



Design by Kim Warrington



A Hot New Look

Change your home with a new
fireplace and mantel design

by Sarah Gleim



Photo courtesy of Horchow

Walk into just about any one of Atlanta's older homes and it won't take you long to realize that the fireplace used to be the center of the home. But just because the primary function of these old fireplaces was to generate heat doesn't mean their design took a backseat. Most old fireplaces were flanked by intricately designed mantels making them the focal point of the room.

Today, however, many builders have gotten away from that concept and install simple—even dull—mantels around fireplaces, leaving

them without much character and style. But there are many ways to liven up your fireplace and make it the focal point of your space.

Warm up to a style

Fireplace mantels, like many other architectural elements, are available in just about any style imaginable—everything from the simple lines of the Arts and Crafts style to the elaborate designs of the Victorian period.

There are companies that specialize in creating mantels made of everything from custom wood, stone, marble and reclaimed wood to natural limestone and poured concrete. According to Jenny Thomas, a designer and owner of Habersham Home in Buckhead and Highland Home in Virginia Highland, you can use just about anything to create a unique mantel. "I've even seen a Cadillac bumper made into a mantel," she says. "Any architectural element can be used as a mantel." She says places like Lakewood Antiques Market and Scott Antique Market are great for finding old and unique mantels.

While car bumpers are certainly not at the top of the list of popular materials, Thomas says wood is the most common material, followed by stone. "Wood is a really common basic, pre-made mantel for an old fireplace," she says. "Cast stone and limestone are also popular." ●

A photograph of a fireplace mantel. The mantel is made of light-colored stone or marble with a decorative, arched top. On the mantel, there are three ceramic flowers arranged vertically in the center. Each flower is dark blue with a reddish-brown center. On either side of the flowers are two tall, clear glass vases. Each vase is filled with a mix of orange and green citrus fruits (like lemons and limes) and topped with dried, dark-colored flowers. Below the mantel is a fireplace opening with a decorative tile surround featuring a repeating floral pattern. A metal fire screen with a diamond lattice pattern is in front of the fireplace. In the bottom left corner, there is a small arrangement of pink flowers and a lit candle in a glass holder. In the bottom right corner, there is a small red and orange patterned object.

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Photo courtesy of The Mantel Market

Start from scratch

If you want a complete overhaul, the most important thing to consider when choosing a new mantel, Thomas says, is the style of the room you're working in. You wouldn't want to install a Louis XV-style mantel in a room unless the room could truly accommodate that look. "I'm working


on a project right now in a Craftsman-style dining room and we are using a simple Arts and Crafts mantel because we don't want anything to take away from the room's existing architecture," she says. "The room is artwork in itself."

On the other hand, master craftsman John Meunier, a custom mantel maker and owner of The Mantel Market, says the mantel becomes a very important architectural part of a room and house. "Because you have a Tudor-style home doesn't mean you have to have all Tudor-style mantels," he says. "No matter what you have, if it's done correctly, it's going to make a statement."

Next to choosing the right style of your mantel, measuring is equally important. Whether you're buying a reclaimed piece or having a mantel custom built, measuring properly is critical in scaling the mantel so proportions are exact.

"Scaling is a style of its own," Meunier says. "If the mantel is not scaled properly, you'll know it. It can't be way too big or way too small." Ideally, the space necessary for the mantel on the wall should be at least twice the width of the firebox opening. "For example, a 36-inch firebox should have 72-inch wall without any obstructions such as door openings, window casings or bookshelves," he says. "It's also critical to measure the size of the room, the height of the ceiling and the size of the firebox."

Fire safety is another essential aspect to choosing the right mantel. Meunier says it is extremely critical ●



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Photo courtesy of Mantel Arts Group LC

to build the mantel to fire code, which generally requires a minimum of 8 inches on either side and 12 inches on the top of the firebox for non-combustible materials such as marble, slate, tile or brick, generally referred to as the fireplace surround.

Make simple changes

If you're satisfied with the look of your home's mantel and fireplace, but want to give it a fresher, more updated look, Thomas says the easiest thing to do is paint. "You can revive an outdated brick fireplace surround with fresh paint," she says. "Choose an accent color a shade darker than your wall color so the brick blends in nicely." Dated brass insert fireplaces

also can be spray painted with a high-temperature paint to give them a more current look.

Just as there are mantel styles to suit every taste, when it comes to decorating that mantel, the sky is the limit. And you don't have to have a large budget to create a striking focal point as long as you have balance.

If your first inkling is to center a favorite painting or mirror over the fireplace, remember you can add a twist to the look by propping it against the wall rather than hanging it. Thomas suggests even hanging it slightly off center. "It will work as long as you balance it out with something else like tall candles or a high arrangement." The traditional symmetrical mantel display—centering one item on or above the mantel (like a painting) and flanking it with a series of identical items (vases, for example) on either side—also works well, especially in a formal space.

You also can try grouping several lightweight items on one side of your mantel (like several small votive candles) and balance them with one single heavier item (like a mantel clock or mirror) on the other side.

And when it comes to displaying artwork, don't feel limited to using only paintings. "A 3-D sculpture ... would be great over a mantel," Thomas says. You also can find simple architectural elements, such as ironwork, at local flea markets and display them over a fireplace. Lighting also is important, so utilize candles and spotlights whenever possible. After all, the fireplace is the room's focal point and you'll want to emphasize that as much as possible. ●

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Make your Mantel Marvelous

- Consider the bones of the fireplace and the mantel itself. Address the architecture of the fireplace and mantel first. Ask yourself:

Are the colors harmonizing with the rest of your home?

Is the proportion good for the size of the room?

Does the style work with the direction of the rest of the house?

Are the areas flanking the fireplace and mantel supporting a balanced feel?

- It is very important to have enough visual weight to balance the fireplace below and the

other side of the room. Depending on your space, this could call for hanging a vertical or horizontal series of two or more pieces. Sometimes a collection of objects grouped together will be a good way to show off the personality of your home.

- A general rule of thumb is to hang the art no higher than 12 inches above the mantel. If your piece of art is out of balance by hanging it at that distance, then it may be too small.
- When accessorizing, a symmetrical composition is more traditional; often a pair of topiaries, or

something with that shape, works well. Keep the side pieces about two-thirds the height of the art.

- With an asymmetrical display, the objects in the group may be related in texture or color or subject, but the overall composition should be balanced, even though you have more things on one side of the mantel than the other.

- Don't use very small goodies on the mantel; save them for a taller chest. Mantel accessories should have some size to them.

Source: Rachel Lichtenwalter, ASID

Accessorize Your Mantel



MANTEL MEASUREMENTS



- 1 total height
- 2 opening height
- 3 opening width
- 4 shelf width
- 5 body width
- 6 leg width at base
- 7 leg depth at base



Photos courtesy of Habersham Homes

Photo courtesy of Mantel Arts Group LC

Editorial Resources are on page 144.