COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT MEMO REPORT
OF FINDINGS FOR DEMOLITION

June 12, 2020

**Address:** 4949 E. Eastman Ave.

**Legal Description:** UNIVERSITY HILLS 3 FLG #2 B44 L1 EXC "PAR 2 & 3"(2007032911)
EXC BEG SW COR L1 TH N 107.8FTN67.3730E 424.82FT S 266.36FT W 394.96FT TPOB

**Current Building Name:** University Hills Lutheran Church

**Construction Date:** barn constructed late 19th century, converted to a church in 1952

**Source of Information:** Denver Assessor’s Office; Denver City Directories; *Denver Post*; University Hills Lutheran Church website (https://uhillslutheran.org/)

**Architectural**
Architectural Style: Mid-century Modern
Architect/BUILDER: unknown
Source of Information:

**Historical**
Original owner: Joseph A. Osner
Original use(s): Barn
Current use(s): Church
Historical background:

4949 E. Eastman Ave. (currently the University Hills Lutheran Church) was originally a barn on the farm of Joseph A. Osner in Arapahoe County. Prior to the post-World War II expansion of Denver, this area south of the city was primarily agricultural, providing dairy, produce, and livestock for the Denver market. Following the war, most of the land was annexed into Denver for residential housing developments. An ordinance approving annexation of 450 acres of Arapahoe county that included the Osner dairy farm was passed by Denver City Council in October 1946. Denver developers Hutchinson & Carey acquired the land for their new University Hills development and started filing plats with the City and County of Denver in 1949. 4949 E. Eastman was part of the University Hills No. 3 Filing No. 2 Plat in 1951. As Denver expanded south, the Mission Board of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod sought a location to establish a new church and congregation. They located 4.5 acres at E. Eastman and S. Dahlia adjacent to the Highline Canal. The only structure on the lot was a barn from Osner’s farm which the church decided to convert into a church.

Born in Ohio in 1857, Osner moved to Denver as a young man. Osner established a successful contracting business known for its work on railroad and irrigation projects including
improvements on the Highline Canal. Osner became a prominent Denver figure and when he
passed away in 1925 the *Denver Post* variously described him as “a contractor, farmer,
ranchman . . . active in Denver civic movements” and a “railroad builder, horse-breeder and
philanthropist.” His farm and ranch were located southeast of Denver along the Highline Canal.
According to probate records, when Osner died his livestock holdings included 55 head of
cattle, 5 milk cows, 1 bull, 35 young horses, 95 work horses, 8 colts, 1 stallion, 30 sheep, 39
hogs, chickens, and geese. During his life, Osner appeared frequently in the newspaper as a
leading member of the Gentlemen’s Riding and Driving Club, which sponsored harness racing
meets on the City Park race course. According to the *Denver Post*, “thru his love for fine horses
he found most of his recreation and his interest contributed materially to developing the horse
industry in Colorado to such a high plane.” The *Denver Post* concluded his obituary with the
statement that “not even his activities in the contracting, farming and stock-breeding lines were
sufficient to absorb all of Osner’s time or interest. He found time for charity work and was greatly
loved for his liberality and consideration of the unfortunate.”

Ownership of the farm between Joseph Osner’s death and the annexation of the land is not
known, though the Jordan Mortgage Company owned it at the time of the annexation. The
mortgage company appears to have purchased it as an investment, reporting to the *Denver Post*
that the land would soon be developed into “a fine residential area.”

The University Hills subdivision was platted in nine filings between 1949 and 1952 and included
most of the area from South Colorado Boulevard to Interstate 25 and from East Yale Avenue to
Hampden Avenue. The subdivision was established by the partnership of Hutchinson & Carey
(Ted Hutchinson of Hutchinson Homes and Lou Carey of Carey Construction Company).

On July 25, 1949 the *Denver Post* reported on the demand for the new homes under
development by Hutchinson & Carey in University Hills. According to Hutchinson, more than
30,000 people visited the development between the first advertisement appearing in the *Denver Post* on Thursday and Sunday night. The advertisement encouraged readers to come “see the
home you’ve dreamed about . . . modern as tomorrow for as low as $57 a month!” At this point
the firm had only completed one show home. Eighty of the initially planned 500 houses were
under construction. Based on the response, Hutchinson planned to ramp up a one-a-day
completion schedule to two-a-day. The advertisement promoted University Hills as “without
question, the best located subdivision in Denver. Never before has such a choice location been
approved for any but the highest priced homes. Here you can enjoy the luxuries of suburban
living at its best—only 15 minutes from downtown Denver!” Advantages promoted including the
ability to select your own decorating and wall paper if you purchased prior to completion,
modern colored bathroom fixtures, strong structural truss roofs, perimeter forced air radiant
heat, Bruce Block oak flooring, waterproof steel sash windows, asbestos siding, and copper
plumbing, garbage disposal and dishwasher, General Electric kitchens, and inlaid linoleum
floors. In January 1950, Hutchinson & Carey’s University Hills development was awarded
second place in a national contest by the National Association of Home Builders in the division
of economy home projects with the more than fifty units.

By September 1950 over 425 homes had been completed. Two-bedroom houses were available
for $8,575 and three-bedroom houses for $8,875. On March 4, 1951 the *Denver Post* ran an
article announcing, “Huge University Hills Project Near Completion.” The article included an
aerial photo and stated: “University Hills, one of Denver’s newest and largest housing
developments, is slated to be completed in April when the 667th home in the project will be
completed by Hutchinson and Carey, contractors. . . . The vacant space in the center of the project is the site of a future school and a church will be located just to the left of the development." This was the only church site embedded within the new residential development, though other places of worship would be constructed adjacent along Colorado Blvd. and Hampden Ave.

Hutchinson & Carey’s University Hills is an example of the new development patterns emerging after World War II, with a shift from small scale development on the scale of a single house or block to the creation of entire neighborhoods by developers. In addition to houses, developers were planning the design of streets along with the placement of parks, schools, churches, and shopping centers to serve the development’s new residents. Landscape architecture firms assisted developers with the creation of these new communities. Well-versed in modern neighborhood planning theory, Denver firm Harman & O’Donnell drew the plans for University Hills as well as many other Denver developments of this period. Before establishing the firm in 1947, Gabriel Harman and Robert O’Donnell had both helped develop federal planning guidelines while serving on the land planning staff of the Federal Housing Authority.

The University Hills Lutheran Church was dedicated on September 7, 1952. An article ran in the *Denver Post* announcing, “Barn Church Dedicated By Lutherans Set Today.” The *Denver Post* described the new church as “an adventure in architecture which produced a modern house of worship from an old dairy barn.” The article described the church as following “functional lines of contemporary architecture,” providing “an auditorium capable of seating 355 worshippers and is constructed to permit sponsorship of a Christian day school.” The church included a sanctuary upstairs and a fellowship area with classrooms below. For the conversion, the gambrel roof of the barn was removed and replaced with a gable roof. The original dairy barn remained evident in the building form, masonry construction, and the retention of the simplified buttresses on the north and south walls. An upper frame story was added above the masonry barn with large windows filling the west gable end.

The congregation’s first pastor, Rev. Raymond D. Schmidt was installed during the dedication. Around 450 people gathered for the celebration. The first Vacation Bible School had 222 children. In fall 1954, the church opened a grade school with a starting kindergarten class of 26 students. A multi-purpose building which served as both a sanctuary and gymnasium was constructed adjacent to the church in 1987. It was expanded to include a childcare facility in 1992. The church’s grade school closed in 2007 due to declining enrollment. The Rise School of Denver began renting the multi-purpose building in 2005 and they recently purchased the building from the church. The University Hills Lutheran Church is currently worshipping at a nearby congregation while planning for a new building to replace the original sanctuary.

**Source of Information:** Denver Assessor’s Office; Denver City Directories; *Denver Post*; University Hills Lutheran Church website (https://uhillslutheran.org/); “Historic Residential Subdivisions of Metropolitan Denver, 1940-1965, National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2011; *The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America* by Gretchen Buggeln, 2015.
Designation Eligibility Assessment

Landmark Designation Criteria:
A structure or district may be designated for preservation if, due to its significance, it meets the criteria listed in subsections (1), (2), and (3) below:

(1) The structure or district maintains its integrity;

(2) The structure or district is more than 30 years old, or is of exceptional importance; and

(3) The structure or district meets at least 3 of the following 10 criteria:

☒ It has a direct association with a significant historic event or with the historical development of the city, state, or nation;

☐ It has direct and substantial association with a recognized person or group of persons who had influence on society;

☒ It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style or type;

☐ It is a significant example of the work of a recognized architect or master builder;

☐ It contains elements of design, engineering, materials, craftsmanship, or artistic merit which represent a significant innovation or technical achievement;

☐ It represents an established and familiar feature of the neighborhood, community or contemporary city, due to its prominent location or physical characteristics;

☒ It promotes understanding and appreciation of the urban environment by means of distinctive physical characteristics or rarity;

☐ It represents an era of culture or heritage that allows an understanding of how the site was used by past generations;

☐ It is a physical attribute of a neighborhood, community, or the city that is a source of pride or cultural understanding;

☐ It is associated with social movements, institutions, or patterns of growth or change that contributed significantly to the culture of the neighborhood, community, city, state, or nation.

Integrity: If a structure maintains its integrity, it may be designated for preservation.

☒ Has integrity
☐ Does not have integrity
Does the structure have potential for designation?

☒ Has potential for designation
☐ Does not have potential for designation

Landmark staff find that 4949 E. Eastman Ave. has the potential to meet the requirements for designation. 4949 E. Eastman Ave. is more than 30 years old with the original barn constructed in the late 19th century. It was converted into a church in 1952. It also retains the integrity necessary to convey both its original use as a barn as well as its more contemporary use as a church. Some alterations have been made to the church including additions on the south and west sides, but these fit with the Mid-century Modern character of the structure and do not detract from the building’s architectural or historical significance. Staff find that the structure potentially meets three of the designation criteria:

- **It has a direct association with a significant historic event or with the historical development of the city, state, or nation:** 4949 E. Eastman Ave. is associated with the historic development of Denver from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century. The property is associated with J.A. Osner, a prominent Denver contractor, farmer, and rancher. It is also associated with Hutchinson & Carey, prominent local developers who chose this location for their first major post-war residential development. 4949 E. Eastman represents the transition of southeast Denver from farmland to residential subdivisions in the mid-20th century. It is also significant for its association with the establishment of the University Hills Lutheran Church, representing the important role the establishment of new church congregations played in the development of community in Denver’s postwar neighborhoods.

- **It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style or type:** The University Hills Lutheran Church is a good example of suburban Mid-Century Modern church design. It is embedded within a residential development surrounded by a large lawn that blend with the surrounding residential lawns. Reflecting the midcentury modern emphasis on indoor-outdoor spaces, it features a flat-roofed, open gallery at the southwest corner, providing a transition between the exterior and interior. Other characteristic mid-century features include the gable roof with deep overhanging eaves; the walls clad in a combination of white stucco, red brick, and vertical wood siding; large windows filling gable end on the west; the abstracted brick bell tower; the abstract colored glass windows on the south side; and exposed rafter tails and long band of windows on the south addition.

- **It promotes understanding and appreciation of the urban environment by means of distinctive physical characteristics or rarity:** As a barn converted to a church, 4949 E. Eastman Ave is a distinctive and rare building that has the unique ability to convey to story of the transition of southeast Denver from agricultural to residential use. The structure is also an unusual mid-20th century adaptive reuse project. The existing barn appears to have provided an opportunity for the church to both save money and create a distinctive church design.

The University Hills Lutheran Church is closely tied to the development of the University Hills neighborhood. It represents a new era of post-war building where residential developers were designing not just houses, but whole suburban communities with plans including locations for
After World War II, the term merchant builder was applied to the developer who essentially undertook comprehensive planning of a new suburban community; purchased a large tract of undeveloped land; platted one or more subdivisions; added infrastructure improvements such as streets, water and electrical lines, and sewers; designed, built, and sold houses; provided amenities such as landscaped parks, community centers, and recreational facilities; donated and/or sold land to a local school district; and set aside areas for shopping and commercial enterprises, as well as sites for churches. . . . Developments featured special use areas set aside for components such as parks and recreation, schools, governmental offices, churches, and commercial enterprises. For large builders creating an entire community, the overall design and appearance of the neighborhood was as important as that of each model home.

For new residential developments, churches provided critical social bonds in areas that often initially provided few amenities and felt disconnected from more established neighborhoods. The architecture of these new churches often reflected Modernist design trends, reflecting the optimism of the period and a belief that church architecture should reflect contemporary life and culture. Mid-century churches not just space for worship but also community activities and education. New church construction followed the construction of new suburbs with a building boom in the 1950s. According to The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America:

Postwar church buildings—sanctuaries, social and education rooms, administrative offices, and recreational spaces—tell us about what mattered to these gathered communities. After World War II, as congregations recovered from the economic restrictions of wartime, flourished in a time of increased attendance and membership, and spread into the rapidly developing suburbs, they spent billions of dollars on architecture. . . . Those who stepped over the church threshold were motivated by a variety of things: a sense of duty, personal desire for worship and spiritual growth, the hope of friendship, concern for the moral education of their children, a commitment to the flourishing of their communities, a search for an outlet for serve, pride, even a patriotic civil religion, or just a desire to feel that they fit it.

Like the design of the surrounding mid-century Minimal Traditional and Ranch houses, the design of mid-century churches reflected modern design trends and well as a need for economy and quick construction to keep up with the pace of suburban expansion. For new congregations, money was often limited. The simplicity of Mid-Century Modern design offered ways to save money and time. Key design features of Mid-century Modern churches included the use of industrial materials such as steel, concrete, large glass windows, and laminated wood; clean and bold lines; abstracted historical church forms and symbol; dramatic roof forms; projecting roof overhangs; exposed rafters; large windows, often unusually shaped or located in long bands; substitution of simplified geometric forms and surfaces for embellishment and decoration; and elimination of excessive ornament. Mid-Century Modern architecture also emphasized and encouraged the connection of indoor-outdoor living, a feature also seen in mid-century residential and school designs.