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Visual Narration to Stimulate Heritage-Based Design Thinking

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To inspire awareness for heritage in Amsterdam's waterfront renewal, the Heritage Work Package (WP7) of the Multi-Functional Quay Wall project (MFQW) uses visual narration as a tool to support heritage-based sustainable urban development. Heritage narratives are a method WP7 applies to translate historical and heritage knowledge into accessible, visual, and design-oriented resources for engineers and designers. This approach makes heritage actionable for contemporary design and planning challenges. The first such heritage narrative, "Amsterdam's Canal Trees," is now publicly available online on the Port City Narrative Reader.

This initiative is part of the Multi-Functional Quay Walls PCF Project.

Connecting Urban Transitions with Historical Context

Historic waterfronts demonstrate how water, infrastructure and everyday life have long been closely intertwined. However, current urban transitions in Europe (particularly those related to climate adaptation and energy systems) are often approached as primarily technical challenges, detached from the socio-spatial dimensions that have shaped these environments. This disconnect between technical problem solving and social needs triggers an imbalance between future-oriented innovations and heritage preservation.

Historic environments contain valuable knowledge on spatial organization and adaptive practices. Yet tapping into this knowledge and making use of past lessons often poses a challenge. Archives may carry incomplete records and can be difficult to access, limiting their direct usability. Heritage documentation, such as that produced under UNESCO frameworks, frequently relies on abstract terminology rather than clearly defined principles: terms like "urbanity" describe an atmosphere or quality rather than specifying what they concretely mean for renewal practice. As a result, this knowledge remains disconnected from the practical needs of designers and engineers working on renewal projects — not because of shortcomings in historical research itself, but because that research is rarely translated into a form they can use (Hein et al., 2025). To make this knowledge applicable today, heritage should be understood not only as something to

preserve, but also as a resource for design — as the Canal Trees narrative below illustrates.

Amsterdam's Canal Ring as a Living System

Amsterdam's UNESCO-listed canal ring provides a relevant case study in this regard. Its quay walls, originally developed for waterborne trade in the 17th century, are now under increasing pressure from intensified use, climate adaptation and sustainability demands. Understanding how these quay walls were historically constructed and how elements like trees, materials and water management were integrated into a single functioning system can inform more context-sensitive and robust interventions today.

MFQW (2024–2028), funded by the Dutch National Growth Fund through RVO, develops innovative quay wall designs tested in a living lab, taking into account the UNESCO World Heritage status of Amsterdam's inner city (AMS, 2025). WP7 explores how historical knowledge and heritage values can be translated into practical tools for designers and engineers. Heritage narratives play a central role in this approach. They combine archival research, spatial analysis and visual storytelling to reconstruct the historical development of specific urban elements (e.g. quay wall construction, trees, material use, cultural activities etc.) and relate them to present-day design challenges. Rather than treating heritage as a static object of preservation, these narratives present it as a flexible, evolving resource: one that reveals long-term patterns of use, adaptation and governance. By organizing this knowledge into chronological and spatial sequences, the narratives translate historical urban planning practices into design logics that are legible and usable in current design processes.

The narratives are produced throughout the MFQW project and made available through an interactive website where users can explore them online. As the project progresses, the platform will continue to expand with new narratives, gradually building a growing knowledge base for heritage-informed design across different sites and themes in Amsterdam.

Heritage Narrative: Amsterdam's Canal Trees

As the first completed narrative on the platform, Amsterdam's Canal Trees offers a concrete example of this approach in practice. It illustrates how trees have functioned as an integral component within the city's canal system. Introduced deliberately by the Amsterdam City Council as design elements during the expansion of Amsterdam, they became part of a systematic greening strategy from the late sixteenth century onwards.

Beyond their aesthetic value, canal trees have always served multiple functions: stabilizing quay structures, regulating water systems, improving microclimates and masking the unpleasant odors historically associated with the canals. Today, this historic tree layout (largely characterized by elms) continues to shape the identity of the canal

belt, despite ongoing challenges including disease, the introduction of cars, and historical disruptions such as the large-scale felling of trees during WWII.

This first case study of a heritage narrative demonstrates how the role and significance of canal trees can be made legible for contemporary designers. It not only raises awareness for their historical and spatial importance, but also encourages their conscious integration into future design plans and revitalisation processes. In the coming two years, we aim to expand the platform with further narratives, and continue to build a broader knowledge base for heritage-informed design.

References

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