

THOROUGHLY MODERN



No longer a fad, contemporary design is here to stay.

BY KIMBERLY RODGERS

BEFORE FOCUS (VIOLS-LE-FORT, FRANCE)

shipped any of its new Gyrofocus Gas fireplaces to North America early this year, Holly Markham, owner of European Home (Middletown, Massachusetts) already had a waiting list of over 100 names for the modern pivoting suspended gas fireplace. Once she was able to make a formal announcement, with a price in place, she was happy to see that people were still very interested and ready to order.

Focus introduced the world’s first suspended, 360° rotating wood version of the innovative fireplace in 1968. The company has been working on the gas model for more than three years. Markham says, “It was challenging to find a way to hide the gas line that would still allow the fireplace to pivot.” Already approved and shipped in Europe in 2021, Gyrofocus Gas recently became available earlier this year in North America. “The reaction to the new model has been great and nobody complained about the wait.”

Founded in 1999, European Home offers a complete line of contemporary wood and gas fireplaces manufactured in Europe as well as the U.S. In addition to Focus, the company is a distributor for Element4 (direct vent gas fireplaces manufactured in the Netherlands); electric fireplaces from Evonicfires, part of CK Fires Ltd. (United Kingdom); and the company’s own brand, European Home Fireplaces, with products manufactured in New England.

Under the European Home brand, the company will be introducing a vent-free firebox using radiant heat. The new fireboxes are unique because they have very clean, simple lines. The finishing comes right to the edge of the box with a large opening replicating a masonry-sized unit. Originally custom-made for an



architect’s project, the new radiant firebox will be rolled out later this year to the marketplace, Markham says.

Like other hearth retailers and manufacturers, European Home has experienced an increase in sales over the last couple of years. Yet, there have been challenges in shipping since it takes longer to get product from suppliers. European Home has managed their customers’ expectations by being as transparent as possible.

“Unfortunately, it is the customer whose timeline is most impacted by supply chain issues,” Markham says. A normal delivery time from Europe has gone from four weeks to about eight to

10. Some domestic vendors have doubled or tripled their lead times for items such as screens, logs, and controls. Consumers have now had over a year of experiencing supply chain issues across different retail markets and have become more accepting of waiting. “While they don’t like the long lead times, people are at least familiar with the problems and calling us sooner to place orders.”

Besides Gyrofocus, the Ergofocus and Paxfocus are currently European Home’s biggest sellers. All are suspended fireplaces sharing similar lines. A combination of factors have contributed to the

continued on page 96

success of these products, Markham says. “In terms of design, Focus fireplaces have always been a source of inspiration. As angular, modern homes continue to have their place, these models fit in seamlessly.”

Everyone loves an original and Focus introduced the first suspended fireplace created by French designer Dominique Imbert over 50 years ago. A former humanities professor, chef, and student of ethnology, Imbert was restoring a farmhouse in a village located in the south of France. To provide heat, he turned to skills he learned as a teenager in a blacksmith’s shop and used salvaged scraps of metal to forge his first fireplace, the Antefocus, in 1967. This led to the creation of the groundbreaking Gyrofocus in 1968.

Today, Focus offers over 60 fireplace models and a global distribution network across 55 countries. The Gyrofocus has been displayed in the Guggenheim Museum in New York as well as museums in France. “The look is iconic and people appreciate the staying power that it has had over the decades,” Markham says.

She notes the Gyrofocus serves as a solution to a home with glass walls because you can add a fireplace and not cover the glass, providing a unique way to add a statement piece without obstruct-

ing the view. “It seems there is a confluence of happenings which have made Focus very popular these days.”

DESIGN RESTORATION

European Home was involved in the restoration of a former Baptist church in Boston’s historic South End neighborhood, which was being redeveloped into luxury condominiums. The company was involved in the design, delivery, and installation of fireplaces for each unit, providing 5 H Series vent-free fireplaces from the European Home brand and two Element4 direct vent fireplaces, which were installed in the luxury penthouse. Co-owner John Markham worked with R+B Design Architecture and the builder, Wadleigh and Associates, from the beginning of the project.

Since the project was located in an area designated as the largest Victorian neighborhood in the U.S. by the National Register of Historic Places, the developers and contractors faced challenges such as preserving certain aspects of a historic building, navigating construction in narrow streets, and providing parking for homeowners.

It has been reported as more people move toward online shopping, there is a

growing trend toward revamping shopping malls into condominiums. “This would be a good use of mall space—they certainly have large footprints and plenty of parking,” Markham says. European Home is a big advocate in the concepts of reduce, reuse, and recycle. “It’s so beneficial to reuse what is already in place and reduce the carbon footprint when possible.”

While European Home is open to more redevelopment projects, most of the company’s business comes from new construction and remodels. “We are also seeing more requests for multifamily homes and our dealers have also had multiunit sales.”

Markham founded European Home based on the simple, yet stylish contemporary design elements she saw while traveling and working in Europe in the 1990s. Over two decades later, the interest and demand for contemporary design continues to grow.

She was certainly on the ground floor of introducing the now popular modern fireplace design to North America. However, when she first began, there was some hesitation from dealers that contemporary fireplaces may be a passing fad. “In 2000, I saw a need in the

market, and I am not surprised that modern now makes up over half of the showroom floor space for hearth retailers. It is amazing to see how the fireplace market has changed.”

Markham believes TV channels such as HGTV have had a big influence in design. Consumers have become comfortable mixing styles and incorporating modern design elements with traditional ones. She points out TV, as well as the internet, have made modern styles a part of everyday life and our eyes have become comfortable with clean lines and sleek shapes (like the mid-century modern Egg Chair). “We see funky elements mixed in with traditional pieces. Modern fireplaces and design elements have now become part of our vernacular.”

“Modern has been around for ages when you think of famous contemporary architects and note when they were born.” She points to numerous influential figures of modern architectural design who were born decades ago, including: Mies van der Rohe (1886), Frank Lloyd Wright (1867), Frank Gehry (1929), and Zaha Hadid (1950). “The list goes on and on. When you consider these dates, you realize modern is not new. It’s a stable and fully embraced design.” ■