

An estate divided?

Jeremy Schnitker, BlockShopper San Francisco
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Berkeley's Spring Mansion has gone through a number of incarnations since the estate was constructed nearly a century ago.

It was initially the residence of its builder, developer and entrepreneur John Hopkins Spring, who had commissioned architect John Hudson Thomas to design the property's two-story, 12,000-square-foot Beaux Arts-style mansion in the early 1900s. Spring would occupy the home from 1912 until 1917, when he sold the estate, which covered dozens of acres, to educator Cora Williams.

Williams would convert the property into her Institute of Creative Development, which was initially a progressive elementary and secondary school and would later be turned into Williams College. The schools occupied the mansion for five decades before the house was purchased by real estate investor Larry Leon in 1975. Leon lived in the home until John Park and his real estate consortium, Monument Properties 5, bought it in 2005.

The consortium initially planned on refurbishing the main mansion and remodeling some of the smaller structures on the property into private single-family residences. That plan met resistance from the community and was eventually scrapped.

On July 6, the entire 3.2-acre estate, which is one of the largest parcels of land in Berkeley, was put on the market for \$6.495 million. The mansion itself is listed for \$4.95 million.

The property can either be purchased as a whole or split up into four parcels, and according to the property's co-listing agent, Red Oak Realty's Robin Gaskins, nobody's sure what the next chapter in the property's long history will be.

"It's hard to tell," she said. "Some people are interested in the entire property, and honestly, that's how my client would prefer it be sold."

Monument is based in Monterey Park in Los Angeles, though Park used to live in the Berkeley hills and is familiar with the history of the estate.

The future of the home "depends on what the purchaser may want to do with it," added David Tierney, vice president and spokesman for Monument Properties.

The property currently has four addresses. The main mansion is at 1960 San Antonio Ave., while the secondary Gate House is at 1984 San Antonio Ave. The former gymnasium is at 639 Arlington Ave. and a former dormitory occupies 641 Arlington Ave.

Gaskins said they've received an offer on one of the four parcels thus far, while the Gate House, which sits on a separate 12,000-square-foot parcel that houses a three-bedroom, two-bath home, has garnered some interest as an independent property as well.

"We've had an offer on one piece of the land and we're negotiating with that potential buyer now," she said, but added the sellers have not decided whether they'd accept an offer for a divided-up parcel yet.

Save for a groundskeeper who had tended to the estate after 2005, the property has not been occupied since Leon moved out, nor has it been drastically altered, Tierney said.

"We've mostly done just some maintenance work on the property, but no sort of remodeling or anything at this point," he said.

Perhaps the only thing that is certain about the property at this point is that it's something you don't frequently see on the market. Stepping inside the main mansion is like going back a century in time.

The rooms present themselves on a grand scale uncommon today, especially in a compact community like Berkeley. And then there's the 30-foot, two-story atrium with four large corner columns and a wraparound secondfloor balcony.

The main home also houses a library, living room, dining room and billiards room, which are mostly empty. There's multiple fireplaces and sets of French doors, while boxbeamed ceilings adorn many of the rooms.

Gaskins said the most impressive aspect of the home isn't even the mansion, but the landscape grounds that surround it. Described in marketing materials as a "100-year-old botanical garden," the grounds have multiple trees that are rare for the area, as well as various ornaments and a fountain, though they've admittedly been neglected over the years.

"It's in need of sprucing up and care, but it's much easier to care for mature gardens than start growing them from scratch," Gaskins said.

Gaskins, who is co-listing the home with Laurie Capitelli - a member of Berkeley's City Council - said much of the attention the home has gotten has been local, and they're hoping to potentially broaden the interest in the home outside the Bay Area or United States.

Regardless of where the interest has come from, the response from those who have seen it has been consistent.

"People are mostly impressed by how well the buildings have maintained themselves over the years, and how well it's held up," Tierney said. "I mean, the place is built entirely of steel-reinforced concrete, which is something you just don't see anymore. The property as a whole has some very good bones."

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