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All:

As the architecture school's representative on the University Library committee, I would like to respond to the petition that has been circulated with a couple of thoughts and have also attached University Librarian John Unsworth's response below. I am also including anthropology professor Lise Dobrin's thoughtful response below that.

In my view, the petition represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the role and structure of the contemporary library. The library is a system rather than a building – Alderman is only one part of a network of facilities across our relatively compact grounds. The library's mission is to provide students and scholars access to knowledge that now comes in many forms, as well as providing sites where all may gather to work individually and collectively on the materials in its many collections, which take many forms beyond books, and information networks. No modern university stores all of its materials in its most valuable real estate at the center of the campus – UVA's system, as most of you know, is extremely efficient at enabling searches and delivering materials throughout the system. The design has been developed to maximize the access to those volumes that can be discovered through the perusing of stacks, while placing more obscure and specialized materials into efficient storage locations and systems where they can be accessed and delivered quickly. Other universities have gone much further in limiting access to open stacks in their new libraries – I think we have gotten the balance about right here.

It is critical that the faculty support the Library's plans for the future of Alderman and the Library system – they have been developed thoughtfully and thoroughly. They will take care of long-standing functional deficiencies and safety issues at Alderman, while restoring the library to the symbolic heart of the university's life in the spirit of the original purpose of the Rotunda. The dome room, as the symbolic heart of the original library, was always about much more than storing books, and the new library will expand that gathering function to all of the many forms of engagement with knowledge that characterize contemporary scholarship, without sacrificing the origins of the institution in its access to knowledge through the book.

Please support the ability of the library to move forward with this long-delayed renovation by not signing this petition and working to convince colleagues who may be inclined to join its limited and backward-facing perspective not to do so. The rich array of spaces that have been incorporated into the design will create a hub for the intellectual life of the university that will be far more valuable to the university than the book count in this one building.

Bill