

Life Without Fireplaces

by Gordon Tully



At a time when we seem most to need the comfort, congeniality, and reassurance of a cozy hearth and warm fire, more and more reasons accumulate *not* to have a fireplace or wood stove. These include pollution indoors and out, and backdrafting of dangerous flue gases in tightly sealed homes.

Technical solutions, such as catalytic converters and glass doors, don't seem to be keeping up with the problems, so maybe we should attack them head-on. If the fireplace is outlawed and we can't snuggle up to a burning log, what can we do to focus our after-dinner get-togethers?

Why Fireplaces and Stoves Appeal to Us

A love of fires may well be built into human nature. Lisa Hescong, in her excellent little book *Thermal Delight in Architecture* (MIT Press, 1979, \$6.95), discusses the ways in which fires appeal to us. She includes the pleasure of thermal contrast, the multiple sensations of sight, sound, and smell, and the pleasant personal and cultural associations we get from the fireplace. The fire is also a center for sociability and full of ceremonial and symbolic meanings. Fire is moving and warm — a metaphor for life.

At one time, fireplaces were the only way to heat a room and cook, so they naturally became a focus. But the persistence of the fireplace in modern homes, where space heating and efficient ranges are universal, demonstrates their power as a symbolic center. Today, there are usually one or two hearths in a house, where the rites of gathering, getting warm, and the simple sensual pleasure of radiant heating all combine. If the hearth is missing, we need to replace this symbolic center, not just for a single room, but for the whole house.

Direct Substitutes for the Hearth

Given the symbolic burden carried by the traditional fireplace, no single

element can fully substitute for the hearth. The one that comes closest is the gas kitchen range, the only other open fire in a house. Perhaps for that reason, the kitchen is increasingly becoming the de facto center of the house. In my family, we commonly entertain first in the kitchen during cooking, and then seated nearby at the table. Often we stay there until the guests leave, never bothering to resettle on couches and chairs. In warm seasons and climates, one tends to spend a lot of time outdoors, some of it gathered near the gas grill, our modern outdoor "hearth."

When natural gas became commonplace, many "fireplaces" were equipped with noncombustible imitation logs, around which a gas flame played. Such a fire is no more (or less) toxic or polluting than a gas kitchen range, and so is a possible alternative (although open gas flames should always be vented to the outside).

Substitutes for the Fireplace

Because the hearth bundles together so many elements — sensory pleasure, function, sacred symbolism, community — will its absence leave an irreplaceable gap in the character of a home? There's no intrinsic reason why these

various qualities cannot be broken up and realized in separate ways. In fact, we do this all the time. Here is a list of substitutes for various characteristics of the hearth.

View. Arranging seating around a distant view is a natural idea, often used. A view changes constantly, like a fire, satisfying our visual sense and, by association, other senses as well. We feel especially cozy and secure looking out over a snow-covered landscape or witnessing the passing of a storm.

At night, a view is more problematic because our eyes are adjusted to the interior light level, which is much higher than the light level outside, especially in nonurban settings. Plus, the glass reflects interior light, obscuring the view even more. A thin curtain or carefully arranged interior light can help avoid the empty blackness of a distant view at night.

In the usual case where a long view is not available, a garden makes a fine substitute, carrying with it a large suite of pleasant associations. Where space is limited, the view window can look into an enclosed outdoor garden (see Figure 1). In the daytime, wind, rain, snow, birds, and insects enliven the scene, and it can be effectively lit at night.

Moving elements. Elements that move can partially substitute for the pleasant action of a fire. An indoor fountain provides an active visual focus, with the added enjoyments of sound and humidity. Hescong, discussing both heating and cooling in her book about thermal experience,



Figure 1. Enclosed gardens provide a pleasant focus during the day and, when carefully lit, at night. The display case on the left holds delicate objects of visual interest and replicates the ceremonial quality of a fireplace.

writes at length about the importance of fountains in hot climates. Surely the vestigial fireplaces in southern California condos would be better replaced by fountains, as in fact they sometimes are.

Because they move and are extremely interesting, confined animals can help make up for the missing fire. A well-lit aquarium provides endless visual interest, and can become the focus for a whole house or apartment. Although maintenance is high, terrariums with plants, snakes, birds, or small rodents can be a wonderful focus, adding warmth and sound to the mix.

Sacred centers. Many people have collections of beautiful things, which if displayed at sitting eye level, next to a seating group, can replicate the ceremonial quality of a fireplace. Alternatively, an indoor plant collection makes a wonderful visual focus.

The Japanese invented the Tokonoma, a niche built to contain pictures, objects, and flower arrangements for contemplation and veneration (Figure 2). The niche creates a focus and implies that its contents have special meaning. If well designed, such a niche could become a sacred center for the house. I don't think a single painting or portrait works as a focus, but a well-arranged collection of pictures might supply enough visual interest to do the trick.

The Real Sacred Center

Of course, we know all too well what the real sacred center of our cul-



Figure 2. The Japanese Tokonoma is a built-in niche that can serve as a substitute for the fireplace and hearth. It gives this room a "sacred center" where precious objects are offered for contemplation and veneration.

ture is — the television. Yet many families resist acknowledging the TV as the focus of the home. TV is a very poor substitute for reality and takes away the most important function of the hearth — hospitality.

Our other shared medium, the stereo, cannot be said to provide a focus. Even when paying rapt attention to the emanations from a radio or CD, one needs a visual focus other than woofers and tweeters.

Other activities and places. The sauna, whirlpool bath, heated swimming pool, or public bath serve a very similar function to the hearth, encouraging congeniality combined with warmth and relaxation. However, without a dramatic change in living habits, this option is reserved for special occasions, selected climates and

seasons, and a few unusual households.

In warm weather, a screened porch equipped with a porch swing is a fine substitute for the hearth. In my family, we eat most of our summer meals by candlelight on our screened porch, on occasion regally entertained by an evening thunderstorm.

We can surely give up fireplaces in our homes, because there are many ways to re-establish a focus. Yet I hope that in places like restaurants, libraries, and ski lodges, fireplaces persist. Perhaps sharing the warm communion of a hearth will become a more cherished experience for all of us when we take it less for granted. ■

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