

## Project Omboeken: Repurposing Print Books in a 21st-Century Academic Library<sup>[1]</sup>

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Many university libraries have experienced a decrease in circulation numbers for their print books.<sup>[2]</sup> At the University Library of VU Amsterdam we also struggle with kilometres of books that are rarely or never used, and as a consequence are gathering dust in our stack rooms. In September 2021, we started Project Omboeken (literally ‘rebook’), which aims to give these books a second life. This paper presents the results from the first half of the project.

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[1] The present paper is a reworked version of the presentation which was given at the 50th BETH conference in Rolduc, The Netherlands. This presentation, in turn, was loosely based on the presentation “Landscaping with Books – How to Repurpose the Print Collection to Foster Community Building and Knowledge Creation” given by my colleague David Oldenhof (VU Library) about Project Omboeken at the 2022 Liber Conference (6-8 July 2022, Odense). My thanks go to David for letting me consult his excellent presentation in preparation for my BETH presentation as well as for his helpful remarks on the present paper. His reworked presentation will be published in *Liber Quarterly* (Oldenhof, forthcoming).

[2] See, for example, Dan Cohen, “The Books of College Libraries are Turning into Wallpaper,” *The Atlantic*, May 26, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/college-students-arent-checking-out-books/590305/>; Leonora Crema, “From Collections to Connections: Rethinking the Print Presence and Use of Space on Campus.” In *Designing Libraries for the 21st Century*, edited by H. Thomas Hickerson, Joan K. Lippincott, and Leonora Crema, (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022 ), 163.

The project is based on the assumption that despite the turn towards the digital, people still value print books. Little Free Libraries are popping up all over urban areas, bookshelves are deployed to give cafés or shops an intellectual ambiance or ‘living room’ feeling, and in 2021 the Netherlands saw the highest number of print books sold in ten years.[3] New public libraries, such as the Deichman Library in Oslo or Forum Groningen, are still full of bookshelves even though lending books is now only one of many facilities and programmes these libraries offer. At the VU Library, we see that students, too, like being around books. Bookcases are a recurrent element in study rooms we refurbished together with students and the study rooms that house book collections are often the busiest.

Instead of throwing away the books that have been so painstakingly collected over the years, this project aims to find ways in which these books can be of value again to students and faculty of VU Amsterdam, in both traditional ways (e.g. as sources of inspiring content) and less conventional ways (e.g. as building material for an art installation). This paper will first discuss how the project



[Image 1] Study room “The Verdieping” at the VU Library, which we designed together with students (photo By Michèle Meijer)

aims to contribute to designing spaces as “living libraries”, then describe experiments we have done thus far. I will end by presenting the challenges we experienced.

At first sight, this project might not seem relevant for theological libraries, which often consist largely of books that are still consulted regularly or must be preserved because they are old or rare. The aim of this project, however, is not

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[3] Job Jan Altena, “De cijfers over de boekenmarkt in 2021.” accessed November 26, 2022. <https://cpnb.nl/nieuws/de-cijfers-over-de-boekenmarkt-in-2021/>.

to remove books from the collection, but investigate how they can reach their full potential in contributing to an inspiring campus. Most of the books we took from the stacks so far, including those from the theological collection, were given new value as part of thematic bookshelves we placed around campus and will remain part of our collection and will remain part of our collection as books can be read and used in the traditional manner. Many of the experiments we did so far can therefore be replicated by theological libraries too.

Project Omboeken was initiated by Hilde van Wijngaarden, Head of the VU Library. Since the start of the project, about fourteen people have been involved for multiple hours or days a week, including a project leader, the heads of several library departments, metadata specialists, subject librarians, and communication and policy advisors. The project is made possible by extensive subsidies from VU-related funds, such as VUvereniging and VU Strategy.

## Living Libraries

The academic landscape has changed rapidly over the past decades. The growing number of online publications means that students and faculty turn less and less to print books and journals. In addition to content, libraries now offer other forms of support, such as data management or innovative teaching methods. They moreover facilitate interaction and interdisciplinary research collaboration between students, researchers, and library staff. [4] As a consequence, university library spaces are now designed with people rather than collections in mind.[5]

Becoming an inspiring meeting place for people, and knowledge, has been designated as a top priority in the VU Library's long-term plan, The Living

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[4] John Brosz, "Supporting the Research Experience: Creating a Hub for Interdisciplinary Collaboration." In *Designing Libraries for the 21st Century*, edited by H. Thomas Hickerson, Joan K. Lippincott, and Leonora Crema, (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022), 355.

[5] Crema, "From Collections to Connections," 163.

Library (2021-2025).[6] Spaces will be designed as “living libraries”: spaces that have an academic ambiance but also feel like a living room, where students and faculty can find relevant literature as well as unexpected inspiration and other perspectives, and where students can study in silence but also meet peers, teachers, and researchers from different disciplines and backgrounds and create new knowledge together. With this aspiration, the VU Library aims to contribute to a vibrant social campus, which is part of the VU Strategy (2020-2025).[7] After the pandemic, the campus must be a place where students and faculty can socialise but also participate in the academic community and feel intellectually stimulated.[8] Project Omboeken centres around the potential of our little-used books to turn our spaces into living libraries and in this way contribute to a social campus.

## Ways to Repurpose Print Books

So far, we have experimented with using our little-used books to design spaces for focus and inspiration, and to create inspiring meeting places where people can feel connected to the VU, both within the library as well as elsewhere around campus. Books gain value again as part of a curated collection around a specific theme, or, less conventionally, as part of an artwork or intellectual decoration.

## Spaces for Focus and Inspiration

At the moment we are renovating the large first-floor study room adjacent to the library’s main entrance area, in which spaces for silent study and for collaboration will be combined. As a central element, we curated book collections around seven Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as Zero

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[6] University Library, “The Living Library: Long-Term Plan 2021-2025,” Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, accessed November 26, 2022. <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/divisions/university-library/more-about/long-term-plan-2021-2025-the-living-library>.

[7] “VU Strategy 2020-2025,” Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, .accessed November 26, 2022. <https://onlinemagazine.vu.nl/vu-strategy-times-publiek-en/>.

[8] Susan Legêne, “The Campus as THE Place for Cultural Encounters and Academic Curiosity.” VU, accessed November 26, 2022, <https://onlinemagazine.vu.nl/vu-strategy-times-publiek-en/social-campus>.

Hunger, Health and Well-Being, and Gender Equality, showcasing the VU's mission to strongly contribute to the SDGs. All subject librarians contributed titles from their own collection to each of these SDG Libraries, and it was wonderful to see how many titles I could contribute from the theological collection. By being multidisciplinary, the bookcases will not only provide an inspiring environment to study, but will hopefully convey to students that relevant perspectives and solutions to global issues can come from all kinds of disciplines, including their own. After installing these SDG Libraries, the next challenge will be to find a user-friendly and aesthetically-pleasing way to link them to our e-books and e-articles on these topics. Several libraries have already found means to enable their print collection as gateway to their e-collection.[9] We are thinking of using QR-codes to link each SDG Library to interesting e-books on that topic.

The books of the SDG Libraries remain in our collection. While most of them come from the stacks and were little used, they may now become in demand again due to this new presentation. We also have books that can be completely removed from the collection and therefore can be used freely. Many of the study rooms in the library and in the other buildings on the VU campus are now devoid of books. In response to a tweet by Dan Cohen, Dean of Libraries and Professor of History at Northeastern University, about circulation numbers going down, people wondered if university libraries should keep books "for their beneficial ambience".[10] With their inspiring content and sound-deadening characteristics, the respondents claimed, they make perfect wallpaper. Such ways to recycle books will be the focus of the final year of Project Omboeken(2023). For instance, why not turn a study room into a 'Blue' or 'Green Room' by filling the walls with blue or green books? Or use books as visual cues to signal to people they are entering a library space,[11] for example by constructing arches of books around the entrances of study rooms that now show no visual connection to the library?

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[9] Examples in Crema, "From Collections to Connections," 167-68.

[10] Cohen, "The Books of College Libraries are Turning into Wallpaper"

[11] Crema, "From Collections to Connections," 166.

## Inspiring meeting places

From the beginning of the project, we envisioned a ‘living room’ in the refurbished study room, where the library can facilitate a literary and cultural programme for students and faculty. The Living Room must be a “collision space”, which facilitates the coming together of people from different disciplines and backgrounds to think creatively and forge new collaborations. [12] In other words, its design must make people feel safe but at the same time stimulate curiosity and take each other’s perspective. We hope to achieve this ambience by having a shelf with the favourite novels of the library staff as well as a bookcase with faculty staff picks. The subject librarians asked all faculty to submit a book from their disciplines which had inspired them, and which would be an interesting read for students; this initiative has already garnered a huge response. The next step will be to add a bookcase with students’ suggestions. The successful ‘Great Reads’ collection at the Walter C. Koerner Library of the University of British Columbia shows that collections curated in this way might become very popular with students and draw in new users.[13]

The SDG Libraries and the Living Room collections are examples of collections that we curated on our own initiative. In the following, I give some examples of thematic libraries that we accomplished together with different groups on campus to help them build and maintain their communities. For example, VU Pride asked the library for help in curating a queer collection next to their office, in order to make research on LGBTQIA+ topics more visible and accessible. The collection also contributes to making the area a pleasant space for their community to talk, rest, and collaborate.

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[12] Tom Hickerson, “Permeable Thinking and Design: Libraries and the Changing Knowledge Ecosystem.” In *Designing Libraries for the 21st Century*, edited by H. Thomas Hickerson, Joan K. Lippincott, and Leonora Crema (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022), 8.

[13] Crema, “From Collections to Connections,” 170.



[Image 2] VU Pride Library (photo by Michèle Meijer)

Following the opening of the Pride library, we were asked by VU Green Office to curate a multidisciplinary collection of books on sustainability in their office space to make it more welcoming and invite visitors to expand their views on sustainability by browsing the collection.

We are now in the process of creating a third thematic library, the Mindful Library. Many universities now have facilities and programmes for mental well-being.[14] At the VU, too, students can go to the Student Well-Being Point or see a psychologist. The Mindful Library is meant as a place for contemplation, reflection, and personal growth. It will in the first place be a real library. Many students are interested in mindfulness and meditation and already practice it regularly by following in-person classes or with apps on their phones. The Mindful Library provides a space where people can broaden their knowledge about mindfulness and find the answer to questions such as: in what philosophical and religious traditions does meditation play a role? What do neuroscientists say about mindfulness? How can we explain the current 'mindfulness boom'? And what is the relation between mindfulness and yoga? To foster the building of a community of students and staff who are interested in mindfulness, we are working closely together with several partners – such as the Amsterdam student association Student Meditation, NEWconnective (a student platform about giving meaning to life), as well as those involved in the

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[14] Joan K. Lippincott, "21st-Century Libraries for Students: Learning and Belonging." In *Designing Libraries for the 21st Century*, edited by H. Thomas Hickerson, Joan K. Lippincott, and Leonora Crema (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2022), 49-50.



Buddhist chaplain training programme at the Faculty of Religion and Theology in order to offer a regular programme of guided meditations, talks, and workshops.

There are also other ways in which books can be used to contribute to an inspiring meeting place. The project also commissions art installations (partly) made from books. There have been some recent projects in The Netherlands where artists were asked to intervene in print collections that were still in high demand or needed to be preserved. [15]



[Image 3] Pantheon. 'The question is not what you look at, but what you see...' by Henk Schut (2022) (photo by Monique Kooijmans) (photo by Monique Kooijmans)

While these projects resulted in interesting new insights into these institutions' collections, we think it is also interesting to ask artists to work with books that can be used freely. Last September, we celebrated the opening of the first art installation, called Pantheon. The question is not what you look at, but what you see... by the Amsterdam-based artist Henk Schut. The installation is placed next to the auditorium, in an area where drinks receptions are held after academic ceremonies (at other times, the space is also used by students for self-study or collaboration). The title refers to The Pantheon of Humanity, an octagonal building designed by the famous Dutch architect Berlage which was never built. The installation looks like a round bookcase from the outside but inside offers a place to retreat and listen to sounds recorded on campus,

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[15] Marjo Bakker, "De kracht van verbeelding: kunstenaarsinterventies in papieren collecties," *IP. Vakblad voor Informatieprofessionals* 26, no. 6 (2022): 12-4.



including students and staff talking about their favourite books. After emerging from the installation, visitors may look at the campus with fresh eyes.

## **Social Events Around Books**

Before I turn to the challenges we encountered so far during this project, I want to give an example of the social events we organised – another part of the project, which enables us to reach out to a new groups of students. As a playful kick-off to the project, we chose to install a Little Free Library on the campus square and fill it with books from our stacks. To select the books, we organised a ‘book safari’ with students to the closed stacks where they were allowed roam about and pick out books. The students became very enthusiastic during the safari because they stumbled upon books they would never have actively searched for but which sparked their curiosity. While some of the books did have to be kept because they had recently been lent, the majority could be placed in the Little Free Library. A park bench and a quote next to it turns this space into a little reading-corner at the heart of the campus square. The library has been a success so far: the collection is dynamic and the bench has become a popular meeting place.

## **Challenges**

The responses from students and faculty to the collections, art installation, and Little Free Library that are already in place have been positive. But as in any project, we also faced (and are still facing) some challenges. At the start of the project, we needed to decide which criteria books had to meet before they could be removed from the collection. After thorough discussions and an extensive pilot we arrived at a set of criteria which the subject librarians could use to analyse their collections, for example:

- is the book being used in teaching?
- has the book been checked-out more than 3 times? (variable; to be decided by the subject librarian)
- was the last check-out less than 10 years ago? (idem)

If all questions can be answered negatively, the book is a potential candidate for deselection. We also follow the policy of the UKB, a partnership of Dutch University Libraries and The Royal Library of the Netherlands (KB), which states that a partner library may only remove a copy of a certain book if two other libraries with a copy remain.

During a pilot with 35,000 art history books, several challenges arose. We started out with an Excel file with, for each title, all the metadata necessary to answer the questions. The easy part was to trim down the list to 7,000 potential candidates by using Excel's filter function. The first challenge had to do with the fact that the availability data of the UKB libraries for the books on our removal list could only be obtained through an automatic programming interface (API). Through the API, we could get the number of times a book was available in UKB libraries, but since a library could potentially remove that book even one day later, such data quickly becomes outdated. An additional problem was posed by the fact that the logistics department can only remove 100 books from the collection per week. Since it is impossible to remove 7,000 books in one day, we had to add another check through the API at the end of the workflow. With people from different library departments involved, good coordination and planning proved to be crucial.

In addition, we found out that our metadata showing whether a book belongs to a donated collection was incomplete. Some collections have been donated under the condition that they would always remain in the collection. As a consequence, book had to be checked manually by a librarian for ex libris or other markings that say to which collection they belonged, a time-consuming task.

Another challenge was posed by the risk of removing books that were (or will be) in demand (again). To lessen the risk, the humanities librarian visually checked art history books that have been removed from the stacks so far. Another method is to search the Excel list with deselection candidates for titles that are directly relevant to the faculty's research and teaching profile or for titles written by people affiliated to the VU. This task is time-consuming and not failsafe. Therefore, budget must be reserved to buy books again.

By means of this pilot, we have established a workflow for deselection that we feel comfortable with. At the same time, we concluded that 100 books per week is not enough to carry out the plans we have for wallpaper, furniture, and artworks made from books in the final year of the project. Therefore, we started with deselecting journals, since journals often have multiple, sometimes even 100 volumes per journal, which can be removed much more efficiently.

A different challenge is how to involve the stakeholders in the project. Students and faculty may have doubts and even strong emotions, especially about the less conventional ways we want to repurpose part of the collection. It is impossible to approach a researcher for each deselection to ask whether that book can really be removed from the collection. We try, however, to keep students and staff informed about the project with a website, newsletter, and through the library's faculty liaisons. On the webpage for Pantheon, for example, we explained how the books were selected.[16] In our communication we moreover emphasise that the project is about giving our books a second life and finding a new purpose for each book.

## **Project Omboeken and Theological Libraries**

We hope that the Omboekenproject will inspire other libraries to take a fresh look at their print collections and consider how little-used books can be of value again to their communities. Instead of throwing books away after a weeding project, we believe they can be deployed to give spaces a specific ambiance. I also hoped to have shown that books that for various reasons cannot be removed from the collection can also be given new value, especially when brought in dialogue with books from other disciplines. Based on the interesting titles I could contribute from the theological collection to the

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[16] University Library, "Art Installation Pantheon by Henk Schut (2022)." Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, accessed November 26, 2022. <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/divisions/university-library/more-about/art-installation-pantheon-by-henk-schut>

various thematic libraries, such as those on climate change and LGBTQIA+ topics, I think many theological libraries will be able to curate similar collections and show the societal relevance of theology and/or religious studies. Naturally, such collections do not need to consist of little-used books only but can be formed from books that are still in demand. Such collections can also be made in collaboration with specific communities so that the library better reflects what its communities value.

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