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Alexander Visits The Oregon Experiment

Recently, fates converged upon sleepy Eugene, Oregon to create a fascinating controversy. As a story involving participatory democracy and the human-built environment, it's one of the most revealing in the latter part of the 20th Century. Most Eugeneans, however, don't see it this way. Panic, froth and potent disinformation spilled into the local media, so coloring the story as to obscure the subject.

In the aftermath, few have the will to examine what happened. That's unfortunate, because the implications are far-reaching. Christopher Alexander's latest project, with its laudable ecological and social goals, was nearly dismantled by institutional disregard for people. Ironically he addressed that very problem in another inspired program, in this same community, over twenty years ago.

by Greg Bryant

Certain places simply feel good. Perhaps it's that lively public square where you meet with friends, or a nook of profound solitude, or the little paradise outside with the bench, the old tree, the warm-colored wall and the perfect sunlight. It doesn't take an expert to know that these spots are just right. So why do architects and planners usually make these judgements for us?

Instead, perhaps ordinary people should design their own surroundings. In 1970, the entire University of Oregon campus became a testing ground for this idea. The creator of the new plan, Berkeley Professor Christopher Alexander, was an architect himself. But he believed that, given the alienating results of modern construction, normal people must know more about humane habitat than professionals.

Passing control to the campus community became known as The Oregon Experiment. The foundation of the plan was the user group. Alexander wrote that "all decisions about what to build, and how to build it, will be in the hands of the users." This meant, among other things, that students, faculty and staff destined to use a new building would design it themselves, with the help of architect-facilitators. The results were excellent: people know a great deal about what they like and need. Many even felt the experience to be, in some way, profound. Soon the Oregon campus became world-renowned as a working model of participatory planning.

The user group, however, was only part of the plan. People should decide their own fate, fine, but how do you keep outside forces from messing up the process? To start, Alexander suggested that the planning office keep most projects small, letting the campus grow through careful, gradual construction. This way users could work at a human scale, and a human pace, and the administration wouldn't feel so tempted to tamper with all those little projects. A student-built bus shelter, arts foundry, and other amenities were created to demonstrate the natural, graceful effect of piecemeal growth.

To keep users from feeling lost in so much unfamiliar design work, Alexander provided an encyclopedic set of suggestions for sensitive architecture, known as a pattern language. He later published an absorbing, best-selling book under this title. Patterns are something like rules, but not so authoritarian. As certain aspects of language can contribute to good sentences, patterns are meant to help people make good human space. For example, one

pattern argues for mixed-use buildings: students should live in small clusters intimate with workshops, libraries, labs and other activities. The resulting social brew is a natural stimulant to education and research. Patterns keep this kind of insight active in community memory.

The Experiment encourages user discovery of useful patterns: "the collection of formally adopted patterns shall be reviewed annually at public hearings, where any member of the community can introduce new patterns, or revisions of old patterns, on the basis of explicitly stated observations and experiments." In this way, the University could study itself.

Alexander introduced another annual exercise known as diagnosis, a poll of people's feelings about nearly every piece of campus. The results were to be publicly reported, undergo community revision, and guide future change.

In Alexander's experience, opinion based primarily on feeling is a perfectly good foundation for community planning. "The myth that's being propagated is that everyone feels differently, that the communality is on the order of 10% and the difference on the order of 90%." He believes that regarding environment, the opposite is the case. People working to improve the humanity of a given spot mostly agree.

But the harmony disappears, and the goals become elusive, when groups are bombarded with tough-sounding technicalities. When these dominate, planners and development professionals usually win the ensuing arguments. Really, there needn't be such fear of citizen intuition since, says Alexander, "no one is going to claim to have good feelings about a traffic hazard."

If people's senses are given priority, a group can take into account "the emotional life of children, the feelings of an old person walking up and down a street, the atmosphere surrounding someone buying a pound of tomatoes", and in that context, necessary structural points can be discussed. This isn't difficult to do, as long as the process emphasizes making things better, not just fulfilling dead requirements.

Campus planners took these ideas to heart, along with other material in the plan, and made some solid strides towards implementation. After helping out with trial projects, Alexander left the Oregon campus. The Dean of Architecture and Allied Arts at the time, Bob Harris, felt this made sense, "he said 'look, if the only architect who can make the Oregon Experiment work is Chris Alexander, it won't mean anything.'"

Over the next decades, Alexander developed an international reputation for fighting cold and insensitive architecture, promoting instead a more satisfying and ecologically sound system of design and construction. His demonstrations of low-cost, high-quality, user-designed homes still set the standard for housing development.

In 1991, he was asked back to the University to facilitate the design of major new student housing. He knew that the Experiment hadn't turned out quite as intended, but assumed that the work environment "would be pretty comfortable." He received quite a shock. Fundamental pieces were missing from the plan he set in motion. He soon became one of the most recent victims of these omissions.

Today, most people on campus have no idea that an Experiment exists. The democratic safeguards, the annual reviews and diagnoses, have disappeared. Campus planners blame this on a lack of resources, but these events could be easily organized by faculty and students. Only a handful of people are now involved in what's left of the process. Some find it empowering, but others

quickly find its limits.

Most users never look at the plan itself, published by Oxford University Press as a concise, easy-to-read book. The Oregon Experiment is a planning classic, still in print after nearly two decades. Many users imagine the book to be merely a philosophical statement. In fact, it describes a working system in great detail.

Alexander designed this process to protect users from power, money and bureaucratic inertia. But over the years those forces have swallowed the notion of the user group, and allowed the protection mechanisms to atrophy. Administrators and participants use some patterns, mildly engaging in user design, but community control does not exist. The planning office was never politically able to implement this, and so has forgotten it. The University President's office does not see any problem: they feel the Experiment "evolved" for pragmatic reasons. This self-deception, not coincidentally, gives the administration unilateral control with a useful gloss of community responsibility.

Campus planners created dozens of buildings under the Experiment, and under normal conditions users were satisfied, happy to be involved at any level. But according to a former student of Alexander's, Jerry Finrow, now Dean of the UO School of Architecture and Allied Arts: "project funding is a politicized process that has only limited concern for overall campus quality."

Many projects were rushed, some were huge, and a few suffered from battles over money. Most seriously, some were removed from the Experiment altogether to satisfy the whims of donors or administrators. One example, a new high-tech Research Park, is a pet project that is, according to Finrow, "of inappropriate scale and complexity, ignoring significant campus open space concerns". Many also consider the park to be a trendy, ill-conceived waste of money. It was a major target of community activists, but was built regardless. In another case, the Business School received donations for a strident gateway, and a gross brick bunker known as the Chiles Center. These displaced an inviting campus entrance and early Oregon Experiment success. Administrators apparently weren't interested in playing tough with a donor's location preference.

User groups are certainly not in control of this process. The highest level user group, the Campus Planning Committee, has no authority, merely advising the President's office. This collection of busy professors and transitory students is easily manipulated, as are other campus committees. When there are problems, users are sometimes considered a burden, and viewed with suspicion, by planners. Alexander's concern is that "people who are treated as a potential danger, with a combination of kid gloves and repression, are not going to be natural and helpful participants in anything."

Unfortunately for the Experiment's designer, he returned to campus to build an unwanted project. Years ago the University left construction of student housing to the marketplace, due mostly to pressure by local landlords. But the State of Oregon issued direction to build significant new housing anyway, in the hope that this would lower rents in the tight Eugene housing market.

By law, this housing must be built with government bonds, that is, borrowed money. This meant that the new rents would be close to market rates, since they would essentially include mortgage payments. The State's orders created among administrators an ideological dilemma, since they didn't want to further penetrate the housing market, and a practical one, since they had no confidence in their ability to fill housing at regular rents.

These quandaries burdened every aspect of the project. Despite the Experiment's call for open discussion, none of this was aired publicly. Administrators hoped to smooth over problems and get on with the building assignment. Officials don't really see the Experiment as something that constrains them: it's for architects and users, no? Somehow, blow-ups over past projects had not shaken them into worry about their process.

Though the administration is responsible for its general lack of planning insight, it's only partly to blame for the particular tumult that was to come over housing. The extreme behaviors of the University in this matter, which were to include shuffling user group members, breaking arbitration, and altering signed contracts, came ultimately from the State mandate to build. Force an unwilling institution to do anything difficult, even to help poor tenants, and its fragile democracy is bound to crack.

Alexander couldn't know any of this was about to happen. He simply geared up for a challenging project. He braced the University with encouragement: they could indeed build student housing at costs competitive with the market, especially in the long term. Not only that, but the buildings could set new standards for beautiful, sensitive, and practical living spaces.

Contracts were signed and research begun. But the University was still reluctant, leading to strange decisions and stranger delays. Eventually, a user group for the housing began to meet. But a silent bomb was thrown into the works.

The University decided to tear down hundreds of units of existing low-rent housing, known as The Amazon, to create a clear site for the new buildings. The Amazon units are rather old and rickety World War II temporary housing, so at the time this decision must have made a certain sense. But it wasn't particularly sensitive to the low-income students already living there. Many found the new housing's projected rent increase to be unaffordable. Eventually, some of these very residents were moved into Alexander's user group. This inserted unresolved political issues into a discussion of design, among people with no political power. How could such a team function? It didn't. This could be predicted by anyone who had digested the Experiment: no design group, or plan to build, should even exist for a project the community finds unacceptable.

Even after the tension was painfully evident, the University continued to let the group stew. The arguments that surfaced in these meetings were, not surprisingly, a little surreal. They were also particularly revealing.

Alexander was trying to build low-cost housing of extremely high human quality. To this end, he asked the University to set a per-unit price: with this money he would build something far more livable than the average alienating, motel-like student hovels.

The students, justifiably concerned over the dismantling of their old low-price rentals, argued for the cheapest possible construction. They hoped that this would keep the rents at affordable levels. Alexander tried to explain that the price of the housing was not set by him, but instead by the University. The functionaries present naturally wanted to avoid responsibility for unpopular site and price decisions, so made no effort to back him up.

In any case, the cheap buildings that the students wanted would not automatically be as inexpensive as the older units. The old housing is only cheap today because there is no "mortgage" left to pay. On the other hand, new units would be built with borrowed money, so they couldn't compete with the old rents.

Alexander fought hard in the group against proposals for thrown-up structures. If you build inferior housing, it just falls down by the time the loan is paid off. So, decades from now, new borrowing would be necessary, keeping rental prices always close to market levels.

For student housing, the secret to low rent is longevity. Well-made, 100-year housing will be dirt cheap after the loan is paid off in thirty years, so generations of students will benefit from it. But low-income students looking at their own slim budgets are, for very good reasons, not so interested in students thirty years from now. Consequently, this straightforward analysis of the long-term public benefit became lost.

Even if it hadn't, Alexander would face a final hurdle. As the pressures compounded, the group lost interest in producing nice places to live, despite Alexander's guarantee to build very special dwellings for the same price as junk. Since students, and administrators, believed this to be impossible, they proclaimed it undesirable. This was more than a little frustrating for the architect, who feels strongly that poor people should not be forced to live in bad buildings. That students and staff ultimately disagreed with this is particularly frightening, and exactly opposed to the intentions of the Experiment.

Apartment dwellers these days live in minimalized housing: boxes for storing people when not at work, school, or driving around. Add a television, and no one seems to care what the space around them looks like. Through the abuse of resources and people, mass-produced pre-fab housing is cheap and turns a quick profit, making investors interested in neither durability nor livability. People have, in a way, adapted to this kind of housing, and see nothing wrong with it on paper.

But rooms, windows, porches and courtyards should be shaped carefully, to nourish people, and give them connection to nature and neighbors. Alexander specializes in making human-scale spaces at low cost. Sometimes this involves trades. For example, to save money Alexander planned to reduce the square footage a little bit. This caused an uproar in the pressured design group. Americans are addicted to excess room: it's the sort of limited freedom that people living in prisons cherish. Under more reasonable conditions for discussion, people normally agree that slightly smaller, well-designed rooms with useable outdoor space are preferable to large cardboard crates on a parking lot.

In this fashion, cost, durability, and quality became "issues" in a design group which should not have existed until the political problems were publicly resolved. The upshot was a public firing of Alexander, sacrificed to take the heat off the University. The administration continues to move to tear down the Amazon, but has no intention of replacing it with Alexander's careful, user-informed designs.

Students today are trying to prevent the demolition in the political arena, and difficult design meetings are still being held, only without Alexander. There exists a proposal to make the old Amazon into an independent cooperative village for low-income students. This is of course a wonderful idea, for both the town and for students: the University is not a very accountable landlord, as bad as many others in Eugene. But it's terribly unfortunate that cooperation-minded, impoverished people, struggling to get an education, won't benefit from Alexander's durable, community-enhancing constructions. They will instead get 50-year-old temporary housing in ghetto-like condition. The heavy maintenance needs of the site might destroy a cooperative. None of this seems right. It's extremely frustrating to watch.

Given that a brutal battle still rages between administrators and

students over the Amazon, this kind of analysis probably looks like a luxury to the combatants. Many get by with the diplomatic, but not really useful, characterization that everyone is somewhat to blame: students, administration and architect. Others see it as a simple lack of management ability on the part of the University. It's sad that the level of discussion under the Oregon Experiment has degenerated to looking for personality defects.

The situation cries out for deep community discussion. Every major University project in the past decade had serious problems swept under the rug, to the point where a strange, dysfunctional process is endemic. The campus community is abused daily by senseless infrastructural changes emerging from cloistered compromises. The fact that the University is owned by the State, and not the city, gives the surrounding community too limited an influence. And faculty, students and staff are so busy in their daily work that they have neither time nor incentive to investigate possibly fundamental problems.

It's instructive to see how these problems fleshed out in Alexander's delicate housing work. For example, his Berkeley team spent months researching patterns for family student housing, and built full-scale mock-ups of different potential units. Very excited about the results, Alexander wanted to construct the mock-ups, free of charge, in Eugene, to show users. But administrators tried to prevent this. Cutting off the architect-facilitator from users would be inconceivable in the Experiment as written. But officials only think hard about the Experiment when it gives them ammunition to defend their immediate political agenda.

In the thick of things, Alexander was attacked with a pattern he himself had written, by people who were unaware of this. It regarded a call for "small parking lots". Because of site constraints, many little parking lots, and their access roads, would have permeated the housing project, destroying much of it. Alexander suggested some alternatives, to protect the community social spaces. Given that people were upset with him for defending nice housing, these suggestions were attacked for being contrary to the Experiment. Certainly, he says, "I didn't just jump up, and salute smartly, every time a pattern was mentioned." In the decades since he invented patterns, he'd found many ways to resolve such design problems, but didn't get an opportunity to explain them. Or much else, for that matter.

Since he moves against establishment thinking, Alexander sometimes startles people with his techniques for saving money and increasing quality. If users were comfortably in control of an agreed upon project, they could openly discuss the value of such methods. But the group had slid back into the standard world of modern construction, with its ideological certainties. When Alexander's team found beautiful cedar siding at the same price as cheap pine, so outside walls wouldn't need paint for at least a century, officials refused at first to accept it. He could not understand why everyone was making "absolutely certain that their preconceptions could not be rocked by reality."

Some of Alexander's techniques for improving quality are actually very old-fashioned. Take windows, for example. He has found it preferable to decide window placement while construction is underway. This was common practice before the age of pre-fabrication. The view, the light, the effect on space, the connection with the street, the overall feeling, cannot be properly determined until you stand in a half-finished room. Despite his explanation of this, administrators, at this point looking for a scapegoat, announced that the architect didn't know how to draw windows into construction plans. Denouncing good ideas through character assassination debases the educational mission of the Experiment, and the University for that matter.

In 1970, Alexander was aware that good buildings couldn't be built without the involvement of ordinary people. He hoped he could just open up the floodgates of democratic design, and inhumane buildings would become a nightmare of the recent past.

But the kind of democracy he was looking for, deeply participatory, careful and broadly empowered, simply didn't exist in this country. That it could develop at a large State institution, unlikely as it may seem in retrospect, was particularly exciting to everyone at the time. Unfortunately, administrators are employed to be neither visionaries nor grassroots organizers. Under the daily grind, they couldn't see that a big job was left unfinished.

The Experiment persists in name because its principles still resonate within the University's body politic. So although there are no empowered advocates of these remarkable, achievable ideals, they could certainly be revived in their birthplace. Students and faculty could run a real community. Staff might suffer less. And the campus could be filled with those wonderful places that make people feel alive.

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Photo Captions: (photos to come)

Left: student-run, student-built. The best kinds of education emphasize the practice of self-direction and cooperation. Left top, the Campbell Club Co-op at the University of Oregon, one of three buildings owned by Eugene's Student Cooperative Association. Residents describe life in these houses as a continuous exploration of real democracy. Left bottom, once again, the U of O foundry, designed and built twenty years ago by students. Each facet and function of the University could improve through this type of fundamental faculty and student involvement.

Above, the Agate street prototypes. Above left, note that there are five different types of window here. Alexander has found that windows and dormers are best sized and situated on site, where the best shape and placement can be determined according to view, light, effect on rooms, etc. Above right, one of the most striking features of the Agate housing are the many grand old trees that were preserved. The buildings were designed to fit in and around them, unusually sensitive for government construction. Below, once students questioned the University's decision to put housing on the Amazon site, the administration panicked and successfully used Alexander as a scapegoat.

This page: The existing low-cost Amazon student housing, erected as temporary residences for returning WW II veterans pursuing degrees under the GI Bill. The University wants to demolish these units, and given the present political conditions this would truly be a shame. Alexander's inspiring design for an urban community on this site would certainly make a terrific place to live and study -- but the University administration does not intend to build it. Given their recent bloody-mindedness they would instead probably replace this charming, if flimsy, village with something far worse. It is clear that the University, now trying to privatize and attract wealthier students, is gentrifying and distancing itself from its role as public servant, arrogantly looking upon Amazon as an underclass embarrassment. Alexander, unaware of all this, was abused by the administration towards these ends, as demonstrated by the University's mad efforts to push up the cost of his buildings. Consequently, the best reason for preserving the Amazon is political: the buildings are symbolic of a commitment to public education that Universities around the country are in danger of losing. The Amazon tenants are fighting to achieve historic preservation status for the buildings, and turn the site into a student co-op, in that case becoming one of the largest in the US. It is a shame that the University's doubletalk to the press, elitist power plays against the tenants, and nasty mudslinging against Alexander, made the best solutions impossible: one where the new designs would lead to a beautiful, low-cost student co-op village, perhaps on another site.

Above, a piece of Alexander's design for the Amazon site, commissioned by the University of Oregon, intended to enhance the sense of community often found in student housing. The urban village could also demonstrate that sturdy, sensitive, high-quality multi-unit dwellings, of a kind rarely

found in the US today, can be built for the same price as standard dormitories or motels. Below, the floor plan for one of the Agate street prototypes of the Amazon housing, with studies, window-seats and alcoves for the benefit of students.

At right, prototypes for the Amazon village -- Alexander's Agate Street Student Housing near the University of Oregon campus. Built on budget, for about \$40,000 per unit, these twenty apartments will stand easily for over a century. Maintenance costs will also be very low: the high-oil cedar siding requires no paint, and the masonry base, extra roof flashing, and rot-resistant stairway design will retard the effects of Oregon's heavy rains. The units are massively insulated, both for energy efficiency and to prevent noise from traveling between neighboring walls. Each of the 20 units is different in plan, many radically, making it impossible for residents to feel like just a number. One of the most important features is the usefulness of the outdoor space. All ledges are seats. There are beautiful garden paths between the buildings. The front porches are deep enough to put furniture on, so one can sit outside during a rain. The deep green roofing, rich and colorful cedar siding, spirited roof caps and imaginatively arranged fencing makes the immediate outdoors particularly inviting for the community. The central courtyard adds to the sense of security, and the pleasant gates and fences protect children from the street without being oppressive or obtrusive. The dormers, multi-level porches and window-seats draw attention to the outside from the inside, and soften the border between the two. All this is quite a bargain at \$40,000 per dwelling. But when the University administration set out to sabotage the project, they misled the press and others regarding the costs and the configuration of the apartments. One of the twenty units has two small bedrooms, perfect for a couple and baby, or perhaps a couple needing an extra study -- but since it was on the ground floor officials showed this unit first to visitors, implying that the entire complex had small bedrooms. Although Alexander did shave off bits of square footage in order to save money, careful layout makes almost all of the apartments feel strikingly comfortable.

Most of the nicest spots recently appearing on campus were token rewards offered by big, damaging projects: the pleasant corner of benches at left sits by a lake-sized parking lot. A big new science complex took the former site of the Museum of Natural History, which received pocket change to build the beautiful building above. Below, new art studios designed with the help of students.

Despite the use of the Experiment's democratic terminology within University administrative circles, the physical evidence overwhelmingly suggests that nothing remotely approaching the plan actually exists at the University of Oregon. The two new smiling plate-glass office buildings above are unremarkably typical of modern, politely accepted, cold-blooded schools of design. Above left, the latest addition to Lawrence Hall, which houses the School of Architecture and Allied Arts. Originally built in the '20s with rustic Art Deco ornament, the building continually suffers from trendy amending and remodeling. By the time of this most recent addition, the Experiment had long since atrophied within a bureaucratic body-cast. Above right, the infamous University Riverfront Research Park, a costly attempt to hop onto the high-tech bandwagon, with office floors that should encourage Silicon Valley computer executives to indulge in their fondness for cubicles. This project was so controversial that it was officially removed from the community decision-making process. Left top, millions from Nike's top executive, a University graduate, poured into a library addition so disrespectful of people that it might act as a deterrent to education. This extremely expensive semi-circular wooden bench is topped by an ornamental trim that makes leaning back impossibly uncomfortable, and the foot-rest is just a bit too far away for anyone's legs. The first thing found upon entering the library is this endless hallway, left, the inside of a submarine in pastels. Terrifying, windowless: a miserable prelude to finding a book. Many components of Alexander's plan, clearly ignored, would have made such a design impossible. The badly misplaced gate, left, creates a subtle damage also warned of explicitly in the Oregon Experiment: avoid cutting off the campus from the city -- don't turn the University into a glorified high school. The giant gate is a model demonstration of this effect: it cuts off visual contact between popular on-campus and off-campus hangouts directly across the street from each other. The effect is compounded by a business building, the Chiles Center, left bottom, a cruel, unresponsive brick fortress, that inserted itself upon an active, prominent campus corner at the whim of the donor. Certain new buildings feature quite arbitrary and disorienting postmodern ornament. The cold, unnatural Science Complex, right, sports dozens of excess columns. Filmmaker David Heine quips, "Apparently Science has lost faith in The Arch."

The Oregon Experiment, begun on the University of Oregon campus in the early '70s, set out to prove that humane, sensitive architecture was possible through the deep participation of the campus community. Opposite page left, the art department's foundry, an early result of the Experiment, designed and built by students and faculty.

The Community made many successful planning and design decisions through Alexander's Experiment over the decades: above left, a well-used kiosk, above right, Richard Britz' Urban Farm, and below, a view from the scholars' walk of the Education School, a complex preserved, and carefully enlarged, under the plan's recommendations.

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