

Eternal flames

Fireplaces may no longer be our only source of heat and light, but our love of the naked flame endures, transcending necessity

WORDS RACHEL LOOS



STEFAN THURMAN/ISTOCK

When Frank Lloyd Wright began designing his revolutionary signature-style Prairie homes, with their groundbreaking horizontal lines and open-plan spaces, he railed against the existing trend for the small and apologetic fireplace. Instead, the iconic American architect, also known for New York's Guggenheim Museum, went for large and eye-catching, with fireplaces decorated with mosaic glass and striking murals. He continued the trend throughout his career, making fireplaces a design feature in all of his celebrated homes. The fireplace, he said, is the "psychological center" of a room.

More than a century later, Lloyd Wright's appreciation of the fireplace is now shared by fellow architects and homeowners alike, for whom a fireplace has become a must-have. "A fireplace sets a property apart," says Anne Collins of Brown Harris Stevens Residential Sales, LLC, an affiliate of Christie's International Real Estate. "There is value added for the buyer seeking elegance and balance in a room. And when

lit with a fire, it provides atmosphere and comfort not found in rooms without one."

Design-wise a fireplace creates an immediate focus and brings symmetry to a room, but perhaps more fundamental is the emotional response a naked flame evokes. Despite the fact that radiators and stoves have today made the need for fireplaces as sources of heat for warmth and cooking redundant, the allure of a flickering flame continues to enthrall. "A fire goes back to the primitive notion of what makes a home," says Arthur Lasky of New York-based fireplace company HearthCabinet.

Humankind's relationship with fire dates back at least one million years. Remains of fire have been found in the caves of early man. The first fires in buildings were contained within an open hearth, bordered by stone or tile and placed in the center of the main living space, the smoke escaping through a louvered hole in the roof. Later, a canopy was used to direct the smoke out of the room more effectively. These were in time moved to the wall where they could be more easily supported, marking the beginning of the traditional fireplace as we know it today.

Over the following centuries the size of the fireplace grew, becoming large enough for family members to sit on either side of it for warmth and light, and also for cooking with a spit. Believed to be the largest in England, the medieval fireplace at Shute Barton manor house in Devon is 24 feet long and 10 feet deep – sizeable enough to roast two oxen at once. The idea of a chimney piece (two "legs" and a decorated a mantel) was developed during the Renaissance, its decorative style inspired by classical Greek and Roman architecture. The intricacy of pattern waxed and waned with the times, the fireplace reflecting the design aesthetic of the era.

CHANGING PLACES

Today's fireplace is something of a design rebel, unconstrained by the style or age of the property in which it is set. Antique marble fireplaces can be found adorning the living rooms of ultra-modern properties, while a rectangular box of dancing flames can add a contemporary touch to a period home.

Condemned as fusty during the latter decades of the 20th century, over the past five years antique fireplaces have become highly sought after. "They are trophy pieces,

Previous pages: The Dominique Imbert-designed Slimfocus is the first suspended room-sealed fire. *Below:* Chesney's Roxburghe fireplace, shown here with the Osterley brass fire basket, is a reproduction of a fireplace originally designed for the Duke of Roxburghe in 1777 and is typical of the company's offering.



chosen as individual iconic items in a room," says Paul Chesney, managing director of Chesney's, one of the UK's leading suppliers of luxury fireplaces. The company's collection includes British pieces dating from 1690 to 1920, as well as 18th- and 19th-century French and Italian designs, and prices can be as high as £500,000 (\$770,000).

"Fireplaces from the Regency period [early 1800s] are particularly popular in Britain," Chesney observes, explaining that "those designs are generally quite simple, with less ornamentation than either Victorian or Georgian chimney pieces, so can be used in both period and contemporary interiors. In America, they like the more decorative Rococo and French style."

"A fire goes back to the primitive notion of what makes a home."
Arthur Lasky

Antique fireplaces, however, are in limited supply as they can only be removed from historic buildings that do not have listed status, and so reproductions are a popular alternative. Made from marble or limestone they can cost up to £30,000 (\$46,200), although one floor-to-ceiling number in Palladian style for an American client cost £110,000 (\$169,400). "The look of marble, in particular, plays an important part in the design," says Chesney. "We work with really rare marble, usually from Italy, and for an intricate chimney piece it can take several months for the design to be carved in a way that shows the marble to its best effect."

Antique-style surrounds do not have to mean similarly aged grates, although the two can be matched. Today, to overcome the pollution-controlling restrictions on the burning of wood, as well as for convenience and lack of mess, fire is most often provided by electricity or gas. With high-efficiency gas fires, such as those used by Modus Fireplaces, the flame is sealed behind glass to ensure maximum heat efficiency, making them »

Above: The Cocoon Aeris Stainless Steel fireplace has a 1.5-liter capacity, allowing it to burn for up to six hours. The fire features an adjustable hanging system that means it can be configured to six height positions.



Above: A unique double-sided gas fire by Modus Fireplaces in the lounge and bar area of the Sheraton Heathrow Hotel, London, incorporates a six-foot dancing-flame burner.

better than the traditional grate in which much of the heat is lost up the flue.

NO SMOKE WITH FIRE

The big game changer in the development of the fireplace, however, has been the introduction of bioethanol. An eco-friendly fuel extracted from plants, its only by-products released during burning are water vapor, carbon dioxide (the equivalent of a candle burning), and heat. With no smoke or ash, the bioethanol fireplace has no need for a flue or chimney. Now, not only can a fireplace be installed into any room or building – as long as there is ventilation – the lack of a chimney has also resulted in designs never before possible.

The Cocoon, for example, stands on legs or hangs from the ceiling on a slim pole. Its designer, Federico Otero from Cocoon Fireplaces in America, used his wide-ranging industrial design background – that includes taps, lighting, and creating watches for TAG Heuer – to go beyond the boxy shape of most contemporary fireplaces to create “a flame

that could fly,” unencumbered by pipes. The result is a Mid-Century Modern-style shell in which bioethanol fuel burns to create an attractive fire. Lightweight, the Cocoon can be moved from room to room, the hung version easily fixed to brackets in the ceiling. “We have a client who takes it from his main residence to his holiday home,” says Anthony Hinchcliff, managing director of the European distributor, Cocoon Fires. “We’re finding it’s popular in high-end boutique developments where the traditional fireplace with a chimney is impossible, but where people want the ambience of natural flame. It gives

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Anne Collins

out about 3-4 kW of heat, about the same amount as a medium-sized electric heater.”

Bioethanol fireplaces are a growing trend in cities such as Hong Kong where apartment living dominates, making the traditional fireplace difficult for many. They are also popular in commercial developments, with companies such as BB Fires supplying contemporary fireplaces to prestige hotels throughout China, among them Hyatt and Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts.

Camping out in the Australian Outback one night, engineer Jarosław Dąbrowski and businessman Alfred Weilandt were also inspired to recreate the look and mood of a real fire without the resulting smoke or ash. Their answer, after two years of research, was Planika’s patented BEV technology, through which a fireplace burns bioethanol vapor to create a long line of dancing flame that sits within a rectangular box. “And it’s a lovely golden flame, as you would get with a wood burner,” says Daria Sędzicka, a spokeswoman for Planika, which is based in Poland but also has offices in the US, Russia, and India.

One of the company’s most recent fireplaces is the Fire Line Automatic 3, which is equipped with a microprocessor-controlled electronic system that allows it to be operated via remote control or Wi-Fi-enabled smart devices. The fire can be set into a wall or mounted in a coffee-table-style box and used as a central focus, or even as a room divider with two or three units joined together to create a long and continuous line of fire.

BURNING DESIRE

In New York, Arthur Lasky and Michael Weinberger invented HearthCabinet’s ventless fireplace, which uses an alcohol gel that burns for beauty and a pleasant crackle. “It creates the right amount of heat for comfort but mostly a flame for atmosphere,” says Lasky. A patented system, the gel is contained in a specially designed, one-time-use cartridge that’s set in a sleek, locked safety box with a steel-mesh front.

The only ventless design approved for use in New York by the city’s Fire Department and the Department of Buildings, all the fireplace requires is a room with ventilation, and it can be used with both traditional and modern mantels and surrounds. Hand-made by craftsmen in the city and customized with a variety of finishes, the fireplaces range from \$4,000 to \$6,000 for one that would

NIKOLAS KOENIG, MICHAŁ KUŚCZAK/PLANIKA

fit a brownstone home, to tens of thousands of dollars for larger projects.

For his New York EDITION hotel, housed in a 41-story historic clock tower in the Flatiron District, hotelier Ian Schrager wanted the feel of a private home so designed a steel fireplace based on one in his own residence. Unable to have a wood or gas fire in the lobby of the multistory listed building, he used a HearthCabinet ventless fireplace to create the ambience he was after. “We custom-detailed the unit and provided a hand-applied, blackened steel finish on our fireplace to »

Below, from top: A stylish fire by Planika is a fitting addition to the POZIOM 511 Design Hotel in the Polish Jurassic Highland; a customized version of HearthCabinet’s ventless fireplace features in the lobby of the New York EDITION hotel.





seamlessly match the EDITION's steel wall," says Lasky. "The 30-foot fireplace wall becomes one luxurious, inviting, home-like feature that greets every arriving hotel guest."

Despite the impact of bioethanol, the wood burner still plays a part in the story of the modern fireplace. Once primarily destined for homes in the countryside, the wood burner has firmly moved into city living, with sales rising fast as people look for heat-efficient fires.

While most are functional in appearance, the Gyrofocus is an eye-catching and luxurious exception. The first suspended, 360-degree pivoting fireplace, it was a design sensation when it was created almost 50 years ago and has since been exhibited in the Bordeaux Centre of Contemporary Visual Arts, the National Centre of Contemporary Art in Grenoble, and New York's Guggenheim Museum. In 2009 it was voted the world's most beautiful object in the Pulchra design competition, beating 99 design classics including the Philips flat-screen television.

Created by French sculptor Dominique Imbert and still handcrafted in France, the Gyrofocus turns quietly with just a touch of the finger and the flames crackle cheerily. Its heat output, though, is a modest 6 kW, with an energy efficiency (the percentage of the energy in the wood that is transformed into heat for the room) of just 57.8 per cent.

A far more energy-efficient fire is Imbert's most recent creation, Slimfocus: the first suspended room-sealed fire, its energy efficiency rating is an impressive 85.4 per cent. The design allows the combustion air intake and smoke exhaust to be contained in the same flue, the outside air drawn at the top of the flue heating up on its way to the firebox.

"The technology is groundbreaking," says Lynda Taylor from Diligence, which retails Imbert's Focus range of wood burners in the UK. "It's the first of its kind in the world." And, like all the best fireplaces, a beautifully elegant focus of the room. ●

Rachel Loos writes for The Daily Telegraph and The Times, and is former editor of Elle Decoration UK.

Left: Causing a sensation when it launched in 1968, the Dominique Imbert-designed Gyrofocus was the first suspended, 360-degree pivoting fireplace. It was revolutionary as much for its technical design as its groundbreaking style.

ON THE MARKET

Home is where the hearth is

Provincial-style estate

Herne Bay, New Zealand

There's a fireplace for any occasion at this four-bed home: in the library, family room, and outdoor seating area (below).

Price upon request

Contact: Karen Spires

+64 9 375 8494

karen.spires@bayleys.co.nz



High Country château

Telluride, Colorado, USA

Contemporary mountain luxury meets the rugged West: this five-bed home's great room boasts a stylish stone fireplace. \$8,900,000

Contact: TD Smith

+1 970 728 1606

td@tdsmith.com

Contemporary chalet

Verbier, Valais, Switzerland

A modern take on tradition, this seven-bed chalet has a central fireplace with mirrored flue in its open-plan living area (below).

Price upon request

Contact: SPG Finest Properties

+41 58 810 30 30

geneva@spgfinestproperties.ch

