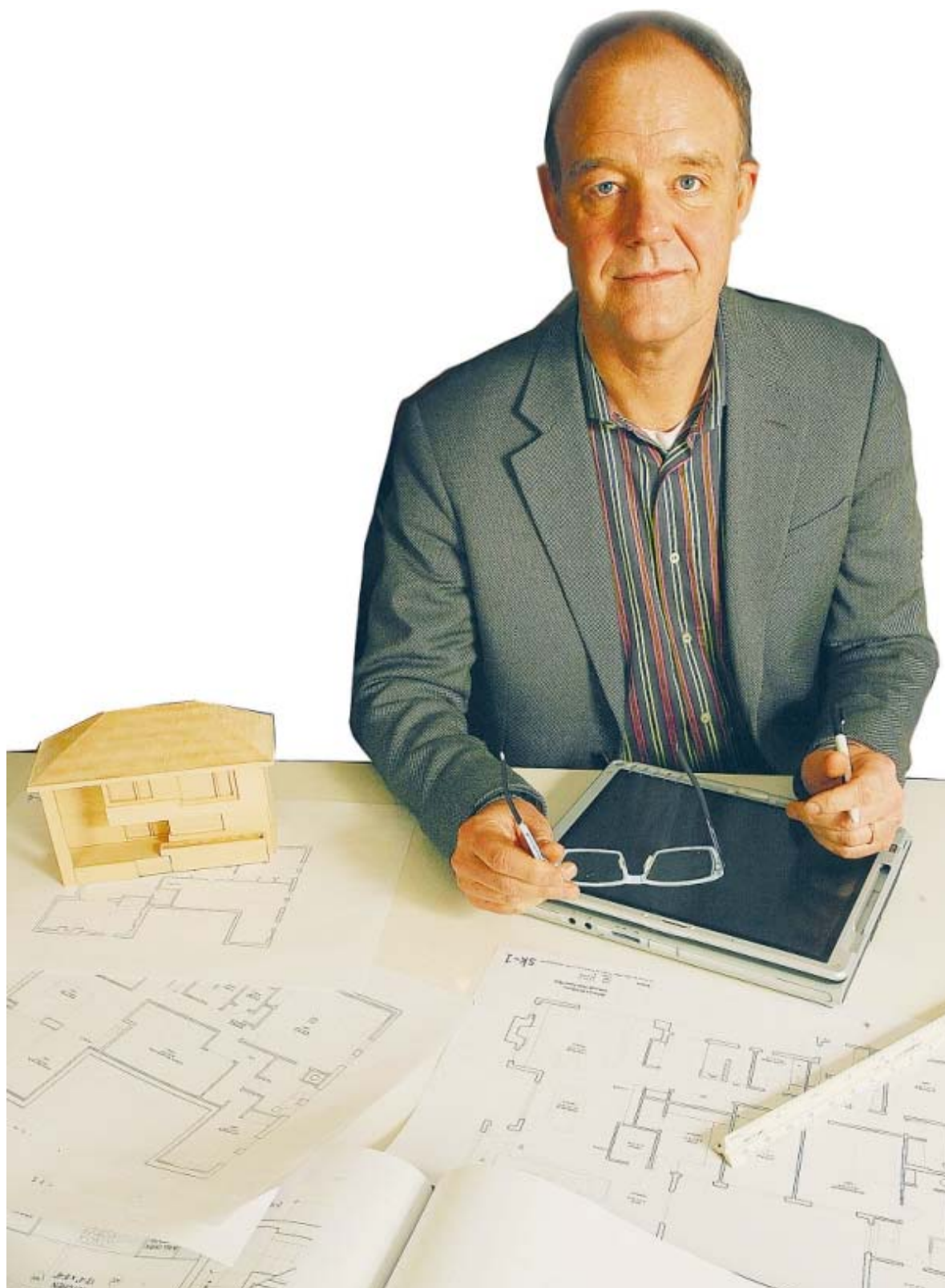


Taking it slow

BY KATHY MCCORMICK, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 13, 2009



Architect and associate dean John Brown of the University of Calgary has set up new website, www.theslowhome.com, to help buyers.

Photograph by: Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

Calgary architect John Brown has an appetizing alternative to the McMansions that have been filling the neighbourhoods of North America.

It all boils down to thinking about the ingredients that make up today's homes.

"It's all about helping people to think about their house in a different way," says the man behind www.theslowhome.com. "It's about helping the average person make better decisions about his or her home, whether it's an existing home or the person is thinking of buying or building a new home."

The slow home takes its recipe from the ever-growing popularity of the slow food movement.

Fending off the fast-food phenomenon that's a way of life for North Americans, the slow food movement is in favour of organic farming, local culinary cuisine, and a return to the traditions and foods that people grow at home.

It's been steadily been gaining momentum since it was introduced in the mid-1980s -- and this grass-roots thinking has come home.

Brown is one of the principals of housebrand, a multi-faceted Calgary business that includes architecture design, home construction, real estate services, and a retail shop that sells its own furniture.

He set up the new slow home website about five weeks ago.

"This (website) is designed for the average person-- not just the wealthy, who have been the only ones able to access the services of most architects in the past," says Brown. "The idea is that instead of buying a suit from a rack (as in a tract home), people can tailor a home to fit their needs."

It's not necessarily about custom design, which might be too expensive for many people, but about "looking at the floor plan and understanding it," says Brown.

An associate dean at the University of Calgary, he has been teaching architectural courses for more than two decades.

"It's not about decorating, but rather examining the spatial and structural facets of the home, how the views work, if the ventilation is adequate, and why the lighting is important," he says.

It's not just geared to the new home buyer, says Brown. "It's designed to help people analyse and think about what they can do in their old home to make it work better for them."

That could be as simple as placing the furniture in different spots to facilitate traffic flow and better

utilize all the spaces in the home, or as complicated as major renovations to add rooms or change use.

Or it could mean moving to a home that better suits the family's lifestyle needs and wants.

"The bigger idea is to raise the level of education, so people will ask for and recognize things that make sense in their homes, and those that don't," says Brown.

"It shows how custom designing, signing, no matter how small, works better than a cookie-cutter design."

The slow home website is, simply, helping people create "good, simple, clean, environmentally-responsible and affordable places to live," he says.

The themes in Brown's slow home movement are three-fold: simple, light and open homes.

The website has a test that people can do to measure and rate their own homes -- according to their own perceptions of what they want.

"A home that scores well in all three categories (simple, light and open) is slow," says the website assessment. "It is well fitted to the way you want to live. It is within your economic means and probably located within some kind of walkable community that does not require a long commute.

"The interior has open, flexible living spaces with a good connection to outdoors.

"This combination of scores indicates that you and your home are well-matched, and your home should be quite capable of helping you create a slower way of life for you and your family."

A slow home, says the website, "is not something you can buy. It is an existing house that you transform into a place that is simple, light and open.

"Even in these turbulent economic times, when resources can be limited, you can begin creating the kind of domestic future that you want."

With Brown's academic background, a large part of the new website, which has already attracted a following the world over, is devoted to mini seminars he teaches every weekday.

Mondays are devoted to segments where a floor plan is presented and Brown shows "what's wrong with this house."

Tuesdays, a real-life design project is presented and analysed, and Wednesdays, people are encouraged to submit their own design changes to make the project work, then Brown shows his final drawings.

Thursdays, one detail from the design project is worked on -- anything from a wall-to-wall headboard in a bedroom, to a fireplace in a living room.

Fridays, Brown picks case studies from renowned architects and designers around the world, as well as does things such as interviewing architects.

The free website is "just a way to talk to people," says Brown. "I hope it will help raise the bar of quality of life for the average person."

IN SHORT

WHAT: The slow home concept takes a home and personalizes it to fit the needs and budget of homeowners in an environmentally sensible and financially responsible way. The home must be simple, light and open to be considered slow--and workable for individual homeowners.

HOW: A new, free website presents daily mini-seminars on architectural themes around livability of a home, examining things such as ventilation and light, the spatial connection of rooms, the connection to the outdoors, and the structural design. It also helps homeowners read floorplans and examine the homes' functions. **WHY:** To help people make better, informed decisions about where they live and how they live. **WHO:** Calgary architect John Brown, one of the principals of housebrand, a multi-faceted

real-estate related company on Fourth Street S. W. and associaite dean at the University of Calgary, founded the slow home website. **WHERE:** Check the website at [www. at www.theslowhome.com](http://www.theslowhome.com).

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