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The hidden power of campus architecture

by Hayden BuckfireSeptember 14, 2026



Holly Burkhart

In 2013, the University of Michigan announced the development of the \$110 million Munger Graduate Residences, funded entirely by

alum Charles Munger. Munger, the late vice chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, made his donation under the condition that he, not a trained architect, design it.

The plans garnered controversy almost immediately. Students bemoaned the lack of natural light in nearly all of the dorm's bedrooms, and residents complained that Munger's emphasis on communal-style living was ill-suited for graduate living. Still, the University went ahead with the project, and the dorm opened in 2015; as anticipated, the windowless rooms elicited complaints. Nearly a decade later, a study by University researchers found that Munger residents suffered from decreased mental well-being. Despite these shortcomings, the building likely isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

University buildings have lasting impacts on students and campus culture at large. Some older buildings, like the Michigan Union and the Hatcher Graduate Library, are still popular among students. Others, like the Modern Languages Building and Mary Markley Residence Hall, are outdated remnants of their time. Most students could tell you whether they like a building, but few stop to consider how much that building is shaping them: their mood, their habits, who they run into and when.

Albert Kahn and Eero Saarinen, two of the 20th century's visionary architects, planned much of the University's campus. Kahn, whose firm designed Hatcher Library, Hill Auditorium, Burton Memorial Tower and many other University buildings, is best known for his industrial buildings in Metro Detroit. Accordingly, Kahn envisioned the University as a "factory of education" and combined his industrial sensibilities with historical references to

create a timeless architectural foundation for a rapidly growing student body.



University of Michigan's Hill Auditorium, designed by Albert Kahn.

Saarinen designed the first master plan for North Campus. He believed that architecture should shape and strengthen communities with humanistic ideals, not just reflect them. In other words, both architects viewed buildings as active participants in university life, not passive areas for classrooms and offices.

Saarinen's ideals are now backed by newer research that shows architectural spaces can influence emotion, cognition and behavior. For example, a 2017 study found that green spaces significantly improve the mental health of local populations.

Further research found that large windows and natural light also contribute to better mental well-being.

Whether you view Kahn's grand Angell Hall or the sprawling School of Dentistry as architectural masterpieces or concrete monoliths, they shape our college experiences every single day. Even in newer campus buildings, intentional choices — and unintentional consequences — dictate our daily routines.



Albert Kahn's Angell Hall.

The Ross School of Business's \$280 million campus — fully completed in 2018 — drew mixed responses from the community over its aesthetic appeal. Its orange terra-cotta exterior and teal windows combine a modernist approach

with the University's timeless look. Regardless of what one thinks of its exterior appearance, the building is almost always full. The Davidson Winter Garden, with its open spaces and tables designed for group projects, has become one of the University's busiest gathering spaces, which suggests the architects succeeded in designing spaces students actually want to use.

Meanwhile, the Central Campus Classroom Building, another nine-figure project completed in 2022, has some obvious design issues. The long, narrow main hallway crowds in between lectures when class ends in the 572-seat first-floor lecture hall, the largest on campus. Adding to the difficulty is that there are only two main exits to leave the auditorium. Even as it boasts modern facilities and great views of North University Avenue and Church Street, I've found it to be one of the least popular study spots on campus.

The comparison illustrates that successful architecture is measured less by appearances than by how people actually use a space. The Diag itself demonstrates this principle. Its open design funnels thousands of students together each day, making chance conversations, student demonstrations and Festifall almost inevitable. Had it been designed differently, campus culture might look very different.

Just as 20th-century University leadership leaned on Kahn and Saarinen to build a campus suited for the 20th century, today's leaders are charting the layout of the next one. In late 2024, the University, then led by President Santa Ono, unveiled Campus Plan 2050, a blueprint for the University's next 25 years of spatial development.



Earl V. Moore Building designed by Eero Saarinen.

The plan outlines sweeping changes, including the possible development of the Stephen M. Ross Athletic Campus, demolition of Markley Hall and a monorail connecting North Campus and the Hill to the Central Campus Transit Center. The monorail would likely pass over Nichols Arboretum, more than a century-old 123-acre park. These decisions will determine which aspects of campus will be inherited by the next generation, and which will disappear.

While a 2050 timeline may seem like a distant future right now, the University's groundwork will soon cascade into tangible change. It is arguably the most important action the University is taking at the moment.

The buildings and spaces created under Campus 2050 will shape how generations of students learn, collaborate and experience the University long after today's administrators have moved on. That

makes today's decisions consequential. If the University hopes to leave the next generation a campus as enduring as the one Kahn and Saarinen helped create, it will need a new unifying vision that recognizes the power of architecture on students.

Hayden Buckfire is an Opinion Columnist who writes about American politics and culture. He can be reached at haybuck@umich.edu.

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