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The youth shall lead them

A Zoom forum on land use and development is not generally the sort of thing I'd recommend for anyone in search of gripping screen time. But [a presentation](#) this week led by students at UC **Santa Barbara** was not only informative; it was also something to revel in.

The topic at hand? **Munger Hall**, a.k.a. "**Dormzilla**," the warehouse-sized dormitory proposed (and designed) by billionaire non-architect **Charlie Munger** — a building whose primary architectural feature consists of sleeping rooms that lack windows and therefore access to fresh air and natural light. In lieu of windows, his concept features LED lights — "virtual windows" — that can be adjusted to mimic daylight patterns. As I have previously reported, the proposal flies in the face of [years of research](#) on the importance of having access to natural daylight in architecture.

Munger Hall generated a media uproar last year after architect **Dennis McFadden** resigned from UCSB's **design review committee** [in protest](#), noting that Munger's design was "unsupportable from my perspective as an architect, a parent and a human being" and that its implementation was steamrolling the university's customary design processes.

Largely left out of the process were students — the very people who would have to inhabit what is essentially the human version of **Public Storage**.

No longer.

On Wednesday evening, a class of environmental studies students led by lecturer **Rita Bright**, who manages the city of **Carpinteria's advanced planning division**, staged a public forum at UCSB that schooled university administrators on what a professional planning process looks like.

Working together, the 43 students analyzed UCSB's **Long Range Development Plan**; a host of environmental and zoning restrictions, including California's **Coastal Act** (which governs part of the university's land); as well as the Munger proposal. In response, they drafted their own **student alternative master plan** — one that met a dozen objectives, including housing 50% of the university's student population and maintaining the aesthetic feel of the campus.

Object No. 7: "Provide fundamental quality of life standards for campus housing, which includes *natural ventilation and light in every bedroom and living room and common space.*" (Italics mine.)

The students then presented their alternative plan at a community forum held at the university's **Campbell Hall** that was streamed online. Members of the community were invited to provide public comment.

Among the specific recommendations listed in the student plan were:

- **Build at a smaller scale** at the site of the proposed Munger building, currently a facilities maintenance site.
- Build on land currently being occupied by **surface parking** (Lot 16), conveniently located near preexisting transportation and other infrastructure.
- Expand dorms on the southeastern edge of campus by building **three-story towers** over preexisting one-story dining halls.
- **Expand and/or replace low-density structures**, starting with a block of older apartments that are currently in need of renovations and upgrades.

The plan adds anywhere from **3,731 to 6,573 beds** to the campus — in the ballpark of Munger Hall, which adds **4,536**.

In addition, as the students pointed out in their presentation, their proposal adheres to codes established by **UCSB's Long Range Development Plan** and the **Coastal Act**. The Munger Hall proposal, on the other hand, will require various amendments to the long-range plan, as well as approval from the **Coastal Commission** because the site intrudes onto a buffer zone for sensitive wetland habitat.

As part of her presentation, student **Audrey Lucio** read from the university's stated **sustainability guidelines** as listed in the development plan. These include: "Create superior places to study, work and live that enhance the health and performance of building occupants."

The kids have got *receipts*.

Also invited to the forum was professor emeritus **Gene Lucas**, who represented the university's — and therefore Munger's — position.

He noted that Munger Hall would provide critical housing infrastructure at a time when a university housing crunch had left students sleeping in [hotel rooms and even their vehicles](#). Lucas encouraged students to check out **a mockup** of the Munger Hall dormitory that just became available for viewing on campus, noting that students tend to feel more favorably toward the project once they have seen the prototype. (A spokesperson for UCSB said that the mockup was currently only open to students, faculty and staff.)

He also stated that the term “windowless dormitory” was technically incorrect, since Munger Hall would have 972 operable windows — just not in the vast majority of the sleeping areas. (If he wants to get into semantics, I would argue that he drop the term “virtual windows,” since the very definition of a window is an opening that admits light and air, while a “virtual window” is an LED light.)

Lucas also stated that if “major revisions” were required of Munger’s plan, he’s “not sure that the donor is going to be interested in providing a contribution.”

More semantics: Munger is no donor. He’s holding the university hostage.

Munger Hall is a bad idea for a host of reasons that have been articulated ad nauseam since the design was first unveiled. But it is especially terrible for the precedents it would set.

“If the leading public university of the most progressive state in the U.S. enthusiastically endorses the idea of putting thousands of its students in windowless rooms, who will lose windows next in the name of density and efficiency?” wrote architect **Juan Miró**, chair of **UT Austin’s School of Architecture**, in [an impassioned essay](#) published in **ArchDaily** in January. “Other students? Prisoners? Refugees? Low income and relocated homeless populations? Seniors? Immigrants?”

A university building isn’t just a building — it’s a structure that offers generations of students a model for ways in which to think about, inhabit and build new worlds. It should be a model worth replicating. And it should — at the very least — attempt to embody the university’s own stated ideals.

As student **Megan Musolf** stated wryly at the top of the presentation: “Our university’s motto is *fiat lux* — let there be light.”

Too bad the administration is sitting in darkness.