

Home is where the hearth is

From rustic to contemporary, fireplaces add a cozy touch to new homes

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The residential fireplace is a vestige, no longer needed to heat the home or house a kettle of soup. Why, then, do new-home buyers continue to pay extra for it and real estate agents tout it as a hot amenity?

"It makes a room," says Sari Kovitz, who included one outdoor and four indoor fireplaces in her Highland Park house, built by Luxuria Homes in 2008. "When people come over, that's where they gather. When I decorated, they were the starting points. Every room of ours would be so different without its fireplace."

Kovitz chose a variety of stone types for her fireplace surrounds and mantels, aiming for a "sophisticated, French look," she says. Her sitting-room fireplace is the most ornate, with a limestone surround, mantel and overmantel. The simplest is a smaller, limestone one in her master bedroom.

Kovitz's fireplaces are at the high end, costing \$10,000 and up, reports Luxuria's president, Jeanine Scheck. At the production-home level, though, fireplaces begin with simple, wooden mantels sans elaborate surrounds, then proceed up the price ladder as buyers add millwork or other materials.

At Pulte Homes, for example, single-family houses do not include fireplaces as standard features, but 40 to 50 percent of buyers choose this popular upgrade. The traditional-style fireplace options here range from a \$4,500 version with a painted, wooden mantel, to an \$8,000 floor-to-ceiling trimwork package that creates a mantel and overmantel. Both have ceramic-tile surrounds.



The Lellbach's custom - made fireplace.

The majority of fireplaces in new homes today have some sort of wooden mantel, with a tile or stone surround, but few are the same, especially in semi-custom and custom homes.

When Debra Bennett Lellbach gutted her Naperville house, which doubles as a showpiece for the home-building company she runs with her husband, Doug, she chose a knotty-alder mantel and overmantel, stained dark gray, for her family room fireplace. But the fireplace surround stops visitors in their tracks, she says.

The surround is composed of multicolored, hand-made clay tiles made by Madison, Wis., artist Eric Rattan from impressions of leaves. The Lellbachs installed the tiles, which run \$60 a square foot, themselves, first laying them out on the floor like a jigsaw puzzle, recalls Lellbach.

"I wanted something that wasn't traditional and wasn't contemporary," says Lellbach. "It's just us." Years from now, when they redecorate, she adds, the leaves will still be in style because of their perennial appeal.

The wood-and-tile combination worked for Vicki Ovitt, a designer who employed her skills on her own Wheaton house in 2008. But she went for a different look. Her living-room fireplace has a formal, black-and-brown, marble-tiled surround, with a dressy, white wooden mantel. Her family room is more casual, so she paired a simpler white, wooden mantel with glass tiles in colors that echo those in the adjacent kitchen. Her lower-level fireplace creates a more den-like ambience with a dark-stained wooden mantel and a glass-tile surround in earth tones.

Ovitt praises Oceanside Glasstile because, she explains, "You can go on its Web site and customize your own combination of patterns and colors before you choose it."

When Angelia Gill saw the fireplace design for her Kenwood condominium, built by Stratagem Home Builders LLC in Chicago in 2008, she was sold. "I thought, oh my gosh, it is stunning," she says of her modern glass-tile surround with a sleek cherry-wood mantel. "It is elegant and understated. When people come over, they are drawn right to it. In the evening, I turn off the lights and turn on the gas in the fireplace and the glass tiles sparkle."

Fireplaces in other units in Gill's complex, Lake Park Gateway II, have equally stunning and contemporary styles. Another option here is a boxy surround of large, travertine tiles that doubles as a mantel.

"Lodge-like" was the look that Mark Verone and Rachelle Hardy wanted for their family room fireplace when they hired Dior Homes to build their house in 2006. "We travel to the West often, so we love that look," says Verone. They chose a floor-to-ceiling fireplace wall of multicolored boulders from Schwake Stone in Des Plaines and an oak mantel. They completed the look with leather furniture.

"It's wood-burning so we use it a lot in the winter," says Verone. "It makes the room cozy."

For those who want a more rustic look, Bob Przewlocki of Preservation Trades Inc. in Wayne locates reclaimed wood, per homeowners' requests. Costs are \$45 to \$70 per foot, not including installation. His clients typically order massive, wooden beams to use as mantels with masonry fireplaces, he says.

Compared to kitchens and bathrooms, the fireplace surround is a small area, says Lisa Rotunno, design associate at Artistic Tile Inc. in Chicago, so many homeowners splurge on it.

"Today, people want texture and dimension, like Ambra, a three-dimensional stone with a wavelike pattern, or Ashlar Stone, a rough-hewn, stacked limestone," she says. "They want something that's eye-catching and unique."

The fireplace, adds Rotunno, is an opportunity for the homeowner to "spend a little to get a lot of 'wow'."