

# Hi-tech vs. environment

By Kay Rohrer; Sunday News Staff Writer; October 5, 1986

A computer business in a historic house is about as opposite as possible. But that is the way Kent Williams wanted it.

The owner of Machine Tool Programming, a software business in Columbia, Williams said, "I wanted to create an environment that was in contrast to what we were doing. I didn't want a hi-tech building with a sterile environment." He wanted a restful and warm place for his employees to perform work that he describes as "mentally demanding."

The four-year-old business was put together by Williams when, as a production manager, he couldn't find a system that he needed. His company specializes in creating software for the sheet metal industry. "We don't have to be anywhere special," he said. They have no walk-in trade and deal internationally with machine manufacturers and their representatives. "You can write software anywhere." he said.

The business was started in Lancaster and now employs eight full-time and two part-time people. Williams faced a choice of buying or leasing in Lancaster or moving to another area. He knew people in Columbia who told him of what they called "an old, large home" that was for sale.

The house at 441 Chestnut St. was designed by famous Lancaster architect C. Emlen Urban. Built in the 1890s for attorney J.W. Yocum, it was part of a row of homes built for wealthy Columbia residents.

Many of the homes on the block have been renovated or restored to house businesses. Williams figured that it would cost 40 to 60 percent less to run an office there than it would for the same space downtown. The deep lot allowed for all the parking he needed, cutting a cost that had proven to be significant.

Williams said, "We could have built for what we renovated," but then he wouldn't have had the atmosphere he was striving for. Sitting at his desk in front of the large ornate windows, he mused, "Renovating this was quite the learning experience."

With a little help from his sister who is an interior designer in Tennessee, and a contractor, he got the look he wanted. "I wanted everything to look like it fit," he said. "And we almost succeeded too well."

Not too many structural changes were necessary because the house had been a private residence and was in good condition. In some parts of the house it was necessary to let well enough alone where 1950s renovations had been done. Where stair railings had been torn out, he used rails and banister from the third floor to replace the original. But the rooms that were torn out on the first floor were not put back, partially because the large open space inside the front door makes an ideal open office where most of the staff converges.

Williams found himself interested in details. Stripping the paint revealed beautiful woodwork inside and detailed designs in the trim outside. Five college women spent all summer striping woodwork. It is now varnished and shows off the dark wood and grain. Archways had been put in between rooms, but they were an addition, and Williams wanted the original squared doorways.

"Initially I wanted to get in quick," he said. "But I changed my mind and made the commitment to do it right." That meant a lot more attention to details, but it was all headed in one direction. "I knew the look I wanted," he said. "I wanted it warm." To help accomplish that he only needed to add burgundy carpeting to accentuate the dark, original wood.

To keep the building warmer, he added storm windows. Exterior storm windows would have hidden the ornate windows that were part of the building's design, so Williams worked it out with the contractor to have the glass put in aluminum frames on the inside of the windows. The framing was then hidden by installing a wooden molding.

The main floor of the house/office is primarily office space. A working restored fireplace in the corner of the living room is visible in the massive mirror that lines the entire wall. The mirror, in the house when Williams bought it, makes the office seem twice as large as it is, giving the employees a feeling of openness. A kitchen at the back of the house makes an idea space for workers to get away from their computers.

Offices, a conference room and a sitting room are on the second floor. As with the first floor, the computers that are the tools of their trade are everywhere. Special wiring had to be added to carry the electrical load. An as yet unrented apartment takes up the entire third floor.

It fits their needs, and employees said they like it. "It sure beats working in your house," one employee joked to Williams.

If he had it to do over again Williams said the only thing he would do differently would be to make the commitment earlier to go entirely into restorative renovation.

It has been worth all the work, he said. They worked from the purchase in May 1985 until moving day in November 1985. Customer like it too, Williams explained, "It helps to change their attitudes." Computer businesses like his have a tendency to come and go quickly. He felt that he commitment to a building like this is a statement about his permanency.

"It has a positive influence on people and is a good working environment for us," he said. "The contrast between the building and what we are doing takes people by surprise."