

Fireplace Surrounds

by Katie Hutchison

Though many elements factor into the making of a successful fireplace, one of the most important is the design of the surround. The challenge is to marry the appropriate surround to the fireplace's context. There are essentially two types of surrounds: the *hole-in-the-wall* treatment and the *focal* treatment. Each suits a different set of conditions as defined by the room's use and mood. The hole-in-the-wall surround suits a fireplace that is one element among many within a multifaceted wall. It works best as part of an active, multi-functional space. The focal surround befits a fireplace that is a central feature in a quiet, more static room.

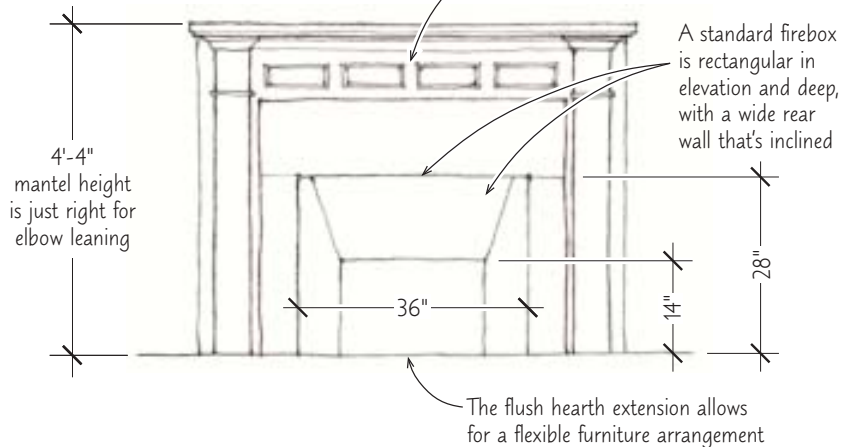
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Traditional Wood Surround With Standard Firebox

FOCAL FIREPLACE

A traditional wooden surround can be used on either a chimney breast or a flat wall. Its static stand-alone design works as the focus of a quiet sitting room, living room, or bedroom.

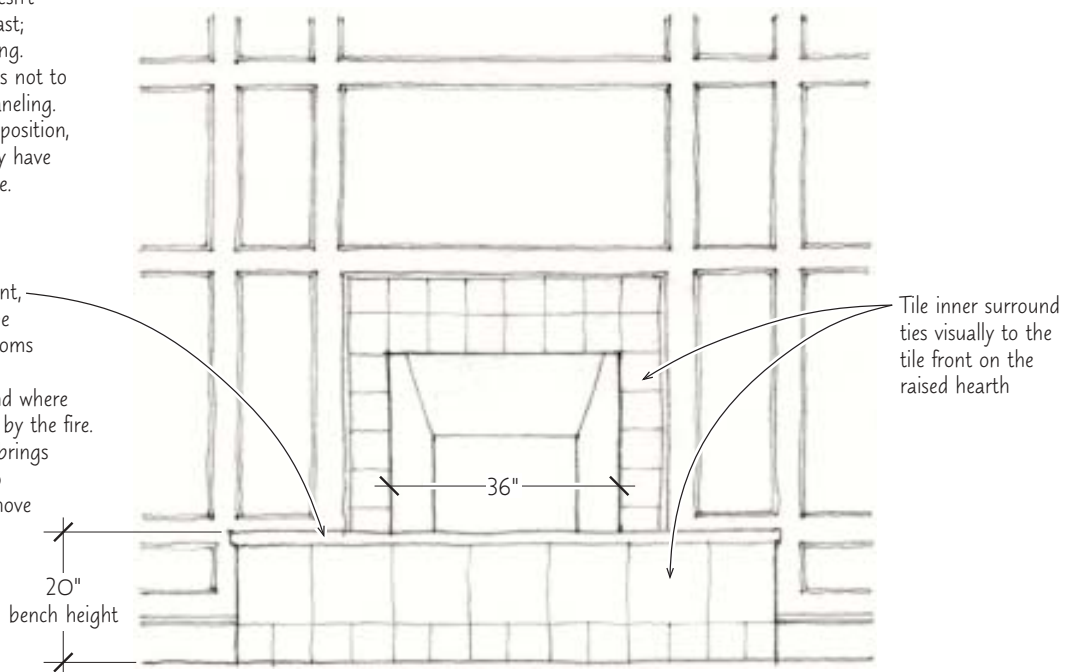
A simple mantel and wood surround frame a stone inner surround. The traditional treatment highlights the fireplace as focal point.



HOLE-IN-THE-WALL FIREPLACE

A hole-in-the-wall fireplace doesn't stand alone on a chimney breast; it is to be appreciated in passing. Often there is no mantel, so as not to interrupt the rhythm of the paneling. As part of an overall wall composition, the firebox does not necessarily have to be centered within the space.

Although a raised hearth and hearth extension might cramp a furnished seating arrangement, the height of the hearth can be an asset in activity-oriented rooms like kitchens or family rooms, which have high circulation and where one might pause momentarily by the fire. The raised hearth height also brings the firebox somewhat closer to eye level when you're on the move or standing at a counter. Appropriately, this surround is less static than a fireplace that's the central focus of a sitting room.

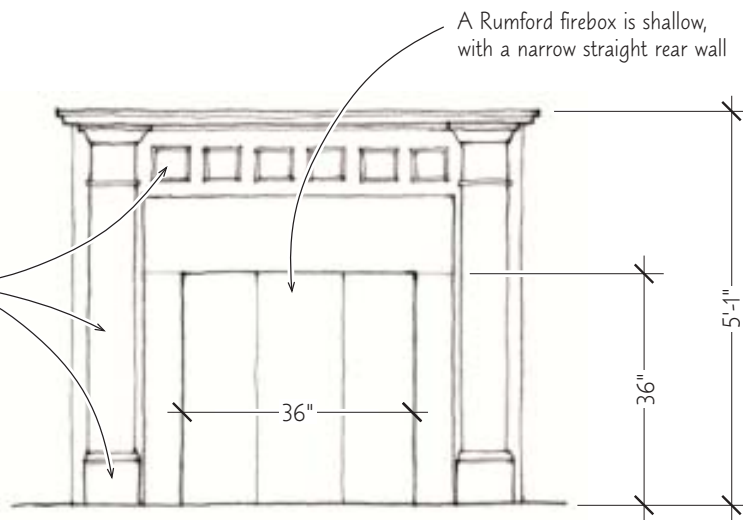


Traditional Wood Surround With a Rumford Firebox

FOCAL FIREPLACE

Developed at the end of the 18th century, the Rumford is known for efficient heating and a square firebox opening, which appears tall when augmented with a mantel and surround. The Rumford's height suits larger spaces and implies a certain grandeur.

Since the proportions of this firebox opening differ from those of the standard firebox, the traditional wood surround used here is modified. Inset panels are changed from rectangles to squares, the pilasters are widened to remain proportional to the increased height, and base trim is added to further refine the look.

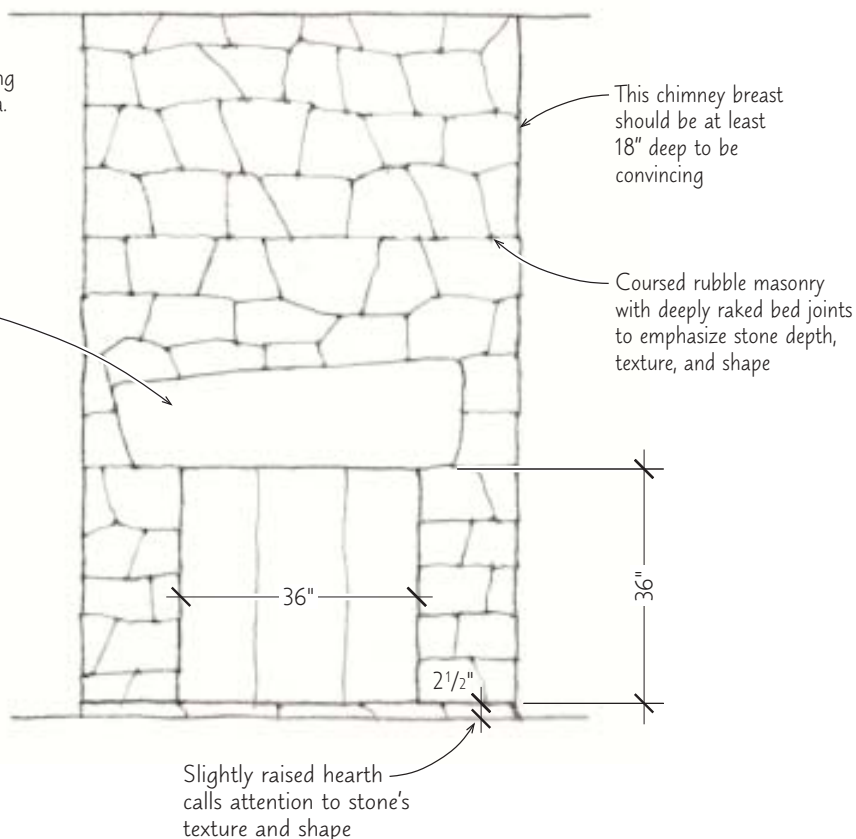


Stone Chimney Breast With Rumford Firebox

FOCAL FIREPLACE

A full-height stone surround suits a large entertaining space that's not overwhelmed by its scale and drama. Its mass and sculptural quality make it the undisputed focus of any room it occupies.

Though this stone is likely a thick veneer, the stone lintel is key to its visual success. Had multiple stones been placed across the top (with the aid of a steel angle), this fireplace would be unconvincing and would appear to defy standard tectonics. The stone lintel lends it some authenticity.

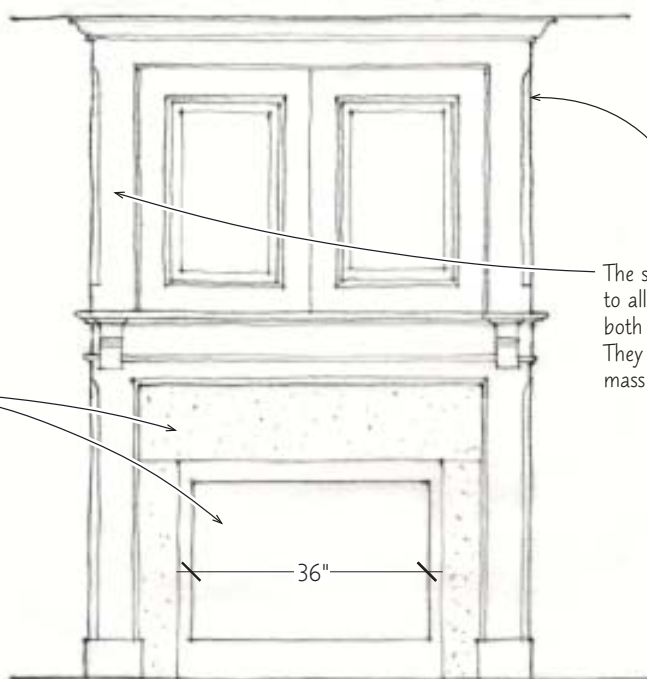


Inner Stone Surround With Wood Cabinet Above

FOCAL FIREPLACE

This chimney breast includes a TV cabinet above a direct-vent prefab firebox, making it the central focus for both TV viewing and flame gazing. It's a cross between a traditional wooden surround on a masonry firebox and an armoire. While it's not for everyone, if properly detailed it's a successful hybrid that works well in a family room.

A metal zero-clearance firebox with stone surround suggests a masonry firebox. Some manufacturers have recently developed units that are more convincing, with flush hearths and sheet-metal fronts that can be completely concealed under the finish treatment.

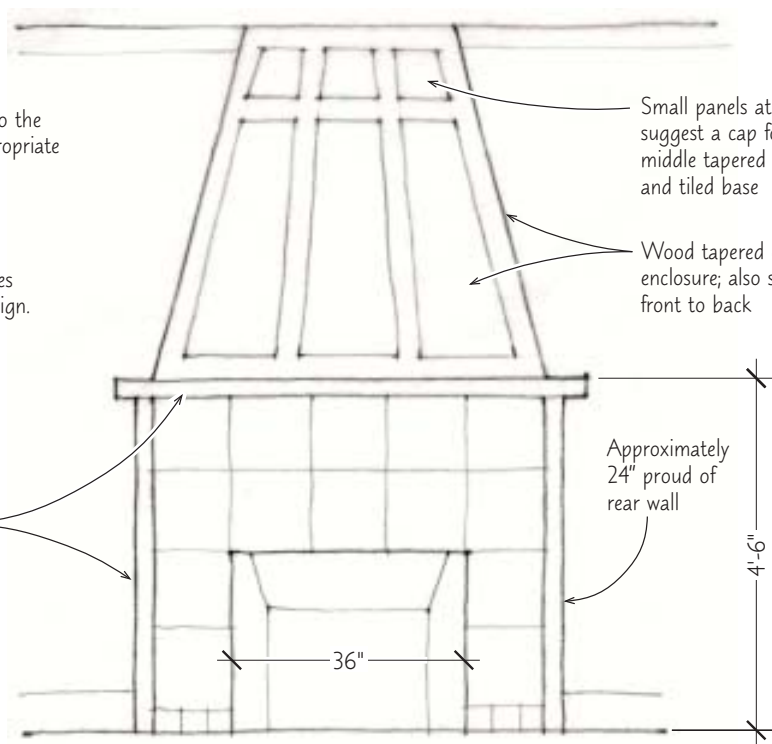


The surround is wide enough to allow for shallow shelves on both ends of the chimney breast. They help reduce the overall mass of the cabinetry.

Contemporary Tile and Wood

FOCAL FIREPLACE

This is an eclectic, whimsical approach to the fireplace as focal point; it would be appropriate for an informal or contemporary space. The tapered chimney enclosure lends a sculptural quality while reducing the overall volume of the fireplace. Pared-down detailing and large-scale tiles accentuate the bold, straightforward design.



Small panels at the top suggest a cap for the middle tapered panels and tiled base

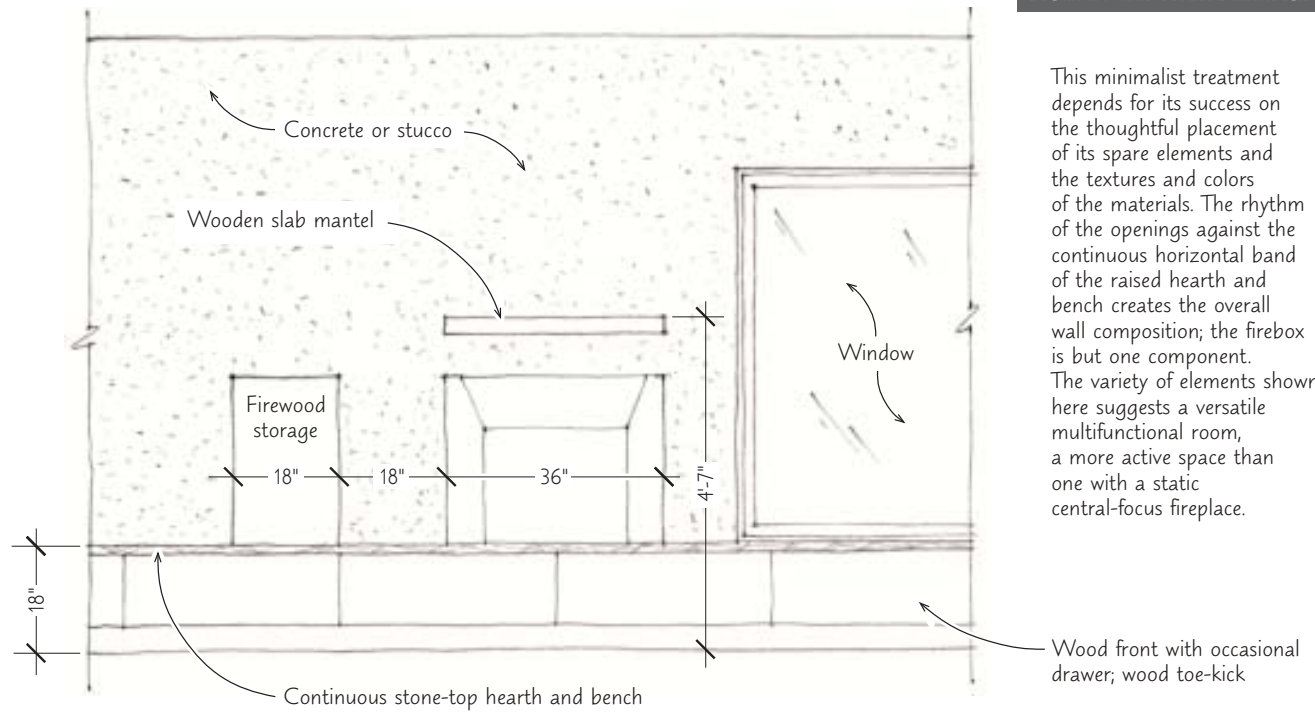
Wood tapered chimney enclosure; also slopes front to back

Approximately 24" proud of rear wall

Wood mantel and side panels frame the tile surround

Concrete or Stucco Surround

HOLE-IN-THE-WALL FIREPLACE



This minimalist treatment depends for its success on the thoughtful placement of its spare elements and the textures and colors of the materials. The rhythm of the openings against the continuous horizontal band of the raised hearth and bench creates the overall wall composition; the firebox is but one component. The variety of elements shown here suggests a versatile multifunctional room, a more active space than one with a static central-focus fireplace.

