

In this converted masonry gas fireplace, flames leap between geometric stone shapes. Basket-weave porcelain tile provides an intriguing dimension.

The Fireplace Is The Art

Natural materials, modern design breathe new life into hearth and home.

Susan Kehoe, Ph.D.

“There is no place more delightful than one’s own fireplace.”

— Cicero, 106 B.C.-43 B.C.

Our primal fascination with fire has never dimmed; since cavemen gathered around fires we have been drawn to the beauty of the flame, which is simultaneously ancient and modern.

In the past few decades, architecture and design have evolved to a place where the fireplace has become a work of art.

Fireplaces have changed dramatically from the standard square brick design with burning logs. For starters, today’s fireplace is horizontal; flames leap
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Right: Louis N. DesRosiers of Lou DesRosiers Architects.

Far right: Squares repeated throughout the updated Frank Lloyd Wright design are grounded in the deco squares above the fireplace mantel. The side-by-side fireplace and TV sit 16 inches above the floor for ideal viewing.

Below: Brush-hammered, textured Mankato stone and smooth, honed Mankato stone complete the two-story fireplace wall.



from small stones, glass, marble chips and geometric shapes seen through long openings that light the room with intriguing patterns. We no longer care if the flames in our fireplace come from logs; the enchantment comes from the flame itself.

Louis DesRosiers, president of the award-winning firm DesRosiers Architects (id@desarch.com), has created dozens of stunning fireplace designs for both renovations and new construction. Lou DesRosiers' fireplace designs create monolithic sculptures from nature's most beautiful materials.

In one instance, a horizontal gas fireplace forms the base for 10 panels of ribbon-cut mahogany, layered between bronze metal bands that reach to the top of the two-story ceiling. The bronze bands join with the limestone surround to form a continuous line into the entire room. In perfect harmony with the space, a curved, cantilevered hearth and mantel also extend into the room. The fireplace becomes the sculpture defining the room.

To incorporate an updated fireplace into a Prairie-style design, DesRosiers used deco squares to set off the long mantel of Northern Buff limestone. Those squares are a repeated theme throughout the space. The glass-enclosed gas fireplace sits next to a flat-screen TV placed about 16 inches above the floor for ideal viewing. Owners can enjoy the fireplace and TV simultaneously.

In another DesRosiers example, Bob Schaerer helped design an intricate basket-weave tile that literally replaces the "art over the fireplace look" in a modern-style room. In this converted masonry gas fireplace, the flames leap between geometric stone artifacts. The fireplace appears asymmetrically centered into a limestone surround, yet exquisitely situated with neither hearth nor mantel.

Steve Brown, owner of American Fireplace (www.americanfireplace.net), says, "Fireplace building codes have changed significantly in the past decade. Ninety percent of the fireplaces in Southeast Michigan now use gas flames instead of burning wood," Brown says. Continued on page 114

» FEATURE



Lower-level den with prefab gas log fireplace surrounded by mahogany granite and framed with polished stainless steel curved molding. Designed by Bob Schaerer, the fireplace molding matches the picture frames above.

Photo by Beth Singer



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Left: Master bedroom with prefab gas fireplace and travertine marble surround. Rift-cut vertical grain walnut interspersed with 1/4-inch polished stainless steel. Barrel ceiling further delineates the cozy retreat. Right: Northern Michigan home of architect Lou DesRosiers demonstrates placement of flat-screen TV.

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“Besides the mess, wood-burning fireplaces draw 30-40 cubic feet of air per minute out of your house and up the chimney. It’s a waste of heat, but that’s what the fireplace is designed to do, draw the smoke and ash created by the wood out of the house — not needed with gas.

“According to code, new gas fireplace installations must operate behind glass doors,” he adds. “However, wood-burning fireplaces that have been converted to gas should not operate behind closed doors because the heat buildup ruins the controls. With converted gas fireplaces, open the fireplace damper and glass doors when operating, then close them both when they are inoperative to save heating costs.”

Another updated application that evolved with the advent of the flat-screen TV is the placement of the TV above the fireplace. DesRosiers likes this pairing, as long as it’s done correctly. In this example from the architect’s award-winning lake house in Northern Michigan, the TV, about the same size and shape as the large fireplace, is set within Fond-du-Lac stone. It is then framed on two sides by Indiana Buff limestone

that serves as a header, mantel and cantilevered raised hearth in the cozy setting. The height of the TV fits with the large scale of the room; furniture is placed farther back from the screen

Brown, who frequently works with DesRosiers and has an expansive showroom, comments that, “The placement of a TV above the fireplace opening should be at least 12 inches from the top of the fireplace to avoid contact with heat. Mantels of limestone, metal or thick glass are required to create a barrier from the heat.”

Sometimes homeowners want the TV-fireplace combination, but don’t want to see the TV when it’s not in use. For this preference, DesRosiers has designed applications of perfect concealment. In one example, large panels of rift-cut walnut rise two stories above a 12-foot wide, glass-enclosed fireplace. The fireplace rests between a floating travertine marble hearth and mantel, adjacent to a monolith of Fond-du-Lac stone. When the couple wants to watch TV, the wood panel drops back and disappears behind the panel system to reveal the flat screen with the touch of the remote control. Talk about smart technology.

DesRosiers says, “Natural materials such as stone, wood and metals integrate into a fireplace design to make it a sculpture.”

One of his fireplace designs incorporates two different textures of Mankato stone: Brush-hammered, textured stone wraps around the mantel and also laces decoratively between wood panels above. Honed Mankato stone in 2-by-4-foot slabs completes the massive wall that could not be described as anything but exquisite.

Undoubtedly, fireplaces remain the focal point in rooms today just as they were in the past. Now they are also the most important piece of art defining the space. **NS**

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