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Builders, vendors ignore feng shui at their peril

Many buyers take ancient principles seriously when house hunting.

Does your home have steeply pitched roof lines? Does it face north? Is there a large pole or tree blocking the front door? Is the home built on a triangular or irregularly shaped lot?

Does the house have a street or driveway pointing at the front door? Is the entrance path a straight line? Is the front door in direct line with rear doors or windows?

If so, your house may have hidden defects that could make it unattractive to hundreds of thousands of homebuyers and owners in the Toronto area of Asian descent.

In a real estate market that includes Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese communities, non-Asian home buyers and owners should be aware of feng shui defects that could make the eventual sale of their property more difficult, as well as the feng shui principles that could make a home more marketable or valuable to an Asian buyer.

Feng shui (pronounced "fung shway") is the ancient Oriental art - some say it's a science - of living in harmony with the energy of the surrounding environment. Literally, it means the way of wind and water, the natural forces of the universe.

The object of feng shui is the proper placement and harmony of a building, and its siting, layout and architectural configuration. In the last 2,000 years, a particular set of beliefs has evolved with many adherents among Asians - and non-Asians - all over the world. A working knowledge of feng shui will help agents, vendors and even builders emphasize qualities that can make a property attractive to the Asian buyer. A study for Price Waterhouse some time ago found that feng shui was a factor for about 70 per cent of Asian purchasers in Southern California.

An increasing number of builders are adopting feng shui principles into the design of their homes. Many, for example, will not build a new home where the stairs face the front door - an omen of bad feng shui.

Here's a highly simplified list of some elements that may indicate a good feng shui site or home:

- * In general, there is a preference for apartments and homes facing south.
- * The backyard should be slightly larger than the front.
- * Any natural water on the land should be free-flowing.
- * Healthy trees, especially on the northwest side, represent protection.
- * Hills on the north side of the house protect from bad influences and allow good chi, or energy flow, to move downhill to the south.
- * Square or rectangular lots are generally the best.
- * The flow of chi is optimized by a curved driveway. Among things to avoid in a house are:
 - * One-way streets that flow away from the entrance, taking positive chi out of the house.
 - * A street (such as a T-intersection) or a driveway pointed directly at the front door or a location at the intersection of a Y junction of streets.
 - * Lots with triangular or irregular shapes.
 - * Proximity to or a view of a cemetery.
 - * The front portion of the lot being higher than the rear portion.
 - * A large pole or tree blocking the front door.

In terms of building shape, the house should not be disproportionate in size to its neighbours. Steeply pitched roof lines and sharp edges may be undesirable to some buyers. Best are symmetrical shapes - square, rectangle, circle or octagon - while irregular shapes are less favoured.

Doors should generally face south, but other directions may be indicated depending on the owner's date and time of birth. Double-door entrances are desirable to let chi enter easily. Door obstructions by poles, trees or columns are undesirable. According to some beliefs, if the entry has a peaked roof or canopy, there will be lawsuits. Solid doors are preferable to transparent, and wood is better than glass or steel.

Asian architects know that the front door should not be in line with rear doors or windows because chi will rush straight through and not circulate. Entrance paths should not be in a straight line. Apartment entrances at the end of a long corridor can result in a chi force that is much too strong. This torrent can be slowed by placing a plant or wind chimes in the doorway.

There are many feng shui principles of interior design, too numerous to list here. But one interesting one is that mirrors generally have very good feng shui, but if placed in bedrooms, they are dangerous if you can see yourself from the bed.

Much has been written about feng shui in general, and its real estate applications in particular. For dozens of relevant Web sites, type feng shui into a search engine and you can spend hours browsing fascinating material.

Bookstores and libraries are also valuable for research. One printed source I found quite helpful is Feng Shui - A Guide For Increased Real Estate Sales To Asians by Sheida Hodge (1998, self-published). It's available at bookstores.