

The Modern Hearth

IT'S SLEEK, IT'S ELEGANT AND IT PUTS OUT SOME SERIOUS HEAT

USED TO BE, in the not-so distant past, fireplaces were straightforward, if somewhat clunky affairs. No doubt they were the beloved and welcome providers of a warm and convivial gathering spot. Still, fireplaces were the beasts in any room, objects around which everything else had to be configured, thanks to their considerable structural

needs. Plus, when they weren't drawing properly, they could occasionally be counted on to smoke up a room and create quite the mess.

Not anymore. The past decade has witnessed monumental leaps forward in fireplace design, along with advances in technology that can add fireplaces to most any room of the house, regardless of pre-existing chimneys and vents.

"The fire is becoming more of an art form, instead of something that looks like it comes from the pioneer days," says Paul Erickson, president of Pacific Energy Fireplace Products, a British Columbia firm that, through its Town & Country Fireplaces division (www.townandcountryfireplaces.net), has been one of the leading innovators in the industry. "What people want now



Town & Country Fireplaces
has sparked recent innovations

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Above, left: Town & Country TC36 See-Thru with Black Diamond burner. Right: Town & Country Fireplaces direct-vent design model WS38

is a fireplace that makes a statement.”

Town & Country Fireplaces is generally credited with helping launch the move toward “clean-face” fireplaces that avoid a mish-mash of metal louvers and necessarily have to be mounted at floor level. Several of its recent designs are for fireplaces that are set several feet above the floor, at eye level, much like painting might be.

Yes, fireplace design has long since moved past the days when the crowning achievement was to create a fire with gas logs that looked like the real thing. And while most homeowners still prefer the classic look in a fireplace, there is a definite shift toward hearths that incorporate a variety of flame options and more environmentally conscious designs.

“The trend in contemporary fireplaces is away from the log look altogether,” says Jeffrey McClorey, president of Bromwell’s (www.bromwellco.com), a retailer and installer of luxury fireplaces in Cincinnati. Established in 1819, it is the city’s oldest business. At Bromwell’s one popular model uses a

raised tray with a gas flame that permeates through a layer of sand. It is finished off with either crushed glass or stones, depending upon the effect the homeowners want to achieve.

Another trend, says McClorey, is a minimalist “ribbon flame.”

“It undulates and dances and is really quite dramatic,” says McClorey. “But there are no stones or glass or anything the even vaguely resembles a log. The beauty is in the flame itself.”

Other innovations include the increased use of more efficient heat transmitters, like ceramic glass screens made of mica that can be installed across the front of the fireplace. While almost invisible to the eye, they conduct heat better than standard tempered glass and do not require blowers to help do the job.

Another innovation that promises to revolutionize fireplaces, particularly regarding their placement in homes, is the development of direct-vent designs. Eliminating the need for chimneys, direct-vent designs can be cut through walls or floors and across crawl spaces.

And with blowers and vacuum systems they can allow venting as far as 140 feet away from a fireplace.

“The bottom line,” says Town & Country’s Erickson, “is that you can now put a fireplace almost anywhere you want it.”

And since direct-vent fireplaces can draw combustible air from outdoors, they don’t suck air from a heated house. “In the past, fireplaces were great at providing a focal point and some degree of heat, but they weren’t always terribly efficient,” says McClorey. “But with the new direct-vent systems, it’s an extraordinarily green process.”

As for what to look forward to in fireplace design, McClorey and Erickson both agree that the future will likely hold a move away from gas and toward electric fireplaces.

“We’re still a few years out from it in the design process. People want a fire that looks like a fire and electric fires still far way short of that,” says Erickson. “But a decade from now, that’s what will drive the industry forward and change the design yet again.” ^{EP}

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