



The I-ENG-A Report

Investigative Engineers Association, Inc.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Special Interest:

- Rapid temperature increase may cause serious chimney damage.
- Points to consider before converting to a gas fireplace.

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Fireplaces & Chimneys Are You Proactive or Over-reactive?

Article Published by: Professional Investigative Engineers, I-ENG-A Member, Colorado

In this issue and over the next several months we will discuss the trend towards fireplace and chimney gas conversions, maintenance, chimney fires and more.

On Saturday, November 18, 2000, at 8:45 p.m. the smoke detection alarms at a well-known hotel chain location sounded. Around the same time flames were seen on the exterior of the hotel's fifth and sixth floors. When the fire spread through the eaves and erupted on the building's exterior, the sprinklers activated but the water didn't reach the flames. The fire burned for six hours and destroyed 126 of the 350 rooms and consumed exterior balconies and siding on the fifth and sixth floors. Damage was estimated at \$19 million. No one was injured.

The fire started in the vent shaft of a wood-burning fireplace in room 220 and crept up the flue and ignited interior supports of the roof overhang. Federal fire experts estimated it smoldered undetected for three hours before erupting. Although all the responsible parties may never be identified, the cause of the fire was determined to be defective installation.

Recently, many units are being converted to gas burning fireplaces. Over the last couple of decades tens of thousands of these conversions have taken place. There are a number of positive benefits to using gas fireplaces. They include: reduced emissions into the atmosphere resulting in improved air quality, reduced operating

costs and lower maintenance costs (including property management and fireplace and chimney care).

During the glory days of wood burning it was not uncommon for local fire departments to respond to fifteen or twenty chimney fires in a single season. Today, they are lucky to have less chimney fires due to benefits of gas fireplaces.

It is not our goal to deter anyone from converting to gas burning fireplaces. It is important, however, to have all the facts before making what can be a sizable investment.

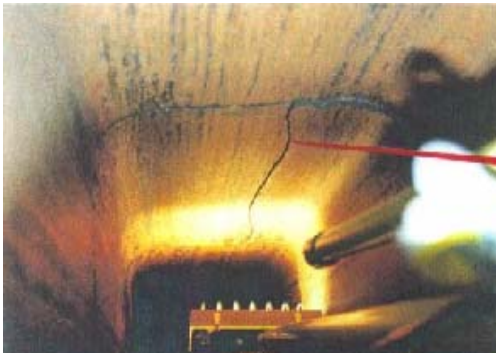
Considerations before converting to gas include: conversion costs and the lost aesthetic value of a wood-burning fireplace. A wood-burning fireplace adds value to the property; both in terms of appraised value and appeal as a rental unit. If you have been told that your fireplace chimneys are unsafe and should be replaced it might be prudent to get a second opinion. Don't hastily make the decision to give up a valuable feature of your property that you may never get back. After all, fireplaces have been around for hundreds of years and routinely and safely serve our needs.

Instinctual reaction to the hotel fire is to do whatever is necessary to make sure it doesn't happen to you. Our recommendation is to take a sensible and

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proactive approach to evaluating the integrity and safety of your wood burning fireplaces. We have associated with many condominium, townhouse and homeowner associations in the mountain resort areas since the fire occurred and the general consensus is a fear of a repeat incident.

When directors volunteer to serve on the board of an association they understand they have the well being of the community in their hands. Acting financially responsible and acting in the best interest of the association can sometimes be difficult to balance. We have received many calls recently from



This photo displays a significant crack in the second flue from the inside top of a chimney which, if not fixed, can present a risk for fire.

board members fearing the worse of their chimneys and wanting to know if they are safe. Other complex associations have made the decision not to burn wood at all until a thorough inspection had taken place.

If you have contracted to have your chimney cleaned, verify that the work has been performed and done properly. There are not many vendors available that conduct chimney evaluations. Those that are may be overpriced and not certified by the National Chimney Sweep Guild. Many board members and property owners with fireplaces do not even realize there is such a certification. Imagine the liability exposure if you have a chimney fire and someone asks the question, "Did we use a certified chimney sweep"?

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