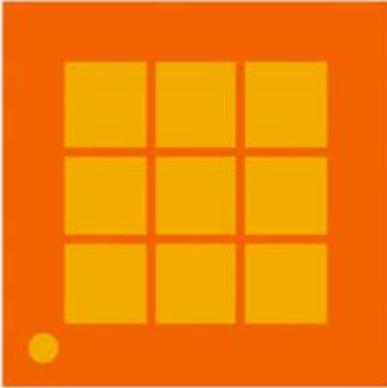


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Taming the Too-Big House

By Elizabeth Lutyens

With feng shui, less is much, much more

Nancy and Greg Forsythe bought their house in southeast Asheville for the view. For the five-acres of privacy. For the surrounding woods, a playground for their two German Shepherds. And they liked the rugged post-and-beam, mountain-lodge style of the house with its passive solar feature. After living there for six years and approaching retirement age, they considered moving from this 4,000-square-foot home and building a smaller one. The idea of "building green" was especially attractive to them, but they decided that they weren't up to the demands of composting toilets and wood-burning stoves. And they didn't see a setting anywhere that they liked as much as their own land.

Giving feng shui a try

Through a mutual friend, the Forsythes met Jaan Ferree, a feng

I was especially pleased that my husband was an equal partner, and an enthusiastic one, in making the changes you recommended. He told me, "This is by far the most valuable help we've gotten to bring our house to life. The consultation with Jaan was

worth every penny we spent.”

Nancy and Greg Forsythe, homeowners

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a renovation of one of their favorite downtown Asheville restaurants, The Laughing Seed. Like many people, the Forsythes had heard of feng shui (pronounced fung shway) and had a vague notion that it involved the auspicious arrangement of objects and spaces. They'd heard it could have extraordinary effects on those who practiced it, such as improved health and relationships, and even an upturn in prosperity, but they had never seen it personified.

The Forsythes told Jaan that on a recent visit to the refurbished Laughing Seed, they'd found the restaurant more welcoming and comfortable than the previous space. It was also more "something else" that they couldn't articulate. They wondered if the enhanced ambiance was the result of the indoor waterfall, the granite-topped bar shaped like a meandering river, the hand wrought cast-iron archway of vines, or any of the other new features. If so, this was a concern. They weren't interested in making their house more exotic or in purchasing extravagant accessories for it. Was feng shui really for them?

"Feng shui," Jaan told them, "is not only about aesthetics, it's also about energy, ch'i. If the ch'i flows, if the elements of fire, water, metal, wood, and earth are in balance, this is why you feel comfortable. It's the 'something else' you were sensing. A river-shaped bar is a great feng shui touch, but simple changes can offer the same result."

Reassured by the word "simple"—after the nightmare of complications promised by building or moving to a different house—Nancy and Greg were ready to give feng shui a try. They made an appointment with Jaan for a consultation and blocked out two hours from their business consulting practice. (Jaan was careful to ensure that Greg would be available as well as Nancy. Unlike traditional "home decorating," where the wife may be the only one involved, feng shui calls for the buy-in of everyone who lives or works in the space.) A few days before Jaan was to appear, the Forsythes pored over the list of "Feng Shui Home Questions" that she had sent them. They didn't have to go further than the first paragraph to feel that these questions were tailored to them:

Your home tells a story about you. It speaks to people who come there, it is speaking to you. What is it saying? Is it the story of who you are right now, who you wish to grow into (personal/spiritual growth)? Act as if it is the first time you have ever been there and begin the story when you drive up the driveway and approach the front door. Is it easy to tell where the front door is, or is it a bit confusing as to where the main entrance is? When you approach the main door is it clear and welcoming? What is it saying to you?

decide which side of the house has the main entrance.” The Forsythes’ driveway ends at the side of the house, facing the garage, offering visitors no clue about where to go from there. Guests seldom choose the front door, since that would require walking a quarter of the way around the house. At the back there are two entrances, one from the deck into the living area, and another into a two-story solarium, neither of which shouted “main door.” The Forsythes tackled the remaining questions on the list, and decided that the story their house was telling was not “the story of themselves.”

Setting the stage for change

Nancy and Greg are management consultants with Ph.D.s.: his, in German literature and history; hers, in psychology. Now, having offices at home, they are busy consulting and developing their creative sides through writing and political involvement. They are thinkers, problem-solvers. Therefore, when they met Jaan at the top of their winding driveway, they were prepared to answer the questions they’d been assigned and get right down to work.

Jaan walked slowly around. “This is beautiful,” she said, surveying the chocolate-hued wood of the house and the larch trees that framed a vivid autumn view of mountains all around. If Greg and Nancy were waiting for a but to follow the beautiful (the “main door” problem was surely obvious), they were surprised. Jaan just said, “Can we sit down somewhere and talk?”

Settled on a front terrace under the afternoon sun, Jaan listened while Greg and Nancy talked. Greg was especially forthcoming. He spoke about the house, which was 18 years old, as if he were already a feng shui scholar attuned to the idea that every physical thing is alive. “When we moved in six years ago,” he said, “I found it dark, stagnant, and empty, just begging for more life.”

Nancy said, “There’s a lot to love and some things to change. We’ve already done significant work, opening spaces up to nature and sunlight.”

Jaan said, “It’s nice to dream about changes. There’s something very sweet about growing into the house instead of a big ta-da! like on television. It’s nice for a house to be in a continual state of becoming.”

After listening to more specific likes and dislikes about the house, Jaan told the Forsythes something about herself. “I blend interior design with ecology, psychology, and space planning. I spent 25 years as a retailer, so included in that mix is common sense.” She gave a graceful wave with a hand adorned with handcrafted silver rings. “I hold the practice of feng shui lightly. For the Laughing Seed I did do work with ba gua, the map that shows the best

mainly concentrate on energy. When an environment isn't energized, I want to know why the ch'i isn't flowing in a positive way. My job is to bring it back in, to activate it."

Seeking the portal

Jaan led the way outside again, all the way back to the spot where she'd stood when she first arrived. She was facing the garage.

Greg said, "You drive up and the first thing you see is the garage. That's why we put up the hex sign."

Jaan approved of using that Pennsylvania Dutch art form as a distraction from garage doors, and she pointed out that the bright-berried pyracantha against the garage wall was equally effective. She was also glad to hear that Greg and Nancy didn't enter their house through the garage. "This is a problem with so many American houses," she said. "You pull your car in and go through a door that usually takes you through the laundry room. Baskets of dirty clothes, muddy boots, chaos. This is the most common entry today, rather than the foyer. The entry should be beautiful and inviting."

"If only people could find it," said Nancy, introducing the recurring theme of the confusing main entrance.

"That can be fixed," Jaan said. "Which is the main gate of ch'i? It's for you to decide. Claim the back way or the front way."

Nancy and Greg chose the back ("The front door leads into a dark hallway," Greg said, "and it's less inviting"), but there were problems with the back, too. This was where the dogs roamed, and the Forsythes had filled in the area with wood chips to keep the mud down. Unlike the front, where there was grass, shrubbery, and ornamental grasses waving in the breeze, there was nothing out back to catch and direct the eye. Jaan suggested adding lights along the steps up to the back deck. "Accept that plantings won't work because of the dogs," she said. She recommended placing three boulders at the point where the steps make a turn toward the house. Nancy and Greg liked that idea, but how to get guests to the steps in the first place?

"How about a stone cairn?" said Jaan, "right on that flat area that leads from the driveway to the first step. Cairns are very Scottish. Have you ever seen one?"

Greg certainly had. His face lit up immediately. Until that moment, Jaan hadn't known that Greg is a huge Scot-ophile. He and Nancy never miss Western North Carolina's annual Highland Games, and he is a firm believer in the wearing of the kilt. A cairn

creating it, talking about adding a Celtic cross rising from the structure of stone. If Jaan had parted with the Forsythes right then, gotten into her car and driven back down the winding mountain road, they would have felt this whole “experiment” was worthwhile.

Into the house

But this was only the beginning. After claiming their portal, the back entrance from the deck into the living area, the Forsythes embraced Jaan’s suggestion that they paint the door a different color. It was then the same slate-blue as the other doors and the trim.

“Red,” said Greg.

“No,” said Nancy. “Cobalt blue.”

“Maybe eggplant,” Jaan said, “blue with a little red.” With a background in psychology as well as design (her concentrations in college), she is well-equipped to balance aesthetics with emotional reactions—to colors, or anything else.

They stepped inside, into the open floor-plan area for living, dining, and cooking. Following a jubilant greeting from Zora and Bruno, the German shepherds, Jaan suggested red (a color that represents fire, one of the five essential elements) for the wall opposite the door. The color would draw people into the living-room area of this open space. It would benefit the inhabitants of the house as well, Jaan pointed out, throwing in a bit of bagua. “This your Fame and Reputation Area. Fire is the element you want to emphasize, and you want to be illuminated and lifted up when you walk into this environment.”

Nancy wondered about their collection of German Shepherd figurines that filled a glass display case and topped surfaces here and there. Jaan said, “We have a relationship with our things, with objects. Everything has some kind of memory or association for us, an energetic attachment to us.” She told them about the seashell piano her daughter, when a young child, had bought her for her birthday when they were at the beach. “If the house was burning down,” she said, “I’d grab just this and run out the door. It’s very important to live surrounded by things that you love.”

Conversely, it’s important to clear away what you don’t love. What Jaan calls “passive clutter,” the opposite of active (good, creative) clutter, made only an occasional appearance in this house. There were spaces and places for everything—in fact, too much space, too many places. Jaan, Nancy, and Greg went from the combination living/eating/cooking area to another large space, a combination library/study/entertainment center. Jaan admired the

windows providing a view of three mountain ranges. She noted, however, and the Forsythes agreed, that the multiple functions of the space could be better defined. After suggesting how they might do that, Jan was led by the Forsythes into the solarium, which was used as a sitting-room and exercise area. The solarium performs another role, too: fans in the two-story-high ceiling carry heat from the massive expanse of glass into the rooms on the second floor.

“The solarium is another room that’s trying to figure out what it is,” said Greg. He pointed to containers of dog food that lined the far wall. “This is by default the dog’s room, too.”

For these multi-use spaces, as well as for other rooms, Jaan prescribed arranging furniture in new configurations, turning on lamps and turning off track lights, painting a wall here and there in a favorable feng shui color, suspending an existing decorative object from a beam—all measures to bring soaring spaces down to human scale. Occasionally she mentioned an addition: an area rug to slow down the ch’i in the wide-open atrium; cupboards to hide less felicitous items (such as dogfood in the atrium, electronic equipment in the study); French doors to separate the dark front-entry from the dining room; large tree-like plants to soften corners; shutters over the windows behind the bed in the master bedroom, to control the ch’i coming in. [See “Bringing a House to Life,” for improvements the Forsythes have made to date.]

But just as often, Jaan advised taking something away. When the Forsythes told Jaan they’d joined a health club, they agreed with her that the weight equipment in the solarium was ripe for banishment. “Sell it,” Jaan said, “or give it away.” When Greg said he didn’t like the trendy, expensive pot-rack hanging over a kitchen island, Jaan said, “You could take it down. You should. Do it today.”

At the end of that long afternoon, the only new acquisitions Jaan had pegged for the Forsythes as absolute priorities were light bulbs, a pile of rocks, and paint.

Curing what ails us

One day 25 years ago, soon to graduate from college, her brain crammed full of her design study, Jaan Ferree had what she now realizes was a defining moment. She wanted to spend her life creating environments that would make people happier and healthier. “I can still remember,” she says now, “where I was walking on campus—the sunshine, the shadows of leaves on the concrete walk. I felt this was so right. I had no idea ‘it’ had a name—feng shui.”

For the next two decades, during which she created and

managed to realize that dream—somewhat. “My approach was unusual for those days,” she says, “sort of like Pottery Barn now. I set up ‘rooms’ with furniture and complementary accessories. I liked to find the unusual, to surprise and delight, to create tableaux that spoke to people. I loved seeing the relationship of people to objects.”

But in 1997, Jaan began seeing her long-ago dream with fresh eyes. She says, “Three key people in my life said, in essence, ‘You are not what you do.’ People would introduce me by saying, ‘This is Jaan Ferree. She owns’ I had become so wrapped up in the world of business that I felt creatively spent in that field. Even though I had been dealing in beautiful objects, I was, after all, still selling. I was encouraging people to buy.”

She continues, “Our society is beset by what social scientists are calling ‘affluenza,’ and I like to think that I’m now part of the solution and not the problem. The cure instead of the disease. A lot of feng shui has to do with clarity, defining and refining, clearing away. I love the relief I see on a client’s face when I say, ‘You have everything you need.’ ”

Bringing a House to Life

Since Nancy and Greg Forsythe were “feng-shuied” by Jaan Ferree, they have taken her suggestions to heart. Nancy says, “We are working down the list. We’re making good progress.” She is especially pleased that Greg is an equal partner, and an enthusiastic one, in the changes going on. He comments, “This is by far the most valuable help we’ve gotten to bring our house to life. The consultation with Jaan was worth every penny we spent.”

A few of the feng-shui-influenced improvements already made by the Forsythes . . .

- They have installed solar low-lighting from driveway leading up to what they now call “the front door.”
- To call attention to the walkway area until they erect the cairn suggested by Jaan, the Forsythes purchased whimsical metal sculptures: a bear made from an oil drum, a turkey with a garden-rake tail, and two birds made from shovels.
- To further accentuate their eggplant “front door,” they have added nearby a stone sculpture they found at the Stone Mountain Highland Games in Georgia. It’s a griffon, which Greg explains is the heraldic symbol on the Forsythe family crest—and it’s a male griffon, which, equally fittingly, is the mythological protector of a house. Greg is building a section of stone wall for its perch.

middle of the master bedroom with a lamp to replace harsh track lighting. The island, and the ficus tree they plan to add, will slow down the flow of ch'i through the spacious room.

- They have scheduled a carpenter to build de-cluttering storage cupboards in the solarium. Nancy may keep the exercise equipment at the other end of that space (thinking ahead to snowy winter days when she might prefer this sunny haven to the gym in town), but she is experimenting with bamboo screens to delineate that area.
- Greg took down the pot rack in the kitchen and put up a section of paneling on the wall behind the stove. He then added a cutout of a metal eagle to draw the eye to this enhanced space. With these improvements, he is paying attention to balancing three of the essential elements: wood, metal, and fire.
- For the living area, in addition to painting a key wall red, the Forsythes splurged and bought a Tiffany lamp with vivid jewel tones. The lamp replaces a pole lamp that had been creating a confusing sight-line through the area. It does more. "Jaan said the colors here were all dark," says Nancy. "Too much yin, not enough yang. The lamp adds brightness and fire."

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