

8 September 2022

Dr. Carla D. Hayden
Librarian of Congress
101 Independence Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20540
202-707-5000

Re: Opposition to the proposed alterations to the Main Reading Room at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Dear Dr. Hayden:

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), the oldest and largest scholarly organization devoted to studying the history of the built environment, joins with the Committee of 100 on the Federal City and the DC Preservation League to strongly oppose the proposed alterations to the Main Reading Room at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The Library of Congress is one of the most important buildings in the United States, and the Main Reading room is its most significant space. The proximity of the Library of Congress to the seat of government speaks to the overwhelming necessity of a well-informed population to the survival of our cherished democratic institutions. The circulation desk, constructed in 1897, is placed at the center of the Main Reading Room and is the focus of a complex mechanical system designed to seamlessly deliver books from the institution's forty-three miles of radiating metal book stacks to the central control room and then to the delivery desk. This was considered an engineering marvel when it was completed in 1897 and stood as a milestone in the history of library design and administration. The entire building was designed around this system, which should be preserved because of its significance alone. The position of the delivery desk speaks to the centrality of the function of the Library of Congress: more than just a collection of books, it serves as a place where groundbreaking research is performed and world-changing connections are made and its destruction will destroy the historic relationship between the librarians and their readers. The proposed project seeks to radically and irreparably damage the design and function of the Reading Room by removing the central circulation desk, replacing it with an oculus, or circular window in the floor, so that visitors to a new "orientation center" (in what was the Control Room) could view the dome from below. This removal would shatter the central character-defining feature of the main Reading Room, fundamentally altering both the special and programmatic relationships of that room to both the Library's irreplaceable resources and the citizens who visit and use them. No longer would the central feature of the Main Reading Room be a device designed to efficiently deliver books to researchers. It would become a gap in the floor that will allow tourists below to gawk at the dome above. Instead of placing books at the center of the Main Reading Room, the center would now be designed to allow tourists to peer upward without the pesky interference of any books.

These proposed alterations to the historic Main Reading Room are unnecessary and ill-advised and will fundamentally compromise the design intent and function of a much-loved National Historic Landmark that both researchers and visitors have experienced and enjoyed for more than 125 years. We write in to oppose

any efforts to demolish the circulation desk in the Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress. The Main Reading Room, with the circulation desk at its heart, is essential to an understanding of the Library of Congress and its capstone role in the importance of literacy in a functional American democracy. We call upon Congress, the Architect of the Capitol, and the American public to oppose these alterations, which will destroy the heart of a building designed for everyone. SAH believes that every effort should be made to protect the Main Reading Room and the circulation desk at its center.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B C G' followed by a horizontal line.

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D., LEED AP BD+C
Chair, Society of Architectural Historians Heritage Conservation Committee

cc: Mr. Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.; Ms. Mary B. Brush, FAIA; Mr. James Buckley, Ph.D.; Mr. Jeffrey Cody, Ph.D.; Mr. Anthony Cohn, AIA; Mr. David Fixler, FAIA; Ms. Priya Jain, AIA; Mr. Theodore H. Prudon, Ph.D., FAIA, Ms. Pauline Saliga; Ms. Deborah Slaton; Ms. Patricia Morton, Ph.D.; Members, SAH Heritage Conservation Committee.