

All the good news about animals, wildlife, and the earth

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Balancing Act

How the ancient art of feng shui helps the animals

► By Julie Richard

The chorus was piercing and frenetic – not from pain or hunger or fear, but from sheer tail-wiggling excitement. Visitors were coming!

As the small group of people reached the kennel door and swung it open, the barking accelerated. The visitors were here! Was it walk time? Food time? Play time? Or were the dogs going to new homes? The possibilities were endless – and oh so exciting!

The chaotic energy that permeated the room instantly caught the attention of the visitors. Interior designers and members of the New York chapter of the International Feng Shui Guild, these animal lovers had come to BARC, a Brooklyn-based animal rescue shelter, for their first pro bono community project. Their mission: to turn this shelter, so full of heart, soul and energy, into a haven of peace, quiet and contentment. They wanted to create a place where animals were relaxed and happy, where the atmosphere was cheerful and calming, and where potential adopters could focus on that special pet instead of the nerve-shattering noise. They would do so using the ancient Chinese art of feng shui.

In the past decade, feng shui (pronounced “fung shway”) has taken the Western world by storm. Feng shui, which literally means “wind and water,” is the art of balancing the

energies of the earth and the heavens through the design of one’s surroundings to create a unified, positive energy flow.

There are two main concepts that work together in feng shui. The first is chi, the universal life force. When that energy flows freely, people are able to live in harmony with nature and the universe, deriving all the benefits of that connection. When chi becomes stagnant and blocked, negative energy builds up. It’s similar to a thriving, flowering plant that suddenly wilts and dies when its soil becomes choked with debris.

For chi to flow freely, yin and yang, the second principle of feng shui, must be operating in harmony. These two elements are constantly in flux and are intrinsic to everything from health and well-being to our prosperity and success in life. Yin and yang must be in balance to allow good chi.

While many of us have knowingly incor-

porated feng shui into our living environments, others practice it intuitively. For instance, some people find that if their desk is a mess, they can’t work as well. When they put things in order, they find themselves thinking more clearly, breathing more freely and becoming more productive. They’ve unintentionally practiced a bit of feng shui. Their personal energy has been brought into balance with the energy of the space around them.





Feng Shui to the Rescue

The living-space energy doesn't just affect people. Animals, too, are highly affected by the energy of the space in which they live.

BARC's relationship with the Feng Shui Guild began with a casual comment. Vinny Spinola, one of the shelter's co-founders along with Tony Spoto, remarked to colleagues that he was worried about the shelter's history as a breeding facility for laboratory mice. He joked that it needed a "good feng shui consultant" to clear the space's negative energy.

That offhand remark reached the ears of ASPCA president Ed Sayres, whose wife, Michele, just happened to be an interior designer and a classically trained feng shui practitioner. She, in turn, thought that redesigning an animal shelter to achieve its maximum potential was just the sort of project that her branch of the Feng Shui Guild had been looking for.

While most shelter workers are accustomed to the sounds of dogs continually howling their hellos and scrambling around, Sayres and her colleagues knew that the chaotic energy of their surroundings wasn't a positive energy for the dogs. And it certainly wasn't good for the shelter's ultimate goal: adoptions.

Feng Shui for Your Pet

Feng shui can help more than shelter animals. In Mt. Shasta, California, Sharon Callahan has been applying the art of feng shui for a dozen years. She'd noticed how many animals were stressed out or ill as a result of the environment they lived in.

"It's important to really look at the animal's environment from the animal's point of view," Callahan says. "Even from a cleanliness standpoint. People get busy house-cleaning, but nobody really looks under the bed. But that's the world at most animals' eye level. Is there too much clutter there? Are things tucked up out of the way for humans, but creating clutter in the animals' world?"

"Whatever we do to make our home environment sacred and beautiful and balanced for ourselves should be taken a step further and viewed from the animals' perspective. Everything we do for ourselves – the placement of mirrors, the use of color – can be done for animals, so they can see it and benefit from the flow of energy as a result."

One element of her feng shui practice is the construction of altars just for animals. Years

ago, when she first rescued her cat, a sickly feral kitten she named Lily, Callahan noticed that Lily took to lying close to her small meditation space. "It was a simple little altar with pictures of my teachers, some small Christmas lights, and offerings of bowls of water. Lily was very frail, but every morning she'd struggle to get up on that altar. I would lift her up, and she'd spend hours lying there, just touching the pictures. Then one day I got smarter and realized that I should create an altar for her, down at floor level, where it would be more comfortable for her."

Now Lily's altar, which sits low to the ground in a corner of Callahan's home office, contains objects that are meaningful to Lily. Her water is there in a large clear bowl. Under it, Callahan places a prayer or a sacred image each day so that every time Lily takes a drink she can see it through the glass. There's a small statue of St. Francis, the patron saint of animals, and some seashells and rocks. A small vase of fresh flowers from Callahan's garden brings nature indoors.

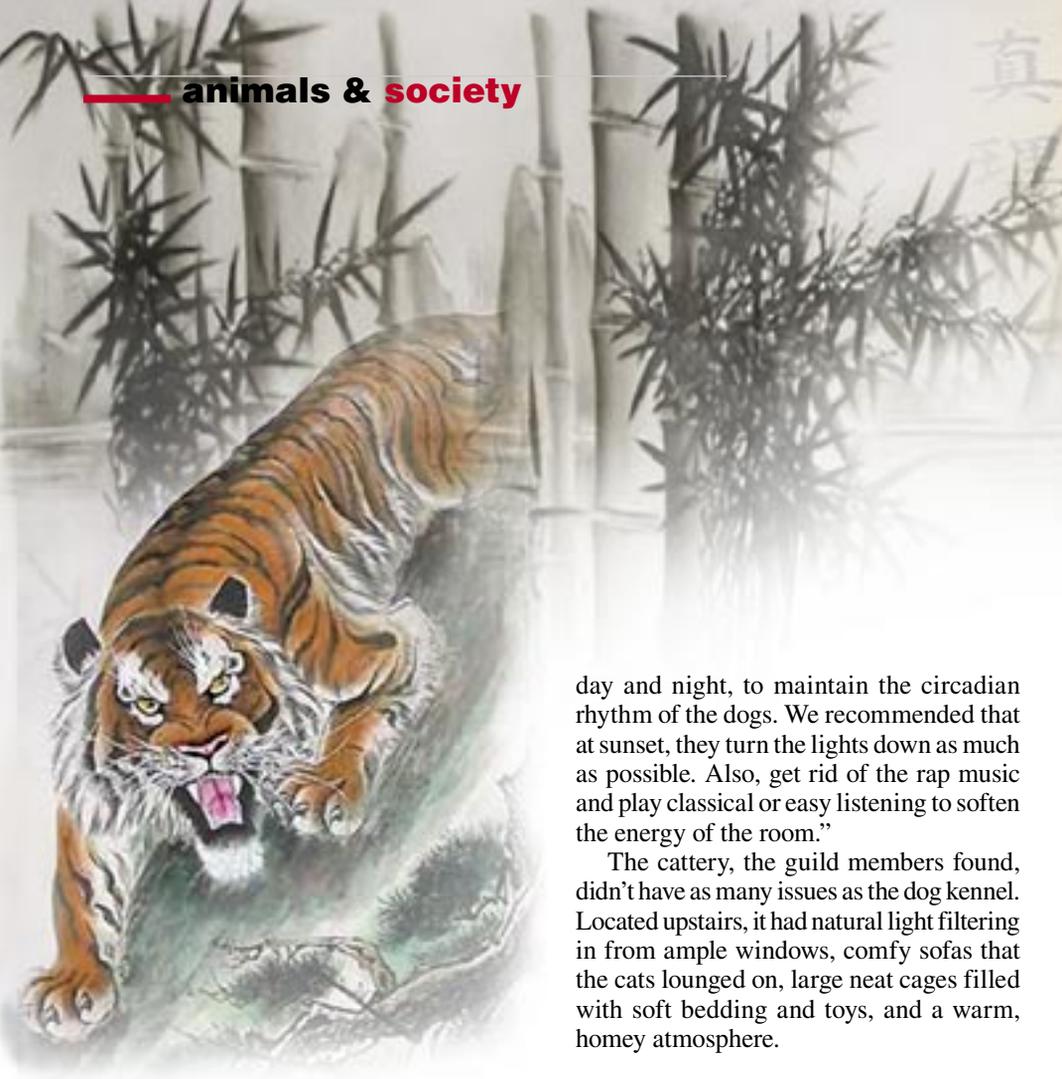
"Lily loves her altar and knows it's for her," Callahan says. "She spends time in front of it every day, sitting as if she's meditating. She

often lies on her back in a kitty yoga posture in front of the altar."

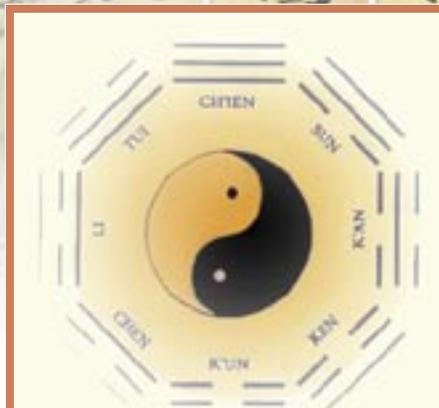
When Callahan started suggesting altars for her clients' animals, people were amazed at how much their animals loved their new space.

"People often don't consider animals as individuals," she says. "That's very important when you're considering how to change their living space to provide the most positive energy for them. Some of the cats I've rescued over the years have loved wind chimes, but others are driven crazy by them. Watch your animal to see how he or she is responding to the changes you're making, and adjust for them. It's an ongoing process and will need to be fine-tuned with what's happening at that time in the animal's life."





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The Basics of Feng Shui

Yin and yang: Along with chi, the principles of yin and yang are at the core of feng shui. They are opposites that must co-exist in balance to achieve perfect harmony. Yin elements include earth, winter, north, dark, cold, and water. In nature, meandering streams and short sloping hills would represent yin; yang elements include people, animals, light, and all animate things. It can be seen in nature as tall trees and mountains. Yang is connected to the sun, summer, day, south, light, heat, and dry.

Shar chi: Bad feng shui can result from shar chi, “poison arrows” that disrupt the free flow of chi. They come in the form of straight lines and sharp angles. Anything sharp or pointed that faces the front door is considered shar chi. Plants, mirrors, and wind chimes can deflect the effect.

Bagua: A bagua is an octagonal-shaped map that allows living or working space to be evaluated in terms of feng shui. According to the map, each part of a space corresponds to one of nine different life aspects: prosperity, reputation, family, health, relationships and love, creativity, knowledge, career, and travel. Placed in the correct areas, particular colors and the use of objects representing elements such as wood, water, and fire can maximize the potency and positive energy of the nine life aspects.

The five main elements: To harmonize an environment, feng shui uses the five elements of earth, water, fire, metal, and wood. Each element has its own characteristics. To harmonize a space according to feng shui principles, each element must be incorporated into its proper place. Where they are placed is determined with the bagua map.

day and night, to maintain the circadian rhythm of the dogs. We recommended that at sunset, they turn the lights down as much as possible. Also, get rid of the rap music and play classical or easy listening to soften the energy of the room.”

The cattery, the guild members found, didn’t have as many issues as the dog kennel. Located upstairs, it had natural light filtering in from ample windows, comfy sofas that the cats lounged on, large neat cages filled with soft bedding and toys, and a warm, homey atmosphere.

New, Improved Shelter Space

Neither Sayres nor her colleagues felt any hint of a lingering negative energy from the days when the building was filled with lab animals. “I think Vinny and Tony have just put so much love into their mission that it was long ago displaced,” Sayres says.

Still, the whole building needed a spring cleaning. Once devoid of the clutter, a wide hallway could become a dog visiting space with a bench for people to sit on to have a quiet visit with their potential new buddy. The building, too, needed a fresh coat of paint in more balanced colors.

When Vinny Spinola and Tony Spoto made the updates they could afford, the effects were immediate. “It really is amazing, the difference it’s made,” says Spinola. “There’s just a feeling of so much more positive energy now. It’s affecting the people and it’s definitely affecting the animals. The dogs are definitely much calmer. It’s not just a fluke.”

And the best news? “Adoptions are definitely consistently up,” says Spinola, “so much so that we’re planning on implementing their entire blueprint a bit at a time as we get the funds.” 🐾

Examining the kennels, the guild members quickly saw why. Because the building was a former warehouse, there was no natural light in the kennels. Rows of fluorescent bulbs hummed above. Drains were dug into the floors, which helped maintain cleanliness, but which allowed positive energy to flow away. Sound was bouncing off the walls, a mixture of the dog chatter and the rap music the employees had pounding in the background as they went about their daily chores. The result was a palpable chaotic energy that assaulted anyone who opened the door.

“We had to maintain functionality of the kennel,” Sayres recounts, “but the question was, how do you do that and get the dogs’ energy to calm down?”

“We were able to immediately offer a number of easily instituted ideas,” Sayres says. “We suggested rubber mats for the kennel floors to absorb some of the sound. To bring daylight in, we recommended full-spectrum light bulbs. Fluorescent bulbs generally emit a cold blue light, and living things don’t react well to them. They can cause anxiety and depression in all creatures. We also suggested they do something to create