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Real-estate agents studying feng shui to help sell houses

By Marc Ramirez
Seattle Times staff reporter

The master arrived from the north, fluent in Mandarin and the ways of feng shui. In the balance hung the condominium Phillip Chan had planned to call home — until Mom stepped in to object.

For Mom, the living room had issues. Angle issues. "It was not completely square," explains Richard Tao, a John L. Scott agent who'd helped Chan in his search for an Eastside condo. It all added up to bad feng shui.

Chan's mother had consulted her Vancouver-based practitioner, who suggested not buying the place at all. Dueling feng-shui practitioners ensued: Tao called in Cynthia Chomos, a Seattle consultant who last year opened the Washington State-certified Feng Shui School for Real Estate Sales.

His offer to Chan: He'd pay for the consultation if Chan decided to go with Chomos, who believed a few improvements could go a long way when it came to fixing problems.

The latest indication of how feng shui (pronounced *fung shway*) — the Chinese art of arranging items or surroundings to attain harmony with one's environment — has become mainstream might be the growing number of real-estate agents schooling themselves on the practice.

Once dismissed this side of the Pacific as a New Age fad, feng shui is now taken seriously, with Donald Trump, Disney and British Airways among those reported to have considered it in building designs. Meanwhile, a more multicultural society is prompting realtors to reassess the realities of doing business.

"Certainly when something new comes in, you have people saying, 'What's the value of it?' " says Ginger Downs of the Seattle-King County Association of Realtors. "But as diversity grows, there's better awareness on the part of agents that they need to serve that diverse community."

Feng shui tips

Feng shui (pronounced "fung shway") strives for harmonious interaction between the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water while creating a place where energy can flow freely. Here's

Chomos is one of several feng-shui practitioners the association works with, offering instruction and hands-on workshops for agents who may not completely buy into it, but see the upside in knowing about concepts important to their clients.

Chan, an industrial engineer, told his agent he'd found the home he was looking for. He agreed to go with Chomos, who suggested mostly minor changes, such as



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Phillip Chan has incorporated the Chinese art of feng shui in his Bellevue condo. Feng shui can enhance the livability and resale value of a home.



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Phillip Chan and Annie Lau used plants and mirrors to improve the feng shui in their living room. A more multicultural society in Seattle has prompted real-estate agents to understand and incorporate such non-Western ideas as feng shui on behalf of their clients.



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Phillip Chan and Annie Lau used feng shui to create a positive energy flow in their Bellevue condominium. Feng-shui practitioners are available to serve home buyers nationwide.

an edited list of suggestions from Anne Mansfield, executive director of the International Feng Shui Guild, for buying and selling a home with feng shui in mind:

Don't buy a house at the end of a busy "T" intersection, which puts you in the path of dangerous "chi," or energy. If you're selling such a home, add hedges or other barriers for protection.

Reduce entryway clutter to create a welcoming atmosphere.

Think of the home and its environment as one place. Both should work in harmony.

The front door should face the best direction for the site. Avoid homes that face hillsides and mountains, where "energy is coming right at you. ... You want to have it behind you, supporting you." Cliffs are also bad, she says — your front door is associated with wealth and relationships, and you don't want that kind of energy to fall away from you. Other considerations: sun and other weather forces, as well as any cultural preferences.

Avoid living next to power transformers (too much "fire" energy) or a cemetery (inactive or downward energy).

Negative energy left by former property owners ("predecessor chi") can be improved with a space-clearing ceremony.

Resources

Cynthia Chomos, Feng Shui School for Real Estate Sales,
www.cynthiachomos.com, 206-919-0107

Anne Mansfield, International Feng Shui Guild, Portland, 888-881-4374

Sheila Wright,
www.fengshuiseattle.com, 888-689-2378

plants and mirrors that would "extend" the condo's "sha" points, or troublesome angles.

Chan's mother again consulted with her feng-shui master, who granted his blessing. Although there are a few things she'd like her son to do that he hasn't gotten around to yet, "they're very happy now," agent Tao says. "That place has appreciated very well."

Feng shui nationwide

The Portland-based International Feng Shui Guild considers itself the profession's umbrella organization, with 22 schools and 30 chapters across the U.S. and Canada. With about 400 members, "we're here to raise the bar so the public feels safer," executive director Anne Mansfield says.

Real-estate-focused feng shui is a rising specialty in the community, she says. Consultants target agents looking to feng shui to satisfy buyers for whom the idea of being in harmony with one's environment is not just a nice idea but rather a necessity, who believe that clutter in their homes creates clutter in their lives.

As Seattle's Chomos says, "If they can find feng-shui-harmonious homes, clients will be happy, and down the road it will be easier to sell that home."

Actually, many feng-shui principles can be found in staging, or dressing up a home for sale, a practice attributed to former Bellevue real-estate agent Barb

Schwarz and accepted for years by realtors. Like feng shui, staging involves clutter reduction and the use of furniture to address foot-traffic flow, but it's strictly concerned with selling a property.

Millennia-old feng shui goes further to address the "emotional appeal" of a home, the reaction one feels when approaching and entering a home. "If you talk to agents," Chomos says, "that's the one thing it's hard for them to put

their finger on."

Last month, she dished expertise at a workshop for nine agents gathered in a Lake Union hotel conference room. All had their own reasons for being there, starting with the three clock hours they'd earn toward required continuing-education credits.

Said one: "I had a couple clients ask me about feng shui, so I figured I'd better know a little more about it." Another puzzled over a buyer who insisted his future home's front door face east. ("I don't know what that was all about," he said.) And Julie Seaborn of Coldwell Banker Bain said she'd dealt with Chinese families who wouldn't buy homes near a graveyard or at the end of a block.

All about chi

Chomos nodded. Twelve years after giving up a public-relations career to pursue feng shui full-time, she'd heard it all before. "Feng shui really looks at the psychology of how we react to the world around us," she said; it was all about chi, or energy, and how it flows — too fast, too slow, not at all.

She unveiled a slide show of problem situations — homes built on slants, below roadways, at the ends of cul-de-sacs. Some problems were small but glaring, such as sharp-pointed plants in passageways — "a very aggressive energy to encounter," she said.

Inherently iffy problems

From a home's surroundings to its design to how items are placed within that design, many of the problems she addressed at the Lake Union workshop were the kinds of things a sensible homeowner might inherently feel iffy about anyway. Others, like ghosts and lingering negative energy from the problems of previous owners, were decidedly more ethereal.

Though Coldwell Banker's Seaborn said concepts like lingering bad vibes have to be taken with a grain of salt, "every home has an energy to it," she said. "You can feel it when you walk in."

Windermere's Eve Whitman says much of feng shui's philosophies come naturally to her. There are homes she refuses to show clients. "Whether I can be specific about it or not, there's something wrong there. It has to do with the bones, the karma, the history of a house. It's so real, it's amazing."

While she doesn't advise filling every corner with mirrors and water features, she says that being sensitive to clients' surroundings can make a difference in a referral-based business.

"It's not just about being a numbers person," she says. "It's about walking into a home and feeling it. ... It's being sensitive to what people say and picking up on the energy of their lives."

"Some clients say, 'I don't want that,' " says Tao, the John L. Scott agent. "Others absolutely want it. It's all about keeping the client happy."

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