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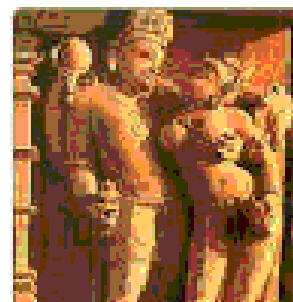
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Not feng shui, but the aim's the same

By Chris Berdik
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On a recent evening, about 40 people gathered in Harvard University's Sackler Museum to attend a seminar on Vaastu, which adherents call the classic Indian "design principles for harmonious living."

Dressed in a brown and gold sari, Sashikala Ananth, an architect and Vaastu scholar, analyzed floor plans of selected audience members' homes. She spoke in terms of energy fields, aesthetics and the interconnection between a home's design and the habits and fortunes of its occupants. Several in the audience sought specifics. "Is it OK to have the staircase as the center of my house? What is the best placement for an entrance?" But Ananth demurred. "It's not a question of OK or not OK...There is no best."



A sculpture from Khajuraho
in central India

According to Ananth, Vaastu is a dialogue between aesthetics, history, and the personalities of individuals. "Most Indian traditions talk about the holistic quality of reality," she explained. "that's why I ask so many probing questions about personal history and behaviors."

Indeed, the holistic quality of reality is a subtext of this year's Summit Meru, a lecture series on Indian art and culture, which opened with the Vaastu seminar and will continue into September with programs in classical Indian dance and sculpture.

The lecture series, centered around the theme of "creating sacred space," is sponsored by the nonprofit Meru Education Foundation, begun last year by the husband-and-wife team of Vanita and Shekhar Shastri of Lexington.

In addition to the lecture series, the foundation also runs Camp Meru, two weeks of arts, crafts and cultural education for children ages 9 to 17, which began Monday at the Ottoson Middle School in Arlington. This year, about a dozen youngsters are attending the camp, which begins at 9 a.m. with yoga and includes Indian language instruction and high-powered guest speakers such as archaeologist Tom Tartaron of Yale University and Joan Cummins, assistant curator of Indian, Southeast Asian and Himalayan Art at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. While the youngsters at camp learn, through activities, games, and field trips, about the ancient Indus Valley civilization, which included large portions of modern-day Pakistan, the lectures are geared toward adults, with a focus on the intersection of art and philosophy.

"There is an underlying grammar to aesthetics," said Shekhar who works full time as a computer scientist while also attending to the foundation. "Dance has its own language. So does music and sculpture..."

To the Shastris, it is not just a matter of peering into ancient traditions or seeking an enhanced appreciation of classical arts. "[We wanted to create] a forum to present the knowledge of traditional systems and how they can be applicable to our modern life," explained Vanita who holds a doctorate in political science from Cornell and is also an expert in classical Indian dance.

“Things like architecture and sculpture, these are not just creations frozen in stone,” said Shekhar, who is also a trained vocalist. “You create a building and live in it, and on a day-to-day basis, you are capturing and creating sacred space in your life...Without trying too much philosophy, we felt the best way to demonstrate this was through art.”

The Meru Foundation grew out of the Shastris’ long-held desire to bring the cultural traditions of their native India together in their new home. After a yearlong sabbatical in India, the couple held the first Summit Meru and Camp Meru in the summer of 2002, funding them mainly out of their own pockets. This year, the Shastris hope to break even.

Even without a major source of outside funding, the Shastris have been able to bring renowned lecturers and performers from India to take part, including dancer Leela Samson and art historian Devangana Desai. Both years, they found willing partners in local museums, including the MFA and the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, which will be hosting the dance programs next Saturday and Sunday. Detailed information on the dates, times and prices for each program can be found on the foundation’s Web site www.merufoundation.org.

Harvard’s Sackler Museum hosted Summit events both last year and this year, and is eager to continue, according to assistant curator of Islamic and later-Indian art Kimberly Masteller.