

REALESTATE | DESIGN

# How to Turn an Idle Fireplace Into a Decor Showstopper

Artful and inventive ways to make the most of a nonworking—or summering—hearth, courtesy of design pros



**LEFT OF CENTER** In a Dublin house by Kingston Lafferty Design, a single potted cactus looks intentional, not lonely.

PHOTO: BARBARA CORSICO

By [Nina Molina](#)

Dec. 2, 2021 11:45 am ET

**WHAT TO DO** with a fireplace that’s purely decorative or is sitting idle in the offseason? It’s unfortunately a perfect place to house a cliché—birch logs, five fat candles, that inane books-turned-bindings-in trick. Jesse Carrier, of New York’s Carrier and Company, is more optimistic: “The fireplace is an architectural focal point in a room, a wonderful stage to set with accessories and mementos that tell your story.” He and other interior designers shared fresh ideas for sparking a room’s black hole, whether a fireplace that doesn’t work at all or one that’s just enjoying the summer off.

## Bring on the Crystals

“I think it is essential to find ways to bring light into a nonworking fireplace,” said New York designer Phillip Thomas. His choice of illumination: “logs” of Selenite, a mineral that forms in large, lustrous translucent crystals. They capture light and create a lovely glow, he said, “almost making it feel like there’s a fire lit.”



In the home studio of a Houston artist, designer Chandos Dodson Epley chose geometric fireplace accessories that suited the monolithic limestone surround and the modern aesthetic of the room.

PHOTO: JULIE SOEFER

## Build a Wee Reading Nook

A nonworking fireplace is a perfect place for a kids' reading nook, said Shaolin Low, an interior designer in Honolulu, where fireplaces rarely see the business end of a match. "You can paint the interior an accent color. Add shelving for books and a custom cushion for the floor so [small children] can cozy up and read," she said.



Julia Sherman, a recipe writer and photographer, turned a nonworking fireplace in her former Brooklyn kitchen into a perfect perch for her puppy, Lucy.

PHOTO: JULIA SHERMAN

## ...Or a Doggie Den

"We were turning a room that was not originally a kitchen into one," said recipe writer and photographer Julia Sherman of her former Brooklyn brownstone. "We decided [the fireplace] would be perfect for a doghouse," she said. "We didn't do much besides clean up the marble and redo the brick." There her terrier mix, Lucy, hung out in the kitchen without being underfoot.

## Max Out the Mantel

The shelf the mantel creates is prime gallery space. Sidestep a cluttered look with a coherent collection. New York

designer Rodney Lawrence topped a Victorian mantel with scores of pose-able wooden monkey sculptures by Kay Bojesen, positioned in every conceivable attitude. Similarly, in Garrison, N.Y., Brooklyn's Workstead studio amassed a collection of vessels by North Carolina potter Ben Owen, unified by their cream color. Workstead co-founder and principal Robert Highsmith also suggests softening mantelscapes with bits of nature: "Bringing the outdoors in with seasonal arrangements can create a sense of wilderness that's a nice balance to the formality of fireplaces."



A prized collection of pottery by Ben Owen crowns a mantel in a house designed by Brooklyn's Workstead.

PHOTO: MATTHEW WILLIAMS

## Riff on an Existing Theme

In a Dublin house, shown above, local firm Kingston Lafferty surrounded a fireplace with sage-green built-ins and inscribed the fronts with a blown-out crosshatch pattern. The designers updated the firebox with tiles in keeping with the overall style of the house, positioning the squares on a diagonal to create a complementary, smaller-scale cross hatch. Their lemony lightness sets off an off-center potted cactus. In the home studio of Houston artist Bibbi Anderson, designer Chandos Dodson Epley opted for simply shaped stone sculptures from Isokern in the idle center of a monolithic, modern limestone fireplace. “We chose the geometric accessories for a more decorative, artistic look, which fit the atelier.”





In another Brooklyn fireplace, New York designer Rodney Lawrence added dimension to the fireplace's decoration by setting two collections, one of vintage wooden balls, one of antique wooden eggs, on the hearth in front of the surround.

PHOTO: RODNEY LAWRENCE

## Come Into the Room

You can make a tableau more dimensional, less blah by setting objets down on the hearth that extends from the fireplace. Mr. Lawrence left the original cast-iron decorative screen in the mouth of the Victorian fireplace, then added large, clear glass vessels in front. One holds a collection of vintage wooden balls of varying sizes; the other, antique wooden eggs. The result, a layered installation.

## Store Stuff, of Course

Stowing things in the little cavern works as long as you don't make your room's focal point an eye sore. Designers Carrier and Company set a wicker container in the fireplace of a living room in a 1920s house in Long Island, N.Y., that's decorated with furniture upholstered in vintage grain sacks and a sisal rug. "The basket nods to the countryside setting of the home, fits neatly inside the firebox and serves as attractive storage by holding canvas cushions for chairs on the adjacent porch," said Mr. Carrier.