

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

Knight's Moves [The University of Oregon Science Complex]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7h30634q>

Journal

Places, 7(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Campbell, Robert

Publication Date

1992-02-01

Peer reviewed

All buildings are broadcasting stations. They fill the air with messages quite extraneous to their immediate purposes. They do this regardless of whether the architect intends them to or not.

American college campuses offer an amazing range of such messages. The concrete megablobs that the University of Wisconsin, let's say, built in the 1960s and 70s trumpet a brazen tale of the oligarchic power of an *arriviste* central administration, of bossy new guys who crunch numbers and work out with weights.

By contrast, the ordered Edwardian quads and vistas of Rice University whisper a bedtime story, possibly fictive, of a strolling social and academic hierarchy so calm and well established it has no paranoid need to assert itself — a hierarchy rather like that of the British in India, similarly housed in a just slightly exotic architecture.

I came to the University of Oregon not as a user of the campus — not as a student, teacher, administrator, or townie — but as a tourist, never the best way to experience architecture. I also arrived as a longtime admirer of the writings of Christopher Alexander, author of *The Oregon Experiment*, which defines many of the goals the new science complex seeks to reach.

Once, at an Aspen Design Conference, I heard the architect Sir Hugh Casson remark that “the Englishness of the English is that in time of crisis they turn not to reason but to memory” — as accurate, perhaps, as any ethnic generalization can ever be. It is true of Christopher Alexander. Like his countryman Edmund Burke, he is suspicious of the world of ideas, suspicious of systems and system-makers. He looks for truth not in any process of intellectual abstraction, but rather in consensual cultural agreement over time. He trusts experience, both personal and collective. Such an attitude has much to recommend it. It leads Alexander to what are — for me, at least — numerous intuitions of hair-raising persuasiveness about what works and what doesn't in architecture and planning.

My quest as a tourist in Eugene, I suppose, was to find out whether the science complex really embodies Alexander's principles and, if it does, whether it validates or discredits them. And, to be open to whatever other mes-

sages might hang in the air, as one might pick up a barely audible scream for help beneath the noisy jawing of a CB radio. Since I can't stand the names science center or science complex, I will refer to this group of buildings simply as Rumpelstiltskin.

The first shock you receive from Rumpelstiltskin is administered by its architectural program. Perhaps misled by a 1985 article in the student newspaper of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts — “The Year Alexander Died,” by Mike Shellenbarger — I had long assumed the University had turned

Knight's Moves

A characteristic "knight's move" is the stairway that hugs the edge of the atrium in Willamette Hall.

Photo by Timothy Hursley.



its back on *The Oregon Experiment*. So it was with astonishment and pleasure that I read the “Manual for Prospective Architectural Consultants,” the brief given to architects being considered for the job of designing Rumpelstiltskin.

The “Manual” announces on page one: “Planning at the University of Oregon is guided by the basic principles of *The Oregon Experiment* and *A Pattern Language*.” It spends the next three pages outlining those principles. And in case anyone has missed the point, it includes an appendix of 24 key patterns, ranging from “Pedestrian Street” to “Department IIearth.”

Testing Rumpelstiltskin against these 24 patterns is probably as good a way as any to determine if it’s truly Alexandrine. Right away, it turns out, it flunks number one.

This pattern, called “Open University,” tells us: “When a University is built up as a campus separated by a hard boundary from the town, it tends to isolate its students from the townspeople, and in a subtle way takes on the character of a glorified high school.” Therefore, “the boundary of the university must weave in and out, like fingers, into the town. Parts of the town must grow up within the campus, and parts of the campus must grow up within the town.”

In short, a university should be a part of community life, not a preparation for it. Rumpelstiltskin faces onto public streets but cannot really be said to fulfill this wise pattern. On one side it confronts campus greenery, on the other an arterial with a strip of service yards. Generously grade it “D.”

“Site Repair”: (“Buildings must always be built on those parts of the land which are in the worst condition, not the best.”) Nestled among ugly existing buildings, roads and parking lots, all of which it helps to integrate and conceal, Rumpelstiltskin gets an “A-plus” for “Site Repair.”

“Activity Nodes”: (“Create nodes of activity throughout the community, spread about 300 yards apart... . At the center, make a small public square and surround it with a combination of community facilities and shops... .”) The 300-yard gauge allows for only one node here, and Rumpelstiltskin possesses just one, the dramatic new multi-story atrium in Willamette Hall. It’s not exactly surrounded by shops and facilities, though. Grade it “B.”

“Building Complex”: (“A building cannot be a human building unless it is a complex of still smaller buildings or smaller parts which manifest its own internal social facts.”) One of my favorites among Alexander’s patterns. Rumpelstiltskin certainly breaks down into the smaller parts, but it is seldom clear what they are supposed to be manifesting. Another “B.”

I do not want to ride these patterns into the ground. The point is they have been kept in mind, at least, within the perimeter of Rumpelstiltskin itself, but less so (perhaps inevitably) in its relation to the larger campus.

There are other sides to Alexander. One has to do with process, letting the users of the architecture make the major decisions. As a tourist, I have no insight into how that worked here. But there are still other basic concepts, such as the notions of piecemeal growth and organic order. Here, it seems to me, is where Rumpelstiltskin makes its one serious misstep.

Rumpelstiltskin is a dramatization and a pretense, not a manifestation, of piecemeal growth and organic order. Created at a single moment by a single team of architects (with whatever input from users), it represents itself not as the unitary thing it is, but as a loose hodgepodge of related but individual buildings that appear to have grown up, like a family, over a period of time.

Take the floor of the atrium. Made of reddish-ocher concrete, it is colored unevenly, as if it has aged over time. On it are inscribed mysterious patterns — radial, snakelike patterns — that seem to be the runes and ciphers left behind by an earlier civilization. We cannot help knowing that these ghostly demarcations are not, in fact, the work of native American Druids, much as we might love to believe it, and merely the arbitrary doodles of designers. They are, consequently, form without meaning. And the uneven coloring is the expression not of the action of time, nor of the imperfect Ruskinian hand of a human maker, but of a sophisticated desire to create the effect of such irregularities.

It is often said of modern architecture that what began as a social and political experiment ended as a formalist dogma. A half-truth at best, but nevertheless an illuminating one. Rumpelstiltskin raises a similar concern: Will the difficult striving toward the kind of world Christopher Alexander imagined begin to be replaced, even at the hands of his admirers, by a formal representation of that world? Everything turns into art so quickly in our era.

Having nursed that particular worry, I should turn to a recital of pleasures. The great atrium is a truly amazing space, a boggling festival of architectural metaphor. The corner stair recalls piazzas like Todi’s, but the pattern impressed on its concrete is that of the coffered slab of Louis Kahn’s Yale Art Gallery. Crisscrossing bridges, like the stair, are a literal embodiment of the wish to connect the different departments.

Hard surfaces everywhere render the idea of connection audible — the talk, the footsteps, the click of bicycles, the doors opening and closing. Leaflike silver sculptures, exfoliating from the tops of piers like suddenly fertilized Corinthian

capitals, make of the atrium a scared moonlit grove, but paving and streetlights make of it, at the same moment, an urban square at evening.

Not quite enough happens around the atrium to justify all this. There is a lot of center here, and a rather thin surround. A look at Alexander's "Alcoves" pattern might have helped. But this is a tremendous, exhilarating space nonetheless.

Another pleasure is the way the old buildings on the site have been respected. These are mostly hideous, with long spans and big cantilevers that express an internally generated power. Rumpelstiltskin simply reaches out and gathers them into the family, like Marines welcomed from an unpopular war. They're respected and allowed to continue to be themselves, while at the same time they're integrated into something larger. Once space-occupiers, they become, with their new linkages, space-shapers.

Smaller joys lie in the many special places. To choose just one: The fountain, by artist Alice Wingwall, is a conceit falling somewhere between an architectural ruin and a natural rock formation — appropriately enough, in its location between the departments of geology and volcanology.

As you spend more time at Rumpelstiltskin, as you move back and forth among the many spaces and buildings that jostle against one another, you gradually become aware of something you cannot name. Some principle of recurrence is holding the whole thing together, but you cannot figure out what it is.

It is not the similar masonry, or the repeating formal elements like octagons and arches, or even the vise-like pressure of the parallel streets that force Rumpelstiltskin into its linear orientation. Nor is it Science Walk, the meandering path (reminiscent of the one in Charles Moore's earlier Kresge College in Santa Cruz) that threads these elements together.

The fountain gives the clue. The water moves in an L-shaped path as it drops through the fountain. Eventually, you realize it is reminding you of the L-shaped concrete stair down which people are flowing in the atrium at the farther end of Rumpelstiltskin. You realize that you have continually found your own body, too, making L-shaped moves — both horizontal and vertical. Knight's moves: two squares one way, one perpendicular.

A knight's move is the representation of a diagonal motion by orthogonal means — of freedom, let's say, by order, or of the organic by the Cartesian. At Rumpelstiltskin it becomes both structure and metaphor.

I began by asserting that campuses are messengers. They announce the powers and purposes that shape them. At Rumpelstiltskin the wily sidle, the fox trot, the knight's move, embodies the message as well as anything does. It is a message about relationships that are always conditional and assertions that are always contingent.

If Rumpelstiltskin expresses anything, it expresses a disinclination to accept any one principle of origin or order. In all its step-step-sidestep patterns, it encodes a dance of conflicting desires. It respects the past and yearns to break clear. It acknowledges authority, but loves the people in all their idiosyncrasy. It accepts Christopher Alexander as The Word, except maybe on weekdays. It embraces a Marine and then steps out with flowers in its hair.

It expresses a mood you might characterize, a little glibly, as post-Derridan, although there's no evidence here of the architecture of deconstruction. It embodies a premise that architecture is perennial discourse and commentary, an intricate Ptolemaic system of feedback cycles, always careful to undercut itself — a talk show, a dance of oppositions, rather than a march of progress. Everybody, it says in sum, got in on the act.

Sometimes the messages at Rumpelstiltskin are fictive. The idiosyncrasy, let's admit, can be more ostensible than real. But as the poet reminds us:

*The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.¹*

Note

1. Wallace Stevens, "Asides on the Oboe," from *Parts of a World* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1942).