



The Story of Holly Square

Gangs Leave Ashes, Residents Rebuild the Heart of a Neighborhood

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a story of hope and pride



Introduction

Back in the day, the Holly Square Shopping Center was *the* place to see and be seen for young African Americans in Northeast Denver.

At least that's how Gerie Grimes remembers it.

"It was the place that was happening for African Americans back in the 1960s and early 1970s," said Grimes, now executive director of the Hope Center in Northeast Park Hill, which operates a renowned preschool as well as vocational services program for adults.

"The uniqueness of it was people knew each other by name. It was a family-friendly atmosphere, and a safe place to hang out. No one questioned you."

Without a doubt, the Holly, as it is widely known, holds a special place in the history and hearts of African Americans in Northeast Denver. In its heyday, local businesses, many owned by African Americans, flourished, and the community took pride in the Holly, and in the nearby, larger Dahlia Square shopping center as well.

Shortly after Grimes left high school, however, the Holly began to deteriorate, racial tensions,

endemic poverty and, eventually, gang problems infected the area.

It's easy to pinpoint the Holly's lowest moment: The early morning of May 18, 2008. That's when a group of gang members firebombed the shopping center, leaving large sections in ruins.

And though it may sound like a tired cliché, out of those literal ashes, something better has arisen. Today, The Holly is a thriving hub of community amenities, including a Boys & Girls Club and a K-5 Roots Elementary school in brand new buildings, a public library, a recreation center, outdoor gathering space and the Hope Center.

"It has really become a mini Harlem Children's Zone¹ kind of set-up," said Jon Hanover, principal of Roots, which operates out of its new building on the Holly property. "Every day after school we walk our kids over to the Boys & Girls Club. It's a wonderful arrangement."

The Holly's rebirth was set in motion by Urban Land Conservancy (ULC) shortly after the fire, which purchased the property in 2009. Through a thorough and patient community process, ULC acted as a catalyst in transforming the Holly

¹ The Harlem Children's Zone is a comprehensive education and social services initiative encompassing nearby 100 blocks of central Harlem in New York City. The HCZ focuses heavily on education, and is home to charter schools, infant care, p[re]-schools, and comprehensive parenting classes, among other offerings.

from charred ruins to the thriving hub of the community it is today.

Through its creative use of 99-year Community Land Trust ground leases, ULC was able to attract new services to the neighborhood, and new buildings paid for by those organizations, while guaranteeing that the new facilities will house programs beneficial to area residents in perpetuity.

To say the Northeast Park Hill community was skeptical at first would be an understatement. Long-time residents had been through innumerable community processes in the past, some led by the city, some by Denver Public Schools. But they never felt listened to: The powers-that-be came in, seemed to listen, but then proceeded to do exactly what they had intended in the first place, with no community input.

But as they would learn, ULC was a different organization, and its commitment to a community process was the real deal.

Still, the story's ending is not yet written. As Northeast Park Hill is now feeling the inexorable pressures of displacement, a real danger exists that the people the new Holly was created to serve will be pushed out as more affluent families move in.

This report tells the story of the Holly's, past and present, and its various possible futures. It's a story of pride, despair, hope and worry. It's a story of how a civic-minded nonprofit like ULC can turn tragedy into hope and ideas into brick and mortar amenities. And it's a story of how the patient and unceasing forces of change can pose a threat to even the best-laid plans.



It's a story of how a civic-minded nonprofit like ULC and the community turned tragedy into hope and ideas into brick and mortar amenities. And it's a story of how the patient and unceasing forces of change can pose a threat to even the best-laid plans.

Part 1: The Early History

Originally known as the Park Hill Shopping Center, the Holly was built in the early 1950s on a four-acre lot, bounded by East 33rd Avenue to the South, East 35th Avenue to the North, Hudson Street to the West, and Holly Street to the East.

The shopping center was anchored by a Safeway supermarket, and also featured a barber shop, a hardware store, a dentistry office, a general apparel store, a dry cleaner, a Gems variety store and a candy store, among other small businesses. Many were African American-owned.

There was ample off-street parking to accommodate family automobiles, which were proliferating in the early post World War II era. The Horizon, a family restaurant where Grimes and her friends liked to hang out, was just across 33rd from the center. It's still there today but is no longer a family friendly establishment.

All in all, it was a lively spot, a real heart of the community surrounded by small, affordable brick bungalows.

"It was a pretty vibrant area when I was growing up," recalled Terry Ware, a city planner who lived in the neighborhood and whose mother worked at a store in the Holly in the 1960s. "And having a Safeway as an anchor made the shopping center a really viable town square-type development."

But the vibrancy Ware described diminished after Safeway decided to pull out of the Holly in the 1970s.

A long slide begins

The cavernous Safeway building stood empty for several years until the Hope Center bought it in 1979. "It was a real eyesore," said Hope's Gerie Grimes. "Safeway pulling out left a big void."

Ware, who worked as a senior city planner under Mayor Wellington Webb in the 1990s and was the Director of Housing and Neighborhood Development under Mayor John Hickenlooper, said court-ordered school busing beginning in the early 1970s led to rapid white flight, which in turn caused Safeway to abandon the Holly.

"It was a pretty vibrant area when I was growing up."

-Terry Ware, Former Denver Director of Housing and Development



He said that any shopping center that loses an anchor tenant faces challenges. The Holly was no exception. “The theory behind shopping centers is that anchors bring foot traffic and car traffic, and what we call the B-businesses really rely on the anchor,” Ware said. “When the anchor goes, so does the main attraction. Traffic drops, and more established stores tend to leave, to be replaced by less viable ‘mom and pop’ businesses. Typically you have less capital in the center, and less viability. And that leads to deterioration.”

The Holly as a shopping center never fully recovered from Safeway’s departure. It remained a community hub, however, with Kapre Chicken, a Family Dollar store, a liquor store and a day care center moving in over time.

But the Holly felt less stable. “Businesses started leaving, or turning over pretty regularly,” Grimes said. Crime in the neighborhood was on the upswing.

Then, in the late 1980s, on the heels of the crack cocaine epidemic that swept the nation, local affiliates of LA street gangs arrived on the scene.

The Holly became an epicenter of gang activity. And it was gang warfare that ultimately led to the Holly’s demise as a shopping center. In the late 1980s, on the heels of the crack cocaine epidemic that swept the nation, local affiliates of LA street gangs arrived on the scene.

LA gangs move in

A 2010 Westword article about the Holly described the shopping center in the 1980s as “home base for the Park Hill Bloods” street gang. Colorado Boulevard served as the turf boundary between the Bloods, who operated east of Colorado, and the Crips, who operated from Colorado Boulevard west through the Cole and Whittier neighborhoods and into Five Points.

Crack-dealing and use were rampant, as was the attendant violence, in the form of random bursts of automatic weapons fire from drive-by shootings, and cold-blooded murders and revenge killings.

Even during the depths of gang violence in the early 1990s, though, the Hope Center and the city’s Skyland (now renamed Hiawatha Davis) Recreation Center, located across Holly Street from the shopping center, were spared the worst of it.

“They [gang members] had respect for our property,” Grimes said. “There was never any graffiti on our building or the rec center and no shootings. We were long established organizations in the community, and a lot of the gang members had hung out at the rec center or had family members who had used our services. They knew about our involvement and outreach.”

The shopping center itself, however, was not as fortunate. Exterior walls of businesses were pockmarked with bullet holes. Graffiti marred walls and windows. As gang activity and violence escalated through the 1990s, more businesses moved out, and some storefronts remained vacant.

One discordantly hopeful sign for the area was the April 1996 opening of the Denver Public Library's Pauline Robinson branch, next to The Holly. Wellington Webb, Denver's first African American mayor, was doing his best to provide services and public investment to the city's most challenged neighborhoods.

This was the situation David Hallman found when he came to the area in 2005 as director of the Hiawatha Davis Recreation Center. Hallman had grown up in the neighborhood, and had played little league football at the rec center he now was running. The vibrant Holly he remembered from his youth bore scant resemblance to the shopping center he could see out the window of his new office.

Now, he said, "Businesses were functioning, but there was a lot of gang activity, folks hanging around outside, loitering. But the management and ownership of the businesses didn't call in complaints, so there was not a lot of police presence. It was just kind of left to fester."

Like Grimes' experience with the Hope Center, Hallman noted that his rec center seemed to benefit from some kind of protective bubble. Other than occasional Crips graffiti sprayed by marauders from across Colorado Boulevard, the rec center suffered no ill effects from the gang activity across the street.

"I don't know if it was a false sense of security, but I felt secure," he said. "We lived in Stapleton and I never felt more threatened around the Holly than I did at home in Stapleton."

Hallman's daughter Jordan, now a graduate student, played club volleyball at the rec center as a teen, and was never even aware there was gang activity in the area. "It was very much isolated within the shopette," she said.



A Devastating Event

That sense of safety was shattered sometime after midnight on May 18, 2008. The previous day, Michael Asberry, a founder of Denver's Crips gang, had been shot to death in Aurora. Recently released from prison Asberry was, depending on whom you believed, either trying to lead the straight life or trying to break back into the drug trade.

Members of the gang he founded knew who was responsible for his murder, at least in a general sense: the Bloods. And what better way to hit the Bloods hard than to cut the heart out of their community?

So on that May 18, according to Westword, several Crips made their way to the Holly with Molotov cocktails, and heaved the incendiary devices onto the shopping center roof. As Westword described it:

“As the Crips hurried away, the fire moved through Tyson's [food market] and then Family Dollar. In the liquor store, heat-triggered bottles exploded like fireworks. The inferno spread quickly through the common area above the stores, consuming one business after another. By the time the fire crews arrived, the flames had broken through the roof and stretched thirty feet into the sky.”

The Holly was left a smoldering ruin.

“The fire was really a turning point,” Hallman recalled. “The visual was telling,” with the burnt-out shell of the shopping center marring the landscape for almost nine months before it was demolished. “You started to feel the blight, the sense that this community was not a priority. It felt like man, this is the ‘bad part’ of the community. Just a feeling of despair.”

As the community began to recover from the shock of the arson, people came together and agreed on one simple point: The ruins of the Holly must not be allowed to sit, fenced off and crumbling, casting a pall over the neighborhood. The nearby, larger Dahlia Square shopping center sat vacant for years as blight in the area. And after it finally was demolished in 2005, the eight-acre site became a sprawling, fenced, weed-strewn lot before redevelopment began in 2009.

That would not happen at the Holly, community leaders vowed.

Part two: ULC enters the scene

ULC President Aaron Miripol first began thinking about acquiring the Holly after Terry Ware called him in the summer of 2008. By then, Ware was Denver's Director of Housing and Neighborhood Development, and Mayor John Hickenlooper had charged him with finding a buyer for the Holly who would redevelop the burned-out shopping center.

"We started immediately looking for partners," Ware recalled. "We knew we as the city couldn't and didn't want to be the only ones coming to the table."

Ware reached out to the Denver Foundation's Strengthening Neighborhoods program, which makes modest-sized grants that allow neighborhood residents to build local capacity. LaDawn Sullivan of Strengthening Neighborhoods urged Ware to contact Miripol.

"Terry called and asked me if we'd be interested in buying the Holly," Miripol said recently. "Plain and simple, if Terry didn't make that call, none of this would've happened."

That call set in motion an eight-year process that has transformed the former shopping center into a sparkling community asset of a decidedly different type.

Purchasing the site fit well into ULC's mission: developing and preserving community real estate assets in urban areas for a variety of community needs such as schools, affordable housing, community centers, and office space for nonprofits.

Back in 2008, ULC didn't have any investments in Northeast Park Hill, but Miripol and his team were interested in gaining a foothold there. The Holly, with its dual reputation as community hub and trouble spot, seemed like an ideal investment for ULC. And the fact that there were other community amenities in place — the rec center, park, library, and Hope Center — added to the allure.

"The community knew us; we weren't outsiders coming in."

- Gerie Grimes, executive director of the Hope Center in Northeast Park Hill





By late 2008, ULC was in serious negotiations to buy the Holly from owner Michael Bullock. At that time, however, Bullock was thinking about rebuilding the shopping center, and its largest tenant, Family Dollar, had the right to rebuild written into its lease.

“There was a fair amount of back and forth trying to get this finalized, but eventually we talked Family Dollar into not taking that option,” Miripol said.

All other tenants had vacated because what remained of the center was structurally unsound, so once Family Dollar agreed not to rebuild, conditions were ripe for a deal.

In the spring of 2009, ULC purchased the Holly site for \$625,000, which included \$50,000 for environmental remediation to make the site suitable for redevelopment.



Working with The Denver Foundation’s Strengthening Neighborhoods program, ULC almost immediately began creating a process through which the community would drive decisions about how the site should be redeveloped.

Building an authentic community process

“The first thing we told ULC was that we wanted to be sure Holly Square wouldn’t take as long to redevelop as Dahlia Square had,” Gerie Grimes said. “We didn’t want to see a pile of debris and dust in the heart of the community year after year.”

Grimes credits Terrance Roberts, a former Bloods gang member, along with ULC, with bringing Strengthening Neighborhoods to the table. Roberts had launched an anti-gang initiative known as Prodigal Son, and had close ties to The Denver Foundation.

That was the genesis of the Holly Area Redevelopment Project (widely known as HARP), a community-led effort supported by the Hope Center, ULC, and Strengthening Neighborhoods that has driven the multi-phase redevelopment of the Holly.

Strengthening Neighborhoods recruited influential community members to be part of the HARP steering committee. David Hallman signed on, as did Gerie Grimes, Aaron Miripol and staff from the Foundation including LaDawn Sullivan. In all, during the early days of HARP’s work, 31 people participated in the steering committee.



Rigoberta Menchu, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, blesses the Holly Courts with Brother Jeff Fard



It was high on the list was that the space be community oriented, and welcoming to all ages.

“I have to give a lot of credit to ULC,” Grimes said. “Not many developers would take the time and invest in community involvement the way they did. I felt it was very genuine.”

The first phase of HARP’s work involved gathering community input about what kinds of services, programs, or businesses should be placed on the former shopping center site. Even gathering input proved challenging, at least initially.

Despite the fact “the community knew us; we weren’t outsiders coming in,” as Grimes put it, “there was such a lack of trust in the system from past experience that it just took a lot of patience on everybody’s part.”

Initially, Grimes and Hallman recalled, community members’ top priority was bringing a supermarket back to the area. “Because of the vast food desert here, that made sense to a lot of people,” Hallman said.

Unfortunately, as understandable as that sentiment was, it was also unrealistic. Major supermarket chains had made it clear to city officials over the years that the Holly, tucked into a residential area without any major streets abutting it, was not a practical location for a new store.

Hallman said he was impressed that Miripol and ULC staff allowed the community’s desire for a food store to drive the earliest days of the HARP process. “Aaron earned a lot of trust by listening, going out and trying, then reporting back that there was no viable interest,” he said.

Miripol also made it clear to HARP members that ULC was not a traditional developer, and would “support what the community wanted,” Hallman recalled.



From vision to plan

In the fall of 2009, ULC and Strengthening Neighborhoods contracted with a community planning company called Community by Design, headed by Jann Oldham, to develop a vision plan for the site. Oldham convened a workshop in November, during which she surveyed participants about the kinds of qualities or characteristics they’d like to see at the reborn Holly, and their preferred uses for the site.

First and foremost, **they wanted whatever went into the space to feel “safe and comfortable.”** Also high on the list was that the space be community oriented, and welcoming to all ages.

In terms of the kinds of programming, most participants wanted education and training opportunities for youth, and event space for the community.

With that information in hand, HARP began developing a vision plan for the site. Based on input from that November workshop, the first step was developing a set of five “good neighbor principles,” designed to reflect the “values and traditions of the community,” Oldham wrote in her comprehensive report on the phases of the Holly’s redevelopment.

The Good Neighbor Principles

Partnership and collaboration

HARP should encourage and build partnerships through collaborative planning during all stages of reinvestment

Quality of life

Reinvestment in the Holly should “promote a socially cohesive neighborhood free of crime and violence through physical features as well as programming.”

Public Realm

Redevelopment “should protect the neighborhood’s access to the site by extending the ‘public realm’ throughout the site, including in its buildings and programs.”

Compatibility

Reinvestment in the Holly Square area should consider how new uses can be compatible with both the physical as well as the social and cultural characteristics of the Northeast Park Hill neighborhood.”

Sustainable design

Redevelopment should “incorporate the basic principles of sustainable design, which implies minimal impacts from development and its on-going operations.”

In April 2010 ULC committed to using the Good Neighbor Principles in selecting partners for the site’s redevelopment.

From there, the HARP steering committee delved deeper into the vision plan. Members understood that the Holly would be redeveloped in phases, rather than all at once, and that the redevelopment would almost certainly feature multiple uses. That plan was completed in August 2010.

There was strong community interest in moving forward immediately with some interim uses of the site, as planning for permanent new facilities proceeded more slowly. Terrance Roberts’ Prodigal Son proposed temporary basketball and futsal courts on the northwestern section of the site, a peace mural, and decorated “peace poles” on a dozen steel pillars from the old shopping center.

The courts, always intended to be temporary, were added between 2010 and 2012. A \$250,000 grant from The Piton Foundation funded that interim project, which received operating support from Strengthening Neighborhoods.

A more detailed description of each phase of the HARP process can be found in Jann Oldham’s HARP Capstone Report, which was published by the ULC in January 2017.

The Good Neighbor Principles were designed to reflect the values and traditions of the Holly community.

The first big step

Working from the vision plan, HARP in December 2010 issued a document known as a Request for Statements of Interest (RFSI). A HARP Phase II report written in late 2011 laid out the reasons for choosing this approach:

“The RFSI approach was chosen for several reasons. First, it provided opportunity to reach out broadly to compatible program and service-providers regardless of their size. Second, it allowed the process to build collaborative partnerships and explore creative redevelopment strategies with those who recognize the value of the Holly and its neighbors, respect for Good Neighbor Principles of the HARP, understand the benefit of joint development of the site and incorporate innovative approaches towards meeting the challenges of today’s economic climate. And finally, rather than issuing a Request for Proposal from developers, a major intent of the RFSI has been to minimize the typical cost of fees and Return on Investments that private developers require.”

Ten organizations responded to the RFSI. They ranged from the small and grassroots (The Bike Depot) to financial institutions (U.S. Bank) to charter schools (Venture Prep) to large service providers (Boys and Girls Club).

A HARP subcommittee interviewed respondents and determined that eight presented ideas aligned with the good neighbor principles. In April 2011 those groups met with about 100 community members during a “meet and greet” at the Hope Center.

Ultimately, this thorough vetting process led to the selection of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver to build Vickers Boys & Girls Club at the Nancy Anschutz Center on the northeastern side of the Holly. The 30,000 square foot facility opened in October 2013, with up to 20 percent of the facility dedicated to space to be shared with other community organizations. In fact, the Vickers Boys & Girls Club is a larger facility than most, with the extra 6,000 square feet being added specifically to serve as a community benefit.



“We had long been looking for a location to serve northeast Denver,” said Kathy Luna, Chief Operating Officer of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Denver. “And we worked hard with HARP and the ULC at being part of the community. So many entities came together to make this happen.”

Construction of the sparkling new facility was made possible by a \$5 million grant from the Anschutz Foundation, as well as a substantial grant from The Piton Foundation. But another, often overlooked aspect of the deal helped it become a reality: a 99-year ground lease the Boys & Girls Club signed with ULC.

The Genius of Ground Leases

As Miripol and his team pondered the ambitious redevelopment project at the Holly, they wanted to be sure that the partners selected by the community were committed to providing much needed services to the area over the long haul. While they had every confidence that an organization with the strong reputation of the Boys & Girls Clubs would honor that commitment, ULC wanted to have a stewardship role to protect its community investments.

Rather than selling off parcels of the 2.6 acre site to foster development, ULC decided instead to enter into 99-year ground leases with partner organizations. This means that the Boys & Girls Club, and Roots Charter School (as detailed later in this report) own the buildings they built on the Holly, but ULC retains ownership of the ground underneath them.

Should the unanticipated happen and the club decides to leave its facility or the school closes, rather than the buildings being sold to highest bidder, the property and the buildings would revert to ULC who has a first right of refusal.

“The HARP vision plan is on the first page of the ground lease,” Miripol said. “It’s a way of ensuring that all this work, all the time the community put into planning isn’t for naught. It ensures the long-term community benefit.”

Miripol said he believes two long-term ground leases with nonprofits is “absolutely unique. I don’t think you have this kind of arrangement anywhere else in the country.”



The shooting

Just a month before the new Boys and Girls Club was to open; a major incident at the Holly cast a pall over the entire endeavor.

On Friday afternoon September 20, 2013, a peace rally was scheduled to be held at the Holly. It was organized by Terrance Roberts, of Prodigal Son Initiative, an anti-gang program with offices in space leased by then State Sen. Mike Johnston, across Hudson Street from the Holly.

Shortly before the rally was to begin, though, Roberts shot Hasan (Munchy) Jones, a current Bloods member, five times, leaving him paralyzed. The shooting took place in front of the Boys & Girls Club.

Roberts claimed self-defense and was acquitted of all charges in the shooting in October 2015.

Immediately after the shooting, tensions ran high and there was widespread fear that some sort of retaliatory action could target the Holly or Johnston’s office.

Miripol, who arrived at the scene shortly after the shooting, remembers a tense atmosphere. “There were 200-plus people milling around. Some were Bloods, some were anti-gang activists.” Some of the gang members were agitating to “take direct action against Terrance’s office.”

Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed, thanks in large part to interventions by Denver city government gang prevention efforts, and nonprofit anti-gang programs including the Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP), and Open Door Youth Gang Alternatives, headed by the Reverend Leon Kelly.

But Roberts, who had been a prominent and important advocate for the Holly, was permanently out of the picture, his reputation as a reformed criminal turned community champion was badly damaged.

When police cars raced to the scene after the shooting, they drove onto the Peace Courts, damaging the surface. But even that turned into a positive, as it gave the community another reason to come together.

“Obviously the shooting was challenging as we had a partnership with Prodigal Son, but the very next morning the community came out to start the healing process by helping put the damaged court back together,” Miripol said. “There was an amazing organic coming together of neighborhood residents that showed the Holly belonged to the community.”

Just five days after the shooting ULC organized an afternoon barbecue at the Holly. Over 150 people showed up, united in their determination not to allow this unfortunate incident to derail the project.

Tony Pickett, who had just been hired as ULC’s vice president for master site development, and was assuming responsibility for the Holly project, said he expected the first HARP meeting after the shooting, just a couple of weeks later, would focus exclusively on that incident.

Instead, he said, “It was about when the next phase of development was going to happen.”

Meanwhile, the Boys & Girls Club proceeded with its planned opening. In addition to the club, the building would host mission-aligned tenants. One was Mi Casa, which provided career counseling, tax preparation, and other services to adults in the neighborhood. Another was Prodigal Son, which later changed its name to the Impact Empowerment Group under new leadership, focused on youth development.

“Obviously the shooting was challenging as we had a partnership with Prodigal Son, but the very next morning the community came out to start the healing process by helping put the damaged court back together. “There was an amazing organic coming together of neighborhood residents that showed the Holly belonged to the community.”” -Aaron Miripol, ULC President



A school for the Holly

Once the Boys and Girls Club was open for business, ULC and HARP turned their attention to finding their next major partner. As that work began, ULC, HARP and Denver's Office of Economic Development (OED) secured a \$70,000 federal block grant to create a 100-foot walkway to provide physical linkages between the new Boys and Girls Club and adjacent Holly Peace Courts with the Hope Center.

Block grant funds also paid for minor cosmetic upgrades to signage and landscaping at the adjacent off-site existing retail center across 33rd Street, where the Horizon restaurant and a small store still resided. The walkway and cosmetic improvements were completed in June 2014.

Pickett helped bring in the Colorado Homebuilding Academy, a nonprofit training organization to do the physical work of building the walkway. That gave some at-risk kids from the neighborhood training, gainful employment and, perhaps most important, a real sense of connection to the Holly endeavor, Pickett said.

In December of that year, HARP issued its second Request for Statements of Interest, to develop 1.2 acres on the western side of the Holly site. Like the first RFSI, this one made it clear that from the outset that any partner would be required to adhere to HARP's good neighbor principles.

Initially, two affordable housing pitches were among those submitted. While HARP agreed to consider those, it really wasn't the community's top priority.

HARP members and community residents had long desired a high-performing public school in the neighborhood. Northeast Park Hill elementary schools have struggled historically with low performance and high turnover of principals and teachers. Giving schools a focus and a new name "Smith Renaissance School" or "Hallett Fundamental Academy," for example, had made little difference over time.

Ultimately, in May 2015, the HARP board recommended Roots Charter Elementary School, slated to open that fall, as the preferred partner for the second major Holly construction project. Jon Hanover, Roots' founder, was a visionary young educator who has cut his teeth at the highly successful, Denver-based Rocky Mountain Prep charter management organization.

Hanover, who was granted a charter by DPS to phase in the school beginning in the fall of 2015 with a kindergarten and first grade, had "made a big effort over multiple years to engage people in the community and bring them to the table," ULC's Pickett said.



The school Hanover envisioned would feature some elements of the strict, “no excuses” schools that had become popular across the country, but with some significant modifications. The “no excuses” model had begun to face some backlash from education reformers worried that it went too far with its hallway silences, overly draconian consequences for misbehavior, and “drill and kill” instruction.

Hanover wanted Roots to take the best elements of the “no excuses” model and fuse them with a more progressive philosophy, in which learning is highly personalized to each child’s needs and interests.

Students, always called “scholars,” would work in flexible groupings that “change frequently and allow scholars to work at their own pace in each core academic subject,” as the Roots charter application described it.

Roots was to open in 2015, but under the best-case scenario, a new building at the Holly wouldn’t be ready until summer of 2016. So Pickett went to Gerie Grimes at the adjacent Hope Center and asked if Roots could renovate an under-utilized section of the center and use it for year one of operations, when there would be just 90 kindergartners and first-graders. Grimes agreed.

The Gates Family Foundation provided a grant for the renovation work, and Roots contributed additional funds from its general operating budget.

To complete the children’s campus theme of the Holly, HARP also endorsed the Near Northeast Community Engagement School, a charter middle school which was slated to open in the fall of 2017 in the community space inside the Boys and Girls Club. Unfortunately, the school fell short of its enrollment goals and never opened. The Boys and Girls Club was seeking another mission-aligned tenant at the time this report was completed.

People involved in this later phase of the Holly’s redevelopment said community engagement waned a bit, and was less robust than during the earlier phases. “Once the Boys and Girls Club was built, there was a letting go, because people could see that promises were being kept and things really were happening,” Miripol said.

Still, the project had the strong support of the community, and people in the area say they are happy to have a new school nearby.

“Once the Boys and Girls Club got built there was a letting go, because people could see that promises were being kept and things really were happening”

-Aaron Miripol, ULC President





Part three: Holly today

A neighbor of the old shopping center who stood in despair looking at its smoldering ruins back in May 2008 could not in her wildest dreams have envisioned the Holly of today. The Roots building, a modern, window-rich structure faces the Boys and Girls Club. The peace poles are still in place in front of Roots, the last vestige of the site's interim stages between ruin and full development.

If you could transport that neighbor forward in time nine years, she might not recognize the 2.6-acre site, so utterly has it been transformed.

South across East 33rd Avenue things haven't changed much. The property fronting the Holly along East 33rd Avenue is owned by Deloris Wilson, who has been the proprietor for decades. It houses The Horizon, a convenience store, a closed dry cleaners, a small clothing store, and a computer repair shop. It's a piece of the old neighborhood, hanging on as change swirls about it. There's also an underutilized old auto repair shop on the corner of 33rd and Hudson where older men like to hang out, another vestige of the past.

The Holly of today does in fact feel like a children's campus. Dozens of students from Roots are marched across the site each afternoon to participate in activities at the Boys and Girls Club and the Hiawatha Davis Recreation Center. The Pauline Robinson Public Library offers after-school programming as well.

There's a growing sense of synergy among the organizations in and around the Holly.

"We're all partners in this, willing to work together for the kids," said Kathy Luna, the Boys and Girls Club COO.

Jason Torrez, the club director said his staff takes kids over the library many days for literacy-based programming, and club members can use the rec center swimming pool. "It's like everything we need is now housed in this immediate area," he said.

**“We’re all partners
in this, willing to
work together for the
kids.”**

**-Kathy Luna, Boys and
Girls Club COO**

The Boys and Girls Club is a hive of activity. Each day it serves about 220 area youth, ranging in age from 6 to 18. Teens have their own area, separated from the younger kids by the main entrance and reception desk. Both sides of the building feature pool and foosball tables. There’s also a recording studio, computer labs, and an arts and crafts room.

The club also boasts an enormous gym with a gleaming hardwood floor. The Food Bank of the Rockies serves a warm dinner every evening, and in the summer, when the club is open in the morning as well as afternoon, there’s lunch served as well.

Roots, meanwhile, has settled into its new building. Last year was a trying one for Hanover and his team. The highly touted school got off to a rockier than anticipated start. And because of anomalies in how Denver Public Schools rates schools with students in non-tested grades (state testing begins at grade 3) Roots, with 90 kindergartners and first-graders, received the district’s lowest rating — red.

Hanover is confident that rating will change over the next couple of years, and that his educational model is sound. Many of Roots students come from families facing daunting challenges. As a result, half the school’s teachers are labeled “success coaches” and work with kids on non-academic skills, while the other half focus on academic content.

Hanover said he wants Roots infused with “a culture of joy.” That means, he said, “We have high expectations but we recognize that kids aren’t robots. We want to blend rigor and joy here.”

Jann Oldham, who led the community processes for the Holly’s redevelopment, said one missed opportunity has been making it easier for local groups to use shared community space built into both Roots and the Boys and Girls Club for meetings, events and festivals.

The problem, Oldham said, was that there was no funding or oversight mechanism to hire someone to coordinate use of the community spaces available at the Boys and Girls Club and Roots. Nor is there a one-stop online resource available for reserving space. As a result, use has been hit-and-miss, she said.



The Danger of Displacement

As Miripol, Pickett, Grimes, Luna, Hallman and other deeply invested in the Holly look to its future, they see potential threats. But those threats aren't embodied by gang members toting Molotov cocktails.

Quite the contrary. The bigger danger comes from a changing demographic in the neighborhood. Yes, displacement is coming to Northeast Park Hill. No one doubts that. The only questions are how fast the change will come and what can be done to mitigate the potential damage to the current social fabric.

In other words, what happens if you oversee a multi-million-dollar redevelopment of a community hub, only to find the community you built it for no longer exists?

A vibrant, mixed-income neighborhood would benefit everyone, community leaders agree. But then they look across town at the Highlands and see how quickly displacement can devour the old neighborhood and push out those who have lived there for generations.

"We have to intervene," said Pickett of ULC. "We can't allow it to be only market-driven. We have created a sense of desirability so we are obligated to mitigate some of the effects of that desirability."

"Mitigating Involuntary Displacement," a 2016 gentrification study by Denver's Office of Economic Development, found that while Northeast Park Hill isn't gentrifying yet, it is ripe for gentrification.

The data used in the study is somewhat dated, however: the most recent housing market data is from 2013. So some advocates suspect that the neighborhood has moved from the "susceptible" to the "early stage" gentrification category.

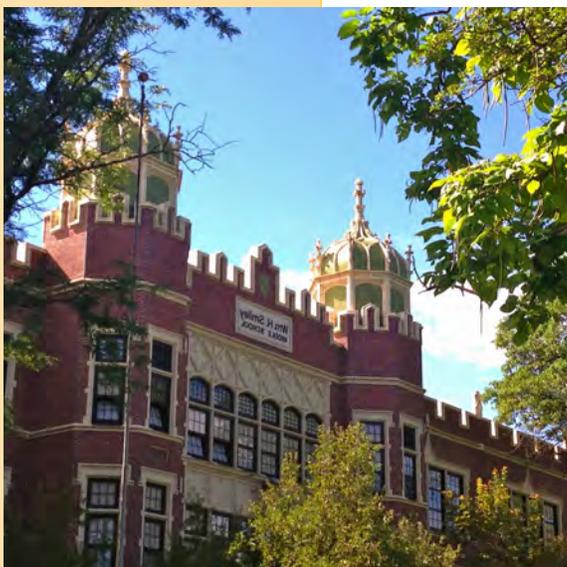
Jann Oldham did some of her own research into Northeast Park Hill gentrification, and came up with some startling findings. Most notably, between 2000 and 2014, the share of African Americans living in the neighborhood declined from 68 percent to 45 percent, while the white population soared to 25 percent from 5 percent in 2000. Over that same period, the average price of a single-family home climbed from \$190,000 to \$325,000.

A map in the gentrification study illustrates that virtually every neighborhood in Denver that isn't already affluent or in the process of gentrifying is vulnerable to the phenomenon. What makes a neighborhood vulnerable, the study says, is median household income lower than the city's as a whole; a percentage of renter-occupied housing units higher than the city's, and the percentage of residents with a Bachelor's Degree lower than the city's.

In 2016, Denver passed an ordinance creating a permanent affordable housing fund. While that represents an excellent first step, it's a drop in the bucket relative to what's needed.

The city study lists nine recommendations for mitigating gentrification, including one that sits in ULC's sweet spot: "bank land in neighborhoods at risk of voluntary displacement."

What happens if you oversee a multi-million-dollar redevelopment of a community hub, only to find the community you built it for no longer exists?



Can displacement be mitigated?

ULC already has land banked parcels in vulnerable neighborhoods: it owns parcels in Cole, River North and Elyria-Swansea, and has already overseen construction of mixed-income housing on a parcel it owns next to the 40th and Colorado rail station in Northeast Park Hill.

ULC's process for developing those parcels will be the subject of a future study.

"We will have an influence where we have land and can exert some control," Miripol said. He also said as the garage and Mrs. Wilson's property adjacent to the Holly go on the market, there could be opportunities to build affordable housing that would allow current area residents to remain.

Some signs of early displacement are already evident. David Hallman, who ran the Hiawatha Davis Recreation Center for 10 years, said a big change occurred in his final year there. Smiley Middle School, located less than a mile directly south of the Holly, had served neighborhood kids for generations. "They used to pour out of that school, up Holly Street and into the rec center after school every day," he said.

But in 2014, Smiley's program was closed because of chronically low performance, and the popular McAuliffe International School moved from the affluent Stapleton neighborhood into the stately old Smiley building. At the time it closed, the historical Smiley program had a student population that was 82 percent low-income. Only 22 percent of McAuliffe students were low-income.

Once McAuliffe moved into Smiley, Hallman and his daughter Jordan noticed that the flood of kids from the school to the rec center slowed to a trickle. "It's like those kids who used to come here disappeared," Jordan said. "I don't know where they all went."

As the neighborhood changes, the ties that bind longtime residents needn't fray, David Hallman said. "Gentrification is not what's done; it's how it's done," he said.

Gerie Grimes has lived in the neighborhood for most of six decades. Her 14 grandchildren all attended the Hope Center preschool, and she expects her great-grandchildren will too when they're old enough. No one's roots run deeper in the community.

When she observes the changes now occurring she takes a longer, and slightly more jaded view.





“It’s not a fair playing field for people of color now, but that’s nothing new,” she said. “I have sat on bank committees screening mortgages, and I have seen first-hand that applications from people of color are not treated the same as applications from white families. If we don’t level the playing field, it will never get corrected, and the changes will overwhelm the neighborhood.”

ULC and like-minded organizations are determined to keep that from happening.

Miripol pointed to several organizations, including Northeast Denver Housing Center and Hope Communities that own affordable housing in the area. Pickett said ULC is exploring options to buy single-family homes in Northeast Park Hill and other, adjacent neighborhoods.

Those factors combined leave Miripol hopeful about the future. He noted that just a few blocks from the Holly, the former Dahlia Shopping Center has been transformed as well. At or near the Dahlia site there are 120 new affordable senior housing units, and a Denver Health Clinic.

The newest amenity benefitting the community is the Mental Health Center of Denver’s new Dahlia Campus for Health & Well-Being. Lydia Prado, vice president of child and family services at the Mental Health Center of Denver, “spent nearly three years meeting with community members and other stakeholders and listening to what people in the surrounding neighborhood wanted and needed to help their community thrive,” according to the campus’ website.

The new campus features early childhood education, pediatric dentistry and a variety of classes available to the community. There’s also a focus on healthy eating, exemplified by a one-acre garden and a tilapia and catfish farm.

“We want to be good stewards of the property, and one way of doing that is protecting the future through our 99-year ground leases, which are renewable for another 99 years,” Miripol said. “When you combine what HARP has done with all of the positive changes taking place at Dahlia, you have a number of impactful assets, all of them important pieces of a vibrant community.”

ULC will continue to prioritize Northeast Park Hill as a neighborhood of opportunity and will partner with residents and organizations to preserve the culture, housing affordability and accessible space for service providers, benefitting generations of community members.