



Sandra Morgen, Director, Center for the Study of Women in Society, p. 8.

Amazon Family Housing Threatened

Story by Alan Pittman
Photos by John Bauguess



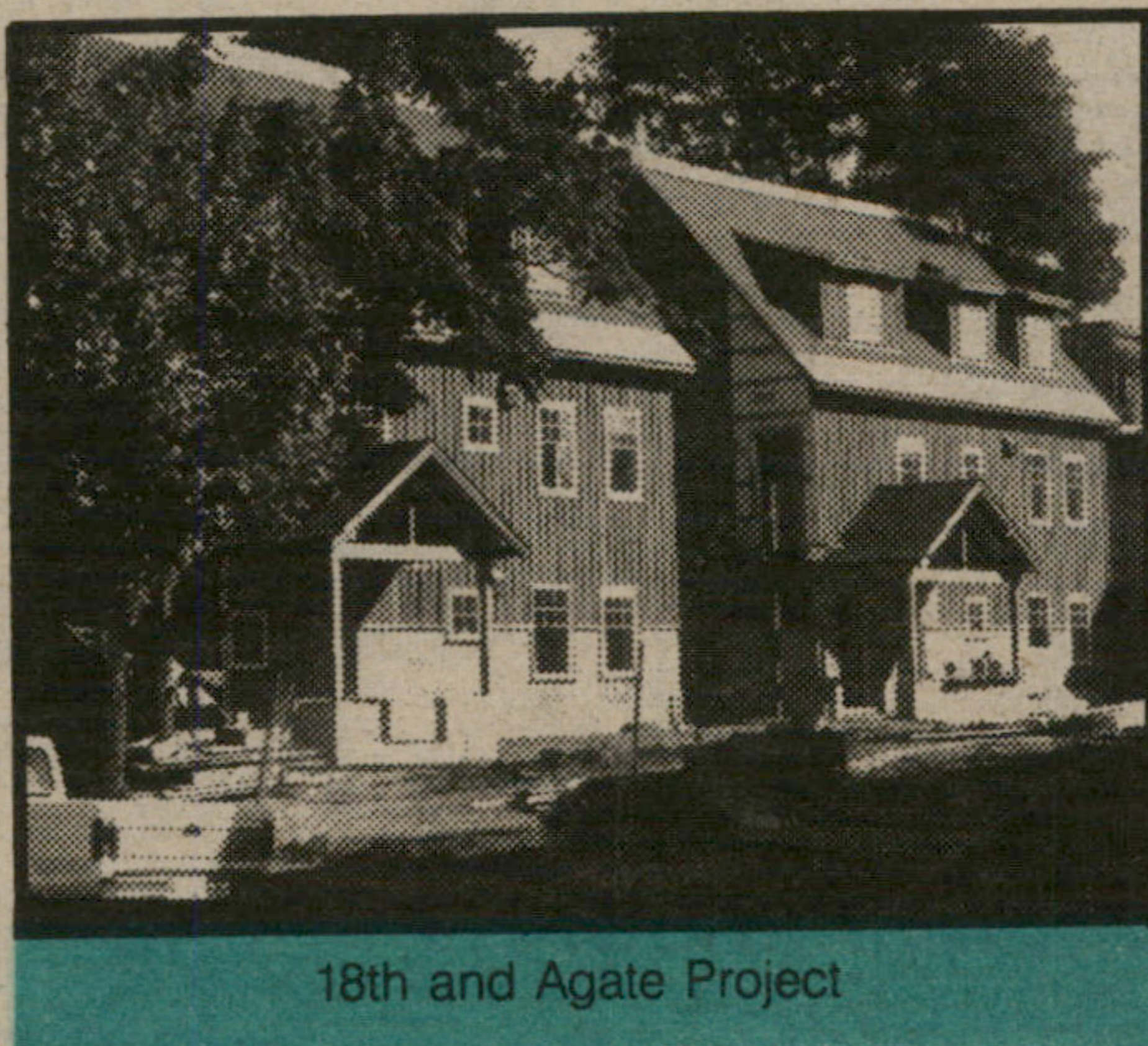
Students claim that both the university and its architect forgot about the whole point of the project—to provide affordable and livable housing so poor students with families could get an education.

Amazon tenant and single mother Olga Straight with her three children (from left), Patrick, Chris and Leslie.

Architect, UO Bicker

AMAZON FAMILY HOUSING TENANT Olga Straight, a single mother of three on food stamps, depends on an affordable place to live so she can finish her Germanic studies master's degree at the University of Oregon. But Straight and hundreds of other student families may be trampled in a brawl among university officials, politicians, and the architect the university hired to build affordable housing that has run way over budget and behind schedule.

The brawl boiled over last week with the announcement by the university that it was "reviewing the relationship" with architect Christopher Alexander. The UO hired the Berkeley, Calif. architect—renowned for his innovation and some say arrogance—to build new family housing at 18th and Agate and then to replace the aging Amazon housing complex at 24th and Patterson that's scheduled for demolition this spring. At deadline, although many sources viewed such a move as likely, the UO had not fired Alexander.



18th and Agate Project

"We recognize that the [Amazon] rental costs being discussed are too high," said UO spokesman John Crosiar in a terse official statement. Costs per square foot at the \$1.4 million, 20-unit Agate project have more than doubled, leading to two-bedroom rent projections of \$450-\$500 per month compared to \$175 at Amazon, university sources and documents revealed.

University Housing and Physical Plant officials blame an "egotistical" Alexander for sloppy, expensive plans that put the Agate project over budget and behind schedule despite their efforts to rein him in, according to interviews and documents. They would not like to duplicate the costly and frustrating Agate experience on a larger scale for the approximately 300-unit, \$20 million Amazon replacement.

Alexander and his firm blame the university for violating their contract and sabotaging the project with foot dragging, ineptness, costly extras and the manipulation of student opinion against them. Alexander said if fired he will sue. Complicating the debacle are pressure on the university from Sen. Bill Dwyer (D-

[continued on page 1]



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HOUSING / Alan Pittman

Amazon

[continued from cover]

Springfield) to build housing without delay and the involvement of state higher education officials brought in to mediate in the tangled, often abrasive dispute.

Who's right? The students, many of whom are now being evicted from Amazon and who live in and pay for family housing, say they are. They claim that both the university and its architect forgot about the whole point of the project—to provide affordable and livable housing so poor students with families could get an education.

Students will be left holding the bag for the costly mess in the end. Because housing is a "self-supporting" unit of the university, administrators will translate the wasteful project into higher student rents. If they fire Alexander, the department stands to lose more than \$100,000 in trashed designs and tens-of-thousands more in probable legal costs and settlements, sources said. Straight, who spends about half her salary as a graduate teaching fellow on rent, and other students on the edge will be hit hard by university and architect blunders.

With this year's 13 percent family housing rent increase, students have already begun to feel the pinch. Housing Director Mike Eyster describes the increase as "substantial, primarily due to the cost of the 18th and Agate project and [another, smaller project]" in an April 29 memo to the state Higher Education Department's representative on the project, George Pernsteiner.

Housing officials and UO engineers are mystified at why top university officials didn't fire Alexander long ago, documents and sources revealed.

Alex Gordon of the UO's Physical Plant directly oversees Alexander on the project. A June 20 document developed by Gordon lists 14 specific "architectural deficiencies" in recommending that the UO fire Alexander from the Agate project. "Continuing with the same architectural representation on the rebuilding of the Amazon complex will lead to poorly designed, expensive and nondurable construction," Gordon wrote, warning that the UO "will be exposed to unanticipated costs and claims as a result of architectural deficiencies."

Among the deficiencies, Gordon cites refusal by the architect to take direction from UO to enhance tenant safety or to make needed additions or delete items to save costs. Alexander failed to visit the site,



Amazon tenant Mari Ely Christie with three of her four children—(from left) Juan, Carlos and Mario.

respond quickly to requests for plan clarifications, meet city permit and handicapped access requirements, return calls or attend scheduled meetings. "The architect's fee of approximately \$300,000 (for direct construction cost of \$760,000) appears exorbitant to the University," the document charges.

A two-week construction delay in April, caused by inadequate plans for which the city refused to grant permits, resulted in wasted money and time. The project's completion date has slid from September to November at a considerable loss in rental income, according to university documents.

A"deeply chagrined" Pernsteiner wrote to Alexander May 12 describing the situation as "an extremely rare and serious occurrence" in building projects. "The owner [UO] will not tolerate further delays in its project caused by inadequate or unbuildable plans, inability to secure permits due to deficiencies in the plans, inadequate construction supervision by the architect, communication problems among the members of the architect's team, or the intransigence of the architect," Pernsteiner warned.

The architect has also long peeved university housing officials, according to documents. In a June 7 memo to UO officials involved in the project, Eyster describes Alexander's work as "shoddy, expensive, egotistical, and inadequate to meet the

needs of student renters." Alexander spent money on garage, courtyard and roof ornament frills while ignoring such basics as having more than one drawer in family kitchens. Cost overruns have forced Alexander to shrink units "to nearly laughable proportions" to stay within contracted costs. "The cost per square foot is over four times what was paid at Southern Oregon [housing project] and higher than even high quality upscale homes in the Eugene area," Eyster wrote. "We must prevent Christopher Alexander from having anything to do with Amazon Student Housing. . . ."

Alexander, on the other hand, says in a Sept. 14 letter to Pernsteiner that the delays and cost overruns he is blamed for are actually the fault of Housing and Physical Plant officials. "There is a combination of unreasonableness, ruthless disregard for common sense, and a bone-headed refusal to take advice from those who have more experience, shown by Alex Gordon and by members of the Housing office, which has predictably led the Agate project into fiscal chaos. . . ." Alexander blames cost overruns and delays on a "spending spree" by housing officials who lack experience with big construction projects.

Jack Viscardi, President of 2G Construction that contracted to build Agate, said the university isn't guilty of mismanagement. He did say he found the architect's firm "set

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Amazon tenant-activist Nancy Forrest with her husband Daljeer Ollek and son Bayunt.

in their ways" and "very, very slow in responding" to builder questions.

Alexander and his subordinate David Edrington, a partner with the local architecture firm Thallon & Edrington, said the designs may cost more but will save money in the long run in maintenance, life span and energy efficiency. The architects closely followed the cost parameters set for the project by the UO, which agreed the quality savings approach was the way to go when it signed the contract, they said.

The student user group set up to help the architect determine what the [Amazon] tenants needed was disbanded in spring 1992 after Alexander cursed at students who suggested his designs were too expensive and lacked livability....

Out of the loop but left holding the bag, students blame both the architect and top UO officials for the debacle.

Alexander, whose innovative theories on user-participation in design were adopted as the University Master Plan in the 1970s, ignored student input for affordable, community-oriented housing, students said. The student user group set up to help the architect determine what the tenants needed was disbanded in spring 1992 after Alexander cursed at students who suggested his designs were too expensive and lacked livability, Amazon tenant Jim Fisher and other group members said. Fisher said Alexander never intended to listen to students. "It's been a farce from the very beginning," he said.

Alexander said he did respond to "obscenities" from Fisher and other students with "mild" swearing on one occasion.

Student activists "are more concerned with hanging on to a cushy situation" of low Amazon rents than durable housing, he said. Student opinion had been manipulated by UO officials out to "demonize" him with selective leaks of information to the press and students. They did this, Alexander said, "because they know they are going to be hammered in court."

On the university's part, "We've got some pretty gross mismanagement going on," said Amazon tenant's council activist Nancy Forrest. UO President Myles Brand and head of administration Dan Williams should have never agreed to hire such a high-priced, experimental architect, should have controlled his costs after they did, or should have dumped him long ago in favor of a cheaper alternative, Fisher and Forrest said.

Tenants question the need to tear down all of the close-knit Amazon community where a two-bedroom unit costs \$175/month.

An engineering study of the complex—made of surplus-WWII temporary housing that was relocated—concluded that maintenance and safety problems would make the complex too expensive to keep up by 1996. But tenant Bruce Gibbons, a licensed builder who described the study as rushed and self-serving, said many of the one-story units at the complex remain serviceable. The university should save money and student rents by tearing down and replacing only those units that need to be, Gibbons and others argued. Sen. Dwyer, who favored building on a vacant site rather than displacing tenants, said he might support such a partial rebuild as a temporary solution.

Although housing director Eyster has argued publicly that Amazon is now beyond repair, he argued a proposal similar to the tenants' idea in a June 8 memo to his boss Dan Williams. Eyster wrote, "Our only option now is to maintain Amazon as best we can for an indefinite period of time (5-10 years)..." Confronted with his writ-

ten statement, Eyster said ongoing cost reductions at Agate will now make Amazon replacement possible.

But Fisher, Forrest and other tenants say Brand and Williams just don't want to see their type of people and dilapidated housing at their university. The UO administration doesn't want true affordable housing "for the same reason that people don't want low income housing in their backyard," Fisher charged.

"We recognize that the [Amazon] rental costs being discussed are too high," said UO spokesman John Crosiar in a terse official statement.

Why has this wasteful debacle gone on so long? Lawsuits and politics may be the answer.

Because of the unfavorable contract negotiated with Alexander, the UO could very well lose an expensive lawsuit, sources and documents revealed.

In a June 1 memo to Pernsteiner, Assistant Attorney General James Casby warned, "Our biggest risk in litigation from the architect is that the weakness and uncertainties of our contract with the architect will be held against us and not the architect."

Sen. Dwyer has long blamed UO students for driving up rents for his Springfield constituents. The UO should build more of its own low income housing to take the pressure off the rental market, he said. In 1989 Dwyer helped pass a bill that authorized \$11 million in bonds for the university to do just that. Critics within the UO's physical plant say he has been micromanaging the project ever since.

In numerous letters, calls and meetings over the life of the project, Dwyer has often taken the side of the architect and criticized the university for "a pattern of obstruction and foot dragging" on affordable housing.

Dwyer accuses UO administrators of being in cahoots with local landlords to maintain high rental prices. "They [landlords] give to the Athletic Department; they give," he said. But Dwyer said the charge was based on a "gut feeling," not actual evidence.

Dwyer's membership on the powerful Senate Ways and Means Committee, which decides the tenuous state higher education and UO budgets, could enable him to exert strong pressure. Last session, Dwyer said he was instrumental in securing \$50,000 in lottery funding for the UO Museum of Art; \$18 million in bonding authority for higher education; and \$300,000 in lottery funding for the UO International College, a favorite project of President Brand. In an August 3 letter to Pernsteiner, Dwyer said Brand made a "personal commitment" to him in a January 29 meeting to proceed without delay on the housing projects. Brand and Williams did not return calls requesting comment.

But Dwyer said he works hard for the university and dismissed assertions that he would use the budget to exert pressure as "a bunch of garbage. . . . I don't ever tie these things together."

But with much of the rest of the Eugene legislative delegation apparently rallying behind the university, Rep. Carl Hosticka, D-Eugene, who is employed as a UO administrator and professor, said Dwyer will have to back down.

"The university now has the option to do what they want to do," Hosticka said.

With the Amazon home for her and her three children scheduled for demolition this spring, Olga Straight hopes what the university will want to do now is really provide affordable housing. □

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