

# CONTEMPORARY DESIGN FIREPLACES

DQ talks to Paul Erickson, president, Town & Country Fireplaces, about what is happening with fireplace design and trends.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CURRENT TRENDS/INNOVATIONS IN FIREPLACE DESIGN?

PE: Expectations of a gas fireplace have never been higher. The visual cues that separate wood and gas hearths are disappearing. New technology has created the category of clean-face gas fireplaces, with no louvers or grills, with bold flames and a hearth that is able to be level with the floor.

Gas fireplaces are becoming proportionately taller, often with arched or portrait dimensions seen in the traditional Rumford design.

Designers and high-end builders are choosing more natural materials such as granite, marble, river rock and fine stone to surround their fireplaces, a trend that seems to be shifting away from man-made materials and metallic facings.

The small gas fireplace that had to be placed higher on the wall to be seen is being replaced by a taller firebox with more flame and bigger glass.

## HAVE YOU SEEN ANY UNUSUAL OR UNIQUE FIREPLACE APPLICATIONS/STYLES?

PE: There is a broader spectrum of shapes and designs available to architects, designers and discerning homeowners. Unique commercial fireplaces and specialty fires used to be the exclusive domain of custom manufacturers. Mainstream demand, too, is receiving attention from manufacturers in ways that would historically be seen as "fringe" products. The traditional rectangle prevails, but fireplaces with rock, sand or tumbled glass instead of logs, for example, are creeping into the North American market.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE FACTORS DRIVING FIREPLACE TRENDS TODAY?

PE: There are two significant streams of thought driving purchase decisions this year. The first is the quest for greater fuel efficiency, driven by rising gas prices. Manufacturers are being pushed by the market to deliver more heating efficiency, in some cases working in partnership with governments and utilities to increase public awareness of these products.

The second trend is the custom home segment that serves our baby-boomer population. This market wants larger luxury fireplaces for the home they have waited their lifetime to build. Less cost-sensitive but with high expectations for design flexibility and service, this segment is expected to grow in the coming decade.

## WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF VENTING SYSTEMS AVAILABLE? WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES?

PE: The trend is clearly shifting from BVent fireplaces (vented using inside air for combustion) to direct vent systems (sealed air units drawing and venting externally).



Power venting, well known in commercial applications, is now available on a limited number of fireplaces to extend the installation flexibility. Locations sixty feet or more from an outside wall or requiring numerous elbows or runs below the elevation of the fireplace are now possible. A good quality power vent system should run quietly at the exterior terminal. It will require a power source to run the fan.

## WHAT ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY HAVE HAD THE MOST IMPACT ON FIREPLACE DESIGN?

PE: The latest fireplace technology includes the decorative direct vent fireplace, which places more emphasis on flame than efficiency but delivers a significantly more realistic fire. This evolution of the luxury fireplace means that there is no valve or controls at the fireplace, which eliminates the need for louvers and allows for greater design flexibility.

Logs made of light-weight ceramic fiber are creating the glow and wrap-around flame that we have always expected from a fire.

Luxury fireplaces and high-efficiency fireplaces are committed to clear ceramic glass. Ceramic glass transfers approximately 90 per cent of the heat to the room, where tempered glass offers only 50 per cent heat transfer. Ceramic glass is rated well above the operating temperature of most fireplaces, meaning that thermal breakage is virtually unknown. Fireplaces using ceramic glass can burn hotter, brighter and safer than those using tempered glass.

### HAS LOCATION PREFERENCE OF FIREPLACES CHANGED OVER THE YEARS? CAN YOU PUT A FIREPLACE ANYWHERE?

PE: There are virtually no limits to where a fireplace may appear. Once relegated exclusively to living rooms and family rooms, the gas fireplace is appearing in bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens like never before.

### IS ENERGY EFFICIENCY OF GAS FIREPLACES A STRONG SELLING POINT TODAY FOR CONSUMERS?

PE: Energy efficiency will continue to be a purchasing decision for a large number of consumers. It is important to remember, however, that efficiency rating and heat output are not necessarily the same thing. Home owners need to consider their room size and shape, and venting requirements before choosing the right fireplace for their home. Selecting a fireplace without considering heat output and venting options may result in a room that quickly becomes too warm to use with the fireplace burning.

Some home owners are more concerned about aesthetics than efficiency. The new decorative direct vent fireplace category



serves those who want more realism and greater design and installation flexibility.

### WHAT DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS AND SELECTION CRITERIA SHOULD DESIGNERS BE AWARE OF WITH FIREPLACES?

PE: Designers love the fact that fireplaces are finally getting away from the mechanical appliance era with the introduction of the clean face fireplace. Gone are the louvers and grills that designers despise.

The traditional split oak log seen throughout North American has been replaced by a variety of log species highlighted by a much brighter flame picture. Fireplaces that are leading the design charge also offer a mix-and-match program for the inside of the fireplace that allows the designer to choose

the logs and firebox liners to complement the style of the room.

Venting needs to be considered when choosing a fireplace, especially for a commercial setting or larger home. Selecting a fireplace with power venting capabilities, for example, will increase the installation flexibility.


### ARE THERE ANY KEY SPECIFICATION ISSUES FOR DESIGNERS?

PE: Designers can insist on a fireplace design that allows them to create the perfect surround or external facing without having to compete with the fireplace hardware.

### WHAT DO YOU FORESEE FOR THE FUTURE OF FIREPLACE DESIGN?

PE: Fireplace control systems can be expected to become more sophisticated, often integrated into whole-home programs.

North American fireplaces, influenced by international designs, will feature materials such as river rock, sand, and tumbled glass as alternatives to the traditional log set in more residential settings.

Generally, the lines between wood and gas fireplaces will blur as gas fireplace technology moves increasingly closer to the look of a real wood-burning hearth. 

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