

# looking east

a new  
direction,  
a positive  
energy, for  
cemetery  
design and  
marketing

Explain this. A woman dies quietly, peacefully, in her sleep at age 95. She lives in a house with her daughter and her granddaughter's family. Her daughter finds her in the morning, curled as if asleep.

Later that night, the family and some neighbors are sitting together, remembering. A neighbor mentions, casually, that early that morning she woke at 2:30 and couldn't get back to sleep. One by one, several other people remember having the same experience. The deceased woman's son, who lives across town, says he awoke at 3:30 a.m., same situation. They later discover he forgot to turn his clock back that weekend. This is a true story. Is it merely coincidence – or do you believe in something more? Do you believe in the things you can't actually see or touch?

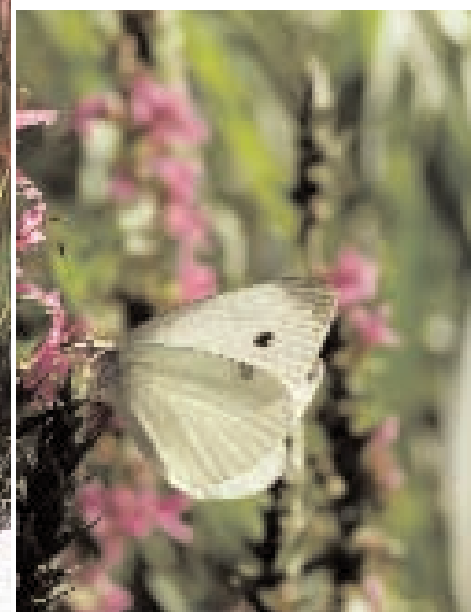
If you believe that the solar system spins through the universe and the moon pulls the ocean's tides in like blankets on cold nights – and if you also believe that the tiniest atoms in your body are in constant motion, why is it so hard to believe that a powerful energy is present in every object, that everything is in motion – and that this in-constant-flux energy bumps up against the energies of everything around it? The Indians call this life energy "prana," the Japanese call it "ki" and the Chinese call it "chi." In the West, we are a bit more skeptical.

b y j e n k i e r n a n





In the Chinese culture, there is a never-ending relationship between the dead and the living; the deceased's energy – good or bad – continues to be transmitted by his or her bones, affecting the family for up to three generations.



But we are beginning to take part in some Eastern practices. Take a look at your local paper or your supermarket's bulletin board postings, and you'll see far more ads for tai chi and yoga classes, meditation and acupuncture than you would have found even five years ago. These practices are thousands of years old, and they are all practices primarily focused on the body's breath and its energy and how every person, every thing, is affected by the energy around it, negatively or positively. If it didn't work, would it still be around 5,000 years after it began?

Perhaps your cemetery has faced – or heard of other cemeteries facing – this concept in the form of feng shui, the ancient Chinese art of “arranging one's life in accordance with the forces of the universe,” as defined by Master Lam Kam Chuen in his book, “Feng Shui Handbook: How to Create a Healthier Living and Working Environment.”

What we in the West understand about feng shui, if anything, is the notion that by clearing space and placing objects in our home in a specific way – our beds in relation to a window or archway, for example – we can affect our ability to find happiness or wealth or success. How? In short, the object is to create paths where this energy – or chi – can flow freely and not get stuck or blocked. That's a very basic description, of course, because feng shui is highly complex, and thousands of books and articles and research papers have been written about the topic. A quick search on Amazon.com brings up 503 books for sale with the phrase “feng shui” in the title. But one branch of the art – called yin house feng shui – is not quite as mainstream. Yet, yin house, dedicated strictly to burial practices, was what started it all. And it has cropped up in certain areas of the United States. It's something that can't be ignored – particularly, but not exclusively – if your community has a large Chinese-American population.

In the United States, the Chinese-American community is the largest ethnic group of Asian-Americans, totaling approximately 22 percent. The group also constitutes 1.2 percent of

the United States population as a whole. In straight numbers, statistics published in 2005 quote the Chinese-American population in this country to be approximately 3.4 million.

But regardless of whether you have one Chinese family in your town, or a growing population, adding feng shui elements to your cemetery is an opportunity worth taking a good, hard look at, from a design perspective as well as marketing. After all, those 503 books, those yoga and meditation classes, are not just being sold to and taken by Chinese-Americans.

Kartar Diamond, president of Feng Shui Solutions, located in Los Angeles, is a feng shui master who has had a lot of experience with burial practices.

Feng Shui literally means “wind and water,” describing how energy moves (via wind) and stabilizes, or resolves (over water). Diamond described feng shui as “a metaphysical art form, which determines such things as what types of homes or businesses can support the occupants in their health and finances and which types of structures undermine the occupants. It is a very complex set of theories and applications but used worldwide, now including the United States.”

While there are varying branches of feng shui, yang house and yin house are two very distinct branches. “The oldest application of feng shui principles came from this branch called yin house that deals specifically with gravesites, although it is not as well known (in the United States) as the yang house reading that focuses on homes and buildings,” said Diamond.

So if feng shui is about creating success and happiness in life, why is it even an issue for the deceased, whose potential for either has – for all intents and purposes – ended, right? Absolutely wrong, according to the masters. In the Chinese culture, there is a never-ending relationship between the dead and the living; the deceased's energy – good or bad – continues to be transmitted by his or her bones, affecting the family for up to three generations. For this reason, the energy needs to flow positively and not get trapped or blocked. The direction of the body is important as is the



placement of markers, particularly in relation to the natural world – trees, hills and water. “There are stories in feng shui folklore about how the gravesite of a parent or grandparent affects the descendants in very specific ways, such as whether the descendants were healthy, sickly, poor, rich, honest, criminal, infertile and a whole gamut of life circumstances,” said Diamond.

Most feng shui practitioners, for these very reasons, will choose traditional burial, but that doesn't mean there won't be families who choose cremation, particularly in the United States where the cremation rate is rising regardless of nationality or religion. “The question of cremation always comes up in discussions about yin house feng shui, and the answer is that where there are no bones buried, the effect on the descendants is neither good nor bad. Still, some people want advice in terms of where to place or bury [cremated remains],” said

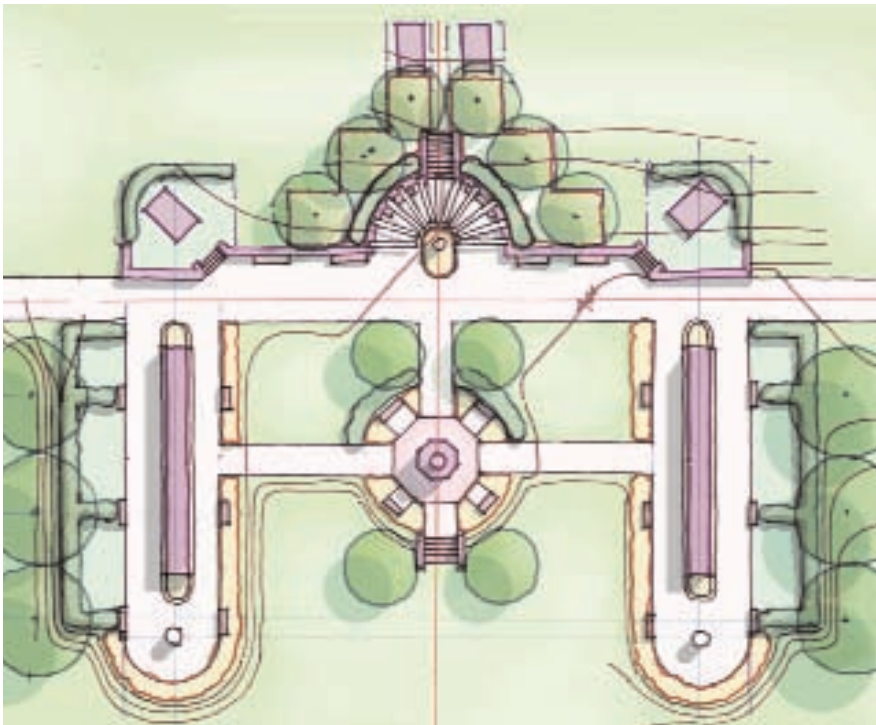


**Above and right:** Cypress Lawn, Colma, Calif. Curved walls create easy and positive energy flow, or chi. The planning for this new cemetery orients all graves to be perpendicular to the contours of the San Francisco hills and facing downhill toward the region's original stream valley. *(Photos courtesy of Cypress Lawn)*

Diamond. "Sometimes even a date can be selected for when the remains can be scattered, but none of this has anywhere near the impact of the traditional grave."

Still, with any feng shui gravesite, the elements of the art must be as perfect as possible. After all, if there is a problem with a feng shui home design, furniture can be moved around, the house can be remodeled, the family can even move, but a gravesite is so much more permanent. "You can imagine the horror for a feng shui practitioner after hearing about all the gravesites that got flooded in Hurricane Katrina,"





Fairfax Memorial Park, Fairfax, Va. The columbarium and lawn burial court are designed to have a classical appearance while meeting the feng shui design requirements of enclosure and protection with open, southward views to a stream valley. (Image courtesy of Jack Goodnoe)

Diamond said.

The most obvious question a cemetery planner may ask is, “What do I need to know in order to design a feng shui-friendly section in my cemetery?” And you might think, after 5,000 years, there is probably a very distinct set of rules that you can just check off, one by one. Unfortunately, this is not so. While there are some basic principles of feng shui design, almost every feng shui master will come up with a different interpretation of what the section should look like. Many Chinese-Americans actually bring their own feng shui masters to the cemetery before choosing a family gravesite.

Jack Goodnoe, president of Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Cemetery Planning and Design, has planned and designed numerous feng shui cemetery sites. To do this, he has consulted with feng shui masters. The more he learns, though, the more complicated he has realized this art is. “It is very personal and, everybody has a different interpretation.” If you ask a roomful of artists to paint a picture of a bowl of fruit, you will get a roomful of different interpretations, said Goodnoe. This is not so different from feng shui, which is art after all.

If you distill feng shui requirements for cemetery site planning, though, there are some basic principles. “As long as you follow those particular principles, the details start to become an expression of each feng shui master’s own interpretation and personal preferences,” he said. “Just as with interior design, there are good ways and bad ways to arrange a room functionally for circulation, views, communication and comfort, but the fabrics and colors you choose become more a matter of personal preference. This is the same with feng shui.”

Goodnoe has also discovered that many of the basic principles of feng shui design parallel good Western design. Both are intuitive and follow a logical, practical approach.

Probably most important to feng shui design is what is called a “chi line,” an imaginary line through the design that allows energy to move freely. This line, said Goodnoe, is very

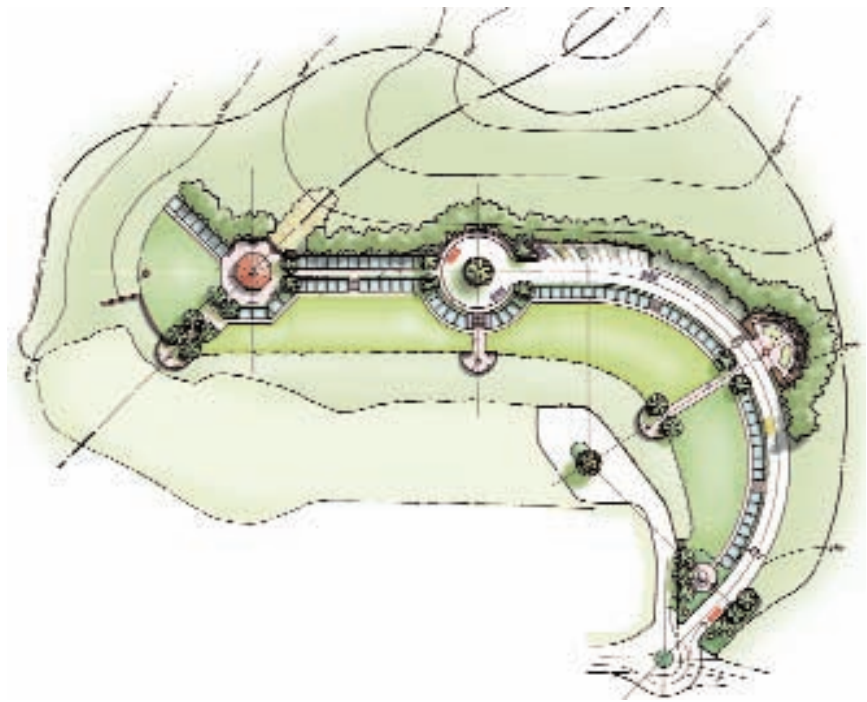
similar to the Western idea of axial design, in which the design is organized about a central axis in order to provide symmetry, balance and visual strength.

“The chi line that is so fundamental to exterior and interior relationships (in feng shui) is very evident in classical European design as an axis,” said Goodnoe. “Fundamental balance is important. It doesn’t have to be literally left and right, but you don’t want the design to feel lopsided, which is the principle of axial design in, say, Versailles or any classical environments where an axis is the backbone, the central spine and the organizing energy force.”

A word often used when describing positive feng shui principles of design is “auspicious,” meaning favorable or positive. A south-facing gravesite is auspicious as is a site looking down on water and protected from the back by hills or mountains. This design is what Goodnoe calls the “armchair effect, as if you were in a large easy chair with a high back that protects you and arms that wrap around you and protect you. It’s open with a view outward and if you find a location on a hilltop or a high location, facing water, that’s perfect. Water is considered auspicious by the feng shui masters because it is a good resolution of energy. The chi flows downhill and comes to a calm resolution.”

In the West, of course, we pay a tremendous amount of money for a house with a water view – and your customers pay more for a gravesite by a fountain or stream, right? In this way, and many others, feng shui is simply intuitive. It’s what feels right to people, what is comforting.

Certain types of water are more auspicious than others, too. Think about water for a minute. Historically, scientifically, a moving river would be considered cleaner and safer to live near than a stagnate pond, which may carry disease. That’s a practical reason to stay away from stagnate water. The principles of feng shui also suggest avoiding such water. “If there is a flowing river, that would be cleaner and healthier,” said Bruce Lazenby, director of property development for the 1,500-



El Camino Memorial Park, San Diego, Calif. The dominant ridgeline and steep slopes were the foundation for the design of this hillside section while conforming to feng shui design principles. The terminal viewing and committal court is octagonal because that is a very auspicious form in feng shui design. *(Image courtesy of Jack Goodnoe)*

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acre Rose Hills Memorial Park and Mortuary in Whittier, Calif., a cemetery that designs and builds all its new sections with feng shui in mind. “That’s the basis for a lot of (feng shui). Observation of the Earth and how it affects us and our lives.” In fact, the feng shui master who taught Lazenby told him that in the United States, the the American farmer is probably one of the best examples of someone who understands feng shui. “And that’s because they are tuned into the seasons and the land.”

In that same way, said Goodnoe, “a sloping site is auspicious because it rises behind you as a protective element and descends in the front so there is a sense of comfort and ease. In Western design, we will often choose a south-facing slope because of solar gain. So the principles are the same.” Thousands of years ago, long before we had heat and fancy homes to protect us, we used the elements of nature to our advantage. Feng shui still does this.

To illustrate just how intuitive feng shui design is, Goodnoe told the story of when he first became involved with Cypress Lawn Memorial Park in Colma, Calif. At the time, he wasn’t as well versed in feng shui as he is now, but Ken Varner, president of the cemetery, told him they were planning a new cemetery a few blocks from the existing Cypress Lawn – and this new cemetery, Hillside Memorial, would

have to entirely meet feng shui principles. Goodnoe suggested that, before he met with the feng shui master, Varner allow him to get a sense of the site and explain what he, as a Western designer, thought was important. “Intuitively, I knew the Sunrise Gardens portion of the design needed an axis because of aligning entry drives, and the existing pond could be a key unifying feature so I premised the design on an axial relationship with views of the water,” said Goodnoe. “Then I got together with the feng shui master, I told him what I thought, and he loved it. My axis was his chi line, my orientation toward the water was his correct orientation, keeping the high ground to the back. What I discovered was whether you look at it from a feng shui point of view or from a Western design point of view, you are still aiming at the same psychological response to the environment.”

Even though we, in the West, can easily wrap our brains around the idea that water is soothing and an armchair effect is comforting, the very idea of energy flow affecting someone’s health or happiness is difficult for many Westerners to grasp. Plenty of you will want to write this off as superstition, and that’s OK. You don’t have to believe, but it’s a fact that a lot of others do believe, and a day may come when one of those clients walks through your gate with a feng shui master in tow.

Varner was getting enough of these visits to prompt the planning and eventual creation of Hillside Memorial Cemetery, a 34-acre site that sits three blocks from Cypress Lawn. “The whole site was designed according to the design standards of feng shui, although the inventory for this property is specifically designed through various gardens and memorial options for families with Asian, Filipino, Hispanic and Anglo heritage,” said Varner.

The planning process for Hillside started in 1998. Goodnoe drew up the master plan, then Varner turned to a civil engineering firm, CSW/Stuber-Stoeh Engineering Group out of Navato, Calif., and a landscape architecture firm, SWA Group out of Sausalito, Calif.

In 2003, construction was finished, and the new cemetery was open for business. Since then, “We have several thousand sites that have been sold,” said Varner. “We inter approximately 500 a year and sell another 1,500 a year through our product marketing program.”

How do they market the cemetery? Varner has a team of counselors who know and understand the Asian culture. And throughout that staff, they speak four different Chinese dialects, including Cantonese and Mandarin. “We market mostly through referrals and networking in the community, through businesses, community events

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and social organizations.”

The four dialects aside, remember that Varner also planned this cemetery to appeal to his entire community, which is quite diverse with not only Chinese-Americans but also a large population of Filipinos and Latinos as well as Caucasians, none of which are particularly prone to request feng shui design.

“Good, solid cemetery design based on the principles of feng shui makes your property attractive, natural and has a harmonious flow to it that is attractive to others without them actually understanding or knowing that we have used the principles of feng shui in the design and layout,” explained Varner.

Also, feng shui design in the cemetery certainly does not have to look like what most Westerners may consider Chinese art. “We don’t have to stereotype the design,” said Rose Hills’ Lazenby. To be successful with the Chinese-American market, you don’t need dragons and bright reds and yellows,” he said. “It’s the attributes that matter more. We did a lotus niche wall that has a very subtle lotus flower. It’s the same material as the rest of the wall. You have to look close to notice it. It doesn’t scream out, ‘Look, I’m a lotus blossom.’”

At 1,500 acres, Rose Hills is considered to be the largest single-operated cemetery in the world. There are still 700 acres left to develop, but only 300 are readily developable, although all are permitted and dedicated for cemetery purposes. “Our entire cemetery, at least going forward, is dedicated to feng shui design,” said Lazenby. “It’s not just for Chinese buyers; it has applications for everyone.”

Before starting any new project at Rose Hills, Lazenby consults a feng shui master, whether that section will be targeted toward Chinese-Americans or not. “She will give me a reaction to it,” he said. “For example, maybe the name we originally chose for the section is not as auspicious as it should be. We listen.”

They also build into every new section flexibility should the family want to bring in its own feng shui

master. And this happens a lot. Said Lazenby, “We know that the family may bring in its own feng shui master and that person may say, ‘this would be great for your family if only you could move it three degrees to the left.’”

Lazenby even remembers one time when a feng shui master told a family this was not a good year for them to build – so the family bought the land but did not begin construction until a year later. “We kept it on the books, waiting for him to say, ‘now we can build it.’”

Of course, there are some changes the cemetery simply can’t do, and they have rules. The private sections obviously have more flexibility, but they try to do what they can for all of their customers.

One of the many details Lazenby has learned about this ancient art: The No. 4 is very unlucky in the Chinese culture because the pronunciation of the word is similar to that of the word “death.” Rose Hills has actually adjusted some of its numbering to eliminate the No. 4, “especially if we know this is likely a Chinese-American market purchasing that area ... We won’t complicate the large cemetery and lawn. That can create operational problems. Our guys would go out to make a burial and instead of grave No. 4, they would be looking for 3a. In private areas, though, we will eliminate the No. 4. So you’ll have 101, 102, 103, 103a, 105 or something like that.”

The No. 8 is a lucky number in the Chinese culture, so Rose Hills will use that number whenever it can. “It’s about having sensitivity like that,” said Lazenby.

Feng shui is not a religion, even if it may sound a bit mystical to the Western ear. And while some elements seem as basic as avoiding a busy street by walking on the sidewalk, this is a complex art taken very seriously by its practitioners. Take a look at your market, suggested Lazenby. Is this something it may soon be asking for, if not already?

Lazenby took a five-day course on feng shui, and when people started talking about moving energy around the room, he thought for a moment he might be in the wrong place. But he stayed, and it made good sense. “When the five days were over, what I understood was that there was a very practical aspect to it that we all do when we design but don’t recognize it as feng shui. It’s called feng shui. On top of that, there are a lot of other things, but it can be very practical as well as mystical.” •

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*Kartar Diamond’s web site is [www.fengshuisolutions.net](http://www.fengshuisolutions.net).*

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