

Backfill

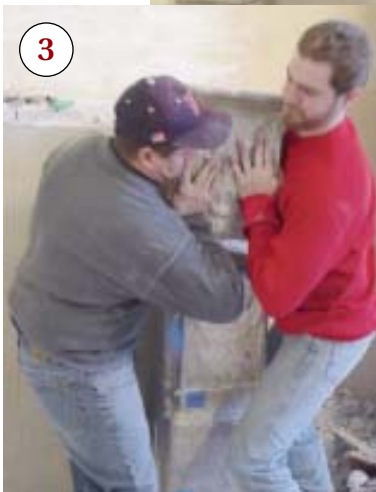
How to Dismantle a 400-Year-Old Fireplace (Very Carefully)

by Mike DeBlasio

There is currently a major expansion and remodeling program taking place at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. My crew and I were called upon to assist Louise Freedman of L.H. Freedman Studios in taking apart one of the exhibits, an ornate sixteenth-century

French limestone fireplace front (shown here with a numerical scheme superimposed on it to catalog the disassembly [1]). When it was installed as an exhibit in 1947, the soft and fragile limestone was backed up with sand-lime brickwork. It was our job to remove this backing, first by drilling holes in the brick to relieve any pressure exerted against the limestone, then by chipping away with a small rotary hammer.

Once the brick was removed, we inserted plastic and wooden wedges into the bed joints to break the mortar bond [2]. With individual sculpted blocks thus freed, we could gingerly lift them one at a time from the assembly and place them on pallets to await packing and storage [3, 4]. Most blocks weighed between 120 and 160 pounds, although a couple of segments checked in at 600 pounds each.



Once its new home is completed, we expect to be called back in to reinstall the fireplace, using different techniques to ensure its continued preservation. So far, we've spent about 10 days on this project and have had a great learning experience along the way.

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