Sustainability : The Modern Feng Shui

In 1999, the International Interior Design Association (IIDA), focusing on the acceptance and use of sustainable design practices, conducted a study. Out of 100 professional interior designers surveyed, only 35% actually applied sustainable design principles, while 80% were merely motivated to increase their use of sustainable design in their projects (Coleman 2). The concern that arose while reading these statistics were that people are not understanding the long term savings nor the true benefits of using sustainable practices in their designs. Not only does it help the environment, but also it could help the mind of those using the spaces. Today, in 2002, designers finally understand the necessity and advantage of these practices. They are not only incorporating the use of recycled and/or natural, renewable materials but are incorporating the ancient Eastern practices of Feng Shui, as well. These two principles applied together not only help the environment, but promote positive “chi” or energy that can benefit the user in more ways than one. The use of these materials in itself is beneficial in that they save the environment from being covered with trash, along with impeding the depletion of natural resources. Feng Shui is beneficial in that it uses natural materials and directional coordinates to promote positive energy within a space, which in turn promotes successful business practices, and overall positive personal mind and soul within. These issues discussed will not only educate designers but the general public, in terms of advantages and necessity of these principles to be applied in today’s designs.

There are many issues concerning the implementation of sustainable design principles such as cost, quality product availability, and benefits. The most efficient way of convincing designers and clients that cost reflects more than just the dollar signs is by
education. In Christopher Ostrowski’s article “Green is Not Just Environmental Anymore; It’s a Money Saver” he discusses the fact that there is a “movement in the industry” to incorporate sustainable design courses in architectural, design and engineering schools (48). Designers studying in colleges and universities today are learning more about sustainability and how the cost, products and benefits are all to be calculated together from the beginning of the project to see how the long term benefits out weigh the initial cost. This allows for the designers to fully express the sustainable topics to clients. Architect Michael McDonough has said, “education and increased awareness has been the impetus on the consumer side a willingness to engage and educate the designer…and [the client]” (Grahl 11). Another designer, Tone Wheeler, focuses on what performance comfort and amenity level the client hopes to achieve and feels without these guidelines it is difficult to address sustainable issues to the client (Efficient 36).

In Christine Grahl’s interview with various designers and suppliers, she finds that the government’s use of sustainability helps with he public’s awareness. In 1998 President Clinton made an Executive Order 13101, which directs federal agencies to use sustainable design in all federal and state building projects (Grahl 10). Along with the executive order there are various national organizations that are involved in making sustainability a mainstream topic. One major influential organization is the US Green Building council. It has come up with the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) that has a program called the Green Building Rating System. This creates an opportunity for designers to give clients the evidence of sustainable benefits in order to give the reassurance of the initial cost and products (Grahl 13). The EPA and the
General Services Administration have both adopted the standards set by LEED as well (Flynn 26).

The overall cost and products have the most influence on the client’s decisions. They want the two to be appealing to not only the eye, but their bank accounts as well. It is not only the designer’s responsibility to alleviate this stress for the clients, but suppliers as well. The suppliers, designers and total industry need to educate the client on the long term health, environmental and cost benefits of sustainable products and buildings (Grahl 13). With this clients and designers need to be assured that the products they are choosing are equally good as the non-sustainable products (Grahl 13). Overall, “manufacturers need to continue to produce green products that do not compromise the appearance and performance of that particular product” (Grahl 14). Critic Jonathan Glancey supports this by saying, “the only criterion that will never waver is beauty” (Thing 12).

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the long-term cost and benefits. If designers do not factor in the life-cycle and sustainable elements early on in a project the initial perception is that sustainability is expensive to implement, which in turn shies the clients away and does not allow them to see the long-term benefits. Christopher Ostrowski also focuses on how sustainability increases energy efficiency and reduces operating costs, which in turn adds value to the initial investment of the client (48). In the last decade sustainable design has been becoming more feasible in initial cost, both product availability and aesthetic appearance, along with the true health benefits. With the help of manufactures producing more sustainable products, the incorporation of these practices will increase even more.
The idea of health benefits incurred by sustainable design is where it correlates with the ancient practices of Feng Shui. Sustainability not only has individual preferences, but social, cultural, political and economic factors as well (Edwards 4). Due to its universalism it is becoming a global trend and from this people are realizing the effects it has on a person as Feng Shui (Edwards 4). It is not only beneficial to the environment, but to the well being of those that occupy the space. The basic principles of Feng Shui revolve around the way the natural elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water effect each other to produce the life-force of chi. If used correctly these elements can bring happiness, prosperity, luck and longevity to a person in a space and creates an overall spirituality in the environment. The governing powers are the Yin-female tiger, black- and Yang-male tiger, white. Despite their opposing energies, they harmonize the factors of the universe creating balance that is positive (Feng Shui 2).

There are two schools of Feng Shui. The Form school, which deals with the physical environment, and the Compass school, which deals with the individual’s energy and the celestial environment (Feng Shui 5). The main focus of both is to find a location with lots of chi to have health, happiness, and financial success. There are some ways that this chi can be diverted too, so a designer has to take into consideration that

- strong winds and swift waters can carry the Chi away;
- rolling hills will block strong winds, but mountains may create wind pockets; and chi is bounded by slow moving, meandering water, where it can then accumulate (Feng Shui 4).

Chi is just as complicated in interior space planning, where one has to focus on the exact placement of furniture, windows, doorways and mirrors; along with the balancing of natural elements to bring in certain energies, and overall correlation to the North, South, East, West coordinates (Feng Shui 7-9). Each of these has a different effect on Chi and
with the right placement of opposites they can be balanced out, which in the end produces positive energy.

Sustainability has similar effects on a person’s quality of life in that it is bound by health and aesthetic benefits (Flynn 26). Deborah Snoonian, author of “Architecture RedisCOVERS Being Green,” admits that there is clear evidence that natural light and ventilation, good indoor air quality and the overall uses of sustainable products and principles “creates an atmosphere, which occupants are, happier, healthier, and more productive” (86); all major effects of Feng Shui. Sustainable buildings not only resonate positive effects on those that work or live in them, but that they will grow in value over time, due to outperforming traditional buildings with energy savings and workers productivity (Snoonian 86). The connecting of building and user “to the rhythms of nature and the greater cosmos” through sustainable products and principles gives a true spirituality to the architecture (Edwards 45). This gives the building or space a soul, which becomes a place of “intangible feeling made up of so many things” (Day 107). This idea of “en-souling a building” by means of sustainable products is a universal approach to the ancient practices of Feng Shui (Day 106).

As one can see, the conscious efforts of a designer, supplier, or the overall industry, to educate a client can be the determining factor in their choice to add sustainable principles into a project. These decisions not only benefit the earth, but the mind and soul of those that use the space. Sustainability adds spirituality to a space, which in turn gives the space a soul, creating a modern spin on the practices of Feng Shui. Overall, the long term effects of sustainability not only have impact on one’s well being, but their bank accounts as well. What other modern practices can create a
peaceful healthy environment, while “upping” the actual value of the building, but sustainability. The incorporation of sustainable elements means a healthy mind and environment, while Feng Shui practices mean a healthy mind by the use of the environment; so sustainability proves to be the modern Feng Shui. This fact, along with the government mandating their new building projects, should be concrete enough to convince the industry to incorporate sustainable principles in all projects. Unfortunately, there is still a stigmata put on these practices as being costly and ugly, but with continued education and availability of products sustainability will eventually be incorporated in every new project.
Works Cited


