



Todd Korol/Aurora Select



John Brown's practice, housebrand, focuses primarily on "tailoring" existing homes to the way its clients live, but it also designs its share of new houses, such as the Simpson Residence (above and opposite) in Calgary, Alberta. The firm supplied the home's furnishings, available through the in-house furniture retail store it established in 2002.

rising star:

john brown, raic

*housebrand
calgary, alberta*

john brown has reinvented his design firm for the new world and the new economy.

by nigel f. maynard

John Brown, RAIC, is on a profound mission, one that doesn't involve anything as mundane as scaling K2 or swimming the English Channel. The soft-spoken Canadian wants to simultaneously improve the quality of mass-market housing and make better houses more attainable for the middle class. As an architecture professor, he teaches students to become good designers and, through various professional efforts, he's instructing the public to identify good design, so they can and will make better housing decisions in the future.

Brown also practices what he teaches. With the help of his wife, Carina van Olm, who oversees business operations, and designer Matthew North, he runs a multidisciplinary practice called housebrand. Part real estate agency (Brown is a licensed Realtor), architecture firm, general contractor, interior designer, and furniture store, housebrand claims it's "a new kind of design firm"—one of the first in North America to integrate all of these house-related disciplines "into one seamless process."

Although the business model is unconventional, housebrand specializes in approachable, practical modern architecture that seeks to delight its clients. Yes, the firm will design and build a new house from the ground up, but its primary passion is "tailoring" outmoded existing homes to the way people really live.

poetic license

Born and raised in Calgary, Alberta, Brown took a circuitous path to architecture, avoiding along the way his physician father's suggestions that he study medicine. "I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I went into engineering, and I absolutely hated it," he says. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the University of Manitoba and no clear plans for the future, Brown decided to visit the university's architecture school; the experience so moved him that he applied to The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture. "I realized it was what I was meant to do," he says.



Photos: Patricio del Rio

Designed in 2007 for a couple with teenage children, the Simpson Residence has a thin U-shaped plan organized around a courtyard to permit the unfettered flow of daylight and views of downtown.

leadership awards

"We started doing basic design exercises, and it seemed to make so much sense because it was a nice mix of the rational and poetic."

Brown graduated with his M.Arch in 1984 and headed off for postgraduate work at Columbia University, lured by the opportunity to study with influential British architect/thinker Kenneth Frampton. "I was there just as his critical regionalism essay was coming out," he recalls. "And it was very important to think about how you can take the ideals of modern architecture and temper them with site, climate, and regional influences. But it became even more important over the course of my career."

After Brown earned his Master of Science degree in building design, he moved to Dallas to find work. Alas, it was inauspicious timing, during the economic recession and S&L crisis of the mid-1980s. Record unemployment and the prodding of his sister led him to apply for a teaching post at the University of Calgary, a job he accepted in 1985 at the age of 28. The academic world has framed his development ever since. Expanding on Frampton's writings, Brown—now the associate dean of Calgary's architecture school—studied architectural theory and worked to reconcile its relationship to practice and the built environment, experimenting with new materials, designing furniture, and doing design/build work.

But ultimately, he wanted to put his theories to the test and did so by launching his first firm, Studio Z, in 1990. Although he earned design awards for several high-end custom homes, Brown didn't find working for wealthy clients fulfilling. "It made me feel good and it made them feel good, but it didn't make much of a difference."

Yearning to have a greater impact in the larger world of market-rate housing, he researched how the merchant builder industry works and how the masses live and feel about housing. "I looked at the real estate industry, appraisals, and banking, and I tried to get a sense of the whole picture and how I could fit into that."

the lockbox unlocked

It turns out the real estate license was key, Brown concludes, and perhaps the most

important professional decision he ever made. The power and influence of Realtors cannot be overstated, he says, because when people think they need a new place to live, they don't hire an architect—instead, they get an agent. "I told my father that the three-week course was the most valuable education I had ever had in my life," he says. The real estate license helped build relationships with potential clients, and the commissions from the transactions allowed the firm to defer some architectural fees to later in the project, when clients had financing.

Unlike most firms, which start out doing small jobs and progress to full houses, Studio Z gravitated from new custom homes to smaller remodeling projects, which it found more interesting, more difficult, and more satisfying. For environmental reasons, the firm rejected suburban projects in favor of urban work.

Studio Z refined the business model in 1997 by adding a construction component, allowing the firm to control quality and consistency from start to finish. "It also meant that suddenly we were doing design/build, so we were able to reduce our architectural fees dramatically, which made us more attractive to people who didn't want to hire an architect anyway," Brown says. The partners changed the firm's name in 2000 to reflect its affordable and approachable nature; they came up with the new moniker at a local restaurant, while drinking martinis made with the house gin.

Intrigued by Brown's holistic approach to housing and public education efforts, Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, invited him to speak at the 2008 seminar on the house Eck organizes annually as part of Harvard's Graduate School of Design summer series. "What I was trying to do was examine alternative practices in a down market," says Eck, a partner at Boston-based Eck MacNeely Architects. "I was so inspired by his lecture that I went out and got my real estate license."

Brown is "looking at the profession in a much broader way than most of us who just wait for the phone to ring," Eck continues. "He's a lot more proactive in engaging clients in a bunch of different ways that make it more palatable for them to accept what we do as designers."

Brown's broad view means housebrand accepts most commissions. It has worked for as little as \$10,000, but "typical" small jobs



Photos (above and top): Bruce Edwards Photography

The Taylor Residence represents the type of retrofit commissions that excite housebrand. The firm helped a retired couple purchase the 1,400-square-foot 1970s townhouse and then oversaw its redesign and construction. And it supplied furnishings for the property.



The firm designed the 1,700-square-foot, 17-foot-wide Chan Residence for a 25-foot infill lot in Calgary. A second-floor main living space yields dramatic views of the Rocky Mountains.

Photos: Patricio del Rio

are \$70,000 to \$150,000, whole-house renovations run from \$250,000 to \$400,000, and new houses (averaging 2,400 square feet) are \$650,000 to \$800,000. The firm sells a process and has no bias toward size or cost. "It doesn't matter to us whether you spend \$80,000 on a condo and we do \$5,000 worth of work or you spend \$200,000 and we do \$100,000," he says. "The process of helping people find something, doing some design work, and doing the construction is the same." It certainly works for the kinds of clients most simpatico to Brown: middle-class individuals, like Michael Husband and his wife, Caroline Niwa, who simply want a great place to live.

"While we sort of skipped the beginner home, we knew that a new-build using an architect would be beyond our means," Husband explains. "Finding a suitable lot or knockdown in the areas we wanted also would have been cost-prohibitive." Instead, housebrand helped the family buy a smallish 1955 bungalow and executed the renovation. "It's quite modern now, which isn't for everyone, but we think it suits the house and our lifestyle," he adds.

brand anew

The soup-to-nuts process housebrand has set up is thriving, even as the rest of the home building industry struggles. The firm hired three

employees this year (bringing the head count to 15) and has three new houses and 20 renovation projects in the works. Meanwhile, its Slow Home offshoot (<http://theslowhome.com>) has evolved into a full-fledged resource and education portal that's resonating with both architects and consumers. Founded in fall 2006, the nonprofit Web initiative promotes alternatives to builder-driven housing through how-to videos and other features. (For more on Slow Home, see page 16 of the January/February 2008 issue.)

The site's mission isn't to bash suburban developments, Brown says, but to provide "information so people can make informed choices about where they live." In the long run, "people hopefully will make better choices: either they'll hire more architects or designers, or they'll demand better from the residential construction industry."

Yes, housebrand's integrated approach works for its partners, but they're under no illusions that it's a surefire solution for every firm. Ever the theorist, Brown says the success of his formula isn't about the specifics, but about turning convention on its head. "The value isn't in saying everybody should have a real estate firm, a construction firm, and a retail store, but you *can* rethink the way you do business and be more innovative in how you get what you do out to the public." ■

milestones

- 1990:** Founded Studio Z
- 1992:** Completed first house
- 1995:** Added real estate services
- 1997:** Added construction services
- 2000:** Changed name to housebrand; launched "tailored home" strategy
- 2001:** Added interior design services
- 2002:** Added furniture retailing; opened housebrand Demonstration Center; Prairie Design Award, Millennium Tower
- 2003:** Added limited-run furniture manufacturing; Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Award of Excellence for Innovation
- 2005:** Added limited-run building component manufacturing
- 2006:** Founded Slow Home Movement; Prairie Design Award, Rothney Astrophysical Observatory
- 2007:** Launched Slow Home website
- 2008:** Opened housebrand Design Store
- 2009:** Started Web-based Slow Home Design School