

# CUSTOM BUILDER™

JULY 08

**FIRE AND  
WATER**  
OUTDOOR LIVING  
RUNS HOT AND COLD

## Flame and Flow

Weaving fire and water into outdoor living sparks the imagination and puts a warm glow into the custom home concept.

BY MARK JARASEK, SENIOR EDITOR, ELECTRONIC MEDIA

**F**ire, water, earth and air; they're the classic elements of ancient Greek philosophy and defined everything in nature for that society. Put them together in a custom home's outdoor living space and you can get results even Zeus would envy.

The trend of outdoor living areas for custom homes has been well underway. In 2006, the American Institute of Architect's Home Design Trends Survey identified a noticeable rise in the popularity of a formal outdoor living space. "There has been a penchant for upscale landscaping and formal lot boundaries, as well as a desire for outdoor amenities such as pools, tennis courts and

gazebos," AIA Chief Economist Kermit Baker observed at the time.

The demand seems to be stronger than ever. More recently, NAHB's 2008 survey research among designers, architects, marketers and builders found that 65 percent of luxury home buyers will be expecting outdoor features in their homes, including fireplaces, pools, decorative water features among a host of other backyard living indulgences that combine classic elements.

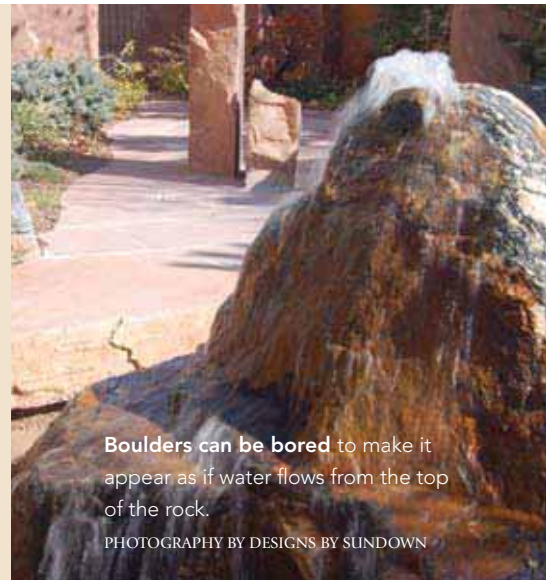
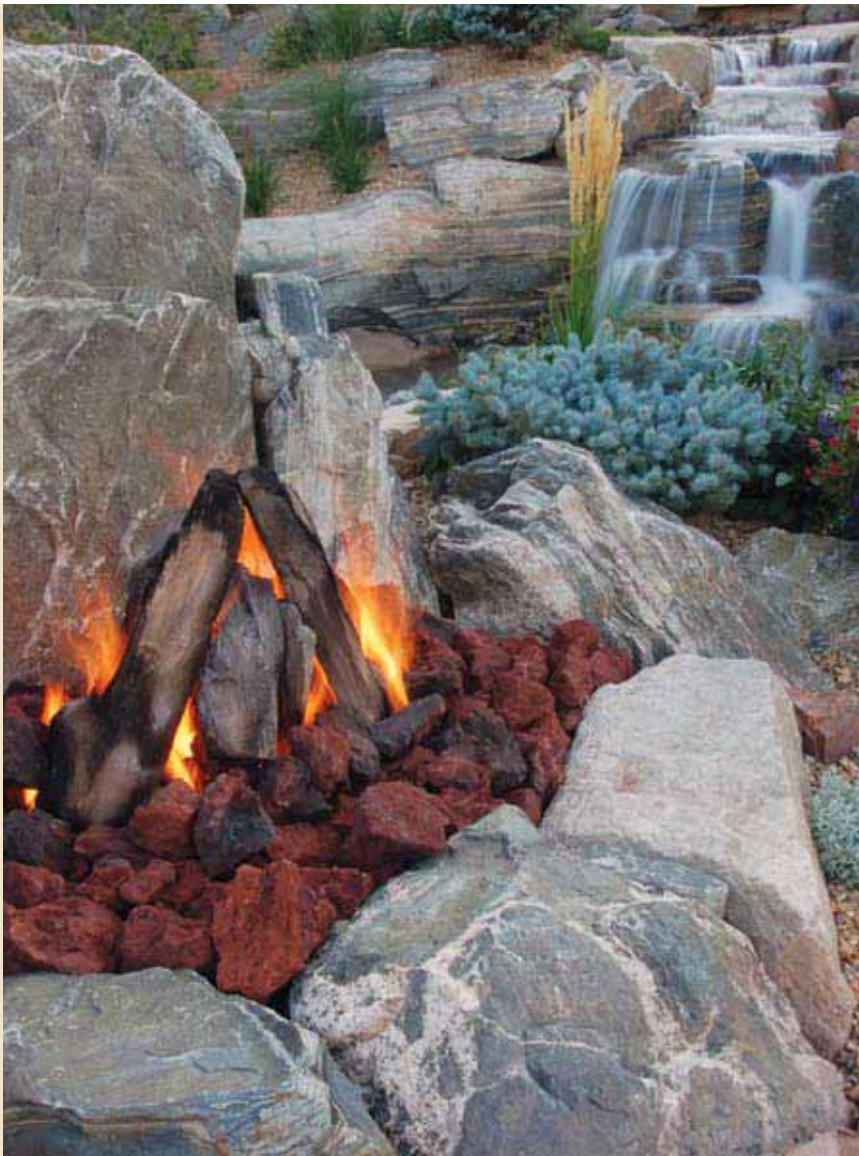
This emerging and evolving expansion of the backyard has brought us from yesterday's quaint concepts of bird bath and charcoal grill to today's dramatic details that introduce

**This inviting outdoor landscape** features a spa, a pool and a fire pit. PHOTOGRAPHY BY DESIGNS BY SUNDOWN

fanciful features with fire bowls and falling water.

### **Unique Challenges**

Adding innovative fire and water features to the outdoor living environment has its share of creative and code-related challenges. Custom builders know that ideas can come from anywhere, as clients more often offer ideas taken from exotic resort hotels, a wilderness area or their own imagination. When tackling this type of project, it's important for builders



**Boulders can be bored** to make it appear as if water flows from the top of the rock.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DESIGNS BY SUNDOWN

## Where the Inspiration Flows

Custom builders are well-accustomed to getting design ideas from clients in multiple ways, shapes and forms.

"Clients usually come to us with a wish list: 'I want a fire element, I want a pool,' whatever that may be," Paul Wrona of Designs By Sundown says. "We take that wish list and study the site and come up with creative ideas and options."

Designs By Sundown has the added benefit of its Colorado locations, so it can take advantage of natural landscape outcroppings as well as materials native to the area including giant boulders. "We do a lot of creative things with boulders, making fire or water elements out of those by coring sections of the rocks or boring a hole where water can come out," he says.

Platinum Homes recently had a client who came in with photographs of a lavish fire and water feature at a resort hotel in London. "Most of what clients bring us are more involved and on a more grand scale, especially if it's seen in a resort-type environment," Bruce Aylward, warranty manager of the firm, says. "We take what people have in their photographs and scale it down to a more realistic size."

Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater Home in southwest Pennsylvania served as the inspiration for a spec home Platinum Homes recently sold. "That design was quite the undertaking," Aylward said. "It took advantage of a waterfall that goes 27 feet to a lower level where there is a retaining pool."



**An existing natural** environment can be creatively woven into the outdoor living area, as the top photo shows. Big boulders can be brought in and cored to accommodate impressive fire features.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DESIGNS BY SUNDOWN

## Design: Idea File



**Paul Wrona prefers** to use natural materials for his designs. "We like to build our fire boxes custom," he says. "The whole idea is to make it blend with the house, and it's difficult to get something that's manufactured to do that." PHOTOGRAPHY BY DESIGNS BY SUNDOWN

to keep in mind they'll be working with two of the classic threats to modern home building: water and fire.

If the custom builder has in-house landscape design/build capabilities, the company can aptly handle its client's outdoor living requests. Otherwise, a high-end landscape design firm can be recruited to do the work.

Landscape designer Paul Wrona advises custom builders who are either building a spec home or have clients with their sights set on a lavish outdoor living environment with fire and water features to bring in a landscape design firm right away.

"The sooner you do that, the better," he says, also noting luxury outdoor living areas are connected to a house in more ways than one.

Wrona is on the staff of Designs By Sundown, an award-winning landscape architecture and construction firm based in Englewood, Colo. His position has him working closely with architects and builders as well as homeowners. He's certainly noticed the growing trend to lavish outdoor landscapes and says their landscape design/build packages have ranged anywhere from \$60,000 to \$300,000.

"Right now, outdoor fire features are very trendy and hot," he says, adding that water features have been around much longer and remain very popular. Additionally, his insight from experience with installations reveals some of the challenges that are unique to this type of project.

"It depends on how extravagant it gets, but any time we're attaching a structure to a client's house, problems can arise," he says. "There are also aesthetic considerations that need to be taken into account. You want any fire or water features of the outdoor living area to match the house; you want it to blend," he says.

Wrona says things typically go much smoother when the builder works with a landscape architect and construction firm throughout the entire process of building the home. "Otherwise, things can fall through the cracks," he says. "If a water feature is designed to be close to the home, then it needs to be designed so that the flow or any potential overflow would go away from the house," he adds.

Platinum Homes is an award-winning design/builder of custom luxury homes based in Scottsdale, Ariz., that

includes outdoor living areas in all of the houses it builds, with many that include water or fire features. Costs for outdoor living areas they've done have run from around \$20,000 up to \$85,000, and sometimes, "the sky is the limit" for the client. Bruce Aylward, warranty manager of the firm, also notes the importance of planning from the get-go when water and fire features are included in an outdoor living design.

"For installations, it's important to get the grading done correctly for the water. You need to make sure the plumbing and gas lines are going to the correct places where they will be needed," he says. "And you want to be sure the gas is metered correctly. Otherwise the fire features might not work the way they should."

Aylward says that everything should be decided at the beginning of construction. They'll typically build their pool and water areas even before the house is built. With Platinum Homes' often building in a desert environment, their team is also sensitive to the impact on the environment. "We like to make sure the footprint doesn't disturb the natural desert features," he says.



**This entry courtyard** with fire woks and an infinity edge pool greets visitors to this 5,300-square-foot home in the Desert Mountain area of Scottsdale, Ariz. The home was designed by H&S International and built by Platinum Homes.

PHOTO BY JOE COTTITA OF EPIC MULTIMEDIA

Issues, including those related to building codes and warranty, can't be ignored. "There are several code issues that need to be addressed, including those related to water drainage and gas lines. Inspections need to be accommodated," Aylward says. "Then if the home happens to be in a community with an HOA, you need to check with the HOA to make sure whatever you are creating fits within their rules, regulations and specifications."

### **Maintenance and the Art of Customer Satisfaction**

Fancy outdoor living environments that call for extraordinary fire and water features also cry out for special care and maintenance. The last thing a custom builder or landscape firm wants is an overflow of callbacks for leaking water or flames that won't flicker.

Although the builder may or may

not be involved in any ongoing maintenance requirements or other issues related to the custom outdoor landscape, a concern for the firm's reputation and ongoing customer satisfaction might inspire staff to address maintenance issues ahead of time with their clients.

Wrona points out that water features have filtration systems that require periodic maintenance, and larger pools would need chemical treatment on a regular basis — both important details that should be shared with a client. Aylward agrees, noting that homeowners have quarterly and annual upkeep for things like keeping dust and dirt out of gas lines and flushing and cleaning pools.

Platinum Homes recently established an in-house home maintenance division. "Homeowners don't always realize the maintenance involved in these

water and fire features for their outdoor living areas," Aylward says. "Even if one of our clients does not want us involved with maintenance on an ongoing basis, we will be sure to communicate what the maintenance requirements are for anything we create.

"Our clients can have us involved as much or as little as they want with their ongoing maintenance needs," he adds. "However, it serves to keep the warranty issues down if we are the ones responsible for the care and maintenance."

Aylward is currently solving a problem related to an issue of freezing pipes in a water feature installation his team is finishing up in the Arizona Highlands.

"The nature of custom building means that it will always be different," Aylward says. "We enjoy it because every project brings its own unique challenges." **CB**