

## Cozy by the fireplace

■ A hearth is always in demand in cold weather, and homeowners are now installing them in every part of the house

BY JOHN BYRD  
SPECIAL TO THE FAIRFAX COUNTY TIMES

For cold-weather comfort and panache, there's no substitute for a fireplace.

"They've never fallen out of favor," says David Foster, president of Foster Remodeling Solutions. "We may be seeing a preference for gas over a traditional wood-burner, but the hearth itself is hugely popular - with homeowners continually seeking distinctions in style, building materials and, even, where it will be located."

Foster says he's currently working on several home remodeling projects that feature a fireplace as an interior focal point.

"A fireplace offers both aesthetic and functional benefits at one price," he adds. "So it's an attractive option."

Fireplace-desire can also be a spur to creative thinking that stimulates a more engaging and original remodeling project.

Case in point, the interior design solution to a great room recently designed for Ted and Wanda Rogers.

The Rogers asked Foster to renovate the circa-1960s ranch they had occupied for 30 years.

The remodeler added over 1,000 square feet of additional living space. But the question that generated really serious discussion was how best to introduce a new hearth.

Wanda wanted to eliminate the original builder-grade brick-facing fireplace, which was situated in the middle of the house and too drafty and cold.

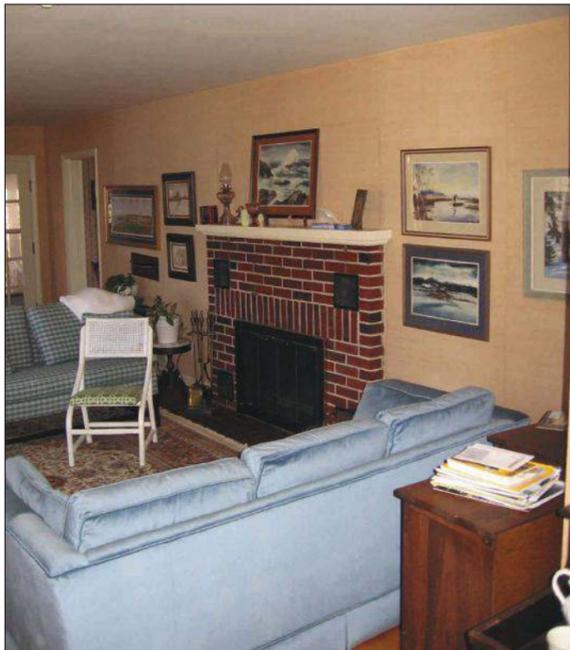
Ted agreed in principal, but was attracted to a gas-fueled fireplace alternative, which offers considerable heating efficiencies.

As all soon learned, however, the existing 8-foot ceiling to the Rogers home was too low to yield much design benefit. That's when Foster proposed re-working the entire mid-house interior by opening sightlines out and up.

To implement changes that now called for connecting the new kitchen to a front-facing family room, the remodeler replaced an obstructive bearing wall with concealed structural supports.

Giving sightlines free reign, likewise, meant removing the living room ceiling and shelling-in previously concealed roofing rafters.

An ascending vertical accent was now introduced: a floor-to-ceiling hearth constructed of dry, stacked LedgeStone.



**BEFORE:** The original brick-facing fireplace was drafty and cold.

The new hearth is designed for a gas-fueled insert equipped with blowers and remote control. Vents draw air in from the outside. The couple can even adjust a thermostat for the desired temperature. This is useful since, at full speed, the unit can generate 55,000 BTUs of heat, enough to keep the entire great room toasty and warm even during the dead of winter.

Foster's architect proposed a wood-trimmed ledge above the fireplace - a simple motif that draws the eye upwards to the accent-lighted vaulted ceiling.

As a housewarming gesture, Foster fashioned a rustic mantle from the rough-sawn oak previously deployed in the rafters of the original structure; a little keepsake of the old place.

Though higher interior ceilings, theoretically, make a room harder to heat, the remodeler re-insulated the ceiling and installed eco-slate roofing, dramatically improving the thermal efficiency of the entire residence.

The new fireplace is flanked by arches: a recess for shelving and cabinetry on the left; a sympathetically curvilinear entry to the new master suite on the right.

"The effect in all directions is exciting," Wanda Rogers observes. "Looking in from the kitchen, the room opens out and up; it feels really warm."

The new vaulted wall expanse also doubles as display space for Wanda's private art collection, which is now illuminated by track lights.

### Family-gathering niche

Meanwhile, in nearby McLean, a Foster client was looking for a floor plan re-configuration that would include a front-facing family-gathering niche with a window wall and a

fireplace.

"We all saw the aesthetic opportunity," Foster recalls. "There would be larger windows on all sides, but also a new front-facing family room with an 11-foot cathedral ceiling dominated by an extensive window wall, and an appropriately post-modern hearth as the central interior focal point."

The window wall would help to contextualize a more symmetrical front elevation—one defined by a processional entrance way with double French glass doors and side-lights.

Taken as a whole, however, the floor plan is functionally a "great room," formed by clever variances in room width and ceiling height differentiated as clearly identified "use" spaces.

"The slightly narrower width confers a degree of intimacy on the family room that suits its purpose," Foster observes. "The hearth, in particular, really defines this."

At 54 inches, the stainless steel hearth features gas burner elements embedded in river rock and functions as both a heat source and an ornamental focal point.

Flanked by open "cubbies" with glass display shelves, cherry wood cabinetry, and a wine rack abutting a wine refrigerator, the built-ins define a functionally separate family entertainment zone that includes wide-screen plasma TV mounted above the fireplace.

A more congenial spot for holiday entertaining is hard to imagine.

### In Vienna

Ed and Kelly Grems of Vienna have worked with Foster on a number of projects over a decade, but held off on upgrading the family room because the family's design process was gestating slowly.

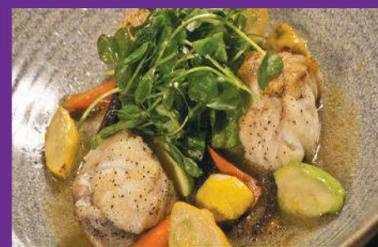
"We're particular; we let the

See HOMES PAGE B-5



PHOTOS COURTESY HOMEFRONTSNEWS

The stacked LedgeStone fireplace designed by Foster Remodeling provides an ascending vertical accent in a remade interior that includes a vaulted ceiling. The gas-fueled flame can be regulated by remote control.



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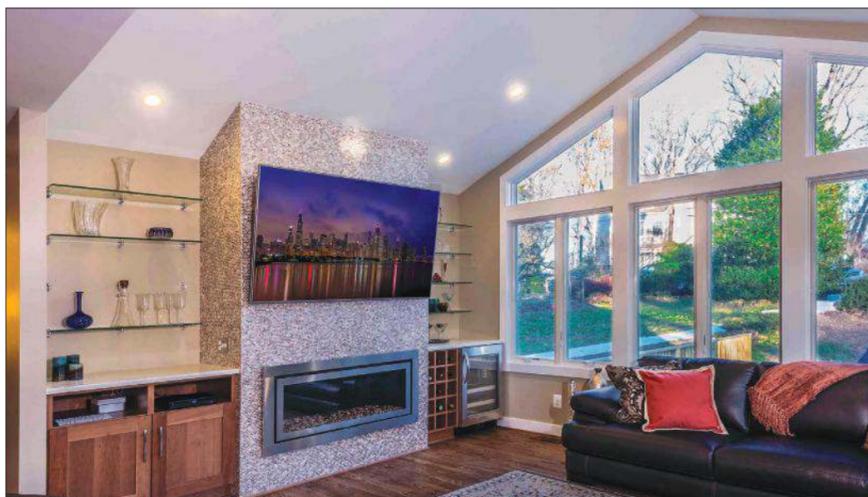
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The McLean makeover features an 11-foot cathedral ceiling dominated by an extensive window wall, and an appropriately post-modern hearth as the central interior focal point.

**HOMES**

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look come to us piece by piece," Kelly Grems says.

One notable piece, was deciding on a formal and traditional look for the fireplace in the family room. In the end, FRS designers created interior elevations that bear no resemblance to the excess of brick that came with the original circa-1990s house.

The earlier half-brick floor-to-ceiling back wall was replaced by perfectly symmetrical built-ins, crown molding and an elevated hearth with a marble surround and an Edwardian-style mantle.

"It's an entirely different mood from the sun room, and [it] perfectly satisfies another dimension of our lifestyle," says Grems.

**New dining room needs hearth**

In a related scenario, a Burke homeowner asked Foster to convert a three season-room into a year-around dining room complete with a gas-fueled hearth on one elevation.

Chris Arnold, a Foster partner who managed the project, knew there would be challenges relative to available space, but with a little



At 54 inches, the stainless steel hearth features gas burner elements embedded in river rock. Flanked by open "cubbies" with glass display shelves, cherry wood cabinetry, and a wine rack abutting a wine refrigerator, the built-ins define a functionally separate family entertainment zone that includes wide-screen plasma TV mounted above the fireplace.

research found a 42-by-38-inch gas insert with an aluminum surround that perfectly suits the wall space between two floor-to-ceiling windows.

"This is something of a formal dining room," Arnold notes.

"Yet the fireplace design is so understated it's visually compatible with the rest of the décor."

Foster Remodeling Solutions periodically offers workshops on home remodeling topics. For information call (703)550-1371, or visit

[www.fosterremodeling.com](http://www.fosterremodeling.com)

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The Grems decided on a formal and traditional look for the fireplace in the family room. The half-brick floor-to-ceiling back wall was replaced by perfectly symmetrical built-ins, crown molding and an elevated hearth with a marble surround and an Edwardian-style mantle.

# 2017 housing market report

BY CHAMPION TITLE

According to Champion Title, who has proudly served the D.C., Maryland, and Virginia region as a family-owned and operated business since 1993, here's where the housing market is headed in 2017.

With a tumultuous 2016 drawing to a close, real estate experts are digesting the political, economic and demographic shifts of the past year and going on the record with 2017 predictions. Here's a rundown of the most important points.

**Interest rates and mortgage rates**

After failing to follow through on any of the four planned interest rate hikes for 2016, the Federal Reserve now seems ready to move. Unemployment - a key figure in determining the health of the economy - just reached 4.6 percent, the lowest since August of 2007 after adding 188,000 jobs a month over the last year. It's predicted that the Fed could raise rates two times in 2017 and perhaps reach up to 4.5 percent. Because interest rates impact mortgage rates, those will be rising as well.

Individuals who recently bought into overpriced metro markets like San Francisco or Miami will likely feel the burden of even small rate increases, while those outside metro areas and those in more affordable regions of the country have little to fear. It's generally agreed that the most direct impact of higher mortgage rates will be a dampening of home sales and price increases.

**Conflicting home sale forecasts**

But not all agree. 2016 was a good year for realtors, with roughly 5.8 million existing home sales. The National As-

sociation of Realtors sees that number increasing to 6 million in 2017. The Mortgage Bankers Association, meanwhile, projects a whopping 6.5 million existing home sales, thanks to continuing low unemployment and wage growth - which brings us to affordability.

**Affordability outlook**

Low inventory has been the story of 2016, with the nation's top 100 metro areas seeing an 11 percent drop over the last year. Along with strong demand due to low rates, this has pushed prices north in a hurry. In Western metropolitan markets, the Home Builders Association predicts price appreciation of 5.8 percent, higher than the national prediction of 3.9 percent. 2016 saw prices increase 4.9 percent. The Midwest has been identified as the most affordable region in terms of housing, and is predicted to be a key market for new homeowners - Millennials.

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