

## The Vaastu Tradition

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In the recent past, I have been asked frequently to demystify and explain Vaastu to the common reader. It seems that the traditions have not only become very separate from the lives of people, but have also taken on an impractical and mystic quality that makes them seem nonviable for ordinary application. The reality is very far from this. All the traditions that have existed in this country have had very strong theoretical base as well as extremely viable application or field practice. The two were held together in a holistic and seamless fashion. Till forty years ago the principles and application of Vaastu were held together by the same people who were equally aware of climate, topography, building materials and energy fields. Unfortunately this connected holistic field of theory and practice is not being taught to the modern designers and the traditional practitioners are slowly getting out of step with the lifestyles of today. As a result Vaastu is getting a name of either slightly abstract and hence 'useless' or that of addressing people's wish fulfilment and therefore 'bogus'.

The lack of dialogue between knowledge holders and practitioners of the tradition, with modern day designers and architects is preventing genuine enquiry and growth in the field as well as spawning a whole generation of quick-fix practitioners who are attracted to the 'mystical' aspect and who are completely unaware of the time tested rigour of the texts. This attraction to the beneficial aspect of Vaastu is a part of a global movement towards 'alternative' healing and energy shifting that has been going on for a couple of decades.

Let me place the principles of Vaastu in a simple framework so that it may be reviewed in its entirety and therefore understood clearly.

**Historical perspective:** The *Vaastu Shilpa Shastra* is a body of textual material that has been mentioned in the *Puranas* as well as Buddhist *Brahmana*. As in the case of Ayurveda, the origin lies in the *Atharva Veda* and therefore far back in the antiquity of this land. The texts were written in their own unique style with references to architecture, sculpture, town planning, vehicle design and furniture design. Even though theory and practice existed side by side in the field of architecture some classical texts such as *Mayamatam*, *Manasaram*, *Viswakarmiyam* and *Kasyapam* have been seen as the basis for the evolution of the principle base. These are texts that speak of theory, philosophy, application and understanding of elemental energy patterns. Even today the perspective built by these texts has relevance and require minimal guidance to become applicable in the construction.

**Theoretical Principles:** The cosmic being or *Purusha* becomes the visible world of reality and in so doing replicates the cosmic order on the earth. It becomes the Vaastu Purusha or the earth-being. Vaastu Purusha is the body on which every aspect of human activity is carried out. Whether we build a house, a factory, school, well, compound wall, tank or play ground, we are placing it upon the sacred body of the cosmic being who has come to reside with us. Every part of his body is sacred, with energies and characteristics that add to and enhance our life on earth. Therefore it is to him we bow in gratitude when we start upon any endeavour, and to him we offer our thanks through flowers and incense, minerals and metals, herbs and colours, amidst music and chanting.

The story of the Vaastu Purusha goes thus: In the ages gone by, there lived a demon called Vaastu who was fierce and powerful and in the habit of terrorizing the world. As the situation became unbearable the gods came together to fight him, but he was too strong for them. Therefore the Gods went to Lord Brahma for help.

Affected by the grief of the gods, Lord Brahma fought and pinned the demon firmly to the ground, and as a further precaution ordered a certain number of gods to sit on him and stop his tyranny. The popular belief is that the Vaastu Purusha lies face down on the ground, though a few texts claim he lies face up.

Though it is a myth it can be interpreted to mean that the energy comes from cosmic space and manifests itself as the contained energy within material phenomena. The cosmic energy manifests itself as a phenomenon after moving through a series of transformation – ether, air, fire, water and earth. Hence the built space is created according to the impulses of the earth, in consonance with the waking and slumber of the earthly energy.

The Vaastu Purusha is considered to be awake when he is oriented towards the cardinal points, and is said to be asleep when oriented towards the non-cardinal points like NE, SW, SE, NW.

**Theory of Pada:** Any given physical space can be perceived in its connections with primary energies. The eight directions, the heavens above and the earth below are considered as significant influences on the nature of growth and prosperity. The cosmology of the space depends a great deal on the dominant worldview of a people.

- ***Brahmasthanam.*** This is the centre of the plot. In the design it is important to create a centre for the building, which grows into the total form.
- ***The Brahma Padam.*** This is the central area of the total form, which includes the central point. In the process of design the *Brahma Padam* is considered to have a very high concentration of energy of the total form.

- **The *Deivika Padam*.** This is the first concentric space around the central *Brahma Padam*. In this space the energies are considered to be fairly high and so the allocation of passages and rooms for the collective rather than individual use such as dining, family rooms are recommended here.
- **The *Maanusha Padam*.** This is the second concentric space, and is considered to contain energy which is fairly comfortable for human activity and therefore all activity rooms such as kitchen, bedrooms, study areas, Puja and rooms for individual use may be placed in this part of the layout.
- **The *Paisaacha Padam*.** This final concentric space can have the storage areas, outer verandah, external walls, outer walkways as also activity areas such as bedrooms and work rooms. In general *Manusha* and *Paisaacha* may be considered together for all special activity areas.

**Cosmology and Orientation:** Every traditional culture has related to the physical environment in terms of states of consciousness of the cosmic spirit; and has built legends and myths around the gods and goddesses.

- *Isaana* (North East): The lord of water, passionate, uncontrolled, deeply compassionate when happy. It is the direction of nourishing energies.
- *Aaditya* (East): Warm, glowing, luminous, beneficial, adding to growth, destructive when crossed. It is the direction of life energy.
- *Agni* (South East): Burning, luminous, capable of both disintegration and healing. It is the direction of spiritual growth.
- *Yama* (South): Destroyer, establisher of *dharma* or rules of conduct, fast and intrepid, deeply compassionate when pleased. This is the direction of the meaning of life and death.
- *Pitru* (South West): The lord of ancestors, holder of the future patterns of human beings, the repository of wisdom, over structured and frozen, incapable of change. It is the direction of ancestral connections.
- *Varuna* (West): Lord of the oceans, creator, adventurous, bold, destructive, herald of change. This is the direction of the unknown.
- *Vaayu* (North West): Lord of winds, fast, destructive, benevolent, creator of mental patterns. It is the direction of intellectual achievements.
- *Soma or Kubera* (North): Holder of wealth and medicine, source of indulgence and luxury. It is the direction of healing.
- *Brahma* (Centre): The anchor of stillness and repose, and the nexus for the entire cosmic movement.

**Process of Design:** The designing process should be based on a thorough understanding of the main principles of design:

- **Bhogadyam - functionality:** The designed product must be useful, lend itself to easy application. For example, a house must have ample spaces for storage of articles and facilities for cleaning. A vessel must be designed in such a way as to hold water and allow for pouring out without leaking or dripping.
- **Sukha Darsham - aesthetics:** The designed product, whether a building or a vessel, must be aesthetically pleasing. The proportions of the spaces and material shape must affect the viewer in a positive manner. This principle covers the exterior of a building (or vessel) as well as the interior. Ornamentation and colour is just one aspect of aesthetics. The proportions of windows and doors, the size of rooms, the rhythm of projections and setbacks play a critical role in creating the aesthetics of form.
- **Ramya - the spiritual response to the manifested form:** The designed product, whether a building for human habitation, or a vessel, or a fabric, must be capable of evoking a feeling of well-being and contentment in the user. The measurements employed in the design, which are considered to be sacred measures, are juxtaposed in such a way as to create harmony in all those who occupy the space or use the object. We can say that 'A built form creates a sympathetic vibration in the occupant'. To calculate the proportions in such a way as to enhance the positive response in the viewer or occupant is the strength of the traditional design.

**Benefits of Vaastu:** The *Vaastu Shastras* have offered many benefits to the user of a built space. These benefits are deeply connected to the meaning and reasons behind the living processes of people. In general most human beings are struggling to find harmony and well being.

By employing the principles of *Vaastu*, these benefits can be ensured. The intangible spaces within a built form, acquire the power and capability to enrich the lives of the occupants in many ways. This does not mean that *Vaastu* is a magical way of getting things done without any effort. Certain vibrations and ambiances can be built that would offer well being and integrity to the life of the users.

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