

by Bill Sendelback

# The Next **BIG** Thing?



Could be. Prefab masonry fireplaces provide an alternative to builder box fireplaces and site-built masonry units – at a reasonable mid-range price point.

**M**ost homes today have at least one fireplace, and recent reports (National Association of Home Builders, 2005) indicate that 55 percent of new homes include a fireplace. Manufacturer shipment data show that almost 1.3 million zero-clearance units were sold in 2006. Low- to mid-priced factory-built fireplaces represent by far the lion's share of current fireplace sales.

But if a customer doesn't want the

usual metal, factory-built fireplace, where does he or she go? Are there alternatives? Fifty years ago, most fireplaces were site-constructed masonry units. Today, that type of construction is far too expensive for most home buyers, and there are very few craftsmen left who know how to build a safe, site-built masonry fireplace that works well.

Hope is not lost, however, for those who want a true masonry fireplace. For

at least the last 15 years, a new breed of masonry fireplaces – prefab units – have been flying under the radar. While more expensive than most metal, factory-built models, they are much less costly than full site-built masonry fireplaces. These new prefab masonry models are relatively simple to assemble and to install, and offer consumers and custom home builders tested and listed

*Model 6317 by Earthcore Industries.*



*The Teton by Ironhaus.*

units that are engineered to operate properly and safely. They are available for burning wood or gas, and even as vent-free units.

Think of these prefab fireplaces as well-engineered jigsaw puzzles. Pallets of pre-cast pieces of cement or other refractory material arrive at the building site. These parts are then assembled according to the plan for that specific model and size of fireplace. Some models require a heavy construction base because of their weight, just like true site-built masonry fireplaces. Other, lighter models are now coming on the market that can be assembled on regular, un-reinforced wood flooring.

Most models also include parts for a masonry chimney, but more and more prefab masonry models are approved to accept Class A chimney, now available in diameters up to 24 inches. Simply attach a mounting plate to the top of the finished fireplace and attach the approved Class A chimney to that plate. This Class A system is particularly attractive if the chimney needs to be threaded around joists, rafters and other obstructions. And Class A chimneys are required in some California markets because of their resistance to earthquake damage.

Assembly may sound relatively simple, but most manufacturers offer extensive installer training programs to ensure safe and sound installations. Some man-

ufacturers target brick and masonry companies to sell and install their products because of the logistics involved. "You have to have the equipment to handle these products, such as trucks and lift trucks for the pallets and heavy parts," says Jeffery Stevens, president

of Fire Rock Manufacturing Co.

While total metal, factory-built fireplace manufacturer shipments were down almost 24 percent through the third quarter of 2007, prefab masonry models have enjoyed sales increases, according to the manufacturers (sales figures are not yet reported to the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association).

This difference in sales results is mainly because most metal, factory-built units are for mid- to low-end new home construction, a market that is temporarily (we hope) depressed, while the market for prefab masonry models is with high-end custom homes, a market that remains relatively robust. "This is a phenomenal market for modular masonry fireplaces," says Fred Schukal, president of Sleepy Hollow Chimney Supply, "and it is unlimited."

Isokern, manufactured in Denmark for more than 60 years and distributed in North America since the late 1980s by Earthcore Industries, was the industry pioneer and has been the industry sales leader. With a combination of factory-owned and independent distributors selling to more than 150 dealers, Isokern offers indoor and outdoor wood-burning, gas and vent-free models with openings as large as 72 inches wide by 36 inches high. The company also offers



*42-inch conventional firebox with height extension by Fire Rock.*



*Indoor Mason-Lite Masonry by Masonry Fireplace Industries.*

its Fire-Lite models for installation on non-reinforced floors.

Isokern uses Icelandic volcanic pumice stone, and touts its insulating value and durability over cement, according to Dale Hall, Western regional manager. Earthcore has been importing the Isokern units from Denmark, but has a U.S. factory under construction in Ches-

apeake, Virginia; it is scheduled to be up and shipping by summer 2008.

Contempo Fireplaces, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, began life with a modular kiva model, and now also offers Rumford styles. Made of vermiculite concrete, the company features refractory laminated to the firebox parts to simplify installation, according to owner Stewart Buffington; colored grout is used to highlight the refractory.

Contempo features a patented outside air manifold in the front of its Rumford units, keeping the air chamber out of sight and allowing placement of a gas log valve in the chamber rather than in the firebox for longer valve life. The company's gas models also include a patented, flat burner pan rather than a tube-type burner.

Contempo is introducing round cast refractory that looks like tile, B-vent and air-cooled Class A chimney models, a 12-volt electric damper for gas models and a shroud to decorate chimney tops.

Stevens at Fire Rock Manufacturing says his sales have "gone through the roof" since October. "With the growth in outdoor fireplaces and our sales surge, we're absolutely going nuts," he says. The company's models

are approved for all fuels, including coal, and include vent-free gas units. Fire Rock is also building a new factory; it's near Birmingham, Alabama.

For 2008, the company is introducing a new outdoor model, tested to the new UL 127 outdoor standard, and a new "mixed design aggregate" pumice material. Called Lite Rock, the new material is lighter for easier, simpler installation, and can be installed on wood floors with a riser kit. This mix will become standard for all Fire Rock models.

Masonry Fireplace Industries offers its Mason-Lite models through one-step and two-step hearth distributors, says managing partner Bill Harris, former president of FMI. Harris claims the Mason-Lite "proprietary mix" material is 40 percent lighter than competing products, allowing second floor installations with no floor reinforcement; it uses Class A chimney. The company's wood-burning models are available in opening widths of 39, 44 and 49 inches. Mason-Lite has partnered with Robert H. Peterson Company on a new gas model featuring Peterson gas logs.

We asked Harris where pricing of prefab masonry fireplaces falls in relation to metal, factory-built fireplaces and site-built masonry units. After stressing that pricing really depends on the



*See-thru Contempo by Contempo Fireplaces.*



*Bellfires Close Clearance Woodfloor refractory built fireplaces by Sleepy Hollow Chimney Supplies.*

region and freight costs, he offered the following general guidelines: A 42-inch zero-clearance fireplace would run about \$550 installed. A 42-inch prefab masonry fireplace would cost about \$4,200-\$4,500 installed. And a 42-inch site-built, masonry fireplace would cost from \$8,000 to \$10,000.

Remember that these are only very general numbers.

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prefab masonry fireplaces

Sleepy Hollow Chimney Supply has taken a slightly different approach to the prefab masonry fireplace market with its Bellfires models. Now in its 20th year, Bellfires is modeled after European designs for more efficient, open-faced wood heaters, says Schukal. Rather than concentrating on new home construction, the Bellfires units are targeted at retrofitting supposedly "unusable" old masonry fireplaces. However, the Bellfires lineup also includes models for new home construction and close clearance models. With a stainless-steel smoke shelf and insulated refractory, Bellfires is aimed at customers "wanting quality, heat output and low emissions," says Schukal.

"Many homeowners are told by dealers and sweeps that there is no hope for their masonry fireplace, but people still want an open hearth flame," he says. "Bellfires gives dealers an option to retrofit that fireplace and make it usable." Schukal suggests that dealers team up with local chimney sweeps to gain sales leads.

All Bellfires units are made to order. The units include a patented, low Rumford smoke chamber. New for 2008 is a five-piece, precast Rumford model with a stainless-steel smoke chamber and refractory using 70 percent alumina for durability. A zero-clearance floor version also will be available.

This well kept "secret" of prefab or modular masonry fireplaces now provides an option for those consumers who don't want to settle for metal, factory-built fireplaces. "If people are given a choice, they will purchase modular masonry fireplaces," says Contempo's Buffington.

"The sales trend is up," says Sleepy Hollow's Schukal. "This is the next hot item in our industry." 

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