

Downtown Fresno's Romain House gets new life with tax preparation business

By BoNhia
Lee

A tour of the Romain House. THEFRESNOBEE

Nestled under the shade of mature trees on a corner of the Mural District in downtown Fresno is a historic home with unlikely new owners — a father and daughter who own a tax preparation business.

Frank Wong and Jayni Wong-Placencia bought the Romain House in June. It's on San Joaquin Street and Van Ness Avenue, in the heart of a neighborhood undergoing a revitalization led by the Assemi family of developers.

The Wongs knew a transformation was taking place, but they didn't realize the scope of it until they ventured downtown from their longtime home office in the Mayfair district of central Fresno.

Now, they're excited to be part of the change and hopeful that the surrounding development will help their property gain equity as they renovate the 110-year-old home into small office spaces.

"Aesthetically, (the house) is just beautiful," says Wong-Placencia, 50, who has worked with her father since she was in high school.

Wong, who is also a real estate investor, bought the property for \$365,000.

"The interior I wasn't real happy with," he says. "It was a sloppy mess."

But it has quite the street appeal: wraparound porch, big columns, a large front door and elaborate bay windows.

The two-story, wood-frame house is on the National Register of Historic Places and the Local Register of Historic Resources. It was built in 1905 for Frank Romain, one of the central San Joaquin Valley's pioneering agricultural developers. Romain established the Griffen-Skelly packing plant just outside Fresno in the 1880s. The plant later became the California Packing Corp.

After Romain, the house became the Sullivan, Burns, and Blair Funeral Home from 1929 to 1959. Wong joked during a tour of the home, while standing near the old embalming room, that he welcomed any ghosts who remained.

The Wongs bought the house from a law firm, the San Joaquin Partnership.

"It got to a point where we really outgrew" the current office, Wong-Placencia says. And, "Dad's at a point where he will start passing on more clients."

Wong, 70, wanted to buy property, not lease. Wong-Placencia says her father values the equity.

Wong started his business, Tax Professionals, in a home he bought in 1965 on Norris Drive just southwest of McLane High School. He's known as "the tax man" who meets with a majority of his clients at their homes where cats nestle in his lap at the kitchen table or walk across his laptop punching in extra zeroes where they don't belong.

The Wongs began their search for a new office more than a year ago. They toured commercial spaces on Blackstone Avenue but didn't find a good fit. Then their Realtor, Shannon Mar of Guarantee Real Estate, emailed them a listing for the historic home.

The house is huge. It's been renovated many times and had an addition built into one side, which expanded its size from 4,700 square feet to a little more than 5,500 square feet.

The busy floral wallpaper on the foyer walls leading upstairs was removed and painted with a gray-beige color. The Wongs are planning to renovate the bathrooms, which show the house's age with small, dingy yellow tiles.

"We want to keep the integrity of the place," Wong-Placencia says. "The woodwork is beautiful."

A foyer with a large gold chandelier welcomes guests into the part colonial revival, part Greek revival home indicative of the houses that used to litter the area. Other professional buildings, a Mexican restaurant and modern lofts now surround the house.

Office space is located on the first floor and on the second floor where a U-shaped staircase takes visitors up to a large landing. The Wongs have their offices upstairs.

A marketing business will soon occupy part of the first floor, but there is space for up to three more small professional businesses, Wong says.

Karana Hattersley-Drayton, the city's historic preservation project manager, is excited to see the new owners in the neighborhood.

"They are so caring and responsible and concerned about being good stewards of that property, so I think it's terrific," Hattersley-Drayton says. "I'm very pleased and delighted to see them step up."

More information

For more about Romain House or to rent an office:

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