

\$1 million rehab turns Franklinton warehouse into home

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The building on South Grubb Street in Franklinton was for years a nondescript warehouse, tucked away on a side street in a part of town where few would see it.

It's a bit more descript now, with a steel mesh fence surrounding a small front yard decorated with artwork, including a bronze Statue of Liberty, a Russian sculpture titled "The Birth of Venus from the Head of Zeus," and a colorful surfboard with "Franklinton" painted in black lettering leaning on a corner of the house.

Yes, the warehouse, is now a *house*, a 5,000-square-foot building that took a year and a half and close to \$1 million to renovate into a home for a pair of doctors — a husband and wife who enjoy city living.

Dr. Robert E. Falcone, a trauma surgeon, is the latest new resident of Franklinton who believes in the rebirth of the long-downtrodden neighborhood. Falcone, 67, is chief executive officer of the Columbus Medical Association, a former president and chief operating officer of Grant Medical Center and a former chief of staff at the Cincinnati Veterans Affairs Medical Center. His wife, Dr. Deborah Meesig, is the chief of staff at the VA Medical Center in Chillicothe.

At heart, though, Falcone is a city kid. He grew up in a Slovenian neighborhood east of downtown Cleveland. In 2002, he spent \$500,000 on a building on North 4th Street near Spring Street Downtown, where he lived for about a decade. He sold it last year for \$1.5 million.

"I'm really quite comfortable in transitional neighborhoods," Falcone said. "Since I've been in Columbus, I've always lived in the city."

He wanted a smaller place, at least smaller than the 12,000-square-foot, four-story building on North 4th Street.

Franklinton seemed to be a good fit.

"It's an arts community, it's evolving, it still has the feel of a neighborhood," he said.

Falcone is an artist and art lover. He needed a house big enough to display his oil paintings, sculptures and other works.

So he found a warehouse that fit the bill. Built in 1965, it was still being used as a warehouse for graphic arts and printing, Falcone said. He bought the property for \$195,000 in 2013 and sat on it for a few years.

"I bought it when I did because it started to be a pretty hip area," he said. The 400 West Rich artists colony isn't far, and neither are the gathering places such as Land-Grant Brewing and Strongwater. An apartment development is rising from an old public-housing site nearby.

Falcone and his wife just moved in last week. He plays bass guitar, so stringed instruments hang on one wall. Paintings cover other walls.

Not every new house or rehab in Franklinton will be as extravagant as Falcone's. But other people continue to invest in the area; some are newcomers, others are returning to the neighborhood.

Eric Allen and several partners bought a four-unit brick apartment building across South Grubb Street from Falcone's house in September for \$115,000. Allen and a crew were cleaning out the building last week.

“These units are a mess,” he said.

But from the porches and upper windows, new residents will be able to see the Downtown skyline. Allen said he rehabs houses in other areas of town. “This is a new neighborhood,” he said. “I’m happy to be part of it.”

Next door to Allen’s building lives Donna Colombini. She and her husband, Joseph, bought their two-story, two-bedroom home in 2013 for \$26,000. He grew up down the street. They bought a house on South Grubb in 1978 and rented it out after moving to the Grove City area to raise their family. After they did, they wanted to downsize and decided to move back to the old neighborhood.

“We heard a lot about things going on here,” said Donna Colombini, 60, who can see the city’s skyline from her front porch.

Judyth Box, who leads the Franklinton Area Commission and owns rental properties in the neighborhood, said she gets calls from people who want to buy small warehouses in the neighborhood and convert them into houses.

“Now it’s hip to move to the city,” she said, “and people will follow the crowd.”

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