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HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

holiday gift guide



contents

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departments

- 2 LETTERS
- 4 FROM THE EDITOR
- 6 POTLUCK
Dishing up news, events,
people, and ideas
- 14 STRUCTURE
*House of the Rising Sun: Vedic
architecture goes beyond green.*
- 20 TASTE
*Pie Simplicity: An American
icon endures in Iowa.*
- 48 PORTFOLIO
*Giving More: Courage,
Selflessness, and Compassion*
- 62 IOWAN GUIDE
A directory of attractions,
B&Bs, and events
- 64 LAST WORD

features

- 24 ***In the Shadows***
Iowa's owls lend an air of
mystery and enchantment.
- 29 ***Holiday Gift Guide***
Iowa products and experiences
for everyone on your gift list.
- 52 ***Bending the Rule***
The Abbey of St. Benedict blends
ancient tradition with new-millennium
possibilities in southeast Iowa.
- 58 ***Powerful Partnerships***
In a West Des Moines gymnasium, teens
learn about life and about themselves.

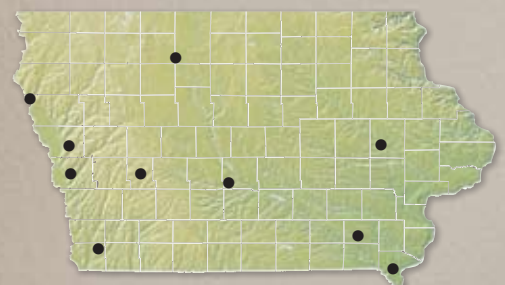
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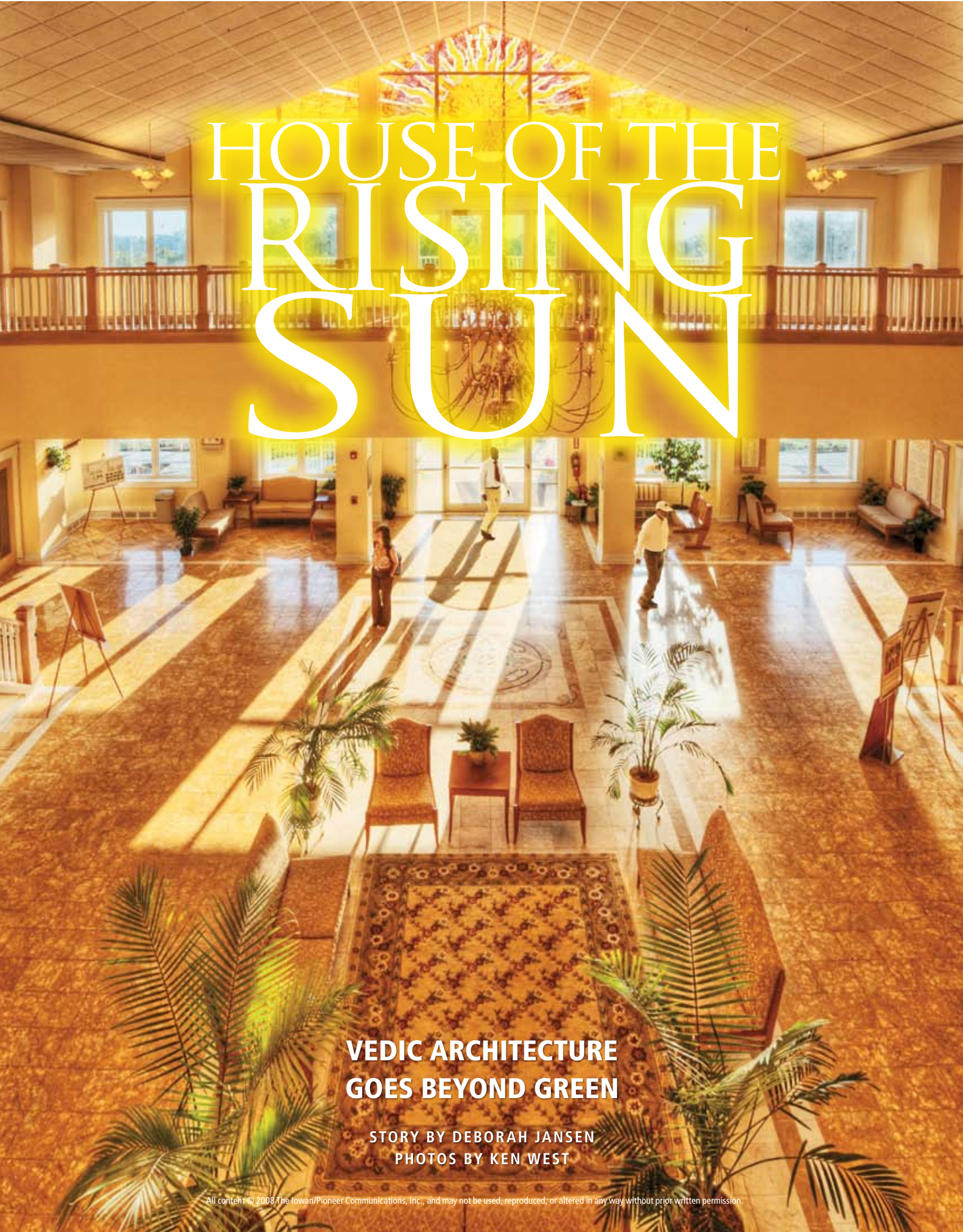
Morning sun passes through Nancy Walker's *Brahmasthan*, pouring throughout the Vedic home. See story, page 14. Photo by Ken West.

THIS PAGE

A modern glass sculpture refracts light in a unique "wall window" inside the Staklands' Vedic home. See story, page 14. Photo by Ken West.

points of interest
featured in this issue





HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

**VEDIC ARCHITECTURE
GOES BEYOND GREEN**

STORY BY DEBORAH JANSEN
PHOTOS BY KEN WEST

Enter the building and stand in its central core, feeling air circulate from surrounding rooms. Walk across the cork floor of its showcase kitchen. Stroke the bamboo countertop. Watch the morning sunrise through a wall of east-facing windows, as solar panels begin soaking up rays to convert into power. You've come to a home designed to be ecologically "green."

But your host tells you it's much more. Her home was designed using 5,000-year-old Vedic principles, the same tradition that delivered yoga and holistic medicine. *Veda* (pronounced VAY-duh) literally means "knowledge" or "truth" in Sanskrit. Just as yoga aligns body parts, Vedic architecture aligns a building's parts — and the people inside — with the power of the sun and the principles of nature. Through breathing and meditation, yoga offers a mind-body, stress-relieving experience. Vedic buildings incorporate light, air, and natural views and elements to reduce stress and increase a sense of well-being. Advocates say occupants of these buildings experience physical, emotional, and intellectual benefits. Some report deep rest, a boost in creative clarity, and even financial success.

Thousands of miles and several millennia away from the ancient Himalayas, Fairfield, Iowa, and its neighbor, Vedic City, today offer the largest concentration of Vedic buildings per square mile anywhere in the United States.

THE BASICS

Arriving in Iowa from India via California, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi provided leadership for Maharishi University of Management, founded in Fairfield in 1971. Although the Maharishi is best known for introducing Transcendental Meditation, he also popularized Vedic architecture throughout the world. Today nearly 350 Vedic homes and buildings dot the landscape in the Fairfield area.

Most architecture — with distinguishing windows, columns, roof lines, and materials — reflects a particular time, place, and population. Vedic architecture employs basic — and timeless — principles transferable to any blueprint. In styles as varied as Victorian farmhouses, Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired Prairie-style homes, and East Indian mansions fit for a king, Vedic design incorporates three basic tenets: orientation, placement, and proportion. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi added to these secondary principles consistent with holistic health: natural, nontoxic materials; solar power; and cross-ventilation.



Morning light fills the east-facing Argiro Student Center (opposite). Energy lines direct placement of structure and fencing in Vedic construction. Style is driven by homeowners. Ron and Maricela Stakland chose Prairie elements for their Fairfield residence (above).

TOWARD THE RISING SUN

Stepping into the Argiro Student Center on Maharishi University of Management campus is like entering a perfect summer day. Sunlight streams through its east-facing entrance and windows. Light penetrates the two-story atrium and reflects off soft-yellow walls. Earthen floor tiles absorb and hold the radiant glow. A stained-glass composition on the atrium's second floor celebrates the beauty of an Iowa sunrise.

"The sun's energy is most nourishing when it is rising," says Jonathan Lipman, AIA, Fairfield-based national director for Maharishi VedicSM architecture and member of a global affiliation of Maharishi Vedic architects. "Vedic structures are oriented to the east to bring the greatest benefits of health and vitality to those who spend time inside them."

Lipman, a Cornell-educated architect, is a past president of the Chicago-based Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy and has guided historic preservation work on a number of landmark buildings. He has appeared as a guest lecturer at Harvard, Yale, and Columbia Universities and as a featured speaker at architectural conferences throughout the country. He has melded his Western scholastics and professional experience with Eastern design principles brought into the 21st century.

He points to Vedic writings, which assert that human brain cells function differently when facing east as compared to orientation toward north, south, and west. "In the Vedic tradition, we align with the direction of the rising sun and thereby orient ourselves to a cosmic intelligence — something greater than ourselves," says Lipman. "Scientific findings are already beginning to confirm the effect of Vedic principles on the human body."



The rooms of a Vedic home are proportional and balanced around a central core — the *Brahmasthan* — through which light and air flow. The Staklands’ “nucleus” includes a wall cutout that frames an outdoor view on the home’s west side.

Recent research has, in fact, demonstrated the positive effects of morning sunlight on the human mind and body. In 2001 a study published in the *Journal of Affective Disorder* compared recovery rates for patients being treated for bipolar depression in a hospital affiliated with the School of Medicine in Milan, Italy. Half of the patients were housed in rooms on the east side of the corridor while the other half were on the west side. Patients received identical treatments administered by the same doctors and nurses. Those on the east side were released nearly four days earlier than those who received only western light.

HARMONIOUS LAYOUT

Vedic buildings are aligned and placed in harmony with nature. “When we look at nature — the solar system or an atom — we observe a silent, central core that holds everything together,” says Lipman. The earth revolves around the sun. Neutrons and protons circle a nucleus. “In the same way, we anchor a building around a nucleus or center point.”

Nature’s relationship of parts to the whole is mirrored by including a silent, central atrium or foyer known as the

Brahmasthan. (*Brahma* translates to “wholeness,” *sthan* to “establish.”) The light and air that stream into the *Brahmasthan* spread to the rooms surrounding it.

When visitors enter the Prairie-style home of Ron and Maricela Stakland, they immediately notice the light and openness of the two-story foyer that lifts the eyes from the first floor to the skylight above. Prismatic light from a glass sculpture in the foyer scatters into rooms surrounding it. At night a soft apricot glow descends from recessed lights in the ceiling.

Ron, an Iowa native and a partner in Darwin Technologies, initially balked at the cost of constructing the two-story, silent core. “That’s a lot of square feet that seemed like wasted space at the time. But now, this is something that gives me pleasure every day. I look up and around, and I feel relaxed. As a father of two teenage sons, I can listen to my kids’ voices and guitar playing when I stand here,” he says, patting the railing and grinning. “It’s good to know what’s going on in the house.”

His wife, Maricela, nods and opens doors to second-floor bedrooms surrounding the core. All rooms on both floors draw light and cross-ventilation from the *Brahmast-*



Nature is brought indoors through expansive windows in the Stakland home. The living room is positioned to take advantage of late-afternoon sun.

han — much like a chimney creates updraft for a fireplace. A sense of spaciousness is tangible in the sight lines that extend from and to every room in the house.

Expansive windows frame outdoor views — bringing the quiet beauty of trees or gardens inside each room. Rooms are positioned to leverage the quality of light suited for each room's activity. Early-morning sun filters into the meditation room — always in the northeast corner. Each sunrise offers a wake-up call in the home's southeast kitchen. Late-afternoon sun streams through a living room's west windows to enhance a sense of hearth and home. Evening sunsets are visible from the west-facing master bedroom, where homeowners can unwind and relax with waning daylight and emerging night sky.

In the 1980s and 1990s, behavioral research explored how physical environment affects hospital patients — particularly views of lawns, trees, flowers, and water features. Patient surveys revealed that most preferred a health care facility with a view of nature. One particular study reported in *Healing Gardens in Hospitals* (2005) found that 90 percent of those who strolled through a hospital garden experienced a positive change of mood afterwards.

BALANCED LIVING

Also embedded in Vedic principles are observations about human beings and their response to space around them. For example, ancient scholars discovered that human body proportions mimic a square, as illustrated by Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of the human body. Given those proportions, some intuitively conclude that humans prefer stable, proportionate spaces rather than off-center, mazelike structures. People experience irritation or stress, goes the logic, when they can't easily find their way into or out of a building.

"Whenever I explain the value of Vedic proportions and calculations to architects, they get it," says Lipman. "Vedic buildings tend to be bilateral and symmetric, which means the right half of the structure has the same exterior measurements as the left half. That balanced sense of proportion affects the appeal of a building, which in turn impacts people inside it."

Pleasing proportions are important to Nancy Walker, who incorporated Vedic architecture principles in her building process to enhance the serenity of her new home. She welcomes visitors into her *Brahmasthan*, where a fountain trickles. Rooms bordered by half-walls surround the entry-



Half-walls and a two-story *Brahmasthan* facilitate light and air — and even sight and sound — in Nancy Walker's Fairfield home.



Nancy Walker's Vedic home was designed to be highly energy efficient, featuring extra insulation, low-E coated double-pane windows, and geothermal heating and cooling.

way and give the 1,700-square-foot main floor a sweeping sense of ease. From any place on the first floor, walls in each room visibly unfold an earthy kaleidoscope of colors — terra cotta, eggplant, dove gray, and turquoise. “I’m not afraid of color,” she says with a smile.

She rises early each day to meditate before heading to her office or a construction site. Her morning practice impacts, she says, her professional creativity. A self-taught architectural designer, she now co-owns and manages Vastu Design & Construction. The company has resources to design high-end homes, but she’s especially proud of affordable ones — cottages and ranch-style homes starting at \$160,000 — that her company created for faculty members at Maharishi University of Management.

About the Photography

The human eye can detect a much broader range of light levels than cameras have traditionally been able to record. Photographer Ken West (www.ioscapes.com) utilizes a special technique in his architectural and landscape photography to capture more faithfully the true light and tonal quality of the original scene.

“It’s rewarding to get people into Vedic homes for the first time,” she says. “All of our designs follow principles of orientation, room placement, and proportion. After that, we select as many natural materials as a customer’s budget can afford. If we can’t have all the secondary Vedic principles, we make sure we at least choose nontoxic materials, such as paints and finishes that don’t produce harmful fumes once they’re dry.”

Vedic designers and architects endeavor to deliver healthy, welcoming, and inspiring living spaces by paying attention to orientation, placement, and proportion. House plans that include nontoxic materials, cross-ventilation, and solar power aim to help homeowners live interdependently with nature and natural law. These principles, say advocates, are anchored in a deep respect for the environment and the holistic quality of human life.

“Once you live in a Maharishi Vedic home yourself, you want everyone to have the opportunity,” says Lipman. “You can create the most beautiful home in the world, but if you’re not happy, what good is that?”

Deborah Jansen is a story catcher and freelance writer in Pella.