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brownhouse's **Laurel Brown**

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Laurel Brown

Blazing a
design trail
in Madison . . .
and beyond

By Jill Muehrcke

Laurel Brown's office, just off State Street, is a symphony of contrasts: bold and subtle, earthy and elegant, sleek and textured. Her outfit — a plush gold jacket and shimmery camisole over jeans — also reflects her love of balancing opposites.

Finding a balance between her home and work life, her artistic and practical sides, is a major theme in Brown's life, and these days, this trailblazing woman has reason to celebrate her newfound equilibrium.

Four years ago, at 42, Brown married for the first time, moved into a new home, and founded brownhouse, an architecture and interior design firm. Her business has grown so quickly that she recently expanded into second-floor office space and plans to take over the remaining upstairs space in the office building soon. (Her husband, Steve Brown, owns the building, as well as an assortment of student housing and commercial property in Madison.) With nine full-time employees, brownhouse now has a staff that includes one registered architect, three architectural-design professionals, and four interior designers.

See a need, fill a need

Brown has built a successful business by filling what she saw as a gap in Madison's full-service, high-style architecture and design studios. She strives to fill that gap by giving equal weight to the three elements she believes are vital to her industry: architecture, interior design, and knowledge of the client's mission.

"You can't address one [of these elements] without the other two," she insists. "We think about every project in its totality."

Most traditional architecture firms don't practice that way. Architects usually drive the project, with interior designers secondary. "But often," Brown explains, "the building needs to be designed from the inside out. There needs to be communication between the two disciplines." Brown also helps clients develop their "brand" so that all aspects of the project reflect who they are. Again, balance is the key.

Finidng balance through necessity

Brown's personal equilibrium has been hard-won. Growing up in Madison, she learned from two hard-driving parents how to take risks, work hard and aim even higher. Her father, flamboyant trial attorney Jack McManus, and her mother Dorothy, who had a Master's degree in chemistry from UW and "was the type of person who could fix a

lawn mower engine with a hairpin," were far from traditional role models. Like them, Brown is multifaceted and enterprising, with vast reserves of grit and imagination.

But Brown's world turned upside down when she was just 22. She was in school at UW-Madison — "taking art classes but kind of drifting" — when her mother, just 53, died of cancer.

"My world pivoted," Brown recalls. She responded by heading to Atlanta, where her sister and aunt lived, and enrolling in design school.

Discovering that she loved and had a natural aptitude for design, Brown took a job with an architectural firm, then started her own business shortly afterward.

"It was a leap of faith," she says. She bought a fax machine at a pawnshop and worked out of a second apartment in her building. Thus, McManus Consulting was born.

Her artistic flair, passion for her work, and can-do attitude proved a winning combination. Working day and night, Brown built a design business that was consistently ranked in the top 25 firms in the Atlanta marketplace.

Despite her success, Brown paid a tremendous price for her frenetic schedule. After 13 years, she found that she could no longer sustain such a punishing lifestyle. So she decided to "unplug from the world" and headed north to Anchorage, Alaska.

A completely different life

"Why Alaska?" we wondered.

"Because it was on the edge of the earth!" she says with a grin. "Also, I'd been hearing romantic stories about it because my dad lives in Alaska nine months of the year."

It was an adventure Brown looks back on fondly. During her time there, she earned a B.A. in art and design from the University of Alaska and even found time to paint, an interest of hers since childhood.

Then, after several years, she says, "It was time to come home to Madison." Brown had friends and family here and it was ironic to her that this was part of the attraction to the area. "All the things I didn't like about Madison when I was growing up — like running into people I knew on the street — were the things that drew me back," she says. "I feel a real sense of community here."

A chance encounter

Brown was in her second year of graduate school, working toward her M.B.A. in the



Laurel and her husband Steve enjoy lunch at one of their favorite restaurants, Crave.

UW's School of Business, when her life was upended once again.

"It's one of those 'If-it-can-happen-to-me-it-can-happen-to-anyone' experiences," she says. "I had come to the conclusion I wasn't ever going to get married, and then a friend fixed me up on a blind date and I met Steve. It was love at first sight."

The two complement each other well.

"We have a lot of the same interests," she concedes. "As a property owner, he's concerned with many of the same issues I am, such as zoning. It makes for a lot of nice conversation."

While it takes effort to balance home and work, Brown feels she's discovered how to do so.

"We schedule vacations. We take two full-scale vacations a year and throw in a few long weekends in places like Chicago and Minneapolis. Also, I've learned I don't have to make every decision myself," Brown says. "If you assemble a fabulous team and empower them to make decisions, it takes off a lot of stress."

But that doesn't mean she's not hands-on. Brown is such an advocate for her clients that she spends as much time talking with building suppliers, negotiating with contractors, and visiting job sites as she devotes to design work — whatever it takes to be sure each project is completed the way her client envisions it.

Creating her niche

Brown and her team focus on commercial property, everything from opulent spas to luxury apartments, mostly in Madison but also around the state and as far away as Naples, Fla. In Madison, they've provided architectural and design services for RZ & Company, Parfitt Cosmetic Surgery Center, Marina Condominiums, and Cameo Spa and Salon, to name just a few.

Brown derives inspiration by traveling extensively. She loves exploring other cultures, taking hundreds of pictures of architecture and design in cities around the world, which she then shares with clients.

"Color is enormously important in all my design," she says. "I use dramatic color liberally." She laments the fact that so many people fear bold colors. "After I win my client's trust, I encourage them to take the risk because it's only paint. After a couple of weeks, they say, 'I can't believe I've lived my whole life without color!'"

Brown's personal style is similar to her approach in designing buildings. "It's all in the details," she says, "pulling accessories together into a great look, trying things that might not be expected and having fun with it."

"I've always loved fashion and used to think I'd like a career in the fashion industry. It's not too much of a leap from that to what I'm doing now," she says, "dealing with fabrics, textures, color."

Finding time for herself

Whatever leisure hours Brown carves into her schedule must be planned. In addition to long weekends of travel with Steve, her favorite pastimes are cooking and going to spas, both excellent ways to relax, detach, and "live totally in the moment," she says.

When she and Steve married, Brown moved into the spacious home he had built on 20 acres at the edge of Fitchburg. She's having a wonderful time redecorating it.

"We don't do much formal entertaining," Brown admits. "We do casual entertaining for a few couples. Our kitchen is great for people to hang out in. We designed it that way on purpose."

While she enjoys being a stepmom to Steve's grown daughters when they visit, Brown doesn't regret not having children of her own. "I always was a professional woman, more interested in growing my business than in having kids," she says. "My business in Atlanta was my baby, my creation. I see my business in Madison the same way."

What's next for this dynamic woman?

"I plan to grow my business significantly," Brown says. She'd like to see herself heading a 75-person firm, doing national work. She wants to build a reputation as being the finest and most creative architecture and design studio not only in Madison, but in the Midwest. She wants people to say, "If you really want it done well, if you want it to be absolutely exquisite, go to brownhouse."

They're lofty goals, she acknowledges, but if anyone can achieve them, Brown is sure she can. And along the way, you can be certain she'll enjoy the challenge. ■

