

Ill wind blows in California over feng shui idea

Lawmaker ignores snickers, proposes new building codes to accommodate earth energies

By Michael Martinez
Tribune national correspondent

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LOS ANGELES -- What troubled California needs is some good chi.

So says Democratic Assemblyman Leland Yee of San Francisco, the speaker pro tempore in the Legislature's lower chamber, who is sponsoring a resolution urging the state architect and local municipalities to revise their building rules and regulations to better allow for feng shui.

Yes, the usual California jokes already have begun, Yee acknowledged.

But feng shui, Yee says, is based on serious ancient science and natural wisdom, originating 4,000 years ago in China, where palaces were designed to blend with earth energies known as chi. Simply put, feng shui (pronounced fung schway) is the art of designing living spaces to make occupants feel at ease and in harmony with their surroundings. Today, it's applied to residential and office structures alike.

"They used to say that acupuncture was goofy too," said Yee, 54, a child psychologist who was born in southern China and came to the U.S. at age 3.

"You hear, 'Feng shui, what is that?' There's a lot of jokes about that. . . . They mispronounce it and they kind of kiddingly say, 'Isn't that mysticism and superstition?'" said Yee, who described his proposal as the first of its kind among states. "Things that are kooky and odd at one time become accepted."

'Wind' and 'water'

Feng shui, which means "wind" and "water," considers location, land, building shape, neighboring structures and history of use in establishing spaces that make people feel at ease with their surroundings. Room arrangement, color, furniture placement and landscaping also are design factors.

For example, entry into a home shouldn't have a straight view to the outside because the chi rushes right out of the space, experts said. In offices, desks should face toward a door, and workers can use rock gardens, little fountains and plants to evoke a natural environment, experts said.

Yee's proposal, recently amended to soften an outright change for statewide "building standards that promote feng shui principles," is derided by Republicans and home builders. A legislative panel will consider the measure this month.

"It's about priorities," said Assembly Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield. "California has the largest deficit. Our credit rating is the worst in the nation; Lithuania has a better credit rating. We pay the highest worker compensation premiums in the nation. Jobs are leaving the state. If this is their priority, it's dysfunctional for California."

Already pinched by high land prices and environmental rules, home construction businesses don't want another obstacle.

"We have a genuine crisis in housing supply and housing affordability," said John Frith, spokesman for the California Building Industry Association. "There's no end to the laws and regulations that make it more costly and more difficult to build the homes and the apartments that Californians need. The legislation should focus less on what goes into a new home and more on making sure new homes are built."

Builders in the San Francisco Bay area have voluntarily used feng shui in home design because of consumer demand there, Frith said.

"It does speak to the tendency of the Legislature to legislate something that should be left to the marketplace," Frith said.

Yee agreed that the state's budget crisis and the worker compensation program are important.

But, he said, "Those critics who say we can't deal with anything else but the budget would rather have this go away and wouldn't face the reality that this is a culturally diverse state and we have arrived, and we have brought our language and culture here, and we're here to stay."

Asians make up 11 percent of California's population and account for almost 40 percent in several cities, he said.

The foundations for his proposal date to his childhood, Yee said. "My parents, who are from China, always talked about feng shui and talked about the importance of it," he said.

He then started getting complaints from about a dozen California homeowners that local building codes won't allow for changes or designs based on feng shui. For example, a Cupertino resident wanted to align the front door of a new house with prevailing winds to take advantage of natural cooling, a feng shui principle, but local officials wouldn't allow it, Yee said.

'You should allow for diversity'

"I thought, this is your own home, and when you're talking about America, you should allow for diversity," Yee said.

To counter misperceptions--and wisecracks--about feng shui, Yee recently held a workshop for legislative staff members and community members. Experts spoke of how spas, resorts,

restaurants and businesses such as Citibank, Merrill Lynch and Charles Schwab now use feng shui.

"We purposely did not have anyone from the Asian community speak about it," Yee said. "They were all white. And we thought hopefully that will get it out of the mystic, Asian, superstitious arena. And if white people think it's OK, maybe it is OK."

One expert, Seann Xenja, 53, of Mill Valley, said the ancient Chinese design principles can provide savings and efficiencies, such as door arrangement in one new federal building in California that he helped design. Contemporary architecture can be so elaborate that it ignores fundamental design benefits emphasized in feng shui, said Xenja, a supporter of Yee's proposal.

"If you think about Frank Lloyd Wright," Xenja said, "what was his biggest contribution? He said the building should fit in and be integrated with the landscape. Doesn't that sound like a logical thing to do? And yet that was revolutionary. That is where you start with feng shui."

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