

The Problems with Decorative Shrouds

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Take a look outside at the top of your chimney. If there is a metal box surrounding and hiding the top of your chimney stack, then your chimney is equipped with what chimney professionals call a “decorative shroud.”

Decorative shrouds are installed to improve the appearance of the top of the chimney. Unfortunately, a decorative shroud may not improve the performance of the chimney. It may create conditions that interfere with good performance, and may in some situations be potentially hazardous.

Decorative shrouds are typically installed on the top of a chimney chase. A chimney chase is an enclosure around a metal chimney. Decorative shrouds are especially popular on factory-built fireplace chimneys.

Don't confuse a decorative shroud with a chimney cap, which sits directly on top of the flue pipe to keep moisture out. If you can see your chimney cap, which has a lid and may have a screen around it, then you probably do not have a decorative shroud on your chimney.

Some factory-built fireplace systems include the option of a decorative shroud that has been tested and listed for use with that system if the manufacturer's installation instructions are strictly followed. Perhaps more commonly installed are unlisted and untested decorative shrouds.

Heat Deflection

A decorative shroud may not allow heat at the top of the chimney to dissipate adequately. Heat may be reflected onto the metal chase cover, and may possibly ignite the combustible wood framing underneath. Heat, smoke and ashes may also be drawn into any gaps in the chase cover - for example, where the flue pipe penetrates the chase cover.

Some metal chimneys are designed to be air-cooled. This type of chimney is made of three concentric layers of metal with airspaces between the layers. When hot smoke is exhausted through the inner pipe, cool air at the top of the chimney is drawn into the outer airspace and down the pipe, providing the necessary insulation. With a decorative shroud in place, too much heat may be retained around the top of the chimney. The cooling system of the chimney may be taking in air that is much too warm; therefore the chimney may run hotter than intended. Combustible materials near the chimney, such as wood framing, may be exposed to potentially dangerous amounts of heat during operation of the fireplace or woodstove.

Bird Nesting

Decorative shrouds provide a warm and sheltered place for birds to nest. Nesting materials may be ignited by the heat at the top of the chimney (intensified by heat contained and reflected by the decorative shroud). Or the nesting materials may simply block the flue and prevent the passage of smoke.

Decorative Shrouds and Codes

Decorative shrouds atop chimneys are prohibited under the International Residential National Mechanical Code, International Fuel Gas Code and the National Fire Association's standards NFPA 211 and NFPA 54 unless specifically listed for the fireplace chimney.

Although most building codes are not retroactive, the International Fire Code requires removal of decorative shrouds unless listed.

What to Do

A competent chimney sweep can help you determine if there is a decorative shroud on your chimney and if it may be a potential hazard. The chimney sweep may want to know if the decorative shroud is listed for use with your particular make and model of chimney. If you can find the installation instructions for the chimney, it will assist your sweep in this determination. The sweep should check for signs of bird nesting around the shroud. The sweep should also check for signs that smoke and heat are being deflected down toward the chimney chase cover instead of flowing up into the atmosphere.

If there is any sign of a problem with the decorative shroud, don't hesitate to ask your chimney sweep to remove it. For safety's sake, you may decide to remove it even if there are no obvious signs of a problem.

How to Find a Chimney Sweep

If you don't already have a good chimney sweep, ask around in your community for a chimney sweep with a good reputation. A well-earned good reputation is the public's "seal of approval."

Chimney professionals also demonstrate their competence through certification programs offered by the Chimney Safety Institute of America (CSIA), the National Fireplace Institute (NFI), Fireplace Investigation, Research and Education Service (F.I.R.E), the Wood Education Technology Transfer (WETT) in Canada, and some state chimney sweep associations.

A current list of CSIA Certified Chimney Sweeps® is available at www.csia.org.

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