

DESIGNERS ILLUSTRATED

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Fire- Works

It was in the early Thirteenth Century in Venice that the first recorded fireplace in Europe was positioned against the inside of a wall. Until then — and the earliest remains of a hearth are roughly 500,000 years old — hearth design was often a central open fireplace or, for the very rich during Roman times, something called a hypocaust, which involved heat flowing from an outside furnace into the house through clay pipes. But by the 1200s engineers had developed relatively fire-proofed materials that could be used to build chimneys, and then Masons devised ways to build the fireplace into the thickness of the wall itself, and from there fireplace design really began to evolve.

In the 16th Century, brick and stonework were refined enough that the fireplace could be completely recessed, the chimney flush against the wall; the opening was usually formed with a Gothic arch. But architects expanded the possibilities and created a new sub genre, which lead to the mantelpiece and by the end of the 18th Century, a variety of new materials including marble and bronze. And later iron. Conceptually the idea was that the fire in the hearth be at a level well below a man's face so that harmful fumes wouldn't reach the eyes, but heat would warm the rest of the body.

Ornaments in the fireplace were increasingly choreographed, and often



Designers Susan Davis and Beverly Steele took their inspiration for the design of this award winning faux fireplace and mantle from the English Bloomsbury movement of the 1920s and '30s. Influenced by the post-impressionists, the Bloomsbury Movement's art and decorative motifs sprang from free-form expression. Hence the motifs here and the angel, custom-made and hand-painted by the designers, specifically for an artist's garden studio. The fireplace and mantle are made from masonite and foam. Project by Beverly Steele and Associates. Photo by Kim Budd, Visual Communications.

*To the Aztec, the hearth was
the house of the firegod himself.*



designed to match the garnishes on the chimney hood. And actually it was during this time that the fireplace reached the peak of its splendor. Viollet-Le-Duc, the famous 19th Century French architect and archaeologist, and the author of a fabulous dictionary of French landmarks, once described a fireplace in Poitiers. It was thirty feet wide, six feet deep, and divided into three hearths. To reach the level of the fire, one had to climb a dozen steps. This gargantuan fireplace occupied one wall of the main hall in a chateau and provided heat for a number of adjoining rooms.

Such was the great age of fireplaces. In the 19th Century, the stove was invented — the Franklin stove in America — and the fireplace gradually shrank both in both form and function. With many fabulous exceptions, including the likes of the livingroom in the The Hearst Castle at San Simeon, the fireplace slowly became no more than a gas-powered convector box in a condominium 's wall burning smokeless, scrapdust logs.

Which brings us to the present in California where the fireplace has come back in the last 15 years as a center of design attention — despite news of dwindling rain forests in South America and clear-cutting old growth forests in North America. The housing boom on the peninsula, for example, has led to larger and larger 'boxes' but also more interest in the surround and the mantelpiece, itself, which becomes the

Above: Designer Stacey Lapuk had this fireplace done for a San Rafael house. "The assignment was to come up with something particularly sophisticated and dramatic. I decided on cheetahs because they suggest beauty, strength and a purity of motion. If money had been no object, doing them in marble or Beauharnais limestone or even wood would have been best. But as it was we settled on a pre-cast composite. A superb sculptor named Manuel Palos did both the fireplace and the cats, which stand three feet tall and sit on 12-inch pedestals. Jane Richardson-Mack added a subtle stain to each cat for definition." Project by Stacey Lapuk Interiors. Photo by Jim Grove

Right: This 'floor-to-soffit' fireplace was part of a major remodel of a Woodside home. Designed and built by Bernard and Linda Renaud. Mr. Renaud, originally from France, used Citeaux limestone (quarried in central France) for this blend of French traditional and contemporary design. The client wanted a fireplace with a trumeau, but had no other specific requirements. The result is a classic full-wall application, which becomes a focal point from several angles, including the home's front door. Project by Stone Creations. Photo by Mert Carpenter.



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design link between fireplace and the rest of the room. On these pages you see some of the most popular designs of the day, and you begin to realize how as a design element a fireplace commands a room, and given the choice should dictate the density and proportion of the pieces in a room, as well as their design.

As an aside, fireplace design has been complicated by the increasing popularity of feng shui, which relies so heavily on the symbolic value of things. For example, it is generally bad form to have a fireplace in a bedroom, because during the time that there is no fire burning, a dark fireplace becomes the symbol of spent passion. By the rules of feng shui every effort must be made to clear the way to the positive, to strip away anything that might consciously or subconsciously cast a negative light. In this case the symbol of dying embers is easily rejuvenated by putting something in the fireplace — whether a basket full of dried flowers or some object.

Feng shui aside, the fireplace retains its enormous power as a place whose potential is to warm, to bring people together, to enliven and enlighten. The appeal is partly sentimental, but also quite real. ❖

This fireplace in a San Carlos home was influenced by the mantel in a Louisiana hotel. Designer Debbie Janssen and stone mason Ralph Schwartz put together this entire wall, which was originally brick. "We created five different planes," explains Ms. Janssen, "to give depth and dimension. (Note top and bottom cabinets). The main problem with a fireplace is to find proportion, both in terms of size and the amount of detail. Too much egg and dart for example is overwhelming; too little and the detail is lost. We think this is an example where everything comes together." Project by Village Manufacturing. Photo by Mert Carpenter.



