

Q I would like to reface the **WHITE-PAINTED BRICK FIREPLACE** in my circa-1880 Victorian house with something more contemporary but still in keeping with the style of the house. The fireplace is 48 inches wide and juts out about 18 inches from the wall. Do you have any suggestions for styles and relatively inexpensive materials?

—ALICIA WARREN
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A: Architect Erica Broberg, East Hampton, N.Y., replies: My first reaction is that the fireplace looks unfinished. I would basically wrap it entirely in new finishes that cover the brick. First check with the building department about how much noncombustible

material is required around the firebox, then you'll know how much room you have to be creative with wood trim and moldings. Here are a few suggestions.

To go around the firebox, choose marble or bluestone, depending on the formality of the furnishings. Bluestone can look modern, which will tie in nicely with retro or modern furniture. If the room is furnished traditionally, stick with a neutral palette and use a Jerusalem limestone or a Crema Marfil cream-colored marble. Tile could also be used to create either a modern or an authentically Victorian look. Reproductions of Art Nouveau tiles would bring this mantel back to its original era instantly.

Cover the rest of the fireplace with furniture-grade plywood, which you can paint. If you don't want a painted finish, use a wood veneer. If you're going to paint, poplar would work for the trim.

The chimney seems disproportionately tall, so use wood trim to accentuate the horizontal rather

than the vertical. Dividing the middle portion of the mantel into three wood panels would give this fireplace, which is the largest architectural element in the room, some scale and let it relate to the historic windows and human scale of the furnishings.

The mantel shelf itself could be a piece of wood about 1 1/2 inches thick with a decorative edge. The brackets holding it up could be fun to design by combining them with fancy molding strips running in between them, directly underneath the shelf. Consider adding a corner block molding on the front edges of the fireplace surround to give it a decorative and finished look.

Make sure to panel the sides of the fireplace, since finishing the front only would look incomplete. Also, wrap the base molding around the fireplace to tie it to the room, and add a hefty crown molding in the room instead of the tiny cove molding that is there now. To be authentic, a picture rail, hung about a foot down from the crown molding could be used as it was intended: to hang framed art on the walls without damaging the plaster.

A must-have would be sconces on the fireplace and a light mounted on a picture frame. Space the sconces evenly between the mantel shelf and the picture rail for balance.

Do you have a question for our experts and editors? Send it to Q&A, *Inspired House*, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506, or email it to ih@taunton.com. We'll select several to answer in each issue.

