

THE STRAIGHT DOPE THE WHOLE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

Shrouds of Secrecy?

By: [Matthew Power](#)

Third-party decorative fireplace shrouds often violate building codes. Worse, they may cause chimney fires. Why take the chance?

Derek Lidstrom, of Gurnee, Ill., just north of Chicago, has big problems with those fancy architectural shrouds you see perched on wooden chimney surrounds. As Lidstrom (whose company, Chimney King, makes UL listed shrouds) sees it, fireplace manufacturers share silent complicity in the fact that 3 million to 5 million of these untested, possibly unsafe, "deco-shrouds" have been put in place on new homes, mostly in the South and West.

"Fireplace manufacturers have a conundrum," Lidstrom asserts. "The 20 percent of their suppliers that sell 80 percent of the products have sold and installed shrouds that were too small."

From 1970 to 1990, they were making and selling these things as part of the fireplace sale. But they were never in the building code."

Eric Hawkinson, vice president of engineering for Hearth Technologies (Heat-N-Glo and Heatilator) in Lakeville, Minn., says his company has now addressed the problem by selling third-party, UL-tested shrouds, and offering specific field design specs for site-built shrouds.

Price Grandy, a consulting engineer with Grandy Associates in Huntington Beach, Calif., has conducted many postmortem examinations of house fires caused by chimney fires.

"Typically, the chimney cap is chosen by the builder's subcontractor," he explains. "Not every shroud that isn't UL listed is unsafe, but there's no way to tell which ones are, except by having them tested by engineers, to see if they meet UL safety standards."