

How to Make Over a Fireplace

The fireplace is usually the main focal point of almost any room. If it's an eyesore, it can bring the whole room down. Ron visits a Pacifica, California home to demonstrate how, with the right tools and a little bit of know-how, a fireplace makeover can make a home and hearth feel warm and cozy.



1. Select materials

A variety of fireplace mantel styles and designs can be purchased in kit form through the local home improvement center. Most of these require custom assembly by the homeowner. When selecting both the tile and mantel for a fireplace makeover, consider the room and its surroundings and choose colors that will blend with and complement the rest of the room.



2. Prepare room

The process of preparing an old brick surface for tile can be a very messy job. Grinding the old brick to prepare the surface can kick up a lot of dust. When the brick needs to be cut, it can be even messier. It is important to clear the room of all furniture and then lay down a protective covering on the floor.

If there is existing wood trim around the fireplace, it will need to be removed. Use a utility knife to cut through any paint and caulk along the edges. Use a hammer to tap a pry bar into position under the wood trim and pry it away from the brick.

When removing trim from sheetrock or plaster, slip a wide putty knife between the pry bar and the wall to protect the wall from damage.



3. Prepare brick

Use a grinder outfitted with a brush to prepare the brick surface. The grinder will remove any dirt and loose paint and roughen the brick so the mortar will adhere to the surface. While using the grinder, a vacuum can be used to help catch some of the dust.



If the existing brick has any overhanging areas or bricks that stick out, they will have to be cut off to form a flush surface to lay the tile on. The brick can be cut with a circular saw equipped with a diamond blade used for cutting stone or concrete.

The vacuum is not an effective solution for catching the large volume of dust that is generated from cutting brick indoors. If the dust is too much of a problem, a plastic tent and tunnel can be constructed around the fireplace with a fan turned outward, sucking the dust out the door.

4. Tile layout

Before setting the tiles in place, determine how they will be arranged. First locate and mark the center of the fireplace. Use 2 X 4s to create a temporary ledge to support the vertical tiles while the mortar dries.



You will need to determine if it looks better to have two tiles meet on the centerline, or center one tile over the centerline. The general goal is to choose the option that leaves the largest pieces on either end.



5. Prepare mortar

The mortar used to attach the tiles to the surface of the brick is called thin set. To give this mortar a stronger bond, mix it with an acrylic additive instead of water. The additive is available at most hardware and home improvement centers.

Use a mixer attachment on the end of a drill and slowly pour the mortar into the bucket with the measured additive. Move the mixer up and down gently as it stirs. When mixing mortar, it is important to let it slake, which means let the mixture rest. In this case it takes about 10 minutes for the chemicals combine.

6. Fill joints

Use a margin trowel, which is a small, narrow trowel without notches, to fill the joints in between each brick. This will create a smooth surface for the tile. Work with one section of the fireplace at a time.



7. Set tile

When installing the vertical tile, apply mortar to the back of each tile with the margin trowel and then use a notched trowel to create ridges that will ensure that the mortar has a uniform thickness over the entire back of the tile. Repeat this process on the brick surface.

After setting the tiles in place, insert a plastic joint spacer between each tile to keep the grout line a consistent width. For the tiles that lay flat, it is only necessary to apply the mortar to the brick surface but not the back of the tile.

After all of the full tiles are in place, cut the remaining tiles. To determine which type of tile cutter to use, see Ron's tile cutting tips.

The mortar needs to set overnight.



8. Grout

Grout is actually the same type of material as mortar in a slightly different form. It comes in many different colors. Each color can dramatically change the look of the finished product.

It is important to mix the grout carefully and consistently. Avoid starting and stopping and avoid over-mixing. Mix the grout just enough to be thoroughly blended and smooth.

Use a grout float, which has a bottom made of foam rubber, to work the grout into the joints. Once the joints are filled, use the same grout float, this time tipped up on edge, to rake off the excess grout from the face of the tile at a diagonal.

After filling the joints, carefully wipe the excess grout from the face of the tile with a damp grout sponge. Rinse frequently, wring out most of the water, use light pressure, and be careful not to pull grout out of the joints.



9. Prepare mantel (mantel styles and finishes can vary; these instructions may need to be modified.)

Wood stains come in a wide variety of colors and styles from a natural stain with just enough color to bring out the natural colors of the wood to much darker tints.

Apply the stain with a foam brush working from the top to bottom. Once each piece has been coated with stain, wipe off the excess with a clean, dry, cloth. Leave the stained wood to dry.

10. Protective finish on mantel

After the stain has dried on the mantel, add a protective polyurethane coating. Apply this finish coat in the same manner that the stain was applied. Allow the finish to dry completely.

11. Mantel assembly

Place the bottom of the leg next to the tile and push it up next to the wall. Use a level to make sure that it is plumb, or vertical, then draw a line along the outside of the mantel leg and repeat this on each side.

Measure the thickness of the mantel legs and transfer this measurement onto the wall inside the first line. This second line is where the cleat will be attached.



The cleat is a piece of 2 X 2 attached securely to the wall studs. The mantel leg is then attached to the cleat along the outside edge. To attach the cleats to the wall, drill clearance holes through each cleat, then secure them in place with screws. Install cleat



Position the mantel leg over the cleat and use a nail gun to attach several finish nails into the cleat, about an inch from the wall.



With the two legs in place, squeeze construction adhesive along the top inner ledge of each leg. The adhesive will secure the mantel skirt that is supported by the legs.

The mantel cap drops into place over the legs.

The mantel cap will be installed with a cleat just the same way the mantel legs were attached. With the mantel cap held in position, draw a pencil line and then measure the thickness of the mantel and transfer that measurement to the wall.

Screw the cleat into the wall studs, add adhesive and then nail the mantel cap to the cleat with finish nails.

Nail the mantel feet into place, and the fireplace makeover is complete.

The new fireplace is still the first thing you notice when you enter the room, but now it is because of its warm, inviting beauty, not because it is such an eyesore.



Before



After

