

Slowhomes



With the fast pace by which communities are built, many homeowners are opting to use local services and materials to create smaller, more functional homes, known as the Slow Home Movement.

A group of Calgary architects are encouraging homeowners to build slowly, leading to higher quality, locally built and healthier homes.

As Calgary grows, we hear a lot of talk about urban sprawl. With new subdivisions springing up on the edges of the city at a furious pace, we're all trying to come to grips with the effects of a booming city and modern life.

We're not the only city in this predicament. The model for growth on our continent has been heavily focused on single family homes, low-density suburbs, and car-oriented design. Not much has changed since the 1950s, when the first residential subdivisions were built. Many places still follow the original pattern, building what some call "cookie cutter" houses in neighbourhoods where a lack of sidewalks and parks encourage our modern, sedentary lifestyle and front-drive garages do little to encourage a sense of community.

For those who want a different kind of place to call home, there's an interesting movement growing. Started by a group of Calgary architects, the Slow Home Movement encourages us to make choices that help reduce our impact on the environment—in terms of sprawl and otherwise—and begin to see our home as more than a place to keep our stuff.

John Brown, real estate broker, architect, and university professor, says the Slow Home Movement was inspired by the "slow food movement", which rose up in response to the processed food industry.

"It started because, really, we feel that many of the places we live in North America are... well, they're abysmal," says Brown, who's also associate dean of environmental design at the University of Calgary. Brown cites studies that suggest the typical suburban setting is not only bad for the environment, but bad for the health of its residents too.

This argument has been around for a while, but there is mounting evidence that suggests sprawling cities contribute to our stress levels and feelings of isolation, in addition to draining our pocketbooks.

But in a city where housing prices are still said to be on the rise, many people wonder if the alternative is affordable.

Is a "slower" home within reach?

Brown says it absolutely is. "Slow home isn't a product, it's an idea," he says. "It's about making simple choices that are in accordance and in step with your life and the way that you live, and trying to make small changes to your behaviour and your attitude."

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—John Brown, Architect

The Slow Home website offers a road map to help people create a home that fits their lifestyle and nourishes their spirit. There are 10 steps, which ask us to consider everything from where we live to the materials we use in our home. The movement encourages homeowners to use local trades, build smaller houses, and adopt open plans, which create light-filled, flexible rooms that can respond to our hectic lives.

With contributors from all over the world, the Slow Home Movement seems to be catching on. "It's amazing to me to think that I can reach more people through that website every day than I have in my entire 25 years of teaching," says Brown.

The Slow Home site includes interviews with architects, project case studies, and "Slow Home Life", video updates that follow a specific project as it takes shape. The movement's "Project Outrage" even has a Facebook group, which boasts more than 1,000 members.

Is the Slow Home ideal catching on in Calgary? You bet it is.

"Locally, it really has more to do with our architectural firm," says Brown, who is the principal of Housebrand, a firm that helps clients find a property that—with renovations and good design choices—can fit their lifestyles and their budget. "We're extremely busy. We specialize in doing work in the inner city, redevelopment, helping clients find something that's affordable...all those principles of Slow Home."

Brown says Housebrand does about 40 inner city renovations per year. "Many of the people who come to me are moving from the suburbs to the inner city," he says. "They want something different."

A key part of the Slow Home Movement is the idea that a series of small changes can equal big changes.

There's always going to be new home construction and new neighbourhoods developing—we should just be asking ourselves what we want in those neighbourhoods.

"We need to ask more from the development industry," says Brown. "They're supplying a product, and a large part of what Slow Home is trying to do is raise awareness, raise the bar for what people will accept. Things haven't changed because they haven't had to."

Brown sees the real estate industry as key in the adoption of Slow Home principles. "It's about having better choices, and I think the real estate industry can participate in that by thinking about the house as more than a product, as a home."

In an era where most people spend more time shopping for a car than they do for a house, the idea seems daunting. But with 10 steps and the freedom to make choices, a Slow Home and a dream home can be the same.

To learn more about the Slow Home Movement, check out theslowhome.com.