

A Room WITH A Flue

Fireplaces are standard in local luxury homes.

How do homeowners make them fit their décor and lifestyle?

By Heather Lampe



The tiles for this Arts and Crafts-style fireplace surround were made by North Prairie Tileworks.

There are few winter activities more relaxing than cozying up next to a warm, glowing fire and watching the flames dance across the logs—and it appears that more and more homeowners are looking to create that soothing experience.

According to the National Association of Home Builders, based in Washington, D.C., 51 percent of homes built in 2004 have a fireplace, compared to only 35 percent in 1970. And it seems that as the number of homeowners wanting fireplaces increases, so do luxurious materials and design possibilities available.

Heating Up Design

Homeowners and designers put a lot of thought into the size, positioning, and design of a fireplace. “The fireplace is an opportunity to set or define the style of a house or a room,” says David Heide, interior designer and owner of David Heide Design Studio in Minneapolis. “The fireplace surround suggests if the house is

Arts and Crafts, Victorian, or modern. It’s a place to signal and indicate the style.”

Robin Strangis, interior designer and owner of Loring Interiors in Minneapolis, agrees: “The fireplace usually establishes the focal point in a room. For example, if you have an antique, French, carved mantel, it would dictate how the rest of the room should go. Or, if you have a stacked stone fireplace, it sets the tone for a more casual, rustic look.”

However, there may be other competing focal points in a room, and this creates a challenge for both homeowner and designer. “In gathering spaces, such as family rooms, there is this struggle for the center of attention between the fireplace and the television,” says Heide. “Sometimes, it’s difficult to find a way for them to coexist without one of them taking a back seat to the other. However, I think that the fireplace can lend ambiance to the room without having all the furniture arranged around and pointing at it.”

Strangis says that new technology has made merging entertainment and aesthetics easier. “The new plasma TVs have decreased the need to do really big, deep cabinets,” she notes. “Because they’re so flat, you can hang plasma TVs over a fireplace like a piece of art or even have an actual piece of art cover the TV when it’s not being used.”

Peter Solac, owner of Woodland Stoves and Fireplaces in Minneapolis, says that his customers are either design oriented or functionality driven, but usually not both. “Some people don’t use their fireplaces much,” he says. “For them, it’s really just to design the grand living room, and the fireplace is only used two or three times a year. It really just has to do with the wood and the marble and so forth.

“And then we have other customers who use their fireplaces every night. They really enjoy burning a fire, so the criteria of how it functions are very important. Of course it has to look nice



A hearth designed by Arteriors Architecture features a clean, modern look.

too, but they really want to know how it works.”

Hot Materials

Fireplace surrounds run the gamut from ceramic and glass tiles to more opulent materials like hand-carved marble and granite. Some homeowners choose natural limestone or fieldstone, while others choose wood surrounds with adjacent, built-in book shelves. Mantels also come in a variety of rich materials, including cherry, mahogany, and alder woods.

“We’re doing a house up north where we’re using onyx . . . sort of an exotic stone,” says Heide. “However . . . it’s a relatively small area, so you can splurge on luxury materials. You can love it, but it can still be affordable.”

Strangis has worked with clients who incorporate antique surrounds and mantels into a new fireplace. “Some of the antique mantels can be very costly. If they’re from an old castle in France or England, they could be very expensive,” she says.

Many homeowners seeking a unique look choose custom materials, such as the ceramic tiles that are handmade by the artisans at North Prairie Tileworks in Minneapolis. “We have some people who really want to personalize their fireplace sur-

round, so we’re doing a number of custom, sculpted relief tiles,” says Roger Mayland, owner of North Prairie Tileworks. “We just finished sculpting a gargoyle for the keystone part of a client’s fireplace.”

Mayland is also seeing a lot of Arts and Crafts fireplace surrounds,

“and lately we’ve been having a lot of people who are drawn to the Batchelder designs.” Ernest Batchelder was a leading designer of the American Arts and Crafts movement during the early 1900s. Batchelder lived in Minneapolis in 1905, and his sculpted tiles adorn the Our Lady of Victory Chapel at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul.

Jim McNulty, owner of McNulty Homes in Minneapolis recalls one family that asked his company to install family heirloom tiles around their new fireplace. When the couple got older and sold their house, they asked his company to take the tiles off the fireplace and install them at the assisted living center that they moved to. “Some people have some very personal things that they do,” says McNulty. “Mantels can also be done very creatively and are an opportunity for personal expression.”

Tim Bjella, architect, interior designer, and owner of Arteriors Architecture in Minneapolis, works with clients who want more edgy designs. “We’ve been using a great deal of custom ground metal that’s lacquered in a particular color,” says Bjella. “It shimmers and creates almost the look of the fire outside the firebox. It changes its appearance as you

move around it.”

Homeowners wanting something even more distinct for their fireplace can opt for unusual ceramic inserts for gas-burning fireplaces. “There are manufacturers out there who are creating alternatives to standard log sets,” Bjella says. He’s seen simple pyramids, squares, and round balls in place of logs. “We recently put in a set of cannon balls in a standard fireplace with a gas undercarriage,” he says. “The flames lap around these six-inch cannon balls.”

House Afire

While fireplaces are typically put in rooms where people gather, homeowners are also putting them in bathrooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. According to the National Association of Home Builders, 4 percent of homes built in 2004 had two or more fireplaces. The Virginia-based Hearth, Patio, and Barbecue Association estimates that nearly 25 percent of homeowners have a fireplace or freestanding stove in a place other than the traditional living room or family room.

“We’re doing a house in Fargo right now that has a fireplace in the bathroom, opposite the soaking tub,” Heide says. “We’re also doing a fair amount of fireplaces in kitchens. That’s become more commonplace in the luxury home market.”

Strangis is working on a project with a two-sided fireplace that divides the great room and sunroom. “I’ve seen fireplaces in bedrooms, of course, and bathrooms, where they kind of create a warm, cozy feeling,” she says. “I’ve also seen them in libraries and offices.”

Homeowners are also taking the warmth of the fireplace outside. Fireplaces may be installed in screened porches or outdoor kitchens.

Homeowners can choose be-

tween wood-burning, natural-gas, electric, or propane fires, but natural gas-burning fireplaces continue to be the most popular. According to the Hearth, Patio, and Barbecue Association, gas-fueled models outsell wood-burning fireplaces by a ratio of two to one.

“A lot of people really like gas fireplaces, because they don’t want to mess with the wood and soot,” Strangis says. “Burning wood creates a lot of dust and ash, so in a lot of these new homes with the light colored interiors, they don’t want the mess.” McNulty agrees: “We see less and less people interested in putting wood-burning fireplaces in their homes.”

While they do need to be vented, gas units do not require a traditional chimney, which gives homeowners more options when choosing a location for the fireplace. However, McNulty believes that when there is no need for a chimney, some of the home’s exterior character may be lost. “It’s kind of funny driving up to a house and not seeing a chimney anymore,” he says. “If you look at some of these large, expensive homes, they just don’t have a chimney anywhere. In some homes we’re building now, people are putting on decorative, nonfunctional chimneys. They’re using gas fireplaces, so there is no need for a chimney, but they want a chimney for detail in the home.”

Homeowners and designers alike appreciate the cleanliness and convenience of natural gas, but some believe that there is something more than just a chimney missing from a gas fire. “There’s the smell, the sound, and the ritual, all of which are important features that aren’t necessarily duplicated with gas,” Heide says. “We’re still doing a lot with real masonry, wood-burning,

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the-way-they-were-meant-to-be fireplaces. I would say that we're doing relatively fewer gas fireplaces compared to wood burning, but we're likely the exception to the rule."

Solac says his customers are split right down the middle when it comes to gas versus wood. "Gas fireplaces now have a much more realistic flame and are much improved just in the last four or five years," he says "And they're so convenient, you just flip a switch. However, wood burning has a lot more soul and a lot more tradition."

Traditional wood-burning fireplaces can be either masonry or factory built. There is also an environmentally friendly class of wood-burning fireplaces that are EPA-certified as clean burning. These fireplaces increase combustion efficiency and reduce wood-smoke emissions.

With the recent surge in condo-

Though it may look like wood grain, the pattern on this fireplace surround was created by burnishing a colored metal.

minium construction, Solac has also seen an increase in purchases of electric fireplaces. Once considered a cheap, less appealing alternative to a real fire, Solac says electric fireplaces have been greatly improved and are perfect for upscale condominiums, where venting is not possible.

"People are starting to take them more seriously and putting all those designer materials around the fireplace," says Solac. Unlike models available in discount home stores, these electric fireplaces are actually installed in the wall with a surround, like a traditional fireplace.

So, whether it's an electric fireplace in a condominium or a grand masonry hearth like those found in historic estates, there are choices to spark every homeowner's imagination. ■

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