

## Habitats/Astoria, Queens; The Old Neighborhood

By TRACIE ROZHON

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PAST The Original Chirping Chicken, the Sanford Diner, the Modern Barber and the Broadway Tavern; past John and Angelo's Italian Delicatessen, Shima's Fine Japanese Cuisine and Lemonia Gyros Souvlaki Hamburgers, and past an old man sitting in a white plastic chair on the sidewalk is Dominic Casamento's block of 29th Street.

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Here, in Astoria, Queens, between Broadway and 31st Avenue, Mr. Casamento has just bought a wreck of a two-story brick house, the only run-down building on an otherwise immaculate street.

"The neighbors should pay me 10 grand apiece for fixing this place up," said Mr. Casamento, a 31-year-old builder who grew up only five blocks away on Crescent Street, where his mother still lives.

Mr. Casamento knows the block well. "My father was the mailman on this block from 1970 to 1980," he said.

He even knows the house. "My father used to be the handyman for the old lady who lived here," he said. "One of the first things I did when this house was for sale was to see if it was the same roof my father and I put on 12 years ago. It was, and, needless to say, it didn't leak."

He laughed.

Mr. Casamento may put on a new roof anyway. "Twelve years is a long time for a flat tar roof," he said, "and now they have these rubber roofs that are great." But right now, he's busy; he's ripped out the insides to the studs and is covering them with sheetrock.

So far, he has filled four Dumpsters with rotted plaster, along with the paneled wainscoting and grooved wooden trim and circle-incised corner blocks that bordered the doorways. He threw away the glass-paned mahogany double doors that connected the rooms.

"After I threw it all out, people came and asked for the stuff," he said. "But I didn't want to waste time. My wife and I have modern taste and we couldn't wait around."

Mr. Casamento and his wife, Mary Lee Casamento, a physician at New York Hospital on East 68th Street in Manhattan, will live here with their two children, Dominic Jr., 4, and Alyssa, born on Jan. 21, the day after he closed on the house.

To Mr. Casamento, coming back to his old neighborhood is an idea he has been nurturing since he and his family moved to Harrington Park, N.J., three years ago. He still works in Astoria. He parks his company trucks in his mother's garage, and, every day, he drops the children off to stay with their grandmother.

One day, he saw the for-sale sign. "I think it was only the second day it was up," he said. He placed his bid immediately; the house was on the market for \$180,000 with Charles Sciberras of Crest Haven Realty. Mr. Casamento paid \$155,000. The realtor said similar houses in the neighborhood have sold, renovated, for as much as \$260,000.

The Casamentos probably will live on the second floor, the bigger and lighter of the two apartments he is creating.

He will rent the downstairs, which is smaller because of the entrance hall and staircase, but has the same number of bedrooms -- three -- for between \$1,200 and \$1,300 a month, he said.

"The return is good," he said, "because the location is good; a safe neighborhood, only two blocks from the subway -- the N train -- and in 10 minutes you're in Manhattan."

He can redo the entire house for \$80,000, he explained, because he doesn't have to pay overhead "to 10 different people who all have their own overhead; I'm the general contractor, so I already have the crew.

"Actually, that's one of the reasons I'm doing the place," he said. "The work isn't always steady, and I hate to lay off people. I feel guilty."

"This way," he said, "it's another project to keep them busy in the down times."

Photo: Dominic Casamento outside the rundown two-story house he bought in Astoria, Queens. (Rebecca Cooney for The New York Times)