

Living life in the slow lane

Architects believe homes can encourage interaction, learning

By Mary Beth Breckenridge, Akron Beacon Journal

Monday, May 9, 2011



Courtesy Bruce Edward/Akron Beacon Journal/MCT

The amount of natural light, the ability to maintain natural flow, access to the outside and being energy efficient are far more crucial factors in a slow home than simply how big or how beautiful the room is.

Slow Home Studio's 10 attributes of a slow home:

1. **Location:** A slow home is in a walkable neighborhood that minimizes use of a car.
2. **Orientation:** The home is correctly oriented to the sun and properly related to its surroundings.
3. **Organization:** The home is modestly sized, with a good flow between spaces and a strong connection to the outdoors.
4. **Entry:** The front and back entries are spaces, not just doors.
5. **Living:** Indoor and outdoor living spaces have good daylight and are easy to furnish.
6. **Kitchen:** The kitchen is compact, with an efficient layout, good work surfaces and sufficient storage.
7. **Dining:** The home has a well-defined dining area that properly fits a table and is suitable for daily use.
8. **Bedrooms:** All bedrooms have good daylight and sufficient storages and can logically fit a bed.
9. **Bathrooms:** The home has an appropriate number of well-organized, modestly sized bathrooms.
10. **Services:** The service spaces are unobtrusive and highly functional.

John Brown believes a home should ease the stress in life, not contribute to it.

Brown is the founder of the slow home movement, a philosophy of home design that emphasizes livability and sustainability. It's about building a home that works for the occupants, not one that's intended to impress.

The concept was inspired by the slow food movement, with its focus on healthful, sustainable ways of producing and preparing food, explained Brown, an architect, real estate broker and architecture professor in Calgary, Alberta.

"You can think of the typical cookie-cutter house as being like fast food" — often supersized and designed to satisfy our craving for beauty, he said. It's a house that's designed to seduce us into buying by feeding our fantasies of a more glamorous life, he said, not one that's necessarily easy to live in or easy on the environment.

A slow home, on the other hand, is reasonably sized and carefully designed to support its occupants, he said. It might have an entry where family members can easily take off their boots, stash their keys and store their backpacks, for example. It might have a living space that encourages people to talk or read, not just watch television or surf the Internet. It's energy efficient, filled with natural light and designed for easy flow among rooms and access to the outside.

“It doesn’t have to be fancy. It doesn’t have to be expensive. It just has to be easy to live in,” Brown said.

He and his partners design those kinds of houses through their firm, Housebrand, and they encourage others to do the same through the outreach they call Slow Home Studio (slowhomestudio.com). Brown and partner Matthew North have also written a book on the subject, “What’s Wrong With This House? Fast Houses, Slow Homes and How to Tell the Difference,” which is available on the website.

Architect Hallie Bowie has long been guided by a similar philosophy in designing home additions and renovations through her Akron company, New Leaf Home Design. But before learning of the slow home movement recently, she never had a name for it, she said.

Bowie sees the movement as a marriage between green building and the Not So Big House idea, a concept championed by architect Sarah Susanka in a series of popular home-design books.

At its heart, a slow home is really about good design, she said.

“It seems to me the slow home has a real values kind of focus,” Bowie said. Its design grows from the occupants’ emphasis on the quality of time they spend with family and friends, not on the quantity of their possessions or their desire to impress people, she said.

A slow home takes different forms for different people. A family who wants less emphasis on television, for example, might create a viewing area that’s separate from the great room, Bowie said. A family who wants to interact more with neighbors might have a front porch.

Brown said slow homes eliminate the little annoyances that tend to make our already harried lives just that much more stressful — annoyances such as entries without closets, bathrooms that open directly to living areas or laundry rooms so close to the back door that people are constantly tripping over laundry baskets.

He likens those kinds of poorly designed elements to an ill-fitting pair of shoes. They just make it harder to get through the day.

Author Shannon Honeybloom also sees a slow home as being a means of providing nurture. To her, the slow home movement involves determining how you want to live or raise children and then creating an environment that supports those goals, a concept she outlines in her book “Making a Family Home.”

“I think the reality of life these days is that life is really fast-paced,” she said. She advocates creating a way of life and a home that put less emphasis on instant information and entertainment and more on encouraging interaction, imagination and learning.

Honeybloom’s concept of a slow home, then, might include such elements as a comfortable reading chair, a backyard garden where the whole family can putter, a computer located somewhere other than where the children usually play and a step stool in the bathroom that enables little ones to wash their own hands or brush their own teeth. Even something as simple as putting a TV in a cabinet, where it’s not always beckoning you to turn it on, can help slow the pace, she said.