

Tenants shocked: Amazon demolition plan will proceed

By Arik Hesseldahl
Oregon Daily Emerald

Amazon housing residents were not surprised by Wednesday's termination of the contract with CES/T&E, but they were shocked to hear that the University plans to proceed on schedule with plans to demolish and rebuild the Amazon housing facility.

Nancy Forrest of the Amazon Community Tenants council says that firing Alexander is missing the point. She wants the entire process to come to a halt, and for the University to start over from the beginning.

"They still don't understand do they?" Forrest said. "They're not addressing any of the serious concerns raised by the residents here. They're still planning to demolish a habitable building and put up something else without any idea of cost. We're just jumping from one frying pan into another," Forrest said.

Forrest still questions the University's position that Amazon is in need of demolition.

"Their own report says that there is no more threat to life and safety than there ever was before," she said. "Why is it that the University does not want to take the time to look at some of the important issues here? We want the University to step back from the table, take a deep breath, and start over on this project."

Several Eugene-area state legislators have joined with the Amazon residents in calling for a moratorium on the relocation of current Amazon residents in order to reevaluate all available options.

Jim Fisher, another Amazon resident, said that he's glad Alexander and his firm are off the project, but he's concerned about what the University plans to do. He's said he doesn't think the University is concerned about cost.

"Cost is our number one issue, and we don't understand the University's position there," Fisher said.

Fisher said he is concerned that all the money paid to Alexander's firm, both for work completed and any losses from a lawsuit, will have to be paid by University Housing residents in the form of increased rents.

"I'm glad that the University got rid of him," Fisher said. "But from this day forward we're going to be paying him for the work he's already done, including the Amazon master plan which is useless."

Architect's designs seen on campus

By Arik Hesseldahl
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Several questions were answered Wednesday as the University administration announced an end to its relationship with Christopher Alexander, the embattled architect of the Agate and Amazon family housing facilities.

Administration officials said there was a "lack of understanding" between Alexander and his firm CES/T&E venture, and that it will proceed on schedule with plans to demolish and rebuild the Amazon facility in time for the 1995-96 school year.

Just who is Christopher Alexander anyway?

This is not an easy question to answer. When contacted Oct. 28 for comments on another story, Alexander informed the *Emerald* he would no longer speak with representatives of this newspaper.

Alexander lives in Berkeley, Calif., and runs an organization called the Center for Environmental Structure, which formed a partnership with the Eugene architectural firm of Thallon and Edrington for the sole purpose of designing and rebuilding the family housing facilities at the corner of 18th Avenue and Agate Street and the Amazon facility, at 24th Avenue and Patterson Street.

Alexander has a history with the architectural environment of the University that dates back to the early 1970s, when he wrote a book titled *The Oregon Experiment*. The processes described by Alexander in that book have become standard University policy when planning construction projects, and are required reading for architecture students. The Science Complex, additions to the education building and additions to the music school were all designed using Alexander's *Oregon Experiment* processes, but by other firms.

Architects around the country regard Alexander as either a genius or a self-appointed guru. Critics sometimes accuse him of trying to create a cult because his ideas run counter to the conventional wisdom of architecture. In the architectural sense, what he does is "not done."

But there is a growing number of people who believe his philosophies have revolutionized the way buildings are now built and how they will be built in the future. Count Jerry Finrow, dean of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts, among them.

"Christopher Alexander is one of the most important theorists in 20th century architecture because when he was a practicing theorist, he proposed views and approaches that no one else had thought of before in the history of the field," Finrow said.

The saga of Alexander's mark on the architecture world began at Cambridge University, where he completed his first college degree, in mathematics. He then completed Cambridge's three-year preliminary program of architecture in two

years. From what one trade writer has said, Alexander believed the program missed the point.

"He wanted to know how to make a beautiful building. He's been obsessed with that question ever since," wrote Jerry Ship-sky in the journal *Architecture*.

Alexander moved across the Atlantic to Harvard University, where he was possibly the first student to ever complete a Ph.D. in architecture there.

Put simply, Alexander applied his background in mathematics toward solving problems of architecture, Finrow said. Ship-sky compared Alexander's work to "inventing calculus simply in order to solve a particular equation or creating the laws of motion simply in order to ride in a car."

Finrow said this led Alexander to the idea that architecture, as it has been commonly practiced, is too simplistic and formulaic to "make beautiful buildings." Applying the traditional rules doesn't necessarily result in a nice building.

Alexander believes that the environment is made up of patterns, rather than things. The distinction between a good and bad pattern can be decided upon objectively by groups of people who have a stake in the design of the building. That means forming committees, known as "user groups" that combine their thoughts on how the building should look into a practical, workable building plan. This process is fundamentally different from anything tried before, and has been hailed by some as the wave of the future.

Between 1977 and 1980, Alexander published a series of books that culminated in *The Oregon Experiment*, which Finrow considers to be the second phase of Alexander's development.

"I think that's the most productive set of ideas he ever had," Finrow said. "The process expressed there is very structured and organized and allows the architect to get into the same place that the users are. It uses their insights to create a basis to work from."

"Our own environment has been ruined by the current architectural separation between client, architect and contractor," Alexander told *Progressive Architecture* in 1991.

In that article, Alexander tells an anecdote about a housing project he worked on in Mexicali, Mexico, during the 1970s.

"A bank official came to the Mexicali project as we were building it and said that clearly the people didn't know how to design housing since, in one, the bedrooms were too big and the living room too small."

"I asked the woman whose house it was to come over and explain, and she told me that it was very simple. The bedrooms were big to give each of her children a place to study, since education was so vital to their betterment ... the living room was small because 'our family all sits togeth-

er on the same sofa anyway. We love each other. Why do we need more space?' Poor people, because of their distressed circumstances, tend to be more direct."

Finrow said Alexander's approach is "a very effective methodology."

"I have practiced from that perspective myself, and I think it's very successful," he said.

But if Alexander's methods have worked so well in the past, what, if anything, has gone wrong with the Agate and Amazon projects?

Nancy Forrest, a member of the Amazon Community Tenants Council, agrees that Alexander may be a genius, but that something has gone wrong with the Agate and Amazon user group process — something that may or may not be Alexander's fault.

Forrest said the University placed too many administration, faculty and staff members in the user group and not enough of the low-income students who will live in the buildings. Forrest further blames University officials for setting the cost boundaries of the project that have become just one of the major sticking points of the entire controversy, without allowing user groups to discuss them.

Alexander is also well-known for his design of the Eishan University campus on the outskirts of Tokyo, Japan. Finrow said it had its own controversies.

"It's no surprise that there has been controversy on this project. But once it got through all the unfortunate experiences of its birth, Eishan has become a marvelous environment that is probably really appreciated and loved by those that live there," Finrow said.

But under present financial conditions, can the University afford to have a "marvelous environment?"

"I would argue that the University can't afford to not have a quality environment. Part of what makes our place meaningful is the environment in which we live. You have to ask if the environment is of good quality and if it's enriching. I think the cost argument is a tough one, but I don't think we can afford to have that attitude," Finrow said.

In 1992, Alexander designed a house for Ann Medlock and John Graham on Whidbey Island, near Seattle, Wash. A glowing pictorial and written review in the April 1992 issue of *House and Garden* highlights the "Alexander experience," with heartfelt quotations from Alexander's associate Gary Black and the homeowners.

Was the University simply looking for "a place to live" when Alexander and his firm were selected to do the Agate/Amazon project? Wednesday's developments seem to answer "yes" to that question. But there are new questions.

How will the design-build process work? How much input will the students affected have on the project's outcome and costs?

Though Alexander is gone, this story is far from over.

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the contract, said George Pernsteiner, associate vice chancellor for administration. He said there was no way the University could continue to pay costs like they did on the Agate project for the bigger Amazon project.

Pernsteiner said, however, that the Agate problems alone weren't the main reason for dismissal.

"By itself, they don't rule out the current architect," Pernsteiner said. "However, the partnership between the University and the architect did not result in a finely working team during the life of the existing agreement."

The contract contains a provision that says the University can terminate the agreement if it does not authorize the architect to start "any phase of planning within two months after approval of the previous phase." Pernsteiner said the last phase authorized was the Amazon Master Plan in August, therefore the Uni-

versity is within its rights.

Neither Chris Alexander or Thallon & Edrington were reached for comment. Pernsteiner said he doesn't know whether Alexander will sue, as he has threatened to do in the past.

The University is currently in the process of reviewing the amount of work CES/T&E has performed on Amazon, Pernsteiner said.

To facilitate the design-build process, the University will produce a document that details the goals for the Amazon project. The document won't actually specify a design for Amazon, Pernsteiner said, but it could contain very specific details such as size of units and finishes of walls.

The document will receive input from a variety of sources, including students and housing officials, after which the University would request proposals from teams of architects and contractors in the spring, he said. The University would select one of these teams, who would both design and build Amazon.



George Pernsteiner discusses the dismissal of Amazon architect Christopher Alexander on Wednesday.