

Billionaire executive Charlie Munger proposes windowless dormitory for 4,500 students at UC Santa Barbara

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The University of California, Santa Barbara, has unveiled plans for “Munger Hall,” a dormitory for more than 4,500 students, designed by Charles T. Munger, a billionaire and executive at Berkshire Hathaway. The design has been denounced by architect Dennis McFadden, who served as a consultant on the university’s design review committee. McFadden resigned in protest of the building.

In his letter from October 24, McFadden wrote to the chairwomen of the committee that the building design constituted a “social and psychological experiment.” He continued, “In the nearly 15 years I served as a consulting architect to the DRC, no project was brought before the committee that is larger, more transformational and potentially more destructive to the campus as a place than Munger Hall.”

“The basic concept of Munger Hall,” he wrote, “as a place for students to live is unsupportable from my perspective as an architect, a parent and a human being.”

McFadden also wrote how he was “disturbed” by Munger’s design to house the students into a 1.7 million-square-foot, 11-story building with the vast majority living in small, windowless rooms, “wholly dependent on artificial light and mechanical ventilation.”

University administrators have since said that the design and the project are moving forward “as planned.”

Projected to cost \$1.5 billion and scheduled to open in 2025, Munger Hall will be the world’s densest dormitory and the eighth densest neighborhood in the world, behind a district in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Although the dorm will be located next to the Santa Barbara coast, the vast majority of its residents will be unable to see it.

Munger, the 97-year-old vice chairman of the investment fund Berkshire Hathaway, has been described as Warren Buffett’s righthand man. He endowed \$200

million to the UC campus on the condition that he designed the housing plan himself, despite having no formal architectural qualifications.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Munger said, “I’m not a bit surprised that someone looked at it and said, ‘What the hell is going on here?’ What’s going on here is that it’s going to work better than any other practical alternative.”

As for the windowless dorms, Munger said that they would have “virtual windows” that use LED lights to replicate natural light. Without a shred of irony he said, “If you want it romantic and dim, you can make it romantic and dim ... When in your life have you been able to change the sun? In this dorm, you can.”

“It’s a pretty cheerful place,” he added, “these little bedrooms.”

McFadden wrote in his letter that a building’s access to natural light and nature were essential to improving a person’s physical and mental health. “The Munger Hall ignores this evidence and seems to take the position that it doesn’t matter.”

He also noted that the university was hell-bent on approving the project to satisfy its billionaire donor: “It was clear the (design review committee) was a mere formality ... The design was 100 percent complete, approval was not requested, no vote was taken and no further submittals are intended or required.”

Many students have spoken out against the plan, with one comparing the bedrooms to “solitary confinement.” Another wrote, “You are asking for students to get depression and commit self-harm,” adding, “Strongly reconsider this entire plan.”

Paul Golderberger, architecture critic for *The New Yorker*, wrote on Twitter, “This design is a grotesque, sick joke—a jail masquerading as dormitory,” adding,

“No, design isn’t up to billionaire donors.”

Other online commenters called the dorm plans “barbaric” and an incubator for COVID-19, with some even comparing it to the panopticon, the 18th-century concept for a prison where the inmates guarded themselves after being under constant surveillance from a central tower.

Munger’s plans will have two single-occupancy bathrooms, meaning one toilet and shower, for every eight bedrooms. While Munger acknowledged that he may die before the project is completed he was confident that “it will be widely regarded as the best in the world.”

Munger Hall has had other precedents, including the Munger graduate housing, a 630-student dorm at the University of Michigan that opened in 2015.

An online forum of students there noted, “It was terrible ... too many roommates (meant) no cohesion or standards. The lack of windows was depressing. Munger is about as out of touch as billionaires come.”

Another student wrote that “lack of windows messed up one of my roommates really badly with school and mental health and well-being.” There was “no sense of time if you’re just in your room with no natural light.” Another wrote, “unfortunately the floor plans at UCSB look far worse than what we have here.”

Thousands of people have already signed a petition to cancel the UCSB project and it could be the spark for renewed student protests at the school. All across the country, the lack of decent, affordable housing has seen many students and their supporters demanding change.

At Virginia Commonwealth University, 400 students at a dormitory in Johnson Hall were told to move after dangerous levels of mold were discovered. Some students had already begun feeling ill in October but have only now been told it was unsafe to live there. Many students were left with no alternative source of housing.



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