

Couple helps give city street new life

Arsenaults have put new homes in place of old

By RICHARD AMRHINE
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

STUART STREET may be a short street, but Christian and Lani Arsenault think it's long on potential.

The block-long street between Washington and Fall Hill avenues, near the canal, is in transition. Though some of the houses remain in poor condition, many others along Stuart Street have been renovated or rebuilt in recent years, creating a small pocket of urban renewal in the city.

During a tour of his recently completed project at 640 Stuart St., Christian Arsenault said he has been working on houses "as long as I can remember. I've always liked to do things myself."

But he hadn't looked at it as his full-time occupation. So years ago he became a certified public accountant and went to work for the government. He currently works for the inspector general's office of the Department of Labor, taking the VRE to Washington four days a week. On some of those trips, he's tinkered with floor plans on his laptop.

"It's not 'me' to function in an office," said Arsenault, who is 46. So he decided to become more involved in home construction, specifically in rehabbing old houses in downtown Fredericksburg. "I've finally figured out what I want to do when I grow up."

With his Class A contractor's license in hand, he hopes to be working on houses full time a year from now. "The wheels are in motion," he said.

Lani, his wife, works as a designer, which means she has the skills to choose

the colors, textures, fixtures and features that make a house a home. It's a labor of love for her. She's also played a main role in sorting through the permitting process.

"There are so many layers," she said.

Erik Nelson, the city's senior planner, said the city always likes to see work on properties that haven't been maintained, whether they are razed and replaced or just fixed up.

"They've gone about it in a very thorough and systematic way," Nelson said of the Arsenaults.

In June 2004, Christian Arsenault bought 626 Stuart St. and quickly determined that the structure would

have to be torn down. The unoccupied, century-old house had one bedroom and a half-bathroom. There was no shower or tub. The house sat not on concrete or even concrete blocks, but on cedar logs.

"We heard that one family raised four kids in there," he said.

Because the lot was only 25 feet wide, with houses on either side, the house had to be dismantled by hand. Christian's dad, Edmond, jumped in to help meet that challenge.

"There was just no room to take a bulldozer in there and move around," said Lani Arsenault.

The couple said other friends and relatives have lent their carpentry and

construction expertise as well.

The replacement house, with 1,500 finished square feet on two levels, plus a garage, sold in July 2005 for \$350,000.

Arsenault bought 640 Stuart St. in January 2005. It was a rambling affair that had been added to over time, nearly filling its deep lot. Arsenault thought at first that the original, front portion of the house would be salvageable. He would remove and replace the rear additions.

"It was unoccupied, too—except for the family of raccoons that ran out of there," he said. "After we got in here and looked at it, we knew it would have to



Photo courtesy CHRISTIAN ARSENAULT

The previous house at 640 Stuart St. had been allowed to deteriorate over the years.



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The Arsenaults replaced the old house with a new one that sits on about the same footprint. That's where the similarity ends.



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A fireplace and Brazilian walnut floors add warmth to the new house at 640 Stuart St. It's the second house the Arsenaults have built on the block-long street.

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come down," he said. So he had to start the permitting process over again. It cost him some time, but it was the only solution.

Today a new house stands where the old one used to be, and the Arsenaults have listed it for sale with an asking price of \$595,000.

It is a showplace inside and out. The front door opens to a main level with Brazilian walnut hardwood floors throughout. The home's footprint is much like that of the original, and measures about 20 feet wide by 71 feet deep, providing a total of nearly 2,500 finished square feet on the upper two levels, plus another couple of hundred square feet in two basement areas.

With space at a premium, Arsenault strived to use it as efficiently as possible. "We put storage here and there to avoid dead space," he said.

To the right of the foyer is a small sitting room or office with a tray ceiling that was given a patterned, metal-look inlay. There is a half-bathroom nearby with a designer glass basin-style vanity.

Straight down the main corridor is the kitchen, with ceramic-tile floor, granite-topped island and counters, stainless-steel appliances and an eating area. Behind that is a laundry and utility room with stacked washer and dryer, along with a laundry tub.

At the rear of the house is the living room with a fireplace,



Lani and Christian Arsenault have a seat on the custom staircase that was built at 640 Stuart St., the second property on the street on which they built a new house.

Wood salvaged from the original house was used for the mantel and in other trim work around the house. A rear door opens to a wide, partially covered deck and small, grassy yard.

Upstairs are three generously sized bedrooms, including a master suite. The master bath has a marble-topped double vanity, a glass-enclosed shower and a reproduction claw-foot tub. The master bedroom has a tray ceiling with a copper-look inlay and indirect rope lighting.

Though much of the interior design has a contemporary look, the trim is pure Fredericksburg, with wide crown moldings,



Tray ceilings inside 640 Stuart St. received special treatment with patterned and painted panels.



The kitchen features an island and granite-topped surfaces, stainless steel appliances and a ceramic tile floor.

chair rail, columns and lots of arches.

A central electronic brain is the hub for whole-house wiring for music, Internet and home security.

The basement has two sections accessed by separate stairways. An unfinished rear area has a 10-foot ceiling and could become a recreation or exercise room. A

front room, which has an inlaid bamboo floor, was created from a crawl space by adding a couple of feet to the original brick-wall foundation. Its naturally cool temperature could make it an ideal wine cellar.

The exteriors of both Stuart Street houses are done in Hardiplank siding, a concrete-based board that is both durable and



Photos by REBECCA SELL / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The master bathroom includes a claw-foot tub and PVC wainscoting that won't be affected by splashed water.

fireproof. The pitched roofs and trim work give them a Victorian look.

Last December, Arsenault bought 224 Charles St., near Dixon Street and a short distance from the train station, and

has now started work on that.

To arrange a showing at 640 Stuart St., call 540/842-1320.

To reach RICHARD AMRHINE:
540/374-5406
ramrhine@freelancestar.com