

# Drafty Fireplaces Meet Their Match

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS

When James and Maryam Shapland need to tend the living-room fire this winter, they'll reach for a remote control instead of the iron tongs.

With cold weather approaching, the Shaplands are relieved to have finally plugged up the wood-burning fireplace in their 1940s Minnesota home—what Ms. Shapland called their energy-inefficient hole in the wall. Its replacement: a gas-fired unit that resembles a flat-screen TV with flames dancing along a bed of flat ceramic stones.

The new Heat & Glo "Cosmo" gas unit, which cost \$4,500 installed and is operated by remote-control thermostat, "warms the room up immediately," she says. A fireplace "didn't actually make the house warm unless you were standing right next to it."

A growing number of homeowners are looking to the hearth as a supplemental heat source to their houses' main furnaces or boilers, sometimes using them to heat individual rooms instead of the entire home. But many are discovering that the romantic crackle of an open fire doesn't actually add much sizzle to energy savings. Some, like the Shaplands, are making changes by inserting new, efficient appliances into existing fireplace openings. Others are buying standalone units that sit in the middle of the room and swivel 180 degrees, or hang like a painting on the wall.

After a difficult 2009 when home building stagnated, manufacturers say fresh designs and novel fuel options are helping drive sales, particularly in existing homes.

Take the \$10,900 EcoSmart Fire "Zeta"—a portable 42"-wide leather, stainless-steel and plywood fireplace that's fueled by bioethanol and resembles a giant Apple MacBook. Or the \$5,998 Quadra-Fire "Edge 60" from **Hearth & Home Technologies** of



The Fire Company Pty. Ltd.

The \$10,900 EcoSmart Fire 'Zeta' is a leather, stainless-steel and plywood fireplace fueled by bioethanol. It rotates on a swivel base.

Lakeville, Minn. It's a sleek, prefabricated fireplace with a sealed door that can run on fuels ranging from compressed wood pellets to sunflower seeds and wheat kernels.

"We just dump in a bag of pellets in the morning and it burns through the day," says Janette Eggiman who installed an "Edge 60" in her Roseburg, Ore., home last year. "It's clean and easy."

Even for those heating with old-fashioned wood, there's a widening array of updated appliances bearing scant resemblance to your grandfather's pot belly stove. Sales of items from the contemporary "eurocollection" are up 10% to 15% this year at **HearthStone Quality Home Heating**

Products Inc. in Morrisville, Vt. That includes its "Bari" wood stove that rotates to allow a view of the flames from different rooms. "These are real efficient," says **HearthStone** president Dave Kuhfahl, "But they are also fun to watch like a light show."

Open fireplaces were a staple before the days of centralized heating. There are 28 of them in the White House alone. Starting in the 1950s, manufacturers began supplanting masons' role in fireplace-building with pre-fabricated units that could be easily put in during new construction, according to the **Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association**, and some 44% the nation's households now have at least

*Please turn to page D4*



# Hearths Get Modern Makeover

Continued from page D1  
one fireplace.

But while they are pleasant for ambiance, most open, wood-burning fireplaces today are about 10% efficient, with the majority of the wood's energy going up the chimney, according to the hearth association. An open fire also feeds on room air and can actually draw heat out of a home.

Consumers are increasingly upgrading to closed units that burn with efficiency of 75% or higher. The federal government is encouraging the switch with a tax credit of 30% of the cost of the installed new stove, up to \$1,500, for some efficient units burning renewable biomass materials such as wood and pellets. It expires Dec. 31.

Andrew Weiss took advantage of the credit this spring when he and his partner Marc Osterweil installed a modern wood-burning stove insert from Danish manufacturer Morso into their 105-year-old home's fireplace. "At first we loved it," Mr. Weiss says of the old fireplace. But as fuel costs rose, "I began to wish it were a source of heat versus a source of expense."

Inserts such as Mr. Weiss's function like an efficient free-standing stove and are modified to fit inside the firebox of an existing fireplace. Room air flowing between the insert and its shell is warmed and sent outward by natural convection or a blower. Inserts also can run on natural gas, propane, pellets or other fuels, as long as there's proper venting.

Until recently, design woes have challenged the industry, with consumers balking against buying ill-fitting units that stuck out into a room and required thick trim to hide gaps.

In response, many manufacturers have put units on a diet, constructing them to lie flush against hearth openings and adding materials such as crystals and glass, to replace the fake logs in gas-powered units.

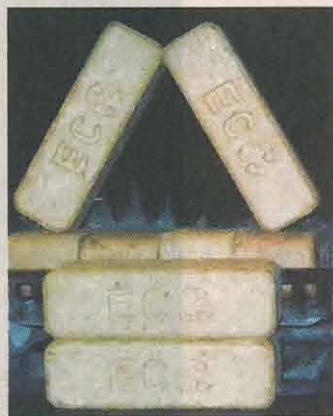
"While heat is important, our clients want design first," says Niels Wittus, who co-owns Wittus Inc., a Pound Ridge, N.Y., hearth importer and retailer with more than 100 dealers in the U.S. "If they don't like the way it looks, they won't buy it."

Some of the more avant-garde options function almost like art. In recent months,



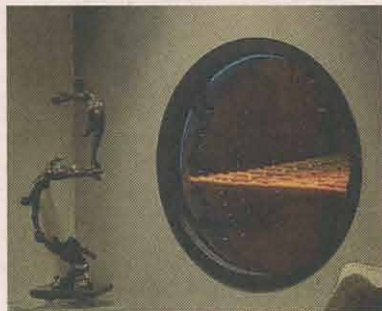
◀ The 'Retro' fireplace by **EcoSmart Fire** runs on bioethanol and can be custom cast in a variety of colors.

▼ This wood-burning stove from Danish manufacturer **Morso** features an expanded fire-viewing window.



▲ Compressed bricks of recycled wood fibers such as these '**Mojobricks**' are gaining in popularity.

▶ The Heat & Glo '**Solaris 36 MR**' is a \$13,999 gas fireplace that projects a six-foot deep illusion of flame.



Hearth & Home Technologies began selling the "Solaris," a \$13,999 gas fireplace that is built into a wall, radiates a toasty 30,000 British thermal units of heat and projects a six-foot deep illusion of flame. Decoflame USA in Gardena, Calif., last year began selling fireplaces that hang like flat-screen TVs, need no venting and are powered on bioethanol derived from beets, sugarcane and corn.

While customers typically buy such units for ambiance, "people are surprised by the heat they give off," up to 9,800 BTUs or enough to lift a 400 square-foot room's temperature by about five to eight degrees, says Tim Lane, Decoflame director of sales and marketing.

Even time-tested wood is getting a makeover. One alternative: pre-made compressed bricks of recycled wood fibers

that are sold in bundles or large pallets and engineered to burn hotter and more consistently without the hassle and mess of split logs.

Sales of two-pound Bio-Bricks made by Biopellet LLC in Berlin, Conn., have regularly doubled or tripled each year since their 2005 launch. Upstart Mando LLC in Chicago says it has sold almost 25,000 cases of its Mojobricks since the product's launch last year.

"We're shocked how many people have wood appliances but are burning these bricks," says Anthony Drago, manager of Ashleigh's Hearth & Home in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

**WSJ.com**

**ONLINE TODAY:** See a video about some of the newest designs in fireplaces at [WSJ.com/RealEstate](http://WSJ.com/RealEstate).