

Re: Alderman Renovation

From: Lise Dobrin, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics Program Director, UVa

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Dear Colleagues,

As a long-time member of the University Library Committee, the Library's faculty advisory body, I'd like to share with you how this looks to me. The ULC met last week to review plans for the Alderman renovation and to consider the criticisms leveled in a document that is the latest in a series of passionate pleas that we not have a renovation that gets rid of too many books. I have to say that every version of this plea has seemed to me totally out of proportion to what is being planned. Taking this plea to the BOV presupposes that the Library leadership does not share the faculty and students' appreciation for print books and has not taken their concerns into consideration. Neither of these things is true.

I have been impressed at every turn by the way the Library leadership has conducted itself in planning for the Alderman renovation. The plans themselves strike a balance between critical safety updates, space and aesthetic concerns, and usability by different academic constituencies. Being able to freely browse books is an important usability concern, but it simply cannot be the only one. For example, should a person who is not a seasoned scholar (say an undergraduate student) be able to go into the stacks and not feel bewildered about where they are and how they will ever get out again? Should the library have shelving that's wide enough for someone in a wheel chair to access? Currently, the old stacks are not ADA compliant, and could not be made so.

Realistically, books are being acquired all the time and will continue to be acquired into the future, so decisions need to be made about where to put them. The Library leadership's approach to this has seemed to me totally thoughtful, as well as mindful of the strong desire some faculty and students have expressed to keep Alderman an environment centered around its books. An extreme version of book off-siting is going to be necessary during the renovation itself, when Clemons will be our only local access point, so we're going to get a test run at that time. In anticipation, the Library is embarking on a period of intensive research. They're studying what has been checked out or even just re-shelved in the last 20+ years (and little surprise: it's far from everything). They are looking at their collections call-number by call-number, and are developing plans to get input from different users (including departments) about what is most important to have accessible to them. Indeed, they are doing this with guidance from an anthropologist who specializes in libraries. But even in advance of this research, I am convinced that the number of books or the linear feet of shelf space are inappropriate indices of what Alderman should hold. There is significant variation in the way different disciplines use existing scholarship. I happen to read a lot of books. I think many anthropologists do. But I'm not sure our colleagues in all other disciplines do. If we make it a first principle that every book is sacred just because it is a book, then there's no way to prioritize the books that people more heavily use from the ones that hardly (or never) get read.

I propose that if we want to direct some of our faculty activism toward the UVa Library, we do it in a way that is better linked to the most serious problems the Library faces. We could start, for example, by reconsidering our participation in a publishing system that sells us back our own scholarship in journals at such high prices that it drives down the Library's ability to buy books in the first place.