Formation and Foundation

The University of California at San Diego (UCSD) is one of 10 campuses that comprise the University of California. The original campus was founded in 1873 as the College of California in Berkeley, California. As the population of the country, especially California, boomed, new branches were created to meet the educational needs of the population. Some new campuses were established at existing places of learning to target the specific niche of agricultural research, oceanography, or other practices based on the college’s geographical setting. In the years following World War II, three new campuses were founded in areas with a great amount of growth: Santa Cruz, Irvine, and San Diego.

The San Diego campus had its roots in the Scripps Institution of Oceanography (SIO), which was founded in San Diego in 1903, and has been in its present location in La Jolla since 1907. In 1912, SIO became a part of the University of California, acting as its hub of oceanographic studies. Initially, the emphasis of study was on graduate work, with undergraduate education coming at a later time. In 1959, when the Regents of the University of California approved a plan for a new San Diego campus, the administration of SIO were influential in determining its location nearby.

When UCSD was founded in 1960, Clark Kerr was the president of the University of California and head of the Board of Regents, which is the main administrative body of the University system. He had previously been the chancellor at Berkeley but in his role as President, had much impact upon the development of the new campuses. Herbert York was appointed the founding chancellor for UCSD in 1960, to the great surprise of many who had expected Roger Revelle, Director of SIO, to take this role. York was an outsider who would bring new ideas to the campus planning process, while Revelle had done much to influence the growth of the campus in previous years. York was instrumental in crucial decisions of the early 1960s but resigned his post in December of 1963 to return to the East Coast. In his place, Kerr appointed a dual chancellorship: John Galbraith, a former history professor at UCLA as Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, and Bob Biron, an established San Diego businessman as head of General Dynamics, as the Vice Chancellor of Business Affairs.
and Finance. Revelle was again considered, but instead he left San Diego for Harvard to start its Center for Population Studies. Galbraith and Biron would be present during the primary planning years for John Muir College, although Galbraith resigned soon thereafter in 1968.

At the time of the founding of UCSD, La Jolla looked quite different than its present appearance. The community of La Jolla was characterized by insular neighborhoods, undeveloped remnant pueblo land, military bases, and agriculture. When the new location for the University of California was chosen for the San Diego region, many questioned La Jolla as an appropriate choice, as universities were known to have a wide impact upon surrounding communities. Some welcomed this as needed augmentation for San Diego’s cultural and intellectual offerings, while others feared the worst-case scenario of unruly college students and undesired diversity.

The UCSD campus was to be located upon the Torrey Pines Mesa, north of La Jolla, overlooking the Pacific Ocean and amid the eucalyptus groves that had been planted around the turn of the century when it was the municipal farm. The land was not officially acquired, however, until after UCSD was able to assemble the land from various military installations in the area: Camp Matthews, Camp Elliot, and portions of Camp Callan. The 456 acres of Camp Matthews, to the Northeast, was acquired after a bill of transfer passed through the federal House and Senate and was signed by President Kennedy in September 1962. The official deed was not granted until October 1964 – one month after the first class had already matriculated. Camp Elliot,
which was a surplus site handled by the General Services Administration, was granted to UCSD in 1965 as a potential site for experimental engineering.\(^4\)

While the first few UCSD classes set up in facilities at SIO and the adjacent Camp Matthews military base, plans continued for the long-term academic and building plan for the San Diego campus. The planning approach for the campus was a series of small colleges, clustered to form a larger university to accommodate many future students. These small, more intimate colleges would each focus on a distinct curriculum, with each college having approximately 2,700 students, and classrooms, residence halls, and faculty offices all in close proximity. Key recreational and research facilities to serve entire campus needs would be provided in a central location, but the emphasis of student life and learning would be in the home college. This was a fresh model for campus design that was only beginning to be studied on other campuses in the United States, and the planners of UCSD heralded it as a pioneering design.

The Regents of the University of California hired architect Robert E. Alexander of Los Angeles to complete the long range masterplan for the University. This Long Range Development Plan (LRDP), released in 1963, was an outline for the administrative and academic structure and also projected population outgrowth of the college. The document established the overarching tenets that would guide the academic organization and curriculum design of the University. It called for 12 semi-autonomous colleges, each with 2,300 students. The smaller colleges would contain classrooms, faculty offices, residences, and dining facilities. The larger campus resources, such as a gymnasium and library, would be located at a university-wide campus center.\(^5\)

The LRDP included a physical masterplan for the San Diego campus as well, incorporating the 12 colleges into a future comprehensive development plan. The 12 colleges would be formed into 3 clusters, each with 4 colleges and its own central gathering space. These clusters were all centered around a formal pedestrian promenade that extended through the campus. This promenade was about one mile in length, placed along the ridge formerly occupied by Highway...
101, which was moved westward to what is now North Torrey Pines Road. The most striking aspect of the masterplan was the series of “spires” that were to be located in the central gathering spaces. The main spire would be the largest, at 250 feet, marking the main center of campus, with three smaller spires at each of the cluster centers. The main center was to occur at the intersection of the grand pedestrian promenade that extended north-south, and a secondary one that ran perpendicular to this. An aerial tram, a rapid transit station, fountains, and a water reclamation facility were also included. The plan noted that each college was to have its own distinct character and consistent building form. The suggested forms for the colleges were the tower type, the cube type, open type, and the cloister type, based on the scale and orientation of the buildings. An executive architect would be assigned to each college to ensure that a cohesive character was achieved.

From the outset, the 1963 plan highlighted and incorporated features that would distinguish the San Diego campus and achieve the small college feel. The topography, natural elements, proximity to the ocean, close clustering of buildings, and pedestrian supremacy were key principles that defined the shape of the plan. The University was tied together by powerful features like the north-south and also east-west promenades but the college units were to maintain intimacy. This was achieved by clustering the buildings close together and locating the classrooms, faculty offices, residences, and dining facilities within the colleges. The Alexander masterplan laid out the principles that were to be achieved through the detailed design and growth of the college. It was a form and massing diagram for the executive architects and building designers to consult as the individual colleges were founded and designed. Establishing the four “types” of building form was a means of preventing too much variation among the building typologies and styles chosen for the individual colleges.

Unlike the building plan for the campus, the landscape plan was intended to be consistent throughout, as a means to unify the distinctive colleges. Wimmer & Yamada Landscape Architects, ASLA, of San Diego were hired to do the landscape plan alongside Robert Alexander. Their plan featured continuity of walks, courtyards, and paving treatments, which used materials and plants that evoked the natural environment of the La Jolla surroundings. An informal landscape treatment and soft edges were to be achieved across the entire campus as a unifying element and also a counterbalance to the axial nature of the Alexander masterplan. The plant palette was muted and minimalist, incorporating Torrey Pines and other local plants, and maintaining a large selection of the eucalyptus trees.

Revelle College, named for the former director of SIO of Oceanography, Roger Revelle, was the first college to accept students at UCSD. It began as the school of Science and Engineering.
buildings of Revelle College were partly constructed before the entire campus masterplan for UCSD had been completed. Revelle College was intended to take the “open” type of building arrangement, according to the Alexander plan, but because buildings had already been completed, they were not planned to produce the same level of architectural cohesiveness as the remaining colleges. The Revelle campus played an important role as a primary meeting space for students in the early years of UCSD.

Second College was planned beginning in 1963 and was slated to open in 1967. It was intended to be the college for Mathematics, Applied Electrophysics, Linguistics, Anthropology, Psychology, Fine Arts, Philosophy, and Literature. John L. Stewart, formerly of Dartmouth College, was appointed as the founding provost in 1965 and had great input into the design of the character of the college. Upon his arrival, which was during the planning process, the college’s curriculum and faculty were still being formed, but the buildings and physical plan had already been established. Alexander’s plan for Second College included seven buildings of “tower” form facing a large internal plaza. The massing plan showed three buildings on either side of a central plaza, with a single tower building on the eastern edge. It was to be located north of Revelle College and just south of the campus center.

**A New Approach for Second College**

When John Stewart arrived in San Diego in 1964, much of the physical plan for Second College was underway according to Robert Alexander’s concept. The architecture had not been developed beyond basic massing studies. Several local architects had already been appointed for the detailed design development of the campus buildings.

Stewart, however, had strong feelings about how buildings impacted student experience and their ability to learn most effectively, both intellectually and personally. He felt that these notions had not been thoroughly considered up to that point in the conceptual design for the buildings of Second College. In fact, he felt quite the opposite. Describing the current plan in a letter from February 1965 to Dr. Carl Eckhart, the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs at the time, he stated:
I do not feel that the style, siting, size, uniformity, and interrelations of the buildings of the Second College do all that can be done for the total learning process and the sense of community of the students—graduate as well as undergraduate. I have no doubt that in many respects the designs represent highly efficient solutions to complicated problems, but to me they give the impression of compressed, cubical machines, conceived too much for the convenience of grown-ups who do not have to live in or near them, and intended for the depersonalized processing of raw material with well-engineered dies.  

Robert Mosher, of the San Diego architecture firm Mosher and Drew, had been commissioned as the architect for Building 2A (Applied Physics & Mathematics). Although he was hired to do only a single building, he also was dissatisfied with the Alexander’s masterplan. He viewed the plan and the architecture as reminiscent of societies that stifled political and personal freedom. This was counter to the fostering of individuality and learning that was desired in the UCSD college experience. Also, from an architectural standpoint, the identical building forms proposed by Alexander did not allow for adequate variation that was intended to serve a variety of different purposes—the antithesis of a key tenet of Modernism. In the opinion of Mosher, the Alexander plan contradicted basic principles of Modernism including form follows function and the desire to create human scaled environments.

Stewart and Mosher were in agreement that the Alexander plan for Second College was too formal and rigid a plan to further the ideals of the intimate college
experience that was desired for the campus. Furthermore, student unrest had recently become a major issue on college campuses throughout the country, mostly driven by political dissatisfaction and the Free Speech Movement. Many colleges feared the volatility of student populations and took measures to discourage uprisings. As it stood, Stewart and Mosher were in agreement that the uniform building masses suggested in the Alexander plan might have further aggravated student dissatisfaction. In light of this social climate, they agreed that letting this plan take shape would be a mistake and called upon Chancellor John Galbraith to help them devise a solution.

This solution came as the result of a retreat in early 1965 at Warner Hot Springs. The intention of the meeting was to assemble the architects and administrators involved in the planning of Second College to discuss the current plan and perhaps devise a new, more humanistic scheme for the masterplan. The retreat accomplished its goal. As a result, Robert Mosher took over master planning for Second College. Robert Alexander eventually resigned from his role of master planner for the UCSD campus and was replaced by A. Quincy Jones of Los Angeles as consulting architect.

Quite soon after its release, it was apparent that the initial masterplan for the campus would need adjustment. The central library (now Geisel Library) was a divisive issue. William L. Pereira, the architect of the central library, insisted on siting the building near the geographic center of the campus, not at the proposed campus center, which occurred close to the western edge, and the heart of the grand promenades. The campus administration accepted Pereira’s desire rather than adhere to the masterplan. Additionally, plans were underway to build a visual and performing arts center (now Mandeville Center) between Revelle and Muir Colleges; this would interrupt Alexander’s promenades, which were the plan’s backbone element. This combination broke down the essence of the initial masterplan, which was an offence to its creator. The question remains whether the reason for Alexander’s exit was due to the new design for Muir College, decided at the Warner Hot Springs meeting, or because of the disintegration of his plan due to the library siting. His exit, however, required the hiring of a new consulting architect and a revised masterplan for the entire University. The 1966 Revised Masterplan by A. Quincy Jones incorporated the medical school, the repositioned library, the removal of the promenades, and an overall “looser,” more naturalistic design. The plan notably retained the cluster college model and the cohesive architectural style to be retained within each of the colleges. Throughout this tumultuous period in the early planning of the college, the commitment of John Stewart and Robert Mosher guaranteed that Muir College in particular would be designed with the utmost sensitivity to the human experience.
Design of Muir College

As planning continued at Second College, the architects and administrators referred to “the spirit of Warner Hot Springs” as the guiding force on the small college.17 Throughout 1965, Mosher and the campus architects assembled the team to complete the buildings for Second College. Weekly meetings ensured coordination of the team of architects which consisted of:

- Robert Mosher, Mosher & Drew, Building 2A, 2A' (1966)
- Liebhardt & Weston, Building 2B (1968), (Natatorium, Gymnasium)
- Frank L. Hope & Associates, Building 2C, 2C' (1967)
- Richard G. Wheeler and Associates, Building 2D (1968)

The Muir College architects were all among the top architects and firms practicing in San Diego at the time. Not unlike any profession or architects practicing today, these men were all competitors, and had different ideas, styles, and visions for their buildings. The firms of Hope and Wheeler each had large staffs and were responsible for many of the largest commissions being built in San Diego at the time, including banks, federal buildings, and corporate headquarters. Mosher and his partner Roy Drew, had a smaller firm with a full repertoire of Modernist residences, schools, and offices around San Diego County. Liebhardt & Weston had also done extensive residential design, yet were also involved in larger institutional commissions in the region, including projects at SIO. Dale Naegle at the time had done mostly residential projects, but had built a widely respected reputation by the time of the assemblage of Muir College's design team.18

It was a project full of challenges and unpredictability. As executive architect for Second College, Robert Mosher had the responsibility of coordinating an architectural vocabulary and site plan that would unite the buildings of Second College, as well as keeping the various architects working towards the goal for the intended campus atmosphere. The form and program of the buildings had already been set several years prior, but much was left to be determined. In choosing the form of the campus and the exterior design themes of the buildings, Mosher employed principles of Modernism and
humanism in architecture, in addition to deciding upon precise details to achieve the desired psychological response to the outdoor spaces.

At the Warner Hot Springs gathering, Mosher had characterized the public spaces envisioned by Alexander as counter to humanistic principles. Instead, he hoped to create “humanistic spaces” that could allow for variations in experience and facilitate intimacy within the student populace. As inspiration, he cited public plazas in Europe, particularly those in Venice, in which one entered into a public square with an element of surprise. A distinctive type of spatial intimacy could be achieved by the constriction of these tight spaces. He pointed to the progression of passing through small plazas, into narrow streets that broke into larger public plazas, which were typical in older European cities. These urban spaces evolved to suit a human-scale environment, unlike a monumental scale of streets of later generations. Smaller spaces produced interesting interactions when filled with people, yet a person experiencing them on a solitary basis would feel security and serenity. He sought to recreate this intimacy of environment by tying the interior spaces of the college together through narrow passageways and open spaces, creating an almost urban level of activity within them. This, he asserted, achieved the principles of individuality and naturalism that encapsulated the intent of the early planners of UCSD.

John Stewart remained actively involved in the design of the buildings and the advisory committees associated with each one. He kept a watchful eye on the design process to ensure that a humanist experience was maintained at Muir College.

Construction of Muir College

In 1966, before the first class of students entered Second College, and several years before the buildings were completed, the college was officially named John Muir College. John Stewart chose John Muir, California environmentalist, nature writer, and founder of the Sierra Club, as its namesake for the ideals that he represented and that the college hoped to achieve.

John Muir – a naturalist, a scientist, and a writer – embodies many of the disciplines on which this college will place emphasis.

Naming a college signifies something: it affirms certain ideas and values. So it is with Muir. We hope...
that this name will point to the example of Muir the man, and that in him will be perceived a belief in the world of independent learning, of variety of experience and human relationships, of commitment to humane goals and purposes.

~ John L. Stewart, Provost

The majority of the academic and residential buildings at Muir College were completed and occupied by 1971 but the first 750 students began attending classes in 1967 at former Camp Matthews buildings. The first graduation was held in 1968.

This early building phase, which includes the nine buildings designed under the collaborative effort led by Robert Mosher, has long stood out as the most architecturally cohesive college at UCSD. Like the buildings, the students share a robust social identity associated with their college and its intimate setting. The residential buildings especially promote a distinct sense of community, which was their design intent. Student life for first-year students at Muir is different than upperclassmen, partly because they are placed together in the high-rise residential buildings Tioga and Tenaya Halls. These promote a unique sense of community within their shared spaces and house structure, while upperclassmen typically live in the Tuolomne (Muir) Apartments, which have more privacy. Muir’s academic program is characterized by the freedom that students enjoy to choose general education courses suited to their individual interests, talents, and educational goals. At the present time,
enrollment at Muir is the highest of any college at UCSD and is double that originally projected.

Student satisfaction with facilities and programs at Muir College usually rank highly in the present. Their opinions in the early phase of building, however, were not always so positive. The Ten Year Study of John Muir College, done in 1978, surveyed students’ views of the architecture of the campus. The sample of published answers was nearly an even split between an appreciation of its “beauty and efficiency, reminiscent of the Sierras” and comparisons to “a cold, rigid and sterile” “penitentiary” of “too much concrete.”

Many students viewed such monolithic structures as counter to Muir’s naturalistic ideals, as illustrated in a 1982 student poem, which imagined “John Muir …rolling over in his grave” at the sight of “Cement Hiding the dirt and grass… and High Rises Blocking the sky [and] sun.” Although that sentiment may still exist, an overall appreciation of the campus prevails. The 2005 student satisfaction study reported Muir College as having the highest satisfaction with living quarters of the student population at UCSD. Students were quoted as saying that Muir College is “something that works,” and it “provides the feeling that you belong…” This was attributed to the physical design of the buildings as much as to the atmosphere of the college.

Lastly, the buildings of the campus core have even been called reminiscent of the cliffs of Half Dome at Yosemite, which is a reflection of the natural environment intended for the site and worthy of its namesake.

This exemplary campus experience has been attributed to the long-standing faculty and staff and thoughtful administrators throughout the years. However, as it was the intent of the architects and planners of the college to achieve such a response, it could be argued that the architecture and environment of Muir College contributes significance to this successful collegiate experience. Whether that is the case, the buildings of John Muir College, and the story of how the college came about, are significant for their place in the history of San Diego, architecture, planning, and education, as well as a distinct era of campus life, attention to the natural environment, and the growth of a region.
Notes:

15. Ibid.
17. Letter from Robert Mosher to A. Quincy Jones. 17 October 1965. Correspondence records of Robert Mosher, FAIA.