

Change of Hearth

Simple Makeovers Can Light Up a Fireplace

By ANNIE GROER
Washington Post Staff Writer

Designers often say a fireplace is the focal point of a room. But if yours leaves you cold, take heart. Giving it a facelift can be easier and cheaper than you think.

Cerphe Colwell and his wife, Susan, were bowled over by the five-level townhouse overlooking a lake in Reston they bought two years ago. But they were utterly underwhelmed by the wimpy white mantelpiece and glass-and-brass doors on the builder's original model.

"I wanted something big. I'm thinking Stonehenge," says Cerphe Colwell, the pioneering underground and new-music radio DJ who is now heard on "World Class Rock" (94.7 FM). So after moving in, the couple sketched a more massive fireplace in the soaring great room, then called in Concrete Jungle, a fabricator in Frederick, to cast

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them a new one. Total cost: about \$3,200, says company owner Kelly Carr.

Similarly, Tom and Sandy Ross Jones couldn't bear the "old-fashioned" floor-to-ceiling brick fireplace of their '50s Alexandria rambler, despite the attempt by an earlier occupant to disguise it with white paint. So as part of a 2003 renovation, they had contractors sheath the brick in drywall, paint the whole thing celadon green to match the adjacent living room walls and add a sleek black granite surround and hearth. Total cost: under \$1,500.

In both cases, there was nothing really wrong with the original fireplaces — except the owners didn't like them. And the makeovers drew raves. "We were completely surprised at how this simple, inexpensive change made such a huge difference in the room," says Sandy Ross Jones, an event planner.

Josh Baker, president of **Bowa Builders** in McLean, has seen hundreds of facelift candidates in this area. "A lot of the time, the brick is not attractive. Certain styles have changed, or you see an entire wall of brick. For a while there were also these firebox cubbies for wood storage. People tend to be

getting away from that."

In one Great Falls home, he says, a floor-to-ceiling brick fireplace with two built-in niches was completely transformed: The firebox was given an earthy fieldstone surround; on either side, identical wood cabinets and doors were added, with a small window cut over each cabinet. One cupboard now houses the sound system; the other conceals access to the woodpile outside the house. Total cost: \$10,000.

Dated brick is not the only problem Baker cites. "Particularly in '70s and '80s houses, you had big, thick rustic beams applied to the wall as a mantel shelf, and those are out of favor," he says. "We take them off and replace them with something traditional, or nothing at all."

Decorative woodwork often is good solution, whether it's a simple, ready-made mantelpiece or elaborate custom work. "In a more masculine den, we'll stain the millwork. For a traditional look, we'll paint it," Baker says.

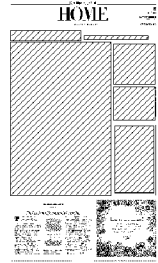
Designer Chad Alan of Washington has performed a number of personality transplants on unloved fireplaces. For one project in Potomac, he left the existing mantel and shelf in place but added vertical panels of custom millwork from mantel to ceiling to draw the eye upward. Everything was painted white, and sconces were installed to flank a pair of vivid botanical prints. Total cost, with lighting: \$1,800.

Alan also likes to use mirrors to cover the fireplace surround, the space between the firebox opening and the mantel. "They provide a flash of light, they reflect color, they look really great and they don't cost very much," he says.

Laytonsville designer Dana Tydings has mirrored the surround on two of her own fireplaces. She calls this the "second-cheapest way" to go because silvered glass with a polished edge starts at about \$9 a square foot, and even a sliver can pack a punch.

She is also a fan of the very cheapest: a \$50 paint-over that involves little more than a coat or two on the bricks and/or mantel, as well as the firebox interior.

"The easiest thing to do is to paint the mantel and the brick a beautiful white," she



says, conceding that “everyone freaks out at painting brick” until she explains how dramatic and economical it is. Equally simple is painting the bricks the same color as the walls — Tuscan yellow or very pale latte, perhaps, “but not baby blue, for God’s sake. . . And always keep the mantel the same color as the trim, or refinish and urethane a natural wood mantel.”

Another frugal fix is to replace the small terra cotta tiles used on hearths in many older houses. A single slab of natural stone creates a more sophisticated, upscale look with minimal construction.

Ilkem Marble and Granite of Lorton charges \$35 a square foot installed for its lowest grade of granite remnant (a full-size piece runs about \$45 per square foot installed). An area four feet long by two feet wide costs \$280 for materials and labor, plus \$150 to demolish and remove the old tiles, says office manager Jackie Davis. That’s \$430 for a complete change of hearth.

But as with all interior design projects, prices can go up and up depending on the scope of the work and cost of materials.

For one radical metamorphosis from traditional to contemporary, Tydings removed a dark wooden mantel, shelf and tiled hearth, then covered a six-by-eight-foot section of wall with 24-by-24-inch porcelain tiles at \$11 a square foot. She chose a tile that mimics pricier limestone, which runs about \$14 per square foot. Total cost: \$1,750.

“Always use porcelain rather than ceramic tile,” Tydings cautions. “It’s much stronger. It’s what they use in hotel lobbies.”

In Old Town Alexandria, spouses and political duelists Mary Matalin (the rabid Republican) and James Carville (the die-hard Democrat) sought interior drama from designers Ed Bouchard and Bud Yeck of the Mill Co. The makeover included refacing all the fireplaces, including something muscular enough to anchor a vivid coral living room, which is featured in the January 2008 edition of *Architectural Digest*.

The designers swapped out a “typical Colonial wood surround with dentil molding” for the high drama of a limestone mantel-piece with an undulating crosspiece to “improve the architecture of the space,” Bouchard says. The stone mantel cost \$4,300; a new granite surround and hearth, labor and other items brought the total to \$10,400.

“It’s like a great piece of jewelry that makes an outfit. It is hugely dramatic,” Matalin says. “Designers say start with the rug. I say start with the fireplaces.”

FIREPLACE FACELIFTS

\$ Under \$300

- Paint the existing brick and/or the interior of the firebox. (For the latter, use high-heat paint.)
- Replace a worn or dated fire screen and tools to harmonize with other furnishings.

\$\$ Under \$1,000

- Replace a damaged or dated tile hearth with a slab of slate, granite or other stone.
- Add a new or vintage fireplace surround or mantel, or replace one that is outdated or poorly proportioned. Sources for ready-made surrounds and mantel shelves include Home Depot (www.homedepot.com) and www.fireplacemantels.com. For antique surrounds, mantels and mirrors, try both Brass Knob locations in the District (www.thebrassknob.com).

\$\$\$ Under \$5,000

- Box in the existing brick or stone with drywall and paint.
- Enlarge and reface the surround and/or mantel with simple custom carpentry, porcelain or limestone tiles, mirror, stone (real or fake) or poured concrete.

\$\$\$\$ Over \$5,000

- Face the entire fireplace with exotic stone or elaborate custom millwork.
- Acquire an antique fireplace surround, preferably ornately carved marble or rare wood from a centuries-old French chateau, English manor house or Italian villa.



Cerphe and Susan Colwell wanted a great fireplace for the great room of their Reston home. So they called in a concrete fabricator.



PHOTOS BY LEN SPODEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

"I wanted something big. I'm thinking Stonehenge," said Cerphe Colwell, and \$3,200 later, the fireplace was done, a dramatic change from the builder's original.

Crackling With Ideas

For fireplace facelift ideas, check out "Fire Spaces: Design Inspirations for Fireplaces and Stoves," by Tina Skinner (Schiffer Publishing, 2003, \$34.95).

There are no before pictures but plenty of afters: traditional, modern, super-sleek, McMansion

massive and free-standing diminutive models in great rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, even bathrooms. Ideas come from fireplace manufacturers as well as designers, including Skip Sroka of Sroka Design in Bethesda.

Annie Groer



The Makeover For less than \$1,500, Tom and Sandy Ross Jones replaced their old fireplace, above, with one that blends into the walls of their living room, right.



PHOTO AT LEFT BY TOM JONES; PHOTO ABOVE BY LEN SPODEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



The Makeover Mary Matalin and James Carville turned an understated fireplace, above, into one that suits their vivid living room, right.



PHOTO ABOVE LEFT PROVIDED BY P.A. FORTNER; PHOTO ABOVE BY LEN SPODEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



The Makeover In contrast to Susan and Cerphe Colwell's dramatic new fireplace made of cast concrete, right, their next-door neighbors have kept the original fireplace, left.

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