

ON LOCATION
WASHINGTON, D.C.

They Found a Way to Stay in the City

Rather than hit the suburbs, a couple merged their rowhouse with the one next door.

By ZLATA KOZUL NAUMOVSKI

For Ralph and Shamita Etienne-Cummings, the suburbs have long held a certain allure — especially since 2010, when their son, Blaze, was born and Mr. Etienne-Cummings's mother moved into their 1876 rowhouse in Washington, D.C.

"Space became more of a premium," Ms. Etienne-Cummings said. Her husband, she explained, is "from Seychelles; I'm from India. Culturally, we always have family that lives with us."

But the benefits of living outside the city — having a big backyard and a bigger house — couldn't compete with convenience of their life in the Logan Circle neighborhood of Washington, on a blocklong street coveted for its historic homes and central location.

"Our son grew up walking everywhere with his grandmother," said Ms. Etienne-Cummings, 52, a lawyer. "We really wanted to stay in our neighborhood but definitely needed more space, and that was difficult to do in an area that's already filled up."

In a stroke of luck, the rowhouse next door came on the market in 2016, and they were able to buy it for \$1.4 million, creating an uncommon opportunity to expand laterally and increase their total living space to around 7,000 square feet.

Their idea was to merge the two houses into a cohesive whole, with light and open spaces for entertaining. But they knew it wouldn't be easy.

The house next door was slightly older, and neither of the street-facing facades could be altered, thanks to strict preservation rules. Also, the additional space that came with it — slightly more than 2,100 square feet — was on floors that didn't align with those in the couple's current house.

"The homes are more than a century old," said V. W. Fowlkes, a principal at Fowlkes Studio, the architecture firm the couple hired. "And the joists buried within the floor plates are historically protected. We had to do some negotiating with the city about how to join the homes, and be judicious about how the structures were going to be altered."

Still, he said, "We were extremely excited by the design challenge."

One obstacle that immediately presented itself was a brick wall dividing the two houses, which couldn't be removed. So the architects preserved it under drywall and used it to anchor a modern glass-and-steel staircase with white-oak treads, illuminated by four skylights overhead.

"We wanted to have a monumental, light-drenched stair that could connect the three levels," Mr. Fowlkes said.

A complicated engineering feat, it is one



LEFT AND ABOVE, JENNIFER CHASE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIFER HUGHES



A monumental staircase required 'a lot of man-hours and redesign.'

of the most striking features of the design — and one of the most expensive. The staircase required "a lot of man-hours and redesign," said Mr. Etienne-Cummings, 54, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Whiting School of Engineering, who described the six-figure cost as "the biggest single price-shock of the build."

Surrounding the staircase are open, simply furnished spaces decorated in soothing neutrals — a serene, cocoon-like environment that Ms. Etienne-Cummings described as "almost minimalist without being too severe."

With just a few key pieces, including a modern sofa upholstered in wool and a hide rug, the living room is relatively spare. A fireplace adorned with handmade zellige tile and finished in Venetian plaster serves as a focal point.

"It's modern but functional," Ms. Etienne-Cummings said of the space.

The dining room is pared down as well, with a custom-made table that has a live-edge walnut top and bronze legs in a pewter finish. A delicate light fixture of black metal arcs with brass heads dangles above.

To create a proper entry, which the couple's original home lacked because of its narrow footprint, the architects erected a wall separating the entrance from the living room. Painted a deep gray and illuminated by a halo-like chandelier, it's the only dark space in the house.

"We wanted to have a little more ceremony associated with the entry," Mr. Fowlkes said. "The entry experience is moody, until you turn the corner and the house kind of explodes."

The back of the house — where the kitchen and an elevated mudroom are — allowed for more flexibility in design, including an addition on one side, to create a sense



Ralph and Shamita Etienne-Cummings, top left with their son, Blaze, bought a neighboring rowhouse and combined the two homes. The kitchen, center above, is a family focal point, and a monumental stairway, far left above, connects the home's three levels. The living room, above, was kept spare, while the dining room, far left above, connects the home's three levels. The living room, above, was kept spare, while the dining room, far left above, connects the home's three levels. The living room, above, was kept spare, while the dining room, far left above, connects the home's three levels. Alterations to the back of the combined structure, left, allowed the addition of more windows.

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The kitchen, which now has bleached-walnut cabinets with bronze hardware and a 12-foot-long waterfall island clad in Caesarstone, "has really become the focal point around which our family engages," Ms. Etienne-Cummings said. "Ralph is the chef, and on most Sundays he'll cook, and we sit around and talk."

In a minor feat of engineering, the architects suspended a 500-pound range hood sheathed in quartz from the ceiling, complete with a custom steel armature to support the stone panels. "That range hood will remain there forever," Mr. Fowlkes said.

All in, the renovation cost about \$2.2 million, but as far as Mr. Etienne-Cummings is concerned, it was worth it. "There's a lot of hustle and bustle in our lives," he said. "It's nice to come into a space and feel like everything is easy and fits like a glove."

