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Ancient philosophy, big business

風水

□ Developers pay to ensure their Asian-oriented malls conform to the Chinese philosophy of feng shui

By Jennifer Chow
Staff Reporter

Asian malls in Richmond are prospering. And the reason may be because developers are following an ancient Chinese success formula.

Feng shui, literally "wind and water", is a traditional formula based on identifying good and bad energies and aligning them to create harmony and success.

Sherman Tai, a feng shui master, says he's provided calculations to many developers as a guide in placing entranceways, offices and furnishings to avoid bad luck. His job is to help developers gain the most potential from their projects which helps them attract buyers.

"I act as a coach and (they) are the football players," Tai says.

Aberdeen Centre is one good example of the application of feng shui principles. Tai says the mall follows the basic outline of a dragonfly which symbolizes success. The fountain near the mall's entranceway collects luck, and the dragonfly (the mall) drinks from it, Tai explains.

Tai is the exclusive feng shui master to the Hong Kong Bank of Canada. He says he's overseen the plans of many of the bank's branches, including Richmond's new proposed branch at No. 3 and Saba Roads.

He says he's also checked over the preliminary drawings for the Richmond Inn to help them select the right colors, floor plan and entranceway location.

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Wind and water philosophy carries weight here

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Tai, a mechanical engineer by training, opened his office in Aberdeen Centre six years ago, and his business is booming with realtors, architects and developers all demanding his services.

The principles of fung shui are based on very complex calculations, Tai says.

"Fung shui is very logical," he says.

Ernest Yee, public affairs manager for the Hong Kong Bank of Canada confirmed that the bank hires Tai exclusively for their projects, including the bank's latest Chinatown branch, Way Foong House, opening next March.

Yee says following the advice of fung shui masters is a longtime bank tradition.

"Even our non-Asian executives use it," Yee says. "We've got nothing to lose." The bank's customers seem to follow the ancient philosophy quite closely, he says.

Although he admits there's no quantifiable way of measuring whether fung shui principles help, "it seems to work," Tai says, because "business is going well." Yee is also satisfied.

"If customers request it and it doesn't hurt, and it seems to help, we're quite happy to follow it."

Richmond's development applications manager David McLellan examines developers' design applications and comes across fung shui every week, he says.

"A lot of the things make a lot of sense," McLellan says, adding that fung shui and good site planning go hand in hand.

The most common conflict he sees in both

commercial and residential applications are the positioning of trees near the entranceways.

"We've had to be fairly creative to adapt to this," McLellan says, referring to the fung shui principle that says trees facing main entranceways bring bad luck.

That issue recently came up in the Hong Kong Bank of Canada's new branch at Saba and No. 3 Roads where a tree on the boulevard was positioned close to the entranceway. The tree is still there, McLellan says, and no decision has been made about moving it. It's a difficult issue because sometimes utility connections and spacing between trees dictate where the city places a tree, he adds. But overall, the city is "not adverse" to fung shui principles, he says.

Milan Ilich, owner of Richmond-based Progressive Contracting Ltd. says he's heard and talked about it, but hasn't applied fung shui yet to any of his projects.

"We certainly are planning to do so," Ilich says, because most of his buyers are Chinese who follow the fung shui philosophy. "We have to make sure we do it or they'll not buy our product." Ilich's company, which developed much of the Terra Nova lands, will put fung shui to use in the new year.

But not all Chinese are believers in the system. Ken Kwan, executive vice-president of Fairchild Holdings Ltd., says his company doesn't apply fung shui principles to its holdings, which include Aberdeen Centre and Fairchild Square.

"I don't study or understand it," Kwan says. "No, we haven't used it."

Despite this, Kwan says good planning and fung shui principles are very similar.

Fairchild researches its target markets very carefully to see "how a tenant is going to react" to lighting, office or store locations, and traffic patterns," Kwan says.

Fairchild, owned by Richmondite Thomas Fung, owns and develops properties that mainly target Asians, including two local Chinese TV stations.

It seems likely the private company has applied some fung shui principles even if only on an unofficial basis because the Asian market demands it.

After all, Fung says, "We believe in doing our homework to meet all of our target market's needs."

Barry Chilton, a realtor with Richmond's Realty World, says Asians take their fung shui principles seriously.

"In some cases, it's a matter of 'no deal,'

Chilton says.

Although he doesn't hire fung shui experts, he says his firm knows most of the common pitfalls to avoid.

For Asians, Chilton doesn't show them houses facing a T-intersection, a front door that directly faces the back door, or houses with ditches.

Newly-immigrated Chinese are most likely to bring up fung shui concerns, but Canadian-born Chinese sometimes revert to the tradition as well, Chilton adds.

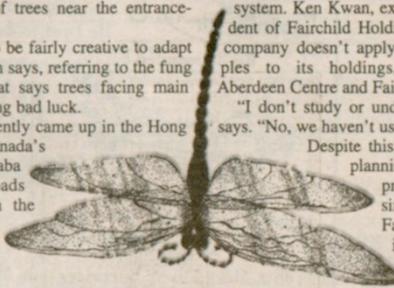
"Sometimes it's used as an 'out' by them," Chilton adds, saying that fung shui concerns are sometimes required to be written into contracts, such as the removal of trees.

Richmond architect David Sze says following fung shui principles isn't always easy because people interpret them differently.

"Most people have their own version of what fung shui means to them," Sze says. "It's like chop suey."

Because Sze accommodates his clients' requests to adhere to fung shui principles, he keeps several books on fung shui in his office. If that's not enough, clients invite their own fung shui masters to sit in on planning meetings. Some even send plans back to Hong Kong for a consultation or fly masters in to look at properties.

Sze doesn't necessarily believe in the philosophy himself, saying some of the ideas are awkward but some make sense. He does admit that once an owner abandoned his plans for a property and sold it after a fung shui master told him the land had bad luck.



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