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 arricite 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 long-term 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 discredit them. And, to be open to whatever other messages might hang in the air, as one might pick up a barely audible scream for help beneath the noisy jangling 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 Shellenberger — I had long assumed the University had turned
A characteristic “Knight’s
nook” 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 Rumpelnstiltskin.

The "Manual" annouces 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,
titling them "Pedestrian Screech" to "Department Hearn."

Testing Rumpelnstiltskin against these 24 patterns is proba-
bly as good a way as any to determine if it's truly Alexandrine.
Right away, it turns out, it hanks number one.

This pattern, called "Open University," tells us: "When a
University is built up as a campus separated by a hard bound-
ary from the town, it tends to isolate its students from the
townspeople, and in a subtle way takes on the character of a
fortified high school." Therefore, "the boundary of the uni-
versity 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. Rumpelnstiltskin 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 aerial
with a strip of service yard. Generously grade it "D."

"Site Repair": ("Buildings must always be built on these
parts of the land which are in the worst condition, not the
best.") Nestled among existing buildings, roads and park-
ing lots, all of which it helps to integrate and conceal,
Rumpelnstiltskin gets an "A-plus" for "Site Repair."

"Activity Nodes": ("Create nodes of activity throughout
the community, spread about 200 yards apart... At the center,
makes a small public squares and surround it with a combina-
tion of community facilities and shops...") The 300-yard
gauge allows for only one node here, and Rumpelnstiltskin pos-
sesses 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 Complexes": ("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.
Rumpelnstiltskin certainly breaks down into the smaller parts,
but it is seldom clear what they are supposed to be manifest-
ing. 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 Rumpelnstiltskin 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 Rumpelnstiltskin makes one serious misstep.
Rumpelnstiltskin 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 unity 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 con-
crete, it is colored unevenly, as if it had aged over time. On
it are inscribed mysterious patterns — radial, snake-like patterns
— that seem to be the runes and cipher left behind by an
earlier civilization. We cannot help knowing that these ghostly
decorations are not, in fact, the work of native American
Duids, 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, but of the imperfect Romanian 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.
Rumpelnstiltskin 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 admir-
ers, by a formal representation of that world? Everything
turns into art so quickly in our era.

Having nursed that particular worry, should turn to a
recital of pleasures. The great atrium is a truly amazing space,
a beguiling festival of architectural metaphor. The corner stair
recalls piazzas like Todi's, but the pattern impressed on its
concrete is that of the cobbled 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 stone sculptures, exfoli-
ating from the tops of piers like suddenly fertilized Corinthian

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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 "ploures" 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 eaves and big soundholes that express an internally generated power. Rumpelstiltskin simply reaches out and gathers them into the family, like Matisse 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 Alvey Wingswall, 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 jut against each other, 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 rosemary, 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 Kroeger 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 rain 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 robin, the fox tree, 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 distillation to accept any one principle of origin or order. In all its step-step-side-step patterns, it enunciates a dance of conflicting desires. It respects the past and passion to break loose. 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-Derrida, although there's no evidence here of the architecture of deconstruction. It embodies a premise that architecture is perennial discourse and commentary, an intricate poesematic 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 sustained than real. But as the poet reminds us:

"The precepts 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