



GIVING NEW LIFE TO THE HEART OF THE HOME

By Stacy Green

A fireplace is more than just a place to warm yourself on a cold day. In any weather, it sets the atmosphere for its surrounding environs. A home with the right fireplace will feel more comfortable, both because of its heat on a winter day and its aesthetics year-round. Likewise, a house with an unharmonious hearth will feel disjointed. If you suspect you're not getting enough from what should be the centerpiece of your home, you have a few decisions to make before dismantling that mantle.

When looking at remodeling an existing fireplace, your first step is determining the scope of your project. A fireplace renovation can be "skin

deep," entailing just the surface of the hearth and surround, or it can address more structural or technological issues, like replacing the firebox or converting from wood burning to natural gas.

If you're unhappy with the aesthetics of an existing unit but can't put your finger on how best to address it, it may be that the fireplace was remodeled and no longer fits its surroundings. Sometimes the firebox has been replaced so that it's now out of proportion with the scale of the room. A general contractor specializing in historic renovations should be able to help you assess the period-appropriateness of your fireplace and the work needed to return it to the home's genre.

In determining the suitability of a fireplace for its home, says Wade Freitag, owner of Craftsman Design and Renova-

tion, "It's important to consider firebox size so the fireplace looks historically appropriate in its proportions to the rest of the room."

Freitag points to a recent illustrative project. In adding a new family room to a 1920s bungalow, Craftsman Design used a high-efficiency gas fireplace with a firebox sized appropriately for the room. Besides looking integral to the house, the sufficiently sized fireplace easily warms the room.

Although Freitag personally loves the "crackle, pop" and aroma of an actual log on the fire, he advocates for gas fireplaces for environmental reasons. "Gas is greener," he says. "It burns clean, conserves trees and heats more efficiently because you're not losing heat up the chimney." A gas fireplace is also less expensive to



build, he explains; because there's no brick firebox or chimney to install, since the gas insert vents directly to the outside through an exterior wall.

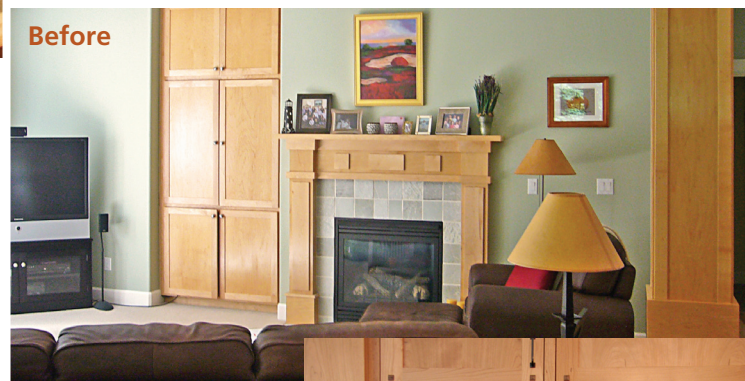
With the money saved in the installation cost, Freitag suggests investing in top-of-the-line gas inserts and logs, which look more natural. He also advises visiting a showroom and seeing how the fireplaces look when lit, paying particular attention to the flame pattern and artificial logs. These should appear as natural as possible, unless, of course, you like an artificial look reminiscent of a 1970s ski condo, with a row of jets creating a chorus line of identical flames.

As important as what's at the core of the fireplace is what's surrounding it, says Portland designer Chelly Wentworth. A fireplace surround, she explains, is more than just the surface material, such as tile, that most people think of. "A surround can mean not only the tiled face, but the mantle, wood detailing, and built-ins that many older-home fireplaces incorporate."

For instance, in the aforementioned family room addition, Freitag designed deep cabinets on either side of the fireplace, a traditional configuration for a bungalow. Freitag says he tweaked tradition somewhat for modern-day livability, making the cabinets "extra deep" to accommodate audio equipment and ample storage.

Wentworth says contemplating the surround for any fireplace should encompass not only the overall configuration of fireplace but also its placement. As an example, she references a living room remodel she designed

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This newer home's living room lacked much of the Neocraftsman character it aspired to. Particular attention to the fireplace wall dramatically transformed the room from generic to individualistic. Centering the fireplace and anchoring it with a symmetric configuration of cabinetry and bookcases emphatically declares the room's intent as a gathering place. In the fireplace's new incarnation, characteristic cherry wood and ceramic tile replaced the historically inaccurate maple and slate. The symmetric wood surround not only makes a statement, it also provides a clever home for the TV behind its retractable upper cabinet doors. The hardwood floor inlay emphasizes the hearth, keeping it in balance with the expanse of wood above.



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for a newly built home in a Forest Heights development. Although built in a Neo-Craftsman style, the house's living room reflected little of that aesthetic.

"Entering that home, it was immediately apparent that no thought had been given to the fireplace placement or design," Wentworth says. The fireplace wasn't centered, as one would expect in that house's style, and it had no built-ins, she says. Addressing the client's desire for a fireplace better suited to the home's character, Wentworth centered the fireplace on the wall, and on either side of it added built-in cabinets with leaded glass doors.

A challenge for modern-day inhabitants of older-style homes is balancing technological advances with old-world aesthetics. In the Forest Heights home remodel, Wentworth's fireplace design

included a bank of upper cabinetry with retractable doors that hides a flat screen TV when not in use. Although upper cabinetry isn't part of a traditional fireplace configuration, the custom cherry cabinets with exposed mortis and tenon joints anchor the new fireplace much more convincingly than the previous maple and slate incarnation.

As with any home feature, a fireplace's materials can either reinforce the home's genre or undermine it. Wentworth recommends selecting finishes thoughtfully but not slavishly. "Today there are so many choices of materials," she says, "and some blend really nicely with older homes." She cites as examples various types of concrete, natural stone, brick, and tile.

Besides allowing you some freedom with material, Wentworth recommends stretching your design sense when it comes

to color and texture. "If a client isn't trying to do a strictly historical renovation, we can take inspiration from a multitude of sources, from the house colors to a favorite piece of artwork."

In a current fireplace redesign, Wentworth has helped guide her clients from her own initial inspiration of period-appropriate Batchelder-designed tiles through color boards that ultimately reminded them of an iconic painting hanging in their own home. The resulting surface choice, she says, is something "uniquely personal." What could be more fitting for the heart of the home? ■

Stacy Green is the writer behind Green Ink, and writes about home improvement, small businesses, the environment, and travel. Contact her at sgreentag@aol.com.



An ugly plaster fireplace from a 1930s remodel had disgraced this Portland bungalow. Determined to resurrect a fireplace fitting to the home, the owners started from scratch (before photo). For a convincing facsimile, the designer used an original built-in buffet from the dining room as a reference point for the fireplace's wood species and overall form and turned to historic reference materials for clues to missing details. The new fireplace, constructed of mixed green fir with a mahogany finish, convincingly incorporates bookcase doors salvaged from the original fireplace. The hearth and surround are of locally handmade unglazed tile, and the keystone and two skewbacks in a thistle pattern are a reproduction Batchelder design consistent with the aesthetics of the home's genre. A traditional built-in mirror flanked by columns gives the room more life and light and emphasizes the fireplace as focal point. The eye is further drawn by the box beam ceiling's lines, and the alignment of fireplace and ceiling light fixtures.