

Vāstu: The Space in Which You Live

by Dinesh S. Parakh

An acquaintance of ours in India once chopped down a 200-year old fig tree because someone told him that it was “bad vāstu.” Perhaps it was coincidence, but the family’s fortunes took a downturn from that point on – ill health, marital problems, and deterioration of finances. My own uncle almost didn’t buy the perfect property because he was told that the property having a basement constituted “bad vāstu” – his family has done nothing but prosper in that property, and the home itself has risen in value 10-fold.

While these stories are anecdotal, they are a reflection of the state of vāstu today. Perhaps no ancient subject is more misunderstood in modern India than vāstu vidyā, also called vāstu śāstra, sthāpatya veda, śilpa śāstra, and vāstu tantra. Loosely translated, vāstu vidyā refers to the science of energy flows in relation to geometric placement. My jyotiṣa guru has defined vāstu as “a universal syntax for form and structure in accord with natural law.”¹

Originally, vāstu was used primarily for temples and idols, as well as the palaces of kings. However – and this is one of this sacred subject’s most outstanding advantages – vāstu is applicable to all situations, from the micro to the macro, from the mundane to the sacred. Your body has vāstu, your car has vāstu, your office desk has vāstu. Vāstu is the site of life, whether the home, body, temple, public, private, etc. More so than many ancient vidyās, vāstu can be immediately applicable to all of us. And while other subjects such as jyotiṣa and āyurveda are not to be dabbled in, even a beginner understanding of vāstu can bring benefits to your life.

In India – and the multitude of other places to which vāstu has spread – vāstu has unfortunately degenerated and debased, falling into superstition and disrepute, becoming commercialized and commoditized like so many ancient subjects transposed into the modern world. Imagine what a strange world it would be if all doors faced east, everyone lived in a rectangular house, and all properties sloped from South to North? We would be living in a cartoon world. But unfortunately, vāstu as it exists today (like modern jyotiṣa, modern āyurveda, etc.) has become a caricature of its sublime self. In most of its present-day manifestations, vāstu has devolved into a series of very strange rules that appear to have no internal logic or relation amongst each other.

¹ A brief note about feng shui, possibly even more in vogue than vāstu these days. There are strong parallels between vāstu and feng shui, but also significant differences. It is possible, as some have argued, that the basic origins of feng shui (like martial arts) are in India, in vāstu vidyā. But it is also entirely possible that feng shui developed independently, a reflection of the same basic principles of energy that are common to all humanity. Whatever may be the case, feng shui has followed the same trajectory as vāstu – an ancient, complex and noble subject that has been trivialized in the modern context, particularly in the West which is (in)famous for ‘dumbing down’ ancient subjects.

So let's start from the beginning, understanding some of the fundamental principles behind vāstu. By understanding a bit of the context – from wherein come the rules – the rules may eventually start to make more sense.

Vāstu is fundamentally about beauty writ large, meaning not just physical beauty, but emotional, intellectual, moral beauty – all the beauty that is a part of and in accord with universal morals, ethics, and natural law. The three underlying organizing principles of vāstu are really three components of beauty. Words are somewhat hollow when trying to convey these concepts (the ideal of course is to have a guru demonstrate examples in actual living spaces) but I lay them out for your consideration and as a starting point.

The first component of beauty, and thus of vāstu, is *sauśthava* or **symmetry**, which also includes (according to the Sanskrit definition) order, rhythm, and evenness. Beauty lives in symmetry, and science has emphatically confirmed that the human faces we find most attractive are invariably those that are the most symmetrical.

The second component of beauty is *vicitratā* or **variety**, which includes meanings such as variegated, astonishing, brilliant, and wonderful. Pure symmetry would be staid and boring, and probably a bit strange (imagine a perfectly square house in the perfect centre of a perfectly square plot of land). A beauty mark adds variety to the symmetry of an attractive human face and enhances overall beauty. Symmetry with variety creates a form of “asymmetrical symmetry”, which is arguably superior to plain boring symmetry.

The final component of beauty is *gati* or **motion** (gait, pace, movement). Motion is life; lack of motion is death. To take a slightly macabre example: imagine our attractive, beauty-marked face in the ultimate state of zero motion – dead – and then alive and healthy. There is no question that motion is a necessary component of beauty. A primary component of beauty is actual or apparent motion, which can be conveyed, for example, by circular or wavy lines.

We can then extend these three components of beauty to the three qualities of an abode. A home, or any site of life (i.e., wherever life is lived, be it home, office, car, etc.), should ideally be:

bhogādhyam: enjoyably comfortable (i.e., having sufficient space). This means that there should be the appropriate amount of space for the occupants of a space to comfortably conduct the business of life. Bigger is not better: a mansion for two people can violate *bhogādhyam* just as much as a shack housing 12. Recall a famous movie motif evoking lonely disconnectedness – a rich man dining alone at a table that can accommodate 50 – and you will get a better sense of what I am referring to.

sukhadarśam: good looking space, pleasing to the senses. There is not one formula for what is pleasing to the senses. While beauty here is in the eye of the beholder, there are still certain universal principles that apply (for example, living space should have sufficient light; colours should be complementary or contrastive in accordance with a

plan; unpleasant odours should be kept at bay; and the space should be kept clean and free of clutter). Most important here is that any design for a space should be internally and logically consistent – or purposely inconsistent if that is the plan of the design. Don't be afraid to enlist the help of a properly trained interior designer or decorator – making a space aesthetically pleasing can be harder than it seems.

ramyam: spiritually blissful. Spiritual bliss is in some ways the most individualized of the three elements. It could mean appropriate artwork, lighting, fragrance, certain daily rites and rituals (nīyam, pūja), etc. There are a thousand ways to make one's space spiritually blissful, and ethnocentric garb is not necessary. A vāstu vedin (one of the names of a practitioner of vāstu) may prescribe a mūrti of Śiva at the home altar; but what use is such a suggestion to a Christian or Muslim? Vāstu is rooted in Hinduism, but a picture of Jesus or statue of the Buddha (provided that the diagnosis and prescription is properly done) will not be any less spiritually blissful for a person adhering to one of those traditions.

True vāstu is intimately related to jyotiṣa and other Indian vidyās. In fact, to do proper vāstu for a person, you require that person's janma kundalī or horoscope, because the most effective vāstu is always *personalized*. So for example, despite the general injunction against south-facing doors, a south-facing door might actually be the best possible entrance for a particular person, based on the combinations in his/her chart. If a person is building a new house, classic traditional vāstu would take a large number of measurements of the poṣaka (head of the household) and the house would then ideally be built to those exact proportions.

Above all, understand that vāstu is about the flow of energy, of prāṇa – if one has but eyes to see. Once a person has reached a sufficient state of spiritual development, things become visible to that person which are not evident to others. So rather than simply stating a theoretical rule that a plot of land should slope from south to north for maximum prosperity, an adept existing in a certain state of consciousness can actually *see* the flow of prāṇa from south to north, a flow of energy which will contribute to prosperity.

Just as there is no perfect muhūrta (even though the marriage muhūrtas of Rāma & Sitā, Śiva & Pārvati were chosen by Sage Nārada himself, both marriages were fraught with difficulties), similarly, there is no perfect vāstu. No matter what house you move into, there will be some give and take. Some things will improve and some things may deteriorate, in accordance with the karma of the occupants. The flip side, of course, is that vāstu reflects the karma of the occupants – if one is meant to experience *sukha*, one will automatically move to a place of good vāstu, and if one is meant to experience *dukha*, the opposite will happen. But even if one is meant to experience *dukha*, the compassion of the Divine and the sages of yore has given us tools to mitigate such *dukha* – for example, by knowing how to make beneficial changes to one's vāstu.

Of course, the ultimate upāya (remedy) for vāstu ills is always the same, as encapsulated by Maharishi Patañjali – tapas, svādhyāya, īśvara praṇidhāna. This fact was seared into my consciousness when one day, shortly after being introduced to vāstu by my jyotiṣa

guru, I visited the apartment of *his* jyotiṣa guru, the redoubtable Mantriji. Mantriji's apartment had apparently violated many basic rules of vāstu, which created in me a moment of doubt, until I realized very clearly that he was allowing his karma to unfold as necessary, without trying to manipulate it. Similar to people who offer prayers only of gratitude to the Divine (rather than asking for something or the other), such "letting-go" is the mark of a spiritually evolved being which we would do well to remember as an ideal.

Here now are some practical suggestions – a bunch of strange rules at this point – to begin the process of converting your home into a heaven. Don't worry about the logic behind these principles at this stage; there is plenty of logic to satisfy intellectual curiosity should you choose to dig deeper into this sacred subject.

1. The front door is the *mukha* or face of the house, and in some ways the gateway to a different dimension. It should be kept *visible*, clean, and memorable (for example, by suitable decoration – think of a wreath on the front door).
2. Any mūrti used for home worship should not be taller than the length of the palm of the home's poṣaka (traditionally the one who supports the family)
3. Religious objects in the home should be the highest object in the room and ideally in the north (or in a very well-lit space)
4. Insofar as possible, keep the North and East of your property clean, light, and free of obstructions
5. The *brahmasthāna*, or centre of any area (whether the entire home or a particular room) should be kept open, light, clean and free of obstruction
6. Keep bathroom doors closed and toilet seats down.
7. If possible, try to wake up facing east or north.

Don't panic if you can't move your bed, if a tree blocks the view of your front door (please don't cut it down!), or if a big dirty shed collecting stale water on the roof is sitting in the northeast of your property. The blessing of this particular vidyā, in comparison to others, is that vāstu is imbued with tremendous practicality and accessible, in some measure, to absolutely everyone. Vāstu can be done incrementally, in accordance with your particular situation. Not everyone is going to be able to afford a large, spacious rectangular plot with just the right slope, east/north facing doors, etc. If you have a bathroom in the northeast, don't fret – just be sure to keep it spotlessly clean and well-lit. Be creative, consult a skilled vāstu vedin if necessary, and you can always find a way to improve your local vāstu.

This is the briefest of introductions to some of the fundamental ideas around vāstu-śāstra. The science and subject is very detailed and very technical; practical mastery requires years of study and practice under a qualified teacher. But I hope that this article will spark a process of thinking more deeply about the space in which you live; and whet your appetite to learn more.