

Taking it one room at a time

With his smart new website, a Calgary architect hopes to educate the public in all that's wrong with cookie-cutter, supersized homes

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North America's obsession with food has been heavily scrutinized by psychologists, medical associations and the media – and there have been many layers of lard to get through. But the supersizing of a nation cannot be reduced to a conversation strictly about food. The epidemic of overconsumption has spread to other passions, including architecture.

For every Big Mac, there's a McMansion waiting to be consumed by the hungry homeowner in search of something big and juicy. For every side order of fries, there's a condominium with angled rooms impossible to occupy.

Such are the empty calories being fed to homeowners, says John Brown, a Calgary architect and professor angry about the meaningless excess of much residential design. Angry enough to provoke Brown to launch a Web-based teaching studio last month – a unique initiative he calls Slow Home.

It's a healthy idea that's full of integrity – sort of a green-tea alternative to a whipped-cream-laced iced cappuccino. Brown, associate dean of research at the University of Calgary's faculty of environmental design, has been studying and collecting floor plans of condominiums and houses for about 20 years. On the Slow Home website (theslowhome.com), he takes viewers through the flaws of those plans with impressive fluency, defining unworkable zones with a red pen, and, alternately, highlighting the dimensions that make a dining room or living room a good place to have a conversation or simply relax.



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Homeowners, says Calgary architect John Brown, 'are simply being sold a bill of goods.'

Internet Links

- [The Slow Home: John Brown's web site](#)



As he scribbles on a computer tablet with his stylus, Brown speaks to his Web audience in accessible language, often in five-to-seven minute segments. Each week presents a different theme: one week, it's poorly and well-designed 900-square-foot condos; the next, kitchens – nasty examples and great ones. Viewers are invited to provide their own solutions to design problems. Every Friday, a case study of a real-life design by an interesting architect is analyzed.

Though the Slow Home website launched only last month, Brown's audience has already gone global: Judging from reader posts, the largest participation comes from people living in Orange County, Calif., but there are also strong audiences in Toronto, London, Sydney, Vancouver and Calgary. His Internet studio may have grown out of an architect's frustration with what's on offer in the marketplace – but the world of design could certainly use more such benevolent gestures.

Brown defines the slow home as a place that is simple, light and open. In other words, it's easy to use, easy on the environment, and easy on your finances. A slow home is defined by open, flexible spaces, often aligned to the outdoors.

Does your home qualify? Take the slow-home test: Do you have bedrooms that are quiet and peaceful? Do you have a table at which everyone can eat? Can your house be kept warm or cool without mechanical means (admittedly a tall order in much of Canada)? Is your main living room connected to outdoor space? Do you spend more than 45 minutes a day commuting?

Brown's virtual studio consciously avoids the thrilling adventure ride offered by the design makeovers dominating the TV airwaves. ("OMG! Look at how we transformed this dump in only 48 hours!") Instead, he says he was inspired by the no-nonsense, step-by-step approach of the early Julia Child television spots, in which an American housewife taught North Americans how to approximate the glories of French cuisine. Her demonstration-cooking school moved the public away from Cheez Whiz on a celery stick to the heady delights of quiche lorraine and cassoulet. As a child, Brown watched the Julia Child shows with his mother at his side. His sister is a slow-food chef based in Calgary. So, hitting on the approach and the methodology for the slow home was only a matter of time.

Practising architecture with a twist has long motivated Brown. He wears many hats, and has even been known to sport a jacket and pinstriped shirt rather than the all-black uniform of the typical architect. Wanting to get in on the market – and the amazing number of postwar bungalows in Calgary's downtown that could easily be retrofitted and expanded – Brown earned his license as a real-estate broker and a construction contractor 10 years ago.

The Slow Home site is, in fact, being funded by Housebrand, a business venture that Brown co-founded with partners Matthew North and Carina van Olm as a design-build studio. Its success comes from providing intelligent, urban living for two kinds of Calgarians: young couples wanting to move out of tiny condominiums and into houses with back yards; and empty nesters who would rather live downtown than stay in the relative isolation of the burbs. In 2003, Housebrand received the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada award of excellence for innovation. Since then, the studio has grown to 15 employees; despite the recession, it will this year design and construct 10 new houses and approximately 40 other projects, from small renovations to large additions.

Brown's energy is astounding. Besides making daily videos for his Slow Home site, he personally replies to every comment that pops up on his Web page. On alternate Saturdays, he conducts free seminars on design within his large retail store – where he sells furniture, art and design objects – on 4th Avenue in the trendy neighbourhood of Mission.

For too long, sloppy thinking has dominated residential design: entrance lobbies without coat closets; powder rooms that open directly onto dining rooms; bedrooms of skewed geometry. Truth is, the public has been silent on the matter – possibly due to a lack of education about how design can work to enhance and lift one's life, possibly because developers have simply gotten away with architectural murder.

As a kind of knee-jerk response, says Brown, people have become convinced that if a kitchen doesn't function well, a bigger kitchen must be in order. A house in the suburbs loaded with goodies – double ovens, a double-car garage and five washrooms – will surely make up for any design problem. Not so, says Brown. Not if the garage robs much of the family room of natural light. Not if the oversized living room merely becomes a repository for a plant and an antique couch from a long-dead aunt.

“It's like eating fast food,” says Brown. “You're consuming empty calories and it doesn't satisfy you for long. A cookie-cutter house is like a Big Mac and fries. It's bad for you and bad for the environment. It's wasteful. These houses are designed to be sold, not to be used.”

Such houses are a specialty of spec developers. A one-bedroom will fetch a certain amount. But, a one-bedroom with a den will certainly fetch more. So what if that den is about as big as a coffin? “We have a very coarse way of discussing houses as something with five bedrooms and five bathrooms. ... It makes me so angry when I think about the environmental cost and the financial investment – it's not the homeowner's fault. They're simply being sold a bill of goods.”

In a small, significant way, Brown is arming the public with the ability to demand more from residential space – and to improve the shape of future cities by insisting on higher design standards. A powerful design lobby can only come out of an educated public. “McDonald's didn't decide to offer salads and take trans fats out of burgers out of the goodness of its heart,” he says. “It did it because the public voted with their dollars.”

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