new complements the old instead. I M Pei knew how to do a new building to fit in with an old one graciously, without losing its own individuality nor destroying the other.

He also know the difference between a public and an exhibition space, one should be Yang and extravert while the other should be Yin and introvert to allow for the exhibits to come through without competing with them.

One gets the feeling that he knows the proper protocol and the ceremonial rites in walking through a museum of history. Most people are not aware that the Confucian ideal of “li” or protocol and ritual of ceremony has greatly influence feng shui. A buiding with good feng shui is a building with a good manner and I M Pei has managed to do this brilliantly without the need to shout and to jump over its host.

Another of his new buildings that I have studied recently is the Suzhou Museum in China, which I have visited only a couple of months ago in preparation for next year’s feng shui study tour. The museum of ancient Chinese art and paintings is organized in 3 sections, with the water feature and the main garden located in the central portion embraced by the East and West wing on either side. The layout of the 3 axes matched the style of the Prince Zhong Mansion nearby, and it is a classic example of a 2-courtyards configuration to assemble the auspicious qi in the Tian Xin or the Heaven Heart.

I M Pi never claimed that he uses feng shui, but a good architect with a classical training in China will unconsciously do the right thing to produce good feng shui.

*12) By 2015, you, will perform a Learning Tour Feng Shui through China, you can count us about this?*

The main theme for next year’s 14-days feng shui study tour to China will be on the influence of Taoism in feng shui. We will see scenic mountains, sacred temples, quintessential Suzhou gardens, well-preserved ancient houses and villages, also the very special Fujiang earth dwellings (Tulou) that have a clear impact by Taoist thinking. During the trip, we are invited to participate in a Daoist festival high up in the Qiyuan Mountain to mark the 9th day 0f the 9th moon in the Chinese calendar. The Daoist monks from the Wanshouguan Temple in Nanchang have also offered a very special blessing ceremony for us when we visit them.

We will stay on top of the Huangshan Mountain to watch the sunrise high above the clouds. Also you will have a chance to learn about Chinese calligraphy and painting in a local artist’s studio and also visit a Luopan maker and his museum in Wanan. Another special treat for this trip is you will meet a local Feng Shui master in Xidi and see his work on Yinzhai (gravesite) Feng Shui.

We will also visit a couple of new buildings done with feng shui, one is the Suzhou Museum by I M Pei mentioned earlier and the other is by another Pritzker Prize-winning Chinese architect called Wang Shu, who did the planning and a new library for the Wenzheng College in the Suzhou University. We will also look at the China Pavilion in Shanghai and discuss how good is the feng shui. I have a detail itinerary here with me, if we have time we can look at more items that we will visit in this tour.

With every trip, I would spend quite a it of time before hand to do the research on each place we are to visit, and I will write up a booklet to hand out to the participant at the beginning of the rip, so they would know exactly what kind of feng shui features worth looking at in each place, and there are some free times where people can do shopping and more shopping!