

Putting Fire In Its Place

by Gordon Tully

For most of us, the appeal of a fireplace is deeply rooted. Invariably a symbol of welcome, it is a warm, safe place where you can curl up with a book, talk to friends over drinks, or ponder the big picture while watching the flames change shape.

There are two basic aspects to fireplace design. One is the physical design of the fireplace: the materials, dimensions, and scale of the fireplace, hearth, mantel, chimney, and fireplace surround. This column, however, focuses on how it fits into a room, and how

the furnishings around it are placed.

It is easy to find a place for a fireplace in most plans, and it is not too hard to put it in a place where the chimney looks good on the outside. What is not so easy is creating the feeling of comfort that draws you toward the hearth. The key to success in planning a fireplace is how you arrange the furniture and circulation near it.

Some Basic Fireplace Plans

Six typical designs are shown, covering most of the basic arrangements

you are likely to consider in today's plans. Absent are the intriguing but impractical two- and three-sided designs popular in modernistic homes. These installations release smoke into the room, since air can move freely across the fire. It is possible to glaze in one or two sides of an open fireplace, but in my view you lose the point of the open design.

In Illustrations A and B, the furniture group is next to and around the fireplace. Ideally, there will be three or four feet of wall or cabinetwork on either side of the fireplace opening to provide closure and increase the feeling of intimacy. The furniture can either abut a wall or be held off a bit to allow access to a bookcase, a woodbox, fireplace tools, or a stereo cabinet.

The axis of the furniture group in Illustration A runs perpendicular to the wall, while in Illustration B, the couch faces the fireplace and the axis of the group parallels the wall. The Illustration B design creates an intimacy and immediacy lacking in the more formal Illustration A design. In Illustration A, the emphasis is social—people facing people. In Illustration B, the emphasis is private—people facing the fireplace.

If the couch in Illustration B is set close to the fireplace, someone can stretch out and get really warm all over from the heat of the fire. This is how you would like things arranged when you read *The Night Before Christmas* to the kids. This same arrangement works in a small room with the couch backed against the wall opposite the fireplace, perhaps with chairs set on the diagonal next to the fireplace, creating a large but intimate circle.

Illustration C is a variation invented sometime in this century, the conversation pit. The floor is lowered at the fireplace, and the edge of the resulting pit lined with continuous couches or pillows set on steps. One advantage of this scheme is that it can be quite large and still feel intimate.

Illustration D shows a fireplace standing free of the furniture, with access to the seating from the fireplace side. This layout occurs in many of Frank Lloyd Wright's houses, because he often placed a group of chimneys in the center of the plan to act as a visual anchor, then sent rooms off from this center in all directions. To enter any room you have to pass in front of the fireplace.

This design makes the fireplace a more important element than in designs where the seating abuts the fireplace wall. The fireplace becomes the focus of the whole room, or even a group of rooms, rather than the focus of a small seating area. The same effect will occur anytime the seating is separated from the fireplace. The fireplace in Illustration D is based on one of our designs, and shows a wide stone hearth and lintel, placed so one or two people could sit or stand right at the fireplace while allowing circulation in front of it.

In Illustration E the fireplace occupies the corner. This is an uncommon arrangement, but crops

up in regional and historic styles such as Tudor and Southwestern adobe houses. In my opinion, such a design works better if the fireplace is not the center of a furniture group, so that one doesn't inevitably end up looking into a corner.

Finally, Illustration F shows a fireplace set into an "inglenook," a 19th-century invention that carries intimacy to an extreme. Sometimes these little fireplace rooms were placed off a large entry hall, providing a place to sit and get warm while awaiting the appearance of the lord or lady of the house.

What to Do With That Other Box

Televisions and fireplaces are in direct competition: both involve looking at something inside a box. The best solution is to put the TV in one room and the fireplace in another.

If they must be together, don't let the firelight reflect off the TV screen; functionally, the best place for the TV is next to the fireplace. A common solution is to recess the TV into the wall next to the fireplace. If you do this, make sure the TV can be closed off behind doors, leaving no doubt that the fireplace, and not the TV, is the focus of the room. We did one family room where the owner insisted on placing a huge built-in TV beside a small fireplace with a raised hearth; visually, the results were most unfortunate.

A Case Study

Frank Lloyd Wright's plans often require one to take a spiral path to enter a home. I once designed a fireplace somewhat in this manner.

The overall plan of this house is based on four wings arranged in a pinwheel (see Illustration G). The fireplace creates a wall between the living room and the entry, which is down a half level. This wall contains a closet off the entry on one side of the fireplace, and a woodbox facing the living room on the other.

To create a private area around the fireplace, I designed a screen which extends along the top of the fireplace wall and then runs into the living room, separating the seating around the fireplace from the passage into the living room.

The long, graceful spiral trip from the front door to the fireplace takes you up the stair into the central dining room, where the view of the woods opens up through the continuous band of windows. You then turn right and look into the living room, beyond which is a different view of a meadow. Another right turn and your view is stopped by a wall; a final turn orients you toward the fireplace.

The fireplace surround is rough-sawn granite chosen from the quarry, with a large piece of bluestone for the hearth. The cabinetwork and screen are redwood, impeccably joined by the fine finish carpentry of the general contractor, Thoughtforms, Inc.

In a house characterized by long, continuous windows, where you feel you are living in the view, this fireplace alcove provides a wonderful, inwardly focused place to spend a winter evening. It shows that a fireplace can be much more than a moving picture set into a frame on the wall. As Frank Lloyd Wright showed, it can be the focus of an entire house. ■

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