

Beyond the Norm

You don't have to be in the great room to enjoy today's hearths

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Most of us carry some instinctual desire to gather around the heat of a fire. From its introduction in medieval times, the fireplace has long been associated with the hearth-- a central place that drew the family together. But lifestyles and the habitation we create continue to evolve. As the spaces where people socialize change, the features that define them change as well. It is only logical that the fireplace is one of these features. People are beginning to consider putting fireplaces outside the traditional living room and family room areas. If we spend more time in the kitchen or outdoors or have a sitting area in our bedrooms, we may consider adding a fireplace in one of those areas.

Because log homes have always been known for their rustic quality, fireplaces and log homes naturally go hand in hand. Although I doubt there are any reliable statistics, I suspect the number of log homes with fireplaces is dramatically more in comparison to conventional homes. It is only logical that the majority of log homes have some form of fireplace. I don't believe I have ever designed a log home that doesn't have at least one fireplace, and most have two or three.

The fireplace has certainly come a long way. Gone are the days of the smoky old stone fireplace, which burns wood as fast as you put it on and sends most of its heat up the chimney. Nowadays, high efficiency fireplaces are the norm. The efficiency of

modern units means that we can once again use them for heat generation as well as for the beauty and comfort they provide. Many units are as efficient as furnaces so the heat that is produced is not wasted or superfluous. These are typically called zero clearance fireplaces, meaning they can be installed close to combustible framing.

Instead of using multiple fireplaces in different locations, it is sometimes possible or desirable to locate a fireplace so that it can be viewed from more than one room. Many models are open on two sides to serve two rooms and create a hearth for each space. For example, a two-sided fireplace can effectively divide a living room and dining room while maintaining a sense of connection. Fireplaces can even be open on three sides (known as a peninsula) or all four sides (oasis). In an L-shaped arrangement, I have used a three-sided fireplace open to the living and dining rooms and the kitchen. However, between a living room and bedroom I recommend two separate fireplaces, a smaller one being used in the bedroom. With multi-sided units, the structural support of framing and facing materials can be more challenging.

If your primary fireplace is located on an exterior wall, you may be able to install an outdoor fireplace opposite to take advantage of the same chase to run your flue. If you already have a chase and especially, a masonry finish, then the addition of a second fireplace may not be so expensive relative to what you receive, as the greatest cost of a fireplace is usually in the structure and masonry. You may also wish to combine the wood storage and use a pass-through system. If you do, ensure that it provides adequate insulation and security and take necessary precautions to avoid insects entering your house.

In addition to our desire for gathering around a family hearth, I believe we are naturally attracted to the intimacy that the crackling fire and glowing embers convey. Many of us hold wonderful memories of campfire experiences. It is no wonder that outdoor fireplaces are rapidly becoming popular. In keeping with today's trend towards more outdoor living, outdoor fireplaces allow us to spend evenings on our patios gathered around the campfire; only the campfire is contained within a firebox. While chimineas, freestanding clay braziers, are becoming popular and can be purchased relatively inexpensively, many people opt for complete high-efficiency fireplaces outdoors. Absent is the irritation of smoke in the eyes or the inconvenience of constantly feeding fuel to the fire. That is not to imply that sitting around a fireplace is comparable to sitting around an open fire. However, a fireplace can offer much in terms of both efficient heat generation and safety. In many areas, open fires are banned due to the build up of smoke particulates in the atmosphere or the fire hazard from sparks. Contained fires can also address those problems.

In addition to more traditional fireplaces, there are other units designed to contain outdoor fires. A fireplace dish, essentially a large steel saucer in which you build a fire, is one such unit. While the wood-burning varieties may not meet some local safety ordinances, they also come as smokeless gas-burning units. There are other wood-burning open units that feature stainless steel mesh on four sides and a spark arrester cap atop a short chimney.

Outdoor fireplaces need to be constructed of weatherproof materials. This usually means stainless steel components, weather-resistant finishes and drain channels. You

may consider an electric fan to force circulation and create more even and efficient heat distribution.

Whether you are locating a fireplace indoors or out, for some people it is difficult to decide whether to install a wood- or gas-burning unit. Like most decisions in the design process, it comes with both its pros and cons. Wood is obviously more natural and attractive, and is more active, constantly changing and crackling. But it does require you to regularly replenish the fuel, to a storage location and to the fireplace itself. It is harder to light and requires extra measures to ensure a safe hearth condition. It is possible to install a gas lighter system in a wood-burning fireplace. This makes one of the chief challenges with a wood-burning fireplace—lighting it—much simpler. However, check to see if these are allowed in your area. Some local gas regulations prohibit such devices.

Gas units start easily, have a constant fuel supply and, from the standpoint of safety, are more flexible. However, they are more uniform and obviously are less ‘realistic’.

When designing your fireplace think of the fireplace as part of a larger whole. Firstly, there is the space in which it is situated. How does the fireplace relate to the immediate area and to those spaces around it? What roles will it serve? It is primarily aesthetic, is it a hearth around which friends and family will be gathering, or does it have a substantial role in heat generation. As a hearth, make sure there is adequate seating around it and make sure that people can move adequately around the seating area. If the generation and containment of substantial heat is critical then additional materials may be used to absorb and radiant heat. Whether indoors or outdoors, you can place the fireplace in a lower or sunken area and make use of stone or other walls to absorb heat and create a

warmer space. Then, there is the structure that contains the fireplace. It will often have several functions. The first is to safely house the fireplace and, usually, to absorb and radiate additional heat. Masonry or ceramic facings have both aesthetic and functional roles. A wood-burning fireplace requires an adequate and safe hearth that reduces the possibility of embers spilling onto a flammable surface. Unless the hearth is a single piece of material, it is advisable to install a metal sheet underneath your hearth finish, to prevent embers that may penetrate grout cracks from igniting flammable material. If you suspect that you will be chopping kindling on the hearth, make sure it can withstand the impact. Provide adequate storage for plenty of wood, kindling and other starting materials, as well as various fireplace tools. You can install a mantle for beauty and display and create nooks to feature art or heirlooms. Install lighting fixtures that illuminate the seating area and consider accent lighting on the fireplace façade or mantle. Gas units, of course, are simpler. They don't require a hearth, or storage additional storage. However, you may want to add stone or ceramic material to radiate heat and complete the display and lighting concepts as you would a conventional fireplace. If your fireplace is in, or abuts, a kitchen, you may consider a built-in pizza oven or baking or warming chambers.

It is easy to see that as our lifestyles become more diverse, familiar features like the fireplace can be adapted to our new home concepts. By clarifying the nature of different spaces both in your home and outside, you may be able to use fireplaces in non-traditional locations to bring an added dimension to your log home.

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