



**To:** Denver City Council  
**From:** Becca Dierschow, Senior City Planner, Community Planning & Development (CPD)  
**Date:** August 8, 2024  
**RE:** Landmark Designation for 5086 Vrain St, the Kunsmiller House

**Landmark Preservation Commission Suggested Motion:**

Based on ordinance designation criteria and on the recommendations of the Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC), staff recommends forwarding the application to the full council.

**Request to Designate a Structure:**

**Application:** #2023L-006  
**Address:** 5086 Vrain Street  
**Zoning:** E-SU-DX  
**Council:** #1, Amanda P. Sandoval  
**Owner:** Jeff and Jeanne Laws  
**Applicant(s):** Councilwoman Amanda P. Sandoval

**Case Summary:**

The owners of 5086 Vrain Street submitted a complete Landmark Designation application for the Kunsmiller House, written by Squaremoon Consultants, to CPD on May 1, 2024. At this time, Councilwoman Amanda P. Sandoval came forward as the official applicant for the designation. Staff reviewed the application and found it to be complete and to meet Denver landmark designation criteria. The Landmark Preservation Commission heard the designation application at a public hearing on June 18, 2024. The LPC found that the application met the criteria for designation and recommended approval. On July 16, 2024, the Land Use, Transportation, and Infrastructure Committee forwarded the case to the full City Council. At first reading, Denver City Council ordered the bill published and the public hearing is set for August 12, 2024.

**Designation Criteria and Evaluation, Chapter 30, Denver Revised Municipal Code:**

To meet landmark designation criteria, in accordance with Chapter 30, Denver Revised Municipal Code, the application must be complete, and the structure must meet the following criteria:

1. The structure maintains its integrity
2. The structure is more than 30 years old, or is of exceptional importance
3. The structure meets at least three of ten criteria
4. The LPC considers the structure’s historic context

**Criteria Evaluation:**

Landmark staff found that the application demonstrates that the structure meets the following criteria.

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

The Kunsmiller House has a direct association with the historical development of Denver, particularly with the development of the Berkley neighborhood. The area of North Denver was slow to develop,

remaining primarily farm land through the late 1880s. Even as developers began building houses and promoting the area of northwest Denver as a clean, healthy place to live, far away from the pollution and population of Denver, the area remained sparsely populated. When the area was annexed into Denver in 1902, it had a population of about 700, in contrast to Denver's population of 134,000. Amenities such as multiple streetcar lines, large expansive parks, and the Jesuit College (now Regis University) made Berkeley a desirable area, but its distance from downtown Denver limited its growth. By 1920, the population of Denver had double, and the land of northwest Denver began to attract significant interest from developers. In 1922, Adolf Kunsmiller purchased six lots in the Berkeley Park Heights subdivision. The Kunsmillers constructed a large family home on the land, making it an anchor of the neighborhood, and representing the area's exclusive popularity.

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

The Kunsmiller House has a direct association with Dorothea and Adolph Kunsmiller, German immigrants to Colorado, who, over the course of their lives, had a substantial influence on society.

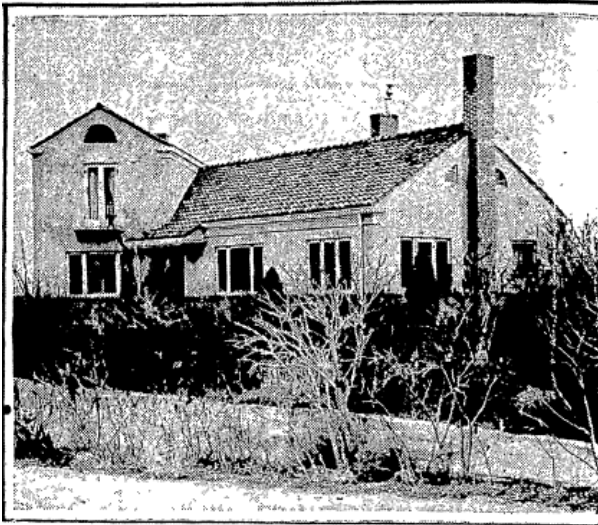
Dorothea Kunsmiller was born in Frankfurt, Germany, but moved to Denver's Auraria neighborhood in 1895. After graduating from West High School, she attended State Normal College in Greeley, where she graduated in 1907. Dorothea's training and commitment to public education led to her 24-year service as an elected member of the Denver Public Schools (DPS) Board from 1931 to 1955. This period included the Great Depression and unprecedented post World War II suburban growth, with student enrollment increasing from 46,000 to over 73,000 students. She was a popular and important member of the DPS board, easily winning election to four six-year terms, and serving as vice president of the board for most of her tenure. She was recognized as a strong advocate for teacher salaries and education of mentally and physically disabled children. The Denver Post reported that Dorothea Kunsmiller served longer than any other board member since the Denver schools were organized into the DPS Board in 1902. She won many accolades for her service including an alumni award from University of Denver in 1953, North Denver's Citizen of the Year in 1955, an "Eddy" award from the Denver Public Schools Retired Employees' Association in 1960, and an induction into the Denver Post gallery of fame the same year. Most notably, DPS named the 1957 Kunsmiller Junior High School (now Kunsmiller Creative Arts Academy) after Dorothea Kunsmiller, the first time the DPS Board named a school after a living person.

Adolph was a prominent and influential banker in Denver for more than 60 years. He immigrated to Denver from Prussia in 1902. He began working as a bookkeeper at Zang Brewery. By 1904, Adolph served as a stenographer for Godfrey Schirmer, German consul or vice consul in Denver. In 1905, Schirmer organized the German American Trust Company, employing Adolph at the city's second bank catering to German-speaking residents. Adolph eventually became manager of the bank's real estate loan department. Adolph continued to rise through the ranks of the bank, serving as Bank Secretary and Treasurer by 1918, and by 1923 bank vice president. In 1924, the bank rebranded as American National Bank. Adolph became executive vice president of American National Bank in 1937. In 1947, he became the bank's third president.

Adolph was also involved in civic affairs, serving as a Freemason and Shriner, president of the German-American Dramatic Society in 1926, and campaign treasurer for a fundraising campaign to support the

Ex-Patients’ Tubercular Home of Denver in 1932. Although not Jewish himself, Adolph was recognized for his support of Denver’s Jewish community, supporting the Anti-Defamation League and providing loans for Denver’s Rose Hospital and several regional synagogues. In 1951, Adolph served as a vice chairman of an initiative headed by the Anti-Defamation League for Colorado to pass a Fair Employment Practices Law to curb job discrimination for minority groups in Colorado. This initiative eventually led to the passage of the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Act of 1957. A 1954 article in the Intermountain Jewish News extolled Adolph’s 49 years with the American National Bank, and how “he has been a good friend of the Jewish community and a powerful factor in Denver’s progress.”

**C. It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style or type;**



**M**RS. DOROTHEA KUNSMILLER, member of the Denver school board, lives in the fine residence shown above. It is located at 5086 Vrain street, and its assessed valuation is \$7,120. Below is shown the home

*Left: The Kunsmiller House in 1934 before the central dormer was added. Right: The Kunsmiller House in 2024. Changes to the structure include the addition of the central dormer and the extension of the eave over the primary entrance. These changes happened during the structure’s period of significance.*

The Kunsmiller House is an excellent and rare example of a 1920s Spanish Eclectic Style house in Denver. While no architect has been identified for the 1924 Kunsmiller House, it is essentially a linear volume clad with white-stuccoed walls under red-tiled roofs. Although similar to the contemporaneous Spanish Colonial Style, Spanish Eclectic architect is a vernacular, simple style without the ornamentation of the Colonial style. Nostalgia for both Spanish vernacular and high style architecture became a national trend in the 20th century primarily after the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Most subsequent examples featured Mediterranean or Mission motifs of stuccoed walls, red-tiled roofs and decorative parapets. As a simple design with little ornamentation, the Kunsmiller House is a rare and distinctive example of the simplified style.

As architectural historian Abby Moor (2002:314) wrote of the Spanish Eclectic house style, “Both plan and façade have an attractive asymmetry...typically with a combination of varying roof levels and forms on one house.” The 1924 Kunsmiller House exhibits inspiration from the contemporary “Spanish Eclectic” house designs of contemporaneous architect G.W. Smith: simple massing and modest entry

into a linear plan with varying roof levels and an asymmetrical layout. According to Moor, G.W. Smith...formulated a Spanish Eclectic architectural style grounded in a picturesque Andalusian idyll of massed white geometric planes and surfaces, austere facades, a very few shuttered windows along otherwise windowless walls, red-tiled roofs and understated parapets, and a cool and secluded courtyard garden.



*The 1916 “Casa Dracaena” in Montecito, California designed by architect G.W. Smith introduced a “vernacular,” everyday-house type of Spanish Eclectic Style house to California, and soon the entire United States through mass-market publications. The similarities between the structure and the 1924 Kunsmiller house are seen in the simplified linear massing, Juliet balconies and unadorned facades.*

The home’s simple boxy shapes, stuccoed walls under red-tiled roofs, iron ‘balconet’ at upper doorway, and incorporation into an indigenous garden-hillside are also representative of the Spanish Eclectic style. The home’s simple yet sprawling floor plan with varying roof levels and asymmetrical layout also follows the Smith and other California examples. The Kunsmillers embellished the style with more and larger windows, an angled 3-story wing with a ground-level garage, and subtle eave returns at the gable ends. The c. 1936 front dormer addition carries the same forms and motifs as the original design. The dormer addition was built within the period of significance for the structure and is contributing to the design. The Kunsmillers added the dormer in about 1936 (based on aerial photographs given that no building permits of this change were found) to accommodate more family members living in the relatively small house.

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

The Kunsmiller House promotes understanding and appreciation of the urban environment based on its distinctive physical characteristics and rarity, given that it is an early Spanish Eclectic Style House on a heavily vegetated lot in Berkeley Park Heights. This historic subdivision dates from the early 20th



century and was on the outskirts of northwest Denver in an area that was more rural than suburban at the time of the house's construction in 1924. The substantial Spanish Eclectic Style house on its expansive large, lushly landscaped lot stood out then and does now. The large Vrain Street parcel and fertile Denver Basin allowed Adolph Kunsmiller to pursue his horticulture interests by planting native trees and other vegetation around the property to frame and shade the house without blocking its Front Range views. In a May 2, 1965, interview with the Rocky Mountain News, Adolph recalled planting 125 evergreen seedlings in 1924, and noted that between 75 and 80 of these trees now towered to more than 40 feet in height. Many mature trees survive on the site and can be attributed to the Kunsmillers' considerable gardening skills. The relatively tall house is perched on a large heavily vegetated site rising above the Willis-Case golf course on its north and west sides, giving the distinctive Spanish Eclectic residence a strong visual presence in the Berkeley neighborhood. Pathways wind through the expansive treed and heavily vegetated site, and its arbor, outbuildings and pond, creating a sense of a lush garden and isolated residential oasis within Denver.

A house of the Spanish Eclectic style is also unusual for Denver, particularly this simple vernacular variety, and it is one of only a few Spanish Colonial-influenced early 20th century houses in the Berkeley area, as noted by the recent Discover Denver survey of the area. The Kunsmiller House, with its Spanish Eclectic styling on an expansive treed and picturesque .72-acre lot, contrasts dramatically not only with the small historic homes immediately adjacent to the parcel, but also with the dense two-story modern houses and duplexes in its immediate environment. The 1924 Kunsmiller house is an important and rare survivor that speaks of Berkeley's rural origins and early residential development patterns of northwest Denver.

**Integrity:**

Chapter 30 requires that a landmark designated property maintain its integrity. Integrity is defined as "the ability of a structure or district to convey its historic, geographic, architectural, or cultural significance...recognized as belonging to its particular time and place in Denver's history." The seven qualities that, in various combinations, define integrity are location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

The existing property retains a high degree of integrity within the proposed period of significance. The property is still in the same location, and, although there have been changes to the surrounding area due to continued development, the neighborhood is still residential in nature; retaining both integrity of location and setting. Although there have been changes to the property's design, the most obvious of those changes, the front dormer, was added within the period of significance and speaks to the changing use of the house by the Kunsmillers. Another addition at the rear of the structure does not negatively impact the historic character of the building. Overall, the integrity of design, materials, and workmanship are excellent and the continued use as a residence helps retain a strong sense of feeling and association.

**Relates to a Historic Context and Period of Significance:**

As is appropriate for a property proposed for designation, the historic context is strongly interrelated to both the areas of significance and period of significance. The property is associated with the development of the Berkeley neighborhood and the wider development of Northwest Denver. As a

property in a more rural setting in its earliest decades, the land surrounding the property remains a mix of undeveloped land (Willis-Case Golf Course) and low-scale residential.

The period of significance is 1924-1975. The Kunsmiller family built the home on the lot in 1924 and remained in the house until 1975. The period of significance extends through the death of Adolph Kunsmiller in 1975. It was at this point that the home was sold for the first time.

**Boundary:**

The designation application proposes to designate the legal description below:

Lots 1-6 and the north 1/2 of lot 7 and the west half of the adjoining vacated alley, Block 3, Berkley Park Heights, together with the east half of vacated Vrain St. and the south half of vacated 51st Ave., City and County of Denver, State of Colorado.

**Public Review Process:**

Community Planning & Development has met all posting and notification requirements delineated in Chapter 12 (Article III, Section 12-96) and Chapter 30 of the DRMC.

**Notifications:**

- Owner notification letters regarding the LPC public hearing
- City Council and Community Planning and Development email notifications
- Registered Neighborhood Organization and courtesy email notifications
  - Berkeley-Regis United Neighbors
  - Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation (INC)
  - Strong Denver
  - Historic Denver, Inc
  - Colorado Preservation, Inc
  - History Colorado
- Posted signage for Landmark Preservation Commission public hearing

**Public Comments:**

As of the date of this staff report, CPD has received 3 letters regarding the Kunsmiller House application.

- RNO comment
  - The Berkeley-Regis United Neighborhood Association (BRUN) submitted a letter of support (attached)
- Public Comment
  - Two neighbors have written letters of support for the designation

**Attachments Provided by CPD:**

- Designation Application
- Map of structure proposed for preservation
- Public comments received by August 8, 2024

END