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MANSION

BALANCE SHEET

A DIY Renovation, With Factory on Hand

A Philadelphia couple undertakes a major renovation using the family business to make high-end custom designs; a central stairway seems to float from the front door to the fourth floor

BY NANCY KEATES

WHEN EMBARKING on a home renovation, it helps to own a business that makes high-end products for top architects and designers.

Adam Kamens, 45, is the chief executive of Amuneal, a Philadelphia-based company that designs and fabricates products like custom stairways, shelving units, tables and kitchens for homes, restaurants and stores. Clients include Saks Fifth Avenue, W Hotels and Twitter.

Mr. Kamens's wife, Kim, was pregnant with their now 13-year-old daughter when the couple bought their house in the Bella Vista neighborhood of Philadelphia for \$690,000. They had previously been living above a glass-blowing studio they owned at the time, called Hot Soup.

With three bedrooms and 2½ bathrooms, the 3,600-square-foot, four-story house had plenty of room for their growing family. But the couple, who also own an apartment in Manhattan and a place in Long Beach Island, N.J., found their new house sterile and closed-in.

It was essentially a white box with granite countertops and a stainless-steel kitchen—what Ms. Kamens calls “spec-house chic.” And it had no natural communal spot, so each family member retreated to their own space.

That had to change, so 2½ years ago they hired RJ Thornburg, who calls himself an “anti-decorator” for his tendency toward minimalist designs. Mr. Thornburg, a longtime friend, spent a few months just hanging out at their house, getting a feel for the light and the space. Then he drew a plan.

“It needed to breathe,” he says. He values the renovation at about \$500,000, which includes the retail prices of the many features designed and fabricated by his company. He paid cost, putting his actual budget at about \$376,400. The Amuneal-made items include parts of the huge pivoting front door of charred oak topped with graphite powder, the brass lights next to the stairs and the Murphy bed in the fourth-floor office.

To open up the space, they replaced a closed central stairway with steel balusters and wood treads that seem to float up from the front door to the fourth floor. They took down a wall between the living and dining rooms, putting in two burnished-steel columns for structural support. An entire exterior wall in the living room was replaced by 18-by-9-foot glass doors



PHOTOS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (6)



PHILLY FAMILY Clockwise from below left: Kim and Adam Kamens with their daughter, Spencer; the first-floor patio with hanging chairs; the living room with new glass doors; an exterior view of the home; Ms. Kamens heads to the loft in the master suite.



OFFICE SWITCH The fourth-floor office has a Murphy bed for when guests stay overnight.



that open up to a new ipe-wood deck and a new kitchen that has custom oxidized-oak cabinets and a large marble-top island.

Upstairs in the master bedroom, where 20-foot high ceilings had created a hollow feel, the couple put in a loft, reached by another steel and wood staircase. The loft holds a reading area with an Amuneal-made system of custom brass poles holding wood shelves.

With Amuneal making most of the components, “there were no limitations,” says Dixon Shay, of Shay Construction, the contractor on the project. He says they would come up with an idea and then refine it, making different iterations until they got it just right. A minimalist wood-burning fireplace with blackened steel boxes was one of the trickier projects, because of limits to where it could be placed. The design-build process took about a year.

Mr. Kamens's parents started Amuneal in 1965, making magnetic shields that protect electronic components from magnetic fields,



but the company struggled after his father died in 1985.

Mr. Kamens returned to the family business after graduating in 1993 from Washington University in St. Louis, where he studied fine arts and psychology. He aimed to diversify the business, and by 1999, Amuneal was starting to make furniture. Their big break came a year later, with commissions from Barneys New York that eventually led to the production of a giant horse



crafted from metal clothes hangers.

That led to contacts with top designers and architects for custom fabrication for retail, then residential work. The company now earns \$35 million a year in revenues and has 150 employees. There is a showroom in Philadelphia and one in the works in New York.

The renovation of his own home has been key to the development of his company's residential products, acting as an incubator for

COSTS	
Staircases	\$134,970
Glass doors	\$20,000
Dining table	\$14,840
Murphy bed	\$35,000
CSU desk	\$28,000
Office shelving	\$23,500
Kitchen	\$81,790
Bed	\$10,850
Brass lights	\$19,690
Ipe deck	\$64,210
Second-floor deck	\$25,000
Structural work	\$22,000
Electrical	\$46,000

Note: Prices of Amuneal products reflect retail values.

ideas, says Mr. Kamens. The company now sells shelving units, Murphy beds and lighting modeled after the system the Kamenses put in. Two new kitchen systems, introduced in May, are based on those in their home. “If we couldn't figure out how to make it for ourselves then we couldn't sell it to people,” says Mr. Kamens.

“Our litmus test is: Would we want it in our own house?” adds Ms. Kamens.