

Real estate

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1853 mansion, once a funeral home, transforming into offices, apartments

By Jim Weiker ■ THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Brent Williams sat in a heavy topcoat in his E. Town Street office a few weeks ago, trying to keep the chills away and the vision intact. • Williams is tackling one of the last great renovations on the once-grand street on the eastern edge of Downtown. While other mansions along E. Town have been buffed and polished into reuse, the Italianate home at 405 E. Town sat empty and neglected.



LEFT: The Italianate house at 405 E. Town St. had fallen into disrepair after the O'Shaughnessy Funeral Home sold it.

BELOW: Brent Williams of Falcon Equities is renovating the home but keeping the parquet floors downstairs.

"I brought people through here and they said, 'Do you really want to do this?'" Williams said in his unheated office in the house.

One of the oldest and most impressive homes on the street, the postcard-ready, three-story white brick Italianate mansion, complete with cupola, comes with a rich history.

Built in 1853, it was for decades the residence of James Fairchild Baldwin, a prominent surgeon who founded Grant Hospital (now OhioHealth Grant Medical Center). In 1947, nine years after his death, Baldwin's widow, Ida, sold the home.

Six years later, O'Shaughnessy Funeral Home picked up the property. The company later added a two-story concrete-block addition onto the rear for storage and embalming, bringing the total space to 10,374 square feet, not including a carriage house that serves as an apartment and garage.

In 2010, after the funeral home moved to Pearl Street, O'Shaughnessy sold the property to James Denos, who planned to use it for an upscale kitchen showroom. That plan never bore fruit, and the property fell into disrepair.

The building attracted several prospects, but they were intimidated by the size of the project, said Larry Herrett, who listed the property for RE/MAX Impact.

"To tackle 10,000 square feet over there was a lot for some people," Herrett said.

"We had a couple of people who approached us early on to continue its use as a funeral home and a couple of people interested in it as a personal residence, but it was beyond their capabilities," he said.

"One party was interested in just tearing it down and using either the grounds and maybe another building for something else. They decided it wasn't worth it because of the size of the demolition. And one party



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looked at it in terms of gutting it out and reconfiguring it into rentals."

Williams had been looking for an old property to renovate for his businesses, Bug Patrol of Ohio and Falcon Equities, when his real-estate agent showed him the home, starting with its crumbling front porch and its 1960s-era metal doors.

"My first reaction was not very positive," Williams recalled. "I saw the front porch and I wondered if that was indicative of the interior."

The interior wasn't much better, but it held enough charms to interest Williams. A grand center hall, with most of its decorative tile floor intact, still greets visitors. A massive curved staircase rises two levels to the upper floors.



This elegant curved staircase traverses all three stories.

First-floor ceilings are more than 12 feet high, and upper-level ceilings exceed 10. Parquet floors decorate two of the first-floor rooms, stained glass

adorns the second-floor hallway, and 10-foot-high pocket doors still slide. The original front doors are still intact, and most of the windows have wood shutters that tuck into recesses next to the windows.

But vandals had stripped copper plumbing and part of the front-porch railing from the home, water damage had ruined the parquet floors in one room, and dropped ceilings hung in second-floor bedrooms.

Last summer, Williams signed a one-year option to buy the property, which he estimates will take two or three years to renovate. He sees a bit of himself in the once-imposing building.

"I really got zapped when the real-estate market crashed," he

said. "I'm in a mode of comeback myself, and this building is the same."

Since signing the option, he has begun stabilizing the property and planning its reuse.

"Is it a home? Is it a business?" he asked himself after securing the property.

He settled on a hybrid. He plans to use the first floor for offices for his firm and another. The second floor will house at least two apartments.

He hopes to integrate the old and new parts of the building with loft styling, exposed ductwork, brick walls and some flaws on the drywall and floors.

"There are so many places of imperfections here," he said while rubbing his hand over splotchy plaster. "I like it."

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