

stirring the home-design

pot

Matthew North and John Brown are borrowing a few tricks from the Slow Food movement in an effort to change the buildings we come home to. *by Rita Sirignano*

Unless it's a discussion about the design of a hot new restaurant, food is not the first thing most people associate with architecture. But it's had a supporting role in the evolution of the Slow Home movement, an approach to residential design spearheaded by architect and University of Calgary professor John Brown.

First, of course, there's the name, a nod to the anti-fast-food movement started when a McDonald's opened in Rome's historic Piazza di Spagna. Slow Food promotes awareness of wholesome food and nutrition; a similar ethos drives Slow Home. It's a philosophy that emphasizes environmental responsibility, economic feasibility and designing living spaces that work. Brown and his business partner, Matthew North, believe the way a house functions, rather than its superficial features, is the most important aspect of a home. And they want to spread the word.

So three years ago, the pair began giving Saturday-afternoon lectures in their offices at Housebrand, the architecture, construction and real-estate firm they run with Carina van Olm. "They were always packed with people," North says. "Then we started doing more specific ones—on kitchen design, on remodelling—and they were so popular that we realized there was a whole demand out there."

In 2010 they published *What's Wrong With This House? A Practical Guide to Finding a Well-Designed Sustainable Home*, which outlines the criteria needed for a home to be slow. (As they are also real-estate agents, the old saw, "location, location, location" is at the top of their list, but in this case it's not a scenic view that's important but a walkable neighbourhood close to amenities, minimizing our reliance on cars). They also started making short Design Minute clips for use on their website, which address residential-design concerns and answer viewer questions.

Last spring they realized a hands-on approach was needed. (They take the hands-on notion literally, breaking out the drafting paper, rulers and pencils). It was a decision again informed by food. "The idea of demonstration teaching to the public came from cooking shows like Jamie Oliver's," Brown says. Like Oliver, who doesn't have a discussion about how to make an omelette but shows how to do



it, Slow Home Design Studio aims to show people how easy and relevant it is to become informed about good design.

Class topics, which change weekly, have included downsizing, kitchen design and separating the wheat from the chaff when it comes to green housing, which can be more about marketing than sustainability. (As an example, Brown notes the "environmental bling" of solar panels but suggests that the proper ventilation and orientation of a house, so that it captures solar energy in winter and gets shade in summer, can be just as cost-effective.)

North laments the many reality-TV shows on design that present a distorted view of the practice, both those where "the neighbours leave and their bedroom is painted in polka dots" and the "house porn" that shows you beautiful homes but not how to achieve one. "It's like reading *Gourmet* magazine," he adds. "It doesn't teach me to cook. All it does is create a desire I have no ability to realize. Design School is about people learning how to think like an architect." **S**

PHOTO BY RANDY GIBSON

SCHOOL'S IN SESSION

There are still a few spots open in Housebrand's classes—House Design for Empty Nesters and Just How Green Is This House?—that go Saturday, Oct. 1. If that is not enough notice, check out the Slow Home Studio Design School's fall lineup at slowhomestudio.com. Then start sharpening your pencils.