

At last, bricks and mortar: Mason builds fireplace

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DREAM HOUSE

Part 15: Home is where the hearth is

For now, the plastic is stretched right over the windows, so looking out them is like

peering at the world through a gauze scrim, or the wrong eye-glasses. The insulation also makes the house quieter than it has ever been when it is being worked on, and the sound of Frank Mack's trowel scraping mortar off the bricks he's laying is a mere whisper.

Mack has been working about two weeks on the centerpiece of

both the living room and the backyard, a massive, double-sided fireplace. He's also laying bricks around the walls of the turret next to the fireplace.

"It's the first fireplace we've done in about two years," Mack said, adding that his line of work is more often about landscaping than hearths these days. "Those flues are some of the biggest

we've ever done," he says, pointing to a 2-foot-square, ceramic, rectangular tube in the backyard. "They weigh a couple of hundred pounds apiece."

Mack has been a mason all his life. He learned the trade from his older brothers after he got out of the Marine Corps about 40 years

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MEASURING PROGRESS



The Cummings begin making their dream a reality. Here are the project highlights so far.

September 2000: Mat and Sarah Cummings buy three-family home in Ipswich.

Fall 2002: Couple buy single-family home on lot behind theirs.

June 2004: Secured building permits from town of Ipswich and signed construction loan.

July 2004: Demolition of old home begins; excavation for new one in progress.

January 2005: First-floor walls completed. All special-order windows have arrived at lumberyard.

March 2005: Roof completed.

April 2005: Roofing shingles and windows installed.

May 2005: Doors installed. Ducts for heating and air conditioning installed.

July 2005: Siding installed. Windows, trim painted.

August 2005: Insulation installed. Fireplace begun.

June 2005: Weathervane installed; rough plumbing and wiring completed; siding delivered.

November 2004: First delivery of lumber and nails. Couple finish demolition of old home.

Throughout 2003: Mat Cummings works on design of new home.

HOUSE: Mason builds brick fireplace

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ago. He's seen a lot of changes, both in materials and how they're used.

He used to mix up his own mortar from Portland cement, lime, sand and water but now uses pre-mixed mortar both because it's easier and because the product's quality has improved.

He does add dye to the mortar, as he has done for this project, and notes, "The dye costs more

than the mortar."

The bricks Mat specified aren't cheap, either. They are called water-struck bricks, meaning they are released from their molds with water.

They have a more irregular appearance than the majority of modern bricks, which are cut with a wire after being extruded through dies. They are also extremely hard and durable.

"They'll last centuries," Mack says. At about a buck apiece, that's a good thing. Mack esti-

mates there are 8,000 bricks in the chimney, more than double what most chimneys contain.

The next challenge Mack faces is installing the limestone mantel Mat ordered for the indoor fireplace. It weighs more than 1,000 pounds and needs to be lifted about 5 feet to be set in place.

"That's going to be a challenge," he says.

We'll be back Oct. 5 to see how he met it and to take a look at the completed fireplace.