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The modern hearth

A fireplace designed by architectural and interior designers Jessica and Efraim Wichmann, of

A fireplace designed by architectural and interior designers Jessica and Efraim Wichmann, of Zeitgeist Sonoma, in Santa Rosa, Calif., on October 9, 2013. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

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Since Stone Age people kindled the first controlled fires 400,000 years ago for light and cooking, the hearth has been the uncontested heart of the home.

But the recent shift from wood to gas flames is dramatically changing the face of the traditional fireplace.

Freed from its formidable masonry box and the need for big chimneys, the modern fireplace can take on a thousand and one different faces, with more flexibility to move about the room. A fireplace can serve as a visual anchor, or it can be discretely set off to the side or even in a corner.

Fireplaces are also migrating to unlikely rooms, from the kitchen to the bathroom, with one of the latest hot spots the Home Theater, where the gentle flame can create a dramatic lighting scheme.

"We're seeing some very interesting home designs that incorporate fireplaces in many creative new ways," said David Coulson, a spokesman for Napoleon Fireplaces, a manufacturer based in Kentucky. "While the traditional hearth will be a mainstay for many homes, modern fireplaces with crisp lines and glass frames will continue to rise in popularity with new homes and redesigned rooms."

Whole rooms used to be designed around the fireplace, with the hearth dictating everything from the way a room was built to where the furniture was placed.

"We're not seeing that as much any more," said Efraim Wichmann, an architect who partners with his wife, interior designer Jessica Wichmann, in the Santa Rosa company, Zeitgeist Sonoma.

"Many fireplaces are just becoming less opulent, more sleek and more minimalist. It doesn't necessarily have the importance that the hearth used to have. It's more of an additional element in the space."

Gas fireplaces really are modern appliances that can be placed within most walls and turned off and on with a remote control, just like a television. Now they are competing with the large, flat screen TV for honors as the focal point in a room.

In fact, many modern fireplaces have taken on the long, rectangular shape of a TV.

"TVs are objects that glow in the room. It's the same kind of thing visually as a fireplace that we all gather around," said Sonoma architect Bill Willers.

And while they can be stacked, with fireplace on the bottom and TV above it, the heat can harm a television if it is simply hung on the wall. Some homeowners are solving that problem by installing the television into the ceiling with a mechanism that brings it down toward the fireplace only when you want to watch.

"It's like an automatic screen. It's a way to satisfy the client who really wants to see the fireplace a majority of the time," Willers said.

He said it's difficult, if not impossible, to meet air quality regulations with wood-burning fireplaces.

But even old wood-burning fireplaces that remain grandfathered into use despite increasingly tight emission restrictions can be remodeled to take on a sleeker, more modern look.

The Wichmanns took a Plain Jane painted brick fireplace in Santa Rosa and gave it a fresh, contemporary look with a new travertine face next to the softening element of horizontal blocks of light Aframosia wood.

They also created a cozy corner fireplace along an exterior wall for clients in Occidental.

"It's definitely not the focus of the room and yet it's an important element, grounding the corner of the room. It's a family with young kids, and they told me that last Christmas they grabbed pillows and all laid on the floor, all 12 of them, around the fireplace," Wichmann said.

As the gas flame fireplace increasingly becomes the norm, it is changing people's perception of what a fire should look like. The earliest gas fireplaces came equipped with fake logs. Now the

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flame can flicker through other materials.

"People don't need to pretend there are logs in there. You can put glass in it and have a sparkle along with the fire, or you can have stones," Willers said. Or you can even leave it as black bottom.

The flame's changing format has become a decorative focal point of the modern fireplace.

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