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McDonald's franchise holders turn to feng shui

By Daisy Nguyen
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HACIENDA HEIGHTS, California: The only familiar signs at the McDonald's in this large Asian community are the golden arches, the drive-through and the menu.

Gone are the plastic furniture, Ronald McDonald and the red and yellow palette that has defined McDonald's, the world's largest fast-food chain. Leather seats, earth tones, bamboo plants and water trickling down glass panels have taken their place.

The makeover elements are meant to help diners achieve happiness and fortune - whether they realize it or not.

That is because the restaurant was redesigned using the principles of feng shui, the ancient Chinese practice of arranging objects and numbers to promote health, harmony and prosperity.

The concept is an unlikely fit with fast food. But the restaurant's owners say the designs are aimed at creating a soothing setting that will encourage diners to linger over their burgers and fries, and come back again.

The makeover is part of the attempt by McDonald's in recent years to remodel hundreds of its restaurants to attract more patrons with unique decor and amenities.

It also fits into McDonald's larger corporate practice of catering to local tastes, with a fondue-style burger in France or a pita-wrapped "McArabia" sandwich in the Middle East.

"We can't look too cookie cutter," Mark Brownstein, one of three owners of the restaurant, said about the new decor.

The basic principles of feng shui include placing strategic representations of five natural elements - earth, water, fire, metal and wood - around the room to increase the flow of chi, or energy.

Feng shui has been employed in the designs of high-rises, banks, even zoo exhibits, and has been popularized by countless coffee table books and TV shows like "Fun Shui" on the HGTV cable network. It is also used in the designs of the Panda Express Chinese food chain.

The McDonald's in the Los Angeles suburb of Hacienda Heights has a wood ceiling, silver-coated chairs and red accents throughout the dining area to symbolize fire and "good luck, laughter and prosperity," said Brenda Clifford, who designed the dining area.

The textured walls, patterned after ocean waves, symbolize "life and relaxation - the balanced things that you want in your life," she said.

Customers are responding positively, whether or not they recognize the feng shui elements.

"When we first walked in we were amazed, we were happy we skipped the drive-through and went inside," Andrew Chen said while lounging in a white leather booth with a friend. Chen, 20, said he didn't notice the feng shui elements. He just thought it was a modern interior.

Two workers at the nearby post office said they have been taking more lunch breaks at the remodeled McDonald's, which opened in late December.

"We're here two, three times a week," Waldo Alfaro said as he munched on a Filet-O-Fish and a salad. "It's relaxing. You don't feel any pressure here."

Nevermind that this is the same McDonald's that's been vilified by critics over its artery-clogging Big Macs and fries.

The buzz about the feng shui McDonald's is starting to attract curious onlookers.

"It's successful as a design. It's got a very clean, open, airy appearance," said Elaine Bjorklund, a professor emerita of cultural geography at the University of Western Ontario in Canada, who was in town visiting a friend.

"I'm not a McDonald's habitué," she added as she snapped pictures of the dining area. "It would be interesting to see if this trend will spread."

Brownstein said he and his partners chose the makeover because the restaurant is located near a renowned Buddhist temple, which is considered good luck. The designs were meant to appeal to the area's growing Asian population, but were also done in a way that would help all customers tap their inner Zen.

With the help of a feng shui master, the designers added details that only feng shui practitioners could appreciate. Clifford said that they included positioning the doors in a way that would block out bad spirits while keeping good ones inside.

Eight rows of red tiles near the food counter are another symbol of fortune, because the number eight is

considered auspicious, she said. The metal sculptures of a crane and koi adorning one wall represent fertility and prosperity.

Clifford even staggered the grout lines in the tiles rather than keeping them straight. "You want to have obstacles in life, it makes you grow," she explained.

While the menu remains the same, there is a McCafé offering lattes and gourmet coffee drinks.

When McDonald's restaurants in Europe upgraded their decor several years ago by adding hardwood floors, armchairs, TVs and other enhancements, sales went up, Brownstein said. He said business has picked up at his restaurant too.

Other franchise owners are taking notice. Clifford said her company has been hired to feng shui two more McDonald's in Southern California.

Correction:

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