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Fireplaces Add Warmth and Value to Canadian Homes

Since people brought fire into their homes in the form of early fireplaces nearly 400 years ago, it has warmed the body and soul and heated many welcome meals. Although the designs of fireplaces have evolved greatly over the years, the charm of a fireplace remains constant.

Fireplaces differ in a variety of ways, including the type of fuel they burn, their construction, and how they are decorated. Older homes usually have a wood-burning fireplace, while newer ones often have a fireplace that burns natural gas. There are also fireplaces that burn wood pellets, and some even burn coal. Many homeowners have upgraded from a wood-burning to a natural gas fireplace to reduce their heating and maintenance costs.

Wood-burning, hand-built, masonry fireplaces have the greatest appeal, thus adding the most value to a home. However, they can cost thousands of dollars to design and build. Masonry fireplaces cost up to 80 percent more than prefabricated units. Prefabricated fireboxes look like masonry and are made of steel.

Natural gas fireplaces appeal to homeowners because of their convenience, and several models are thermostatically-controlled meaning that the user sets the temperature and a sensor adjusts the amount of gas burned. Controlling the temperature with a wood-burning fireplace is difficult, and space is required to store the wood.

The heating capacity of fireplaces is rated in BTUs (British Thermal Units). One BTU is the amount of heat generated by a burning match.

Some people are surprised to learn that a chimney is not required to have a fireplace. Direct-vent fireplaces vent the exhaust through an opening in an outside wall, similar to what is required for a clothes dryer. Vent-free fireplaces are natural gas or propane-burning units, and operate at 99 percent efficiency. However, they are not permitted in some areas, so be sure to check with your provincial and municipal government to determine if they are allowed in your community or strata unit.

If you're planning on building a home, be aware that some designs are very energy efficient and can be heated by a single fireplace. The location of the fireplace and circulating fans is crucial. Consult with a residential architect and fireplace contractor for more information on specific units and their placement.

Another fireplace consideration is maintenance. Burning wood in a fireplace produces creosote vapours, which condense in the relatively cool chimney flue. The creosote residue accumulates on the walls of the chimney and can ignite if a hot ember rises up the flue and touches the residue. The result is an extremely hot fire.

If you regularly use a wood-burning fireplace, have it inspected at least once each heating season for creosote build-up. If detected, have it professionally removed. There are chemical chimney cleaners, which are poured on flames in the fireplace, but experts consider the cleaners to be inadequate and dangerous. Another option is to burn a special log containing compounds that remove build-up. Both of these methods release powerful chemicals some of which mix with the indoor air in your home. Chimney sweeps (cleaning contractors) have the knowledge and experience to properly inspect and clean your fireplace and chimney.

Installing a fireplace in your home, or having the existing one repaired or upgraded is a great investment that adds value to your house. Consult with fireplace professionals and you will have not only warmth for years to come, but also happy memories of many evenings warming by the fire.

**John Price and
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