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Mind Over Mortar

Proponents of Vedic Design And Feng Shui Believe That Our Homes Can Determine Our Health. What Does Science Have to Say?

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Architecture can move us to tears with its beauty, astound us with its majesty, warm us with its coziness or alienate us with its coldness. But can it actually make us ill, or heal our sickness? Can it make us smarter or more successful? Can it boost our energy, or sap us of same?

Architect Jonathan Lipman answers yes, firmly and unhesitatingly, to all of the above. His colleagues in the architectural establishment, not to mention scientists who insist on demonstrable proof, aren't so sure. But a small group of architects and neuroscientists have recently joined to address some of these provocative questions -- and to Lipman and others who believe in the healing power of architecture, that's a step in the right direction.

Lipman, chief architect of the Iowa-based Maharishi Global Construction, stood before a crowd of nearly 160 people at the National Building Museum last month and argued for treating our homes as conduits of cosmic energy.

The evening program, "A Lecture on Vedic Architecture: A Holistic Approach to Sustainability," was devoted to the idea that a system of immutable principles, which Lipman refers to as "natural law," guides all human activity -- including the design and construction of buildings -- toward alignment with an overarching universal intelligence. When people live in accordance with natural law, so goes the theory, they are healthy, happy and at peace. But when they defy it, they must endure the spectrum of human suffering: anxiety, misfortune, sickness and violence.



A brahmasthan -- a peaceful central core -- is visible from the entrance of Jeffrey and Rona Abramson's Vedic home in Potomac. (Photo by Katherine Frey for The Washington Post)

Lipman, 52, is a measured and serious-minded man. He is a Cornell-trained architect, and former president of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy. He is also a longtime practitioner of Transcendental Meditation, the relaxation technique introduced to the West by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 1960s, and a resident of Maharishi Vedic City, the community of the octogenarian guru's followers that has sprouted up, improbably, amid southeastern Iowa cornfields.

As a proponent of Vedic design -- architecture informed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's teachings, rooted in ancient Hindu Vedas, or sacred texts -- Lipman's beliefs can strike non-adherents as eccentric, to say the least. Chief among them is that one's house must face east or north in order to align with universal intelligence and ensure the occupants' well-being. Houses facing any other direction are practically begging inauspicious forces to sweep in and wreak havoc.

One local house in full compliance belongs to developer Jeffrey S. Abramson and his wife, Rona. The couple practices Transcendental Meditation twice daily in a 5,500-square-foot Cape Dutch home in Potomac whose Vedic specs Abramson credits with bringing him personal and professional vitality.

Upon moving there in 1987, he says, he immediately felt "unrestricted. It was as if I had handcuffs on all my life, and the handcuffs were taken off -- as if natural law was coming and working for me. I had partnered now with the agency that was running the entire universe. I started to excel. I started to blossom." Abramson, who also spoke at last month's conference, is so convinced of Vedic architecture's benefits to mankind that his most recent project, Tower II, an office and hotel complex in Rockville, will be built according to its principles.

Like the highly popular feng shui, which consults ancient Chinese mysticism to cleanse home or work environments of destructive energies, Vedic architecture exists at the intersection of spiritualism, design and self-improvement. Both belief systems have detractors who write them off as either old snake oil in a New Age bottle, or cult-tinged pseudoscience.

But to devotees, the anecdotal evidence in support of such beliefs is too compelling to ignore. And the numbers of the convinced, or at least the curious, are growing. After spending centuries as pure esoterica, feng shui now rates its own long, well-stocked shelf in the interior design section at Barnes & Noble. Four years ago, a Lipman lecture at the building museum attracted about two dozen people; the June 13 conference was sold out.

"The most powerful influence of natural law on the Earth is the sun," says Lipman. "In Vedic [theory], the influence of the sun right around the time of sunrise has a whole set of specific nourishing influences. A building acts as a kind of intermediary between us and the sun, and early-morning light is most available to us if that building faces in that direction."

Many architects, and indeed many so-called "morning people," would not find such a statement controversial. Nor would they quibble with other components of Vedic architecture: its emphasis on balance and symmetry; its requirement that each house have a *vastu*, a walled or fenced patch of land in front of its entrance; its solar-influenced program for room placement within a home.

Where Lipman and his fellow Vedic adherents run afoul of Western empiricists, however, is in their contention that people in houses that don't face east or north, or those who do not sleep with their head pointing toward the east, are more likely to experience lack of energy, anxiety, aggression, or even mental and physical illness.

Lipman is up for the challenge. He cites studies, published in the *Journal of Neuroscience*, suggesting that rats are sensitive to having their heads placed in different directions, and he welcomes research involving human beings.

It seems like an issue tailor-made for the Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture, a coalition of architects and brain scientists who have come together, according to board member Esther Sternberg, "to try and address how modern principles of neuroscience can inform questions of how the elements of physical space effect creativity, cognition and mood."

Sternberg, a director at the National Institute of Mental Health, says her organization has not specifically studied whether the de-cluttered interiors and color palettes of feng shui, or the orientation dictates of Vedic design, can affect people's well-being. She and her colleague, architect John Eberhard, stop well short of lending their academic imprimatur to either movement.

But there's no question, they say, that natural light, architectural balance, or the presence of clutter can affect one's mood. And mood, they say, can affect one's health.

Clutter, for example -- the bete noire of feng shui practitioners -- is "a very potent inducer of the stress response," says Sternberg. "Clutter is essentially lots and lots of sensory inputs in one space. And when one has to deal with too many sensory inputs, one can get anxious." As for sunlight, she says that "optimal amounts and wavelengths of light have different effects on the triggering of all those brain pathways that start at the eye and go through to the visual areas, and they can also trigger the stress response."

Some of Eberhard's research into human responses to architectural proportion suggests that people may be hard-wired to appreciate the scale and balance that Vedic architects employ as a matter of doctrine. In one test, for example, participants were asked to choose a favorite shape of obelisk. The landslide winner had proportions that corresponded not only to the Washington Monument, but to the ancient Egyptian obelisks on which the monument was based.

"You could say, well, that's because people know what the Washington Monument looks like; that's why they picked it," says Eberhard. "I think it's possibly more fundamental than that: that whatever was in the human brain 5,000 years ago, when the Egyptians were building their obelisks, is still there today. What we know from neuroscience and genetics is that the hard-wired parts of our brains were essentially laid down 50,000 years ago. Therefore whatever we have now, in the sense of our response to proportions or to symmetry or to harmony, are things that were laid down a long time ago."

We're still a ways off from hooking people up to EKGs and seeing whether the dial goes crazy when their bed is placed under a window (in direct violation of good feng shui), or when they enter a house from the inauspicious south versus the oh-so-auspicious east. But Jonathan Lipman, for one, isn't afraid to get the research ball rolling.

"The initial question always has to be, simply: Is there a real, natural phenomenon occurring?" he says. "And if there is, then people will start floating models that can be tested. Eventually we'll have a good theory as to why."