



Selected articles from  
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## Feng Shui at USF

By [Jack Robinson](#)

I was astonished and seriously disappointed last summer when I saw that the "Learning in Retirement" program at the University of South Florida's main campus in Tampa was offering a course in Feng Shui (pronounced "Fung Shway"). The course description in the LIR catalog stated (in part):

Feng Shui (Geomancy), the Chinese science of placement, is a popular, yet mysterious practice. Properly applied, feng shui is believed to balance the life flow in our environment, enabling us to enjoy favorable, positive energies in harmonious and healthy homes, prevent illness, preserve well being, and ensure longevity. Architectural and landscape design, use of colors, placement of light, and furniture layout are believed to have a transformative effect.

As a retired USF science professor, I regarded this "science" course as a threat to my University's reputation. I called the LRI program director and asked why the course was being offered, and suggested that it perhaps ought to be cancelled. I was told that LIR's policy is to present courses on any subject that LIR members are interested in, and that this one had been approved by the LIR Curriculum Committee. I then decided to enroll in the course, so I could play devil's advocate as a student.

The basic ideas of Feng Shui, like those of astrology, were reasonable things to try a couple of thousand years ago. But by now -- in an age of science and technology -- you'd think people would know better. According to the [Skeptic's Dictionary](#):

Feng Shui is related to the very sensible notion that living with rather than against nature benefits both humans and our environment. It is also related to the equally sensible notion

that our lives are deeply affected by our physical and emotional environs. . . . Feng shui has become a kind of architectural acupuncture: wizards and magi insert themselves into buildings or landscapes and use their metaphysical sensors to detect the flow of good and bad "energy." These masters for hire declare where bathrooms should go, which way doorways should face, where mirrors should hang, which room needs green plants and which one needs red flowers, which way the head of the bed should face, etc.

When I went to the first class meeting, the teacher welcomed me even though she knew I was a skeptic. She is a very pleasant person who planned the course well, explained things clearly, and provided helpful handouts. She also brought in guest speakers who authentically represented their craft. Most of the students seemed quite happy with the result -- most of their comments and questions indicated great interest (and, incidentally, gullibility).

My purpose was not to try to change the beliefs of the teacher and the guest speakers, but to show my fellow students that they should be skeptical about the ideas presented. I was neither disruptive nor disrespectful, knowing that would only irritate and turn off the people I wished to help. For the most part, I just asked skeptical questions at appropriate times, to try to stimulate the students into thinking critically.

During the second of the four lessons, I persuaded the teacher to show a videotape that I provided -- a four-minute segment from [Penn & Teller's \*Bullshit!\*](#) TV program about Feng Shui. Three Feng Shui masters were hired to specify the proper nature and placement of furniture in the bedroom and family room of a home. (Each worked independently, without knowledge of the others.) Although all three agreed that Feng Shui is a science, two of them disagreed about the placement of the bed. Two agreed that the furniture in the family room was well arranged, but the third moved all the pieces to different places. Two endorsed the bright red color of the sofa and chairs in the family room, but the other said that red would cause serious health problems for anyone who spends much time there.

Some of the students laughed during the video -- maybe that indicated some healthy skepticism. But the teacher claimed that the three "masters" were not really good practitioners of Feng Shui. She further said that medicine is a science, and just as one may get three different diagnoses from three doctors, Feng Shui masters can also arrive at different conclusions. But three different doctors will ordinarily arrive at the same diagnosis (I don't know if the other students appreciated this). I suppose I should also note that, unlike the three "masters" in the video, who just dictated where things should be placed and what colors they should be, my instructor and the two guest speakers were very much concerned about the homeowner's tastes and feelings.

The instructor and guest speakers continually explained Feng Shui in vague terms of chi and energy flow, or magnetic influences, when there are other obvious reasons, for example, why the growth of trees is stunted in a high, dry climate. They also invoked concepts very similar to the discredited notions of astrology. One of the guest speakers said she wouldn't live in Sedona, Arizona, because "the energy there is too vortexed."

Another thing that bothered me was that, more than once, the teacher invited the students to take the guest speakers' business cards, apparently so the speakers could be hired by interested students.

During the first class meeting, I had asked if the concepts of Feng Shui have been verified

scientifically. The teacher's response was that Rupert Murdoch, the multi-millionaire, uses Feng Shui to improve the operations of his businesses. I then clarified my question: Have there been any well-designed scientific experiments that verify Feng Shui? I was told yes. But soon I perceived that in Feng Shui, "experiment" usually means "change things around and see what you like."

One of the handouts claimed that "experiments have shown that red light can kill the HIV virus in blood." On the Internet I found what appeared to be the experiment upon which this claim was based: "Reduction of HIV in Red Blood Cell Concentrates Using Riboflavin and Light." It wasn't the light alone that acted on the HIV virus, it was the photochemical riboflavin that was excited by the light. Further, the light was violet, not red. Unfortunately, I could find no opportunity to bring this information to the attention of the students. But during the final class meeting, I was able to make the following point (between the brackets):

<< The examples presented in class seem to show that Feng Shui is a flexible theory and you [the guest speaker] are always able to please your clients. To me, this indicates that even though a theory is false, it can sometimes lead to good results if it is applied by a person with common sense and good judgment. But that's not always the case with Feng Shui. I'll illustrate this point by reading a few paragraphs from [an article](#) in the *Los Angeles Times* (Note: This linked version carries a different headline from the original *Times* version):

### **Feng Shui Nonsense Spreads Want a Corner Office, First Check the Chi**

Mitchell Stern had one of the best perches in town.

From his window on the 11th floor of DirecTV's El Segundo headquarters, the new chief executive of the satellite-TV company could take in the mountains, downtown skyscrapers, LAX and ships out at sea.

Stern traded that panorama last week for a view of the Hyperion sewage treatment plant and the company parking garage. But the new office has something his old one lacked: It's a lucky charm for someone born on May 25, 1954, Stern's birth date.

At least that's the assessment of the feng shui consultants hired by Stern's boss, media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

In short, my message is: Be informed and beware. >>

Only five of the eighteen students present were interested in receiving a copy of the *L.A. Times* article from me. On the other hand, there had originally been thirty people enrolled in the course. I hope that some of the other twelve had already dropped out because they perceived Feng Shui to be a *pseudoscience*.

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## **CHAIRMAN'S CORNER**

By [Terry A. Smiljanich](#)

## Double Trouble For Hubble

To see the greatest telescope in history, you don't have to travel to Mount Palomar, Mauna Kea, or the Andean mountains. All you have to do is look up at the right time and place, shortly after twilight ends, and see it pass slowly overhead. On a recent August evening, I watched it, a third magnitude light moving steadily through the head of Scorpio low in the southern skies.

I am speaking of course of the Hubble Space Telescope (HST), launched in 1990, and holder of many astronomical firsts -- providing the most detailed and "deepest" views of the universe (peering back in time to the beginnings of galaxies), establishing the expansion rate of the universe, confirming the existence of huge black holes at the center of some galaxies, and providing intricate details of the collision of a comet with

Jupiter. [Images from the HST](#), including the [massive clouds of stardust in the Eagle Nebula](#) (left image), have become icons of the astronomical world. There were plans on the books to have the HST begin extensive searches for planets orbiting stars in nearby globular clusters. For people who wonder why we should care about science and scientific funding, one look at the [Hubble "Deep Field,"](#) (right image) with hundreds of galaxies populating a portion of the sky barely larger than a pinpoint, went a long way to conveying the awe of a universe vastly greater than we ever imagined.



But the Hubble is in serious trouble. With no more repair missions, it will likely cease functioning altogether in 2007. Although a shuttle repair mission was scheduled for last year, the Columbia disaster has put on hold further space missions. In January, new NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe announced that even when shuttle operations resume, the HST will not be on the itinerary because a repair mission to the HST is "too risky." It seems that future shuttle operations will have to be in orbits that would allow the International Space Station to serve as a rescue haven should a similar launch problem occur, and the HST is in an incompatible orbit.

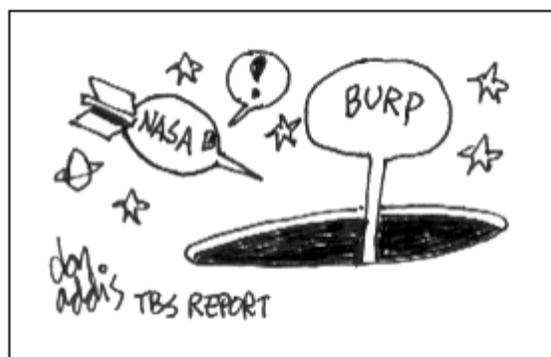
Since this announcement, an outcry in the scientific community, together with Congressional concerns, has caused a reexamination of this decision. A panel of experts appointed by Congress has recommended that a repair mission be put back on the schedule. NASA has relented only to the extent of considering a robotic repair mission involving no humans, but the technology to accomplish this complex task is untested and unlikely to be ready in time. A petition signed by 26 former NASA astronauts has called this robotic option "pie in the sky," and urged a manned repair mission. So far, NASA has not relented, pointing to budget cutbacks, new priorities (including a Mars mission twenty years down the road), and more stringent safety parameters. Timidity is the new password at NASA headquarters.

Adding insult to injury, on August 3 a critical component of Hubble quit working -- the Space Telescope Imaging Spectrograph (STIS). This is the only instrument on the HST capable of resolving starlight into visible and ultraviolet spectra, which is the exclusive way of examining the chemical

and physical properties of the images received. Without the STIS, Hubble can do little but take pretty snapshots. The STIS can't be blamed, however. It was installed in 1997 and was supposed to last only five years. It was scheduled for replacement this year with a new Cosmic Origins Spectrograph (together with a new improved camera). With all repair missions canceled, however, HST will remain orbiting 350 miles above us, crippled and doomed. Not until the scheduled launch of the James Webb Space Telescope in 2011 or thereafter will we have another optical telescope orbiting above earth's obscuring atmosphere.

I doubt that this story will make many headlines. The media will continue to be absorbed with issues like gay marriage, the right to own assault weapons, "Orange" terror alerts, and whether Michael Jackson and Kobe Bryant will be acquitted. Meanwhile, the (formerly) greatest telescope in history passes silently overhead, unsung and unnoticed.

## Snippets



Contrary to everything Dr. Stephen Hawking had been hawking for nearly 30 years, the astrophysicist has now seen the light, or at least is now theorizing that a black hole at some point "opens up and releases information about what fell inside. So we can be sure of the past and predict the future." Hawking presented his latest findings in July at the 17th International Conference on General Relativity.

*(Tampa Tribune, July 16)*

And if light can escape from a black hole, certainly a person's energy fields can be felt, and manipulated in a healing way, by a practitioner holding her hands inches away from the patient's body. Just ask Kimberly Garcia, a nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital, and her post-surgical patient, Robin Reeves. When Reeves was in pain, Garcia says that her energy fields felt "like quicksand." Employing "Healing Touch" (a.k.a. "Therapeutic Touch" and "Quantum Touch"), Garcia's synchronized hand movements over a 30-minute period removed the quicksand and restored the free flow of energy, reducing Reeves' pain "from a 10 to a 2." Garcia even has the endorsement of Tampa

neurologist Rob Wilson: "I [had] a migraine. . . . She took me into the nurses' break room and I lay down on a bench. She put her hands over my head and I felt the heat. . . . Within 10 minutes the headache was gone. . . . There are so many things, the intricacies and how things are aligned in the body, that we still don't know. . . . I really believe it's a great modality." Though Dr. Wilson may be unfamiliar with the placebo effect, the article does contain skeptical commentary from Dr. Stephen Barrett (quackwatch.com) and Dr. Robert Baratz, president of the National Council Against Health Fraud.

*(Tampa Tribune, June 28)*

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And if a person's energy fields can be manipulated by Healing Touch, perhaps they can also be influenced by Feng Shui. So, if you missed the course at USF (see lead article1), there's always the Florida School of Feng Shui in Dunedin, founded by certified practitioner Carol Cannon. But rather than concentrating on the home's interior, Cannon's specialty is the back yard: "Feng Shui begins with a look at the land because the land is where our energy is arriving from. We want to make sure that . . . the dimensions of the lot make sense and are in balance. We can do that with plants and accessories." She even "cured" Diane and Larry Gallin's domestic problems (stress, arguments) by installing a triangle-shaped fountain at a crucial point in the yard. Attests a relieved Mr. Gallin, "It was enough to change the energy."

*(St. Pete Times, June 26)*

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"Medical education is more like a POW experience. . . . So once you get out you are the image of your persecutors." That, in part, is Dr. Carol Roberts' explanation (and apology?) for having practiced "symptom correction" (ENT and emergency medicine) in Brandon for more than a decade, before escaping captivity to open her holistic Wellness Works practice in 1994. Roberts, who teaches at USF's School of Public Health and the Florida College of Integrative Medicine and is an officer in the American Holistic Medical Association, is excited about the NIH's new \$30-million study of chelation therapy as a preventative for heart attacks and strokes. Although science has not yet found evidence of chelation's efficacy in cardiovascular disease, Roberts has been treating patients to such treatments for several years. "We are going to sink or swim by the results of this study," she says.

*(Brandon News, June 23)*

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