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Old Flame New fireplace warms Craftsman bungalow in a traditional way

Author(s): MIRIAM RAFTERY Miriam Raftery is a free-lance writer. **Date:** July 18, 1999 **Section:** REAL ESTATE

THE PROBLEM: When Tom and Phyllis Shess purchased a North Park bungalow built in 1915, they wanted to enhance their home's Craftsman-style charm. But the fireplace was an eyesore and a safety hazard -- definitely not an asset.

"The fireplace was painted hot pink, both woodwork and brick," Phyllis Shess recalls, "to match the pink wall-to-wall carpeting and the rest of the totally pink house. It was truly dreadful."

When Phyllis left town to attend a conference, Tom surprised her by painting the fireplace and the walls white. Returning the favor, Phyllis surprised Tom by pulling out pink carpeting to reveal original wood floors underneath.

Unfortunately, the new paint soon started peeling off the fireplace. So, the homeowners stripped off all layers of paint, only to reveal crumbling, water-damaged bricks.

"In 1915, when they built a fireplace, they only used a small amount of concrete," Tom Shess says. "So water had been creeping up from the yard for over 80 years."

The chimney began to separate from the outside wall, causing lath and plaster inside the home to buckle. Weeds began growing inside the hearth.

"We had the only fireplace on the block that had to be mowed," Tom jokes. "We didn't dare use the fireplace, because we would probably have burned down the house."

After an inspection revealed that the chimney likely would tumble into the neighbor's house within the next few years, Tom and Phyllis warmed to the idea of replacing chimney and fireplace, but knew a modern style would look out of place in their vintage home.

The solution

Phyllis designed a fireplace in the Arts & Crafts style popular when their home was built. She drew inspiration from a hand-crafted art tile titled "Palomar Oaks" by Laird Plumleigh, a master tile maker and owner of Alchemie in Cardiff.

Using the decorative tile as a centerpiece, she designed a surround and hearth using reproductions of Ernest Batchelder tiles found in many Craftsmen-era homes. The new fireplace would be crowned by a wood mantel and flanked by cabinets with leaded glass insets.

"I'm a frustrated designer. This was a very creative outlet," says Phyllis, a district attorney who is also an associate editor at the North Park News.

As publisher of North Park News, Tom knew of the area's reputation as one of San Diego's premier bungalow communities and shared his wife's desire to replicate vintage architectural elements.

"The first thing we did was search for craftspeople who could re-create an original Arts & Crafts look with handmade tile and fine woodwork," he recalls.

The couple hired Jim Crawford, owner of **Authentic Fireplaces Chimney Repair** in San Diego, to tear down the original chimney and fireplace, then construct reproductions that would look as old as the home.

"This is a hand-built fireplace. I come from seven generations of brick masons and stone masons in Northern Ireland," says Crawford, who uses a crew of English and Irish master craftsman skilled in Old World trades including woodworking, lath and plaster repair and cabinetry.

"The bricklayers were a charming group of Englishmen," Phyllis says of the workmen who constructed a masonry chimney and fireplace.

The homeowners visited Plumleigh's tile yard, where they were delighted to spot 4-by-4-inch green field tiles and 2-by-2-inch gold accent tiles in stock. The find saved them hundreds of dollars that custom-made tiles would have cost.

"He hand-makes all of these tiles, using kilns, just the way Ernest Batchelder did at the turn of the century," Phyllis says.

Since the handmade tiles have irregular edges, Tom and Phyllis laid out their tile design on the floor to make sure all the pieces would fit. They photographed it and carefully numbered each piece before installation. Plus, they kept a few extra tiles on hand to replace any that might become damaged in the future.

Adrian Stamp, owner of Adrian Stamp Finish & Carpentry in San

Diego, constructed cabinets and a mantel using lumber similar to that in vogue at the turn of the last century.

"It took forever to find original-growth Douglas fir," says Tom, pointing out the fine, straight grain on his finished mantel.

Barry May, owner of Barrymay Artglass in San Diego, designed decorative leaded glass insets in a Frank Lloyd Wright style. Old-fashion hinges and shelf brackets from San Diego Hardware and a set of cabinet pulls from Restoration Hardware add to the vintage look.

Lighting inside the cabinets completes the new "old" fireplace, illuminating the homeowners' collection of books and antique accessories. The completed project cost \$9,426.25.

"Ninety percent of the job was done in two weeks," says Crawford.

Cabinetry and other details delayed completion for another month or so. But for Tom and Phyllis, the outcome was worth the wait.

"We're very happy with it. It's just what we wanted," Phyllis says, savoring a cup of cappuccino in front of a crackling fire.

The Arts & Crafts-style fireplace looks so authentic that it recently fooled an expert who came to visit.

"An architectural historian thought the fireplace was original to the 1915 house. That was our biggest compliment," Tom says, adding warmly, "Our fireplace is brand new, but it looks like it's been here for a hundred years."

Nuts and bolts

Problem: Crumbling chimney and fireplace needed replacing, but North Park homeowners Tom and Phyllis Shess didn't want a modern look in their Craftsman-style 1915 bungalow.

Solution: Design an Arts & Crafts-style fireplace using vintage-style materials installed by craftsmen specializing in reproduction of historic architectural elements.

Fireplace Design: Phyllis Shess

Contractor: Jim Crawford, **Authentic Fireplaces** Chimney Repair, San Diego

Handmade tiles: Laird Plumleigh, Alchemie, Cardiff

Cabinets: Adrian Stamp Finish & Cabinetry, San Diego

Leaded glass door design: Barrymay Artglass, San Diego

Hardware: San Diego Hardware, Restoration Hardware

Cost total: \$9,426.25

Cost breakdown:

Demolition of original fireplace and hearth; construction of
replacements including laying tile, electrical work, log set, gas jet and
permits . . \$7,423 Handmade tiles \$729 Cabinet
construction and installation \$800 Original design of leaded
glass doors \$400 Hardware \$74.25

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