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Real Estate

HABITATS

When Opposites Attract, and Stick Together

By PENELOPE GREEN

AT 10 a.m. on a recent Thursday, Peter Kaplan's octagonally shaped home office was vibrating alarmingly. The financial markets on his three display screens were charting in a medley of hot colors -- reds, greens, yellows and blues. On a fourth screen, a business news reporter from CNN was declaiming in a stentorian voice over the station's zipper, while the light above the ceiling fan flickered just off the beat of the trance music Mr. Kaplan, a money manager, was playing to rev up the show. A visitor's eyes blinked uncomfortably to its rhythm.

Reiko Gomez, a feng shui practitioner, interior designer and Mr. Kaplan's wife, explained that she had not given the room its peculiar shape to make Mr. Kaplan feel like the star of his own life-sized video game or in homage to the control rooms of Drs. No and Evil. Ms. Gomez said that the eight-sided room, its cabinets veneered in guy-friendly wood paneling, had been built to reign in Mr. Kaplan's spiraling energy.

It is part of a renovation driven by Ms. Gomez that married two 400-square-foot one-bedroom apartments in a walk-up on East 17th Street. Each side rented for just over \$1,000, so the landlord was thrilled, Ms. Gomez said, to give his permission for the break-through, since rents over \$2,000 in a vacant apartment -- as one of them had been -- become destabilized to market levels. (The couple has a lease holding the rent to \$2,486 until 2007.)

Unlike Mr. Kaplan's office, the rest of the new apartment is a kind of Zen tone poem. A wall of silver-leaf panels (originally placemats, and bought for \$1 each from the restaurant Verbenas's going-out-of-business sale), the seductively colored furnishings and the artful lighting show Ms.



Gomez to be a rather more sophisticated designer than your garden-variety, throw-the-tinkling-fountain-in-front-of-the-door feng shui maven.

There were no wind chimes that a visitor could spot, and the ever-present feng shui touchstone -- that fountain -- read more like sculpture than as a "water feature." (Water is for abundance, Ms. Gomez said: "That's why Chinese restaurants have a fish tank out front. It's feng shui 101.")

Feng shui, for those living off the grid or without a television set, is Chinese medicine for your home. A de rigueur gesture that organizes the real estate of Hollywood royalty, Chinese restaurateurs and Donna Karan, it's like decorating with quantum mechanics, to paraphrase Karen Rauch Carter, author of "Move Your Stuff, Change Your Life: How to Use Feng Shui to Get Money, Respect, Love and Happiness" (Fireside; 2000).



As an example, Ms. Gomez offered, "people wonder why they're not moving on from a failed relationship, and yet they're still sleeping on their old mattresses, with all that bad energy."

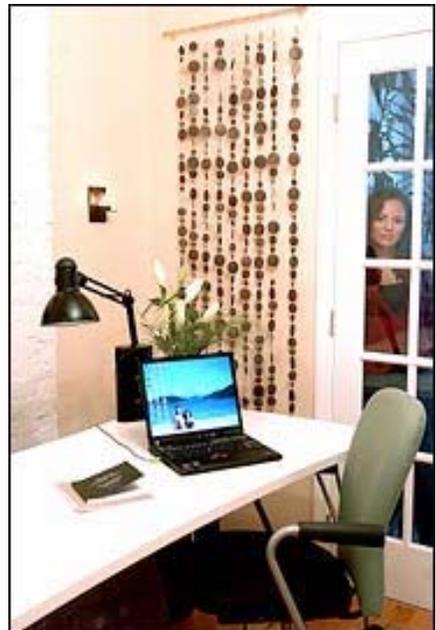
In any case, the placement of your stuff, as well as its shape and composition -- fire, water, earth or metal -- throbs with intent and meaning, according to feng shui tenets.

The octagon, for instance, is the most balanced shape, Ms. Gomez said, "so Peter plopped down in the middle of one is attempting to achieve some kind of inner balance."

Don't hold your breath waiting, suggested Mr. Kaplan, who then explained he likes to ring a bell and yelp a bit when he makes a particularly good trade.

"But I've been trained to do that behind closed doors," he said. "We call the hall the decompression area, and I'm supposed to enter it meekly, and make sure my door is closed before I open hers."

Ms. Gomez works at home, too, in a much more serene space just steps away. Their his-and-hers offices are so wildly different and yet so frighteningly proximate you marvel at the couple's enormous continued affection for each other. Such familiarity would, in the ordinary course of things, often breed the most vicious contempt. But these two, who start work at 9, can't wait to meet for coffee at 11.



"We like to meet midmorning at a central location between our two offices," Mr. Kaplan said. "Usually, that's the living room."

The cappuccino machine is their hearth, Mr. Kaplan said. The throaty static of the milk steamer soothes him. "Once I hear that sound," he said, "my pulse drops back to a level approaching normal." He continued: "Working at home together, you have to be the sort of couple that wants to be together. And we do."

Bubbling harmony has not always frothed up around these two. Indeed, Ms. Gomez and Mr. Kaplan, who were set up by a mutual friend seven years ago, so loathed one another on a first date, they said, they almost came to blows.

At 27, Ms. Gomez, now 34, was already a good-works veteran. She'd been running nonprofits since she was a sophomore in high school in California. With a degree in political science, she planned to be a lawyer or a politician, but during a year in New York on a public-policy fellowship, she spent a month at the Siddha Yoga ashram upstate, working on the charitable foundation of its guru, Gurumayi.

She wasn't the same when she left, she said. So she went back to the ashram to work on its children's programs, and a year stretched to four. In India, she helped with a children's hospital. At its groundbreaking ceremony, she collided with Vastu Shastra, the Indian practice of sacred architecture -- the seed of feng shui -- and something went click in her brain.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kaplan, now 37, who has a degree in comparative literature, was writing fiction and working in construction. His stories weren't selling, he said, and he was at a particularly low point in his life.

"In high school, I was the guy in the leather jacket, smoking in the hall," he said, "and Reiko was the prom queen. So these characters were still present in some way on that horrible date. We were like sandpaper rubbing against each other." Mr. Kaplan stewed for a week and then called Ms. Gomez to list in explicit detail how inappropriate he thought her date behavior had been.

Ms. Gomez was stunned. "Have a nice life" was her response, and she began to hang up the phone. "I could hear Peter yelling, 'Wait, wait!' It's not worth the karma, I thought, and picked the phone back up." And at that moment, both say, the prom queen and the lout vanished.

"And it was just two human beings talking on the phone," Mr. Kaplan said.

They were married a year and a half later and moved into his little apartment on 17th Street, one-half of their new home. Their neighbor across the hall moved out in 2003, and they began renovating, at a total cost of \$5,000. Mr. Kaplan had begun trading and writing a financial newsletter.

Ms. Gomez had launched her feng shui design practice with an early win. A Hollywood producer -- who requested anonymity for reasons of privacy -- had a hit shortly after she decided that his home was sorely lacking in the water department. The day he dug his new pool, his new movie soared at the box office.

"We all want something," Ms. Gomez said. "That's why people call me."

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