

Playing with Fire

One way ... ambiance

Conventional design wisdom states that rural log cabins call for more rustic stone fireplaces while a large residence in town deserves a refined blend of brick, paneling and cabinetry.

In a locale like Steamboat Springs, this separation is blurred because of the more rustic, elaborate homes, calling for a blend of the two extremes. So why not think in terms of contextually appropriate materials and texture continuity? More isn't always better.

"Our fireplace complements the design of our house," says Steamboat resident Dustin Garrow. "And the colors in the masonry complement our furniture and fabrics."

Form and placement bring up issues from aesthetics (adjacent windows) to structural (supporting the weight of the stone) to technical (clearance for the vent flue). The fireplace should be a complement to the space. Too big and it can take away from the space. Conversely, a unit that is too small can make a room feel Alice and Wonderlandish. Fireplaces need to be both a centerpiece around which furniture and windows are coordinated, and a passive piece, playing second fiddle to the television.

Breathe a moment. Feel the flow. It's through this symbiotic relationship of man and fire that one achieves balance.

Try this: A massive fireplace unit can be mitigated by articulating the shape and varying materials. Mixing stone, brick, metal, timber, and wood often render a much more pleasing effect than an ubiquitous amount of the same stone. Don't be afraid to take cues from traditional fireplace design to see how different materials work. By distilling the ornamentation of a classic fireplace, you can be left with pleasing shapes and proportions.

The key is to be creative, without going over the top in any one direction.



This Steamboat fireplace enhances the ambiance without overpowering the room ...

and another ... practicality



... While this Steamboat fireplace – in the home of Karl and Bonnie Bunker – enhances the ambiance and the aroma with freshly baked pizza.

Most fireplaces are for burning wood, burning gas or for sitting in front of during long romantic evenings with your hubby. But cooking pizza, too? Brilliant!

Bonnie and Karl Bunker's fireplace not only heats their home west of Steamboat, but doubles as a pizza oven. "We moved in last February and inherited it," Bonnie says. "We didn't do much research so we're still getting used to it."

The Bunker's fireplace is crafted with green soapstone and manufactured by the Finnish company Tulikivi. The company makes single fireplaces with a wood burning feature and the aforementioned slide-in pizza box, or room dividers, where the oven half opens into the kitchen and the atmosphere-enhancing fire into a living room or den.

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Soapstone, also called steatite or soap rock, is a metamorphic talc-schist largely composed of talc. It's highly heat resistant and is found in small deposits all over the world. For centuries, it has been a medium for artistic carving, hence the beautiful look of the outside.

It's also heavy. "We have these huge steel support beams in the basement so it won't go through the floor," Bonnie says.

The family can build a monster fire and it rolls for hours, heating the whole house. "It's super efficient once you get it cranked up," Bonnie says.

If you're using wood to heat, why not make something good to eat?

Brian Hanlen is a local designer and writer.

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