

Designing for Health: The Ancient Feng Shui Philosophy in Modern Healthcare

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"Designing for Health" is a monthly, web-exclusive series from the healthcare interior design leaders at Perkins+Will that focuses on the issues, trends, challenges, and research involved in crafting today's healing environments.

Feng shui has been called an art, a science, a philosophy, a belief system, an architectural approach, a design method, and a superstition. Originating over 4,000 years ago in China, a feng shui master was hired by emperors to assure the divine leaders of harmony, balance, and continued success. Today, Hudson Hospital in Hudson, Wisconsin and other healthcare systems across the country are discovering attributes of feng shui that can support and enhance the healing environment.

The name feng shui literally means “wind” and “water,” two energetic elements the Chinese believe circulate not only through the earth but through the body as well. This continual flow of energy is known in feng shui as *ch'i*. In ancient times, feng shui masters studied the patterns of the rivers, the direction of the wind, and general topography to ascertain whether a particular site would be auspicious for a building or village. Those practices and the subsequent feng shui principles still have relevance today as architects and designers embark on a new design:

A connection to the land. In feng shui, wellness and healing is contingent on living in harmony with nature. It is believed that natural daylight and views of nature keep patients and staff connected to the land and in harmony with their surroundings.

Front entry orientation. Traditions hold that determining which direction a building faces and how it is sited on the land can be the difference between a successful institution and one that is not as successful. Some conditions that can determine the outcome are relationship to roads, the presence of water, proximity to hills or elevated areas, and a view from the front entry.

Shape of the building. One of the basic underpinnings of feng shui is that a space will directly correlate with the well being of those who live or work within it. Clarity of form not only allows for ease of construction and remodeling, but also sets up the interior environment to have a well-defined parti and can create a harmonious relationship between patients and staff.

Predecessor influence. If a building or site had a different use prior to the current healthcare setting, it is important to know what it was used for and why the premises were vacated. The history of a site can be celebrated in the new building or, as the Chinese believe, if the previous occupants had a negative experience (i.e. the business closed or unhealthy materials were used) corrective measures need to be taken to ensure past influences do not affect the new occupants.

To establish a balance in both interior and exterior environments, Chinese ideology incorporates the use of the five elements: water, wood, earth, fire and metal. This system originated as the delineation of conditions needed to support the ancient Chinese agrarian society. Wood represented the crops or plants. Water and Earth were needed to support the growth of the plants. The ash from the Fire was used to enrich the soil; Metal tools were required to hoe, trim, and rake the plants. To yield a successful crop required the use of all five elements. Over time, the importance of the five elements transitioned into all aspects of Chinese life. Their presence became paramount in man-made, as well as natural, environments to assure balance and harmony both inside and out.

Incorporating the five elements in design can go beyond their agricultural origins as a color and a shape represent each element. Wood is represented by the color green, plants and trees, and by the shape of a column. Fire is represented by the color red, by fireplaces or candles, and by angular shapes. Earth appears as the color yellow or brown, in the form of pottery or clay, and as a square. Metal is identified by the color white, metal items, and/or round shapes, and Water as black, fountains or aquariums, or wavy shapes. A space having the presence of all five elements is believed to generate balance.

In addition to the five elements, feng shui practitioners utilize the concept of *Yin* and *Yang*, two complementary and opposite forces in nature to create synergy and achieve balance in design. Yin represents the qualities of dark, retraction, cold, soft, and quiet, while Yang represents the qualities of light, expansion, warmth, hardness, and expression. These two aspects are interdependent and interrelated. Having too much of one results in imbalance. Maintaining this balance between Yin and Yang in an environment can relate to the design language of visual balance and in healthcare can harmonize patient spaces in terms of materials, acoustics, and lighting.

An example of feng shui in a healthcare setting is Fairview Southdale Hospital's Elsie O. Mitchell Meditation Sanctuary in Edina, Minnesota. Designed in collaboration with the client team, Perkins+Will incorporated natural materials and design features evolved from the five elements to create a space that is rich in symbolism, based in simplicity, and provides sanctuary for people at a time when they need it most.

At Hudson Hospital in Hudson, Wisconsin, feng shui is an integral part of the healing culture established more than 10 years ago when they first opened their doors to patients. Marian

Furlong, president and CEO of Hudson Hospital, was an advocate for incorporating feng shui principles in the original design of the hospital as a benefit to the patients, staff, and community. Now in the midst of designing a major interior renovation and a 40,000-square-foot medical office building addition, the team at Perkins+Will is working closely with hospital leadership and their feng shui consultant, Carole Hyder, to continue this philosophy of design throughout the evolving hospital campus. Principles of feng shui are major considerations in all elements of the design process from site planning to interior material selections. Furlong shares the intent of the original building design to “support the staff to assist patients and families to heal.” By continuing this mission and carrying forward the established feng shui principles, a sense of flow and balance are maintained and create a warm and soothing atmosphere in this comprehensive healing environment.

Bios

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