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More than just pretty facings

cast concrete and the contemporary fireplace

BY KHAI FOO

No area of the home carries as much nostalgic and emotional weight as the fireplace. Although it has long since relinquished its role as the home's primary heat source, the fireplace has continued to occupy a distinguished position as decorative and social focal point of the home.

Perhaps this is because we have a primal need for the warmth and mesmerizing glow of an open fire. Or perhaps it is because our idea of "home" is inextricably tied to the idea of "hearth". Whatever the reason, the fireplace has remained a fixture in our living rooms and dens - taking the chill out of winter evenings, and holding up our family photos and Christmas stockings.

Like wainscoting, corbels and hurricane lamps, the form of the contemporary fireplace evolved from a functional need — specifically, the need to safely contain a fire and transmit its heat efficiently throughout the interior spaces of a building. To this end, early fireplace design used fireproof materials with a lot of thermal mass — typically stone and brick masonry.

Mantelpieces, designed to contain smoke from the fire below, were similarly massive. With such substantial scale and solid materials already a requirement, the fireplace became a natural focus for interior design, with magnificent examples produced in every architectural period. The fireplace mantel and surround eventually came to define the architectural style of an interior through its proportions and detailing.

Technological advances in the twentieth century, however, eliminated the hearth's functional aspect — homes were well-insulated and centrally heated, and television became the new centre of our social spaces. The technology behind the fireplace also began to change — natural gas eclipsed wood as the fuel of choice. Direct venting all but eliminated clearance issues and even chimneys, as most fireplace "units" could be vented through the nearest exterior wall.

The form of the modern fireplace reflected this change in technology — small, self-contained and even movable units replaced the massive masonry structures that were once necessary. From a design perspective, this freedom from technological constraints had mixed results — in many installations, fireplaces became little more than glorified space heaters, with mantels and surrounds added on as an afterthought - a mere shred of the grand architectural pieces of the past.

More recently, however, there has been a shift in the fireplace industry. Buoyed by a renewed global appetite for design, the last decade has seen an unprecedented focus on the style and visual appeal of the hearth. Homeowners have expressed a renewed desire for the substance and authenticity of a traditional wood-burning fireplace — but without having to burn wood. The industry has responded with "clean-faced" gas fireplaces that have no visible vents and larger, hotter flames that replicate a real wood fire.

At the same time, the influences of international design have resulted in a trend toward minimalist fires that use unconventional materials and new proportions to create sleek, ultra-modern installations. With a wider range of styles at their disposal, designers are approaching fireplaces as opportunities to enhance entire rooms and once again, make unique design statements. The new fireplaces effectively create "blank canvases" of the walls they occupy, with beautiful fires at their centres.

To rekindle the mass of the great historic mantelpieces, designers are using substantial materials — stone veneers, tile, steel and concrete — in new and modern forms. The plasticity, wide colour range and availability of cast concrete have made it the preferred choice for many design professionals.



Naturally non-flammable, cast concrete reduces installation restrictions so that the new "clean-face" looks can be used to full advantage. With concrete facing components, walls can be clad around the firebox without interruption or compromise due to heat clearances. Concrete's excellent thermal mass qualities allow it to store and radiate the heat from a modern gas fire, potentially improving its overall performance. Additionally, with the current trend to combine a fireplace and a flat screen television on a single feature wall, a concrete mantel can serve as an effective buffer between the heat of the fire and sensitive electronics.

Cast concrete also contributes to a sustainable and healthy home — not only do modern concrete formulations utilize recycled materials, they are also designed with performance and durability in mind. In most climates in North America, the strength and freeze-thaw resistance of high-performance concrete allow it to be successfully utilized in outdoor rooms.

Whether indoors or out, a typical concrete installation will last a lifetime with little or no maintenance. This means no extra chemicals in the home from cleaning or refinishing. Additionally, concrete has one of the lowest levels of VOC's and off-gassing when compared to other commonly used building materials, which is particularly important when used in the heated environs of a fireplace.

The key benefit of cast concrete fireplace mantel and wall treatments, however, is how they look. With incredible design flexibility, concrete may be manipulated and configured in virtually limitless ways. Cast mantelpieces can quote classic motifs or express austere minimalism. The high strengths of modern concrete allow it to be cast in large, thin formats that reduce the structural demands on supporting walls without sacrificing visual effect. Walls may be clad floor to ceiling, recalling traditional chimney chases — all the while conveying substance, mass and a luxurious, organic feel.

In spite of changing tastes and the constraints of new technologies, fireplaces continue to occupy prominent places in our homes and it seems, in our hearts. Cast concrete fireplace mantels and wall facings offer designers functional, diverse and sustainable options for a new generation of enduring hearth designs. **DF**

