

VAASTU



**Design
and decorate
homes
to reflect
eternal spiritual
principles**

**THE INDIAN ART
OF PLACEMENT**

ROHIT ARYA

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INTRODUCTION



Architecture is one of humankind's greatest means for celebrating our place in the natural world. It is a conscious, rational effort to create harmony. The spirit of the world is acknowledged, even as structures are reared to make it more manageable. Architecture is also a phenomenon of urban life. The country house was too close to nature to attempt to order it, but the city or town uses architecture as an act of self-assertion in the face of nature's harsh realities.

India can lay claim to the oldest urban settlements ever known to humankind—the towns of the Harappan plains,

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circa 3000 B.C. It also had a culture that adored and exalted nature yet used one word—*nagarika*—to describe both the city dweller and the cultured human being. Architecture in India therefore had very strong urban moorings from its inception.

Fortunately, Indian culture has always valued the transcendent cosmic aspects of art. Hence the striking distinctiveness, the idiosyncratic originality, of *vaastu shastra*, the Indian art of placement. Vaastu shastra reaches out to the universe even as it simultaneously imposes structure upon it. It is a strange amalgam of science and religion, of design and instinct—perhaps inevitable for a practice that has lasted over two millennia and has only now been taken off the list of endangered arts. Vaastu concerns itself with the subtle complexities of the energy system that is a human being in relationship to both the natural and designed environments. Its links with geomancy are especially strong, and its fundamental philosophy is in agreement with feng shui, even though both differ widely in details. To state it simply, vaastu is the creation of forms that are in harmony with the natural laws of the cosmos.

At its most practical, vaastu lays down certain principles that orient and plan each element of a building from the big-picture considerations such as shape and size to the details of where windows and doors should be placed. In traditional India, building a house was not just an investment for the future. It was also a religious act, one of the vows made by the groom to the bride. She accepted him on the

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condition that he build an edifice for the public good: a way-side shelter, a temple, or an inn. The private and public spheres of a person's life were never considered to be separate compartments. The individual expression of self, manifest in building a house, was always to be tempered by the deference to traditional wisdom and its principles. Such balance was believed to bring about prosperity and the contentment of an enriched public life. For, as defined in the Rig Veda, *vaastu* is derived from the phrase *vasanti praminae yatra*, "a place where living beings reside." To make such a place a representative of the cosmos was therefore an attempt to live life more fully.

This book seeks to keep alive the spirit of *vaastu*. Wisdom is not restricted by history, time, or culture. The moment is now for *vaastu* to take its place on the honor roll of ancient arts of the world, and become accessible to all.

1 THE HISTORY OF VAASTU



The great gods in Hinduism form a triad—Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva, He Who Dissolves Creation. In popular mythology these three great gods are prone to errors of action; their superabundant energies cause them to act before considering the results that may follow.

One such mistake was committed by Brahma—ever prone to such mishaps—because he couldn't resist experimenting with creation. Out of the void Brahma created a

humanoid form so monstrous that, on the humanoid's day of birth, his shadow fell across the earth like a second night. When this giant began to expand at an alarming rate, Brahma was pleased; his powers of creation had lost none of their vibrancy. But to the universe at large, this ever expanding creature was a source of terror, for he was hungry. He bellowed across the wastes of space that he would satisfy his hunger with anything in his path.

The lesser gods complained bitterly to Brahma. "Why must we bear the consequences of your creative fits? This creature will devour us first, you later, and all of creation in the end. Do something!"

Brahma, suddenly sobered by these complaints, realized his responsibilities to the other progeny of his creation. He assembled a task force of the *asthadigapalakas*, the guardians of the eight cardinal directions. Together they snuck up behind the monster and, in an unchivalrous but effective move, hurled themselves onto him in a cosmic tackle, squashing him flat onto the earth. Brahma added his considerable weight to the center, and literally ground the monster down into the soil. Eventually forty-five gods were employed to sit on the monster and keep him in place; their positions can be seen on the classic grid used by Indians to decipher the vaastu of any site (figure 1).

Now it was the monster's turn to complain. "Why do you gods punish me for behaving according to my nature, a nature Brahma gave me to begin with? Is this fair? And by the way, I am still hungry!"

THE HISTORY OF VAASTU

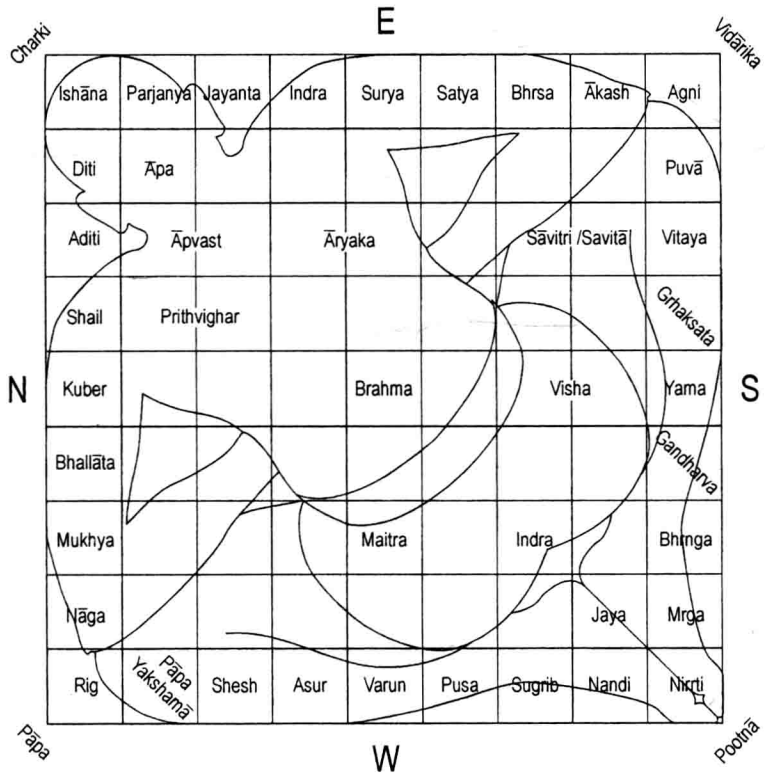


Figure 1. The vaastu grid.

Brahma felt the humanoid’s arguments had merit, so the great god worked out a compromise. The demon would become immortal, provided he did not budge from his place on the earth. And in the future any person who built a structure of any kind could do so only after worshipping the demon, newly named Vaastu Purusha. Those who followed this order would be blessed; they who did not would risk the demon’s wrath. This story would ever be fresh, reminding

people of their obligation to feed the hunger of Vaastu Purusha, who now became part of the earth itself.



Myths always conceal some eternal principle. We can see Vaastu Purusha as the conscious life energy of the earth. It is a male principle, the yang to the yin of the Mother Goddess Earth. The actual life force of Earth is called *vastu*, while the manifestation of this force in all objects that reside within or on the earth is called *vaastu*. *Vas* means “to live” or, even better, “to be.” Many attempts have been made to link Vaastu Purusha to the eternal Purusha, the Primordial Man of the Vedas and Upanishads, who sacrificed himself so that the universe might come into being. Thus, by worshipping Vaastu Purusha one develops the conscious, aware, and joyous attitude to life that is the foundation of vaastu.

As Shilpa Ratnam says, “Vaastu is the energy of life. Vaastu is the unmanifest. Vaastu is the matter of all matter. Vaastu is the microcosmos, it is the macrocosmos. Vaastu Purusha is the spark of the soul within.”

And yet deeper still, at a subterranean level, operates another mythical belief. Many ancient cultures have viewed man as the reflection of all creation—man as a microcosmos to the macrocosmos without. That ideal worked in the temples of Egypt, Greece, and India. Indeed, in India every well-designed Hindu temple is a Cosmic Man.

But simultaneously every temple, and by association

every human, takes on the proportions of the *Yupa Stambha*—the cosmic pillar, the Axis Mundi or center of the universe. Every structure built, but especially a temple, is thus a re-creation of that Yupa Stambha, a creative cycle of alignment with the cosmos that is ever fresh, for each person has to make the commitment anew. This is one of the reasons for the promise made in the marriage ceremony to build a public structure. It was an acknowledgment of the special place man held in the cosmos and of his gratitude for that. Every human, male or female, was a personification of the center, the Axis Mundi. A house or temple or rest house was built to provide external evidence of this profound realization.



The most compelling evidence of the pre-Vedic roots of vaastu is to be found in the archaeological remains of Harappa, a civilization of the Indus Valley. Harappan culture was imbued with vaastu principles. Sites of their ancient urban clusters dot the northwestern contours of the Indian peninsula, extending as far as Afghanistan in the north and deep into the hinterland of Gujarat in the south. The Harappan people had a script, indecipherable even to computer simulations of today, and eerily similar to the runelike hieroglyphics found on Easter Island in the Pacific, quite literally half a world away. The Harappans had a religion, which seems to both predate and confirm the Vedic-Yogic traditions of later India. On one of their square seals used in trading,

or perhaps for currency, sits a Vedic Pashupati (Shiva, lord of the animals) in a yogic posture of *udharvalinga*. This is at least 1,500 years too early, according to religious scholars' established timeline.

Above all, these cities of the plain were urban. A density of 30,000 to 100,000 inhabitants per square mile was common. And every feature of these cities, especially the older sites, conforms to vaastu tenets in a manner that staggers the imagination. The streets were built to plan and the points of the compass were the guides (figure 2). In some towns the streets were so perfectly aligned with the elements that the wind acted as a natural garbage collector, wafting debris along to convenient loops in the corners, where they



Figure 2. A Harappan city.

could be collected later. The streets were up to thirty feet wide, straight as an arrow and crossing at right angles in accordance with the vaastu tenet of using the square as the basic unit of construction. Living quarters were usually concentrated in one part of town, a rectangular cluster set apart from the citadels rising over the cities. The hot winds dictated that no house facing a main street had windows or doors; sheltered side streets held the private entrances to homes.

Harappan citadels had thick walls and towers, with a marketplace as the central space. The Great Bath at Mohenjodaro citadel was 40 x 240 feet in dimension and was brick lined. Granaries were situated next to it. The entire city was built primarily of bricks made by baking the abundant clay of the Indus River Valley, a departure from the norm of dressed wood and stone, which was to be vaastu's leitmotif in later years.

But nothing in this very advanced city was quite so modern as the little-known matter of these urbanites having indoor toilets. There was a well-developed, covered sewage system, with deep channels to carry away the waste and stone manhole covers to access the subterranean channels. This was a level of sophistication that cities in India and the rest of the world would reach again only in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. By 1500 B.C. the culture had disintegrated and the Harappans were forgotten. In 1915 ancient bricks from this long-forgotten "mound of the dead" were blithely used to build a railway embankment! By

1920 archaeologists had examined some of the seals casually tossed away in favor of more useful bricks, and they let out great yells of protest at this ignorant destruction of what was probably the first urban culture in the world. The bricks, over 3,000 years old, still hold up trains traversing them in Pakistan. Only the vaastu principles behind these cities survived.

Tracing the history of vaastu can quickly turn into a frustrating business, for India as a culture has relied heavily on the oral tradition, and until recently there was always an unspoken contemptuous pity for those whose memories required the aid of treated bark and stylus. Indeed there is a popular belief that most texts are written down in a period of decline in the subject they deal with, as a scramble to salvage fragments of knowledge before it is too late. Families held knowledge in trust and secrecy, and its transmission could be cut by a single untimely death. Knowledge and skill was diffused over a landmass the size of Europe. Many an ancient Indian heritage lived a precarious existence in the minds of irascible and cantankerous gurus who were perfectly prepared to die without parting with their treasures if they deemed no one worthy of such knowledge. (The oldest martial art of India and of the world, *kalaripayattu*, is on the verge of extinction today because the masters, at the turn of the twentieth century, refused to train what they perceived to be the wild and undisciplined youngsters of the time.) Add to such a scenario India's tradition of not caring much for history, and the difficulties become immense.