

Slow Design

Designers in the Slow Home movement are creating homes made for health and comfort rather than resale value.



FAST FOOD MIGHT OFFER QUICK SATISFACTION and silence a rumbling stomach, but we all know it's not good for us in the long run. The same can be said of "fast houses"—greenhouse gas-emitting residences designed with only their sale in mind. Buying a house is one of the biggest decisions many of us make, and today more and more of us want to be sure the place we'll call home will nourish us by being a healthy, comfortable place to live, as well as gentle on the environment.

John Brown, founding principal of Housebrand, a Canadian residential design firm based in Calgary, is working to create homes that meet these requirements. Together with his partners, Matthew North and Carina van Olm, Brown is the force behind the growing Slow Home movement—a philosophy of home design modeled after the Slow Food movement. The thought behind the philosophy is the belief that our choices in food and housing have similarly significant effects on our physical and emotional well-being—not to mention the planet.

"Slow Food isn't about expensive ingredients and intricate preparations," Brown says. "It can be macaroni and cheese, or vegetable soup or a grilled cheese sandwich." What matters, he says, are the sources of the food, "the thoughtfulness with which you've gathered the things you're going to eat, and how you've prepared them and enjoy them. The same is true of your house."

THE SLOW PHILOSOPHY

In a Slow Home, those principles of thoughtfulness and quality translate to well-proportioned spaces designed to accommodate the daily needs of residents, with minimal wasted space, plenty of natural light and a strong connection with the outdoors. Describing acres of treeless McMansions squeezed in developments located miles from daily amenities, Brown, who is an architect, real estate broker and professor of architecture, says that too many North American houses are "designed to be sold more than they're designed to be lived in." Builders tout house size, extolling quantity (in square footage) over quality. Even those green household accessories included in many new builds—low-flow toilets and a solar panel or two, what Brown calls "environmental bling"—are inconsequential in a 4,000-square-foot house that's a 90-minute drive from the owner's workplace.

To help determine whether a house is laid out to its best advantage, Brown and North created the "Slow Home Test." Included in their book, *What's Wrong With This House?*, the test assesses 12 universal elements including location; conservation of land and water; a good-sized, well-placed entry; a kitchen with an efficient work triangle; private but accessible bathrooms;

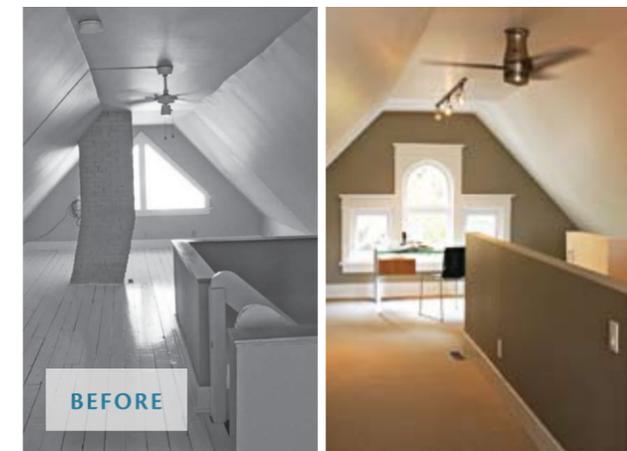
and an appropriate amount of space for parking, laundry and mechanical equipment. A score lower than 13 (out of 20) means a house needs to undergo some design changes or should be crossed off a buyer's list of potential purchases. (Rate your house on page 22.)

Factors such as location and size are easier to address when moving or building, but even homeowners who aren't planning on going anywhere can apply the Slow Home principles, whether they live in a single-family dwelling, a townhouse or an apartment. "It's the same as with food—you don't have to change everything at once," Brown says. "Just start with one meal a week." For example, if you need to shield a room from intense summer afternoon sunlight, you might plant a tree or large shrub outside the window, improving comfort and saving on cooling costs and energy use. Conversely, where it's dark or chilly, a window or tubular skylight can be added to let in more sun for natural warmth and light.

Perhaps one of the most cost-effective, high-impact changes a homeowner can make is to analyze the arrangement of furnishings, Brown says. "A lot of times I'll go into a house and the owner will say, 'My house is too small,' and it's not," Brown says. "Often all that's needed is to give a room—particularly a common area such as the dining or living room—a new focal point, whether through orienting the furniture differently, changing the location of something major such as a television, or perhaps adding a fireplace."

SLOW AT WORK

Housebrand clients Catherine and Aaron Montgomery put the Slow Home philosophy into practice after purchasing their 1912 Victorian home near downtown Calgary. They liked the shade provided by elm trees on their lot, as well as the house's proximity to their business offices and good neighborhood schools. But the house had formerly been divided into two apartments and was showing its age. Because the building was narrow and had neighbors at close range on either side, the rooms were dark and uninviting. The Montgomerys hired Brown and North to rework the house to meet the needs of their growing family, which includes their two young daughters and a dog. That meant relocating the bedrooms to the front and back ends of the second floor to take advantage of the light coming in, and redoing the kitchen with a large island where the girls can do homework or crafts while their parents make dinner. The closed-off (and rarely used) formal dining room was opened to the kitchen and is now used for all meals, as well as entertaining.



BEFORE



BEFORE

TOP: Because the Montgomerys' Victorian home is long and narrow, Housebrand designers John Brown and Matthew North wanted to take advantage of the sunny front and back ends, where natural light spills in. They transformed this sunny but unused space into a cheery office.

BOTTOM: Replacing the open-tread staircase with a sleek, modern version conceals an understair storage spot and makes the hallway feel more modern.

"For us, renovating in a Slow Home fashion means making the most of what you have, in both your home and your community, in a way that is going to enable sustainable living," Catherine says. "We didn't change the envelope of our house at all, but worked to make efficient use of the space we already had." That also meant concentrating on how and where the family spends its hours at home. "There's no point in having a great 'bonus room' if you spend all your time in the kitchen," she says.

More information about the Slow Home Movement, including its 12-step design philosophy, Brown and North's book *What's Wrong With This House?*, online design workshops, and "Design Minutes" that offer how-tos and case studies, is available at slowhomestudio.com. You can also follow the Slow Home movement on Facebook at facebook.com/slowhome. >>

—SARAH ZOBEL

Housebrand, a Calgary, Canada-based design firm that specializes in the Slow Home philosophy, remodeled this 1912 Victorian for clients Catherine and Aaron Montgomery. Changes included removing a countertop and installing an island to open up the century-old kitchen's floorplan and make it more functional for the Montgomerys and their two young daughters. They also opened the kitchen to include a rarely used formal dining room, which is now an everyday eating and entertaining space. PHOTOS COURTESY HOUSEBRAND

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HOME RENOVATION

Score Your House!

HOUSE IN THE WORLD

1. LOCATION: A Slow Home is located in a walkable neighborhood that is in proximity to work, shopping and amenities in order to minimize the use of a car. **YES 3/NO 0**

2. SIZE: A Slow Home is correctly sized to efficiently fit the needs of its residents in order to reduce unnecessary energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. **YES 3/NO 0**

3. ORIENTATION: A Slow Home is properly oriented to the sun, prevailing winds and immediate surroundings in order to facilitate natural heating and cooling. **YES 2/NO 0**

4. STEWARDSHIP: A Slow Home conserves land and water for future generations; reinforces smart, compact city growth patterns; and makes a positive contribution to the community. **YES 2/NO 0**

HOUSE AS A WHOLE

5. ENTRY: The front and back entries in a Slow Home are good-sized spaces of transition with adequate storage and, if possible, room for a bench. **YES 1/NO 0**

6. LIVING: All indoor and outdoor living spaces in a Slow Home have good daylight, a natural focal point, and can accommodate a wide variety of uses without wasted space. **YES 1/NO 0**

7. DINING: The dining area in a Slow Home is a daylit space located close to the kitchen and can properly fit a table without any circulation conflicts. **YES 1/NO 0**

8. KITCHEN: The kitchen in a Slow Home is located outside the main circulation route and has an efficient work triangle, continuous counter surfaces and sufficient storage. **YES 1/NO 0**

9. BEDROOMS: All bedrooms in a Slow Home have good daylight, sufficient storage, a logical place for a bed and enough room for circulation. **YES 1/NO 0**

10. BATHROOMS: All bathrooms in a Slow Home have private but accessible locations, are well-organized, modestly sized and have sufficient counter space and storage. **YES 1/NO 0**

11. UTILITY: A Slow Home has utility spaces for parking, laundry, mechanical equipment and storage that are unobtrusively located, highly functional and do not conflict with other uses. **YES 1/NO 0**

12. ORGANIZATION: A Slow Home is efficiently organized with like rooms grouped together and clear, unobstructed circulation. **YES 3/NO 0**

SCORING BOX

SCORE 0 TO 6: FAST HOUSE

(10 percent of residences)

Badly designed with flaws throughout, fast houses will likely be difficult to live in and have a high environmental footprint. Purchasing a house that scores in this range is not recommended. If you own a fast house, use caution before undertaking remodeling. In most cases, not even a substantial project will be enough to fix the severity of the problems.

SCORE 7 TO 12: MODERATELY FAST HOUSE

(47 percent of residences)

With more poor design features than good ones, these homes are not simple to live in or light on the environment. However, they can be gems in the rough if you're able to undertake major remodeling. Whether this is a residence you're considering to purchase or one you already own, investigate the costs and benefits of making necessary improvements.

SCORE 13 TO 16: MODERATELY SLOW HOME

(32 percent of residences)

With a good underlying design and problems in only a few areas, these homes are already simple and light places to live. A minor remodel can often upgrade them to a Slow Home. If this is a property currently listed for sale, give it serious consideration. If it's a house you own, congratulations, you live in a well-designed residence that, with a few small improvements, could become great.

SCORE 17 TO 20: SLOW HOME

(11 percent of residences)

In a Slow Home, very little needs to be done to improve the design and any improvements are relatively minor and easy to complete. Whether this is a property you already own or one you are considering to buy, you should feel confident knowing this is a home that is simple to live in and light on the environment.

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