

A sobering take on feng shui

The decor philosophy is drawing new followers: recovering addicts hoping to reorder their lives.

By Kavita Daswani, Special to The Times
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FENG SHUI was co-opted by the West at the same time that disco started to take hold, and some 35 years later, it's still rattling wind chimes. Now this quasi-mystical home improvement formula is getting a look from the world of rehab, where its unique blend of wishful thinking and Martha Stewart finickiness is seen as the promise of a more sustainable recovery.

This ancient Chinese philosophy is now being used to help modulate behavior, and feng shui advisors and consultants on both coasts have reported an increased interest in the services from individuals struggling with such addictions as narcotics, alcohol, sex, shopping and gambling. Consulting costs range from \$300 an hour to \$1,500 per 1,500 square feet.

Ken Lauher, who bills himself as a celebrity feng shui consultant in New York, has noticed a spike in calls from recovering addicts during the last several months, and Connie Spruill, director of education at the Feng Shui Institute of America near Columbus, Ohio, reports that 1 in 10 of her new clients is struggling with a predilection toward alcohol and drugs.

"I think it's the evolution of feng shui in America," said Sylvia Watson, co-manager of the Feng Shui Institute of America. "There has been a lot of success for people who need help with their career or a relationship, and it's only natural that people are starting to think about using feng shui in dealing with addictions."

Channeling esoteric notions of Taoist cosmology, feng shui is more than just glorified clutter clearing. Lauher, for one, takes a multi-pronged approach.

Using Chinese astrology and his clients' dates of birth as a guide, Lauher tries to determine if there is an imbalance that might be fueling the desire for liquor, painkillers or other substances. He works with clients using *qi gong*, a gentle exercise that can elevate a person's energy. He suggests morning and evening meditations -- and then he reconfigures the physical aspects of their home.

"I work with a lot of well-known people -- actors and actresses, singers and songwriters," he says without naming names. "But they are not coming to me to tell them how to position a couch or bed or to make their house look like a Chinese souvenir shop. They're coming to me to really change their energy in how they experience life."

Janice Sugita, a Palm Springs interior decorator and feng shui consultant, focuses on removing subconscious triggers in a person's home or work environment. Painting a bedroom a soft sea-foam green would be more appropriate than keeping Jimi Hendrix, Blind Melon or Sublime posters on the wall. Best too to remove any water feature: A fountain, a gleaming mirror, even a shiny granite counter top can trigger thirst in an alcoholic.

One client, Sugita said, came out of rehab and went straight back to an apartment where the bong still occupied a place of honor. Armed with a special compass and a *ba gua*, an octagonal diagram that orients life situations and body parts with the front door, Sugita assessed the apartment building, studied the history of the property and made recommendations to soften the environment for her client. These included adding dumbbells to a corner to bring in a metal element, and filling the space with live plants.

Control in a critical time

PSYCHOLOGISTS agree that addicts are at their most vulnerable in the immediate aftermath of rehab.

"When they come out of rehab, they're not really sure what direction to go in," said Dak Kopec, an environmental psychologist schooled in feng shui. "They're scared of failure. Feng shui brings in a sense that they have control of their lives, whether it's through some environmental modification or changing their clothing or hair, or looking at their relationships."

In her work, Connie Spruill looks at the five elements of feng shui -- water, metal, fire, earth and wood -- and balances them in space, "bringing in more of the earth for grounding, flashes of fire for motivation and wood to represent a new beginning."

Not surprisingly, the approach has its detractors. Keith Owens is the director of the Brookside Institute in Newport Beach, where patients spend up to six months recovering from substance abuse through a combination of therapy and medication. "In our view, addiction is a brain disease, and it's very difficult to talk in such a narrow spectrum about any one thing that works," Owens said.

Other physicians approach feng shui with an "all's fair" attitude, acknowledging that release from rehab is scary and it's impossible to know what will help a person stay on the wagon. "It all has to do with energy and the way we perceive things," said Chris Prentiss, co-founder and co-director of the Malibu treatment center Passages. "How we feel is largely a product of the conditions in which we live. And feng shui has the ability to change that in quite a dramatic way."

When Prentiss bought the Passages property in 2001, he used feng shui principles to determine where the furniture should go -- and did the same on the six houses he subsequently added to the enclave.

Still, he agrees that feng shui should be used only as part of a full complement of proven therapies.

"Feng shui by itself isn't going to do it," he said.