

# Retelling the Intangible Maritime Heritage of Sliedrecht's Dredging Past



Research Plan  
MSc3/4 Revitalising Maritime Heritage

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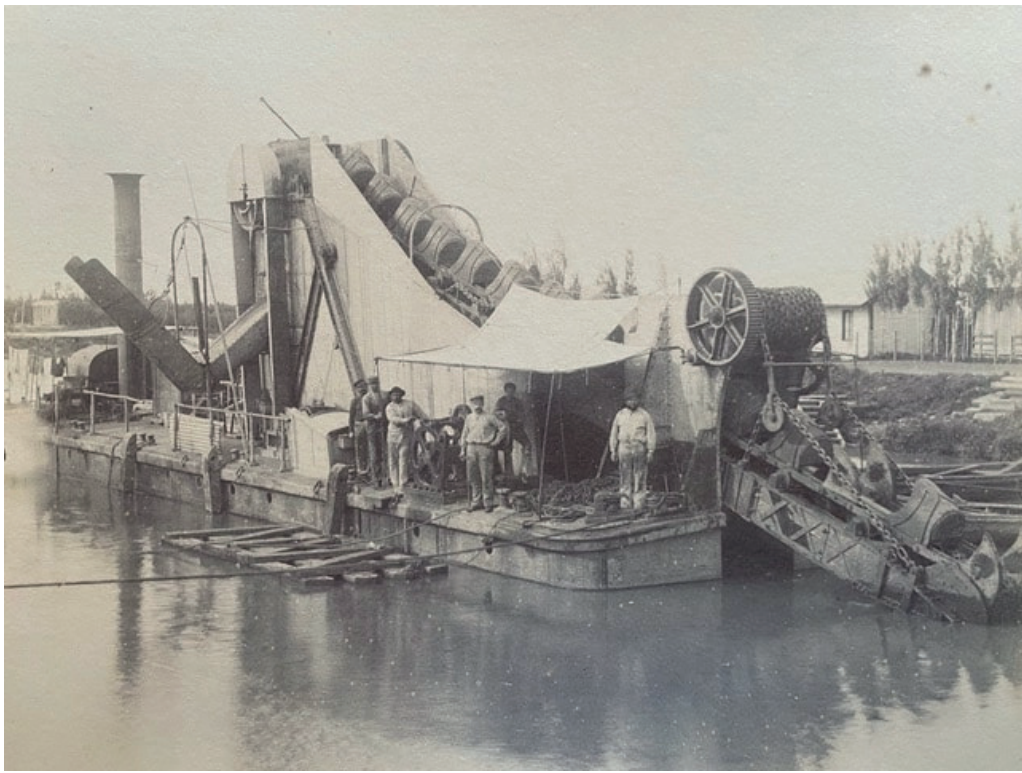
## ***Introduction***

The Waterdriehoek is a region between Dordrecht, Gorinchem, and Kinderdijk known for its maritime and industrial heritage. Its strategic position along major waterways, such as the Merwede and Boven-Merwede rivers, has established it as a centre for dredging, shipbuilding, and other industries since the Middle Ages (Korteweg, 2018). Over the centuries, these industries have transformed the region's landscape, leaving a complex relationship of both tangible and intangible heritage that reflects the connection between the inhabitants, their culture, the industry, and the water.

The dredging sector is a significant aspect of the maritime industry in the Waterdriehoek. Dredging involves the removal of mud, sand, or silt from the bottom of a body of water to ensure that waterways remain adequately deep and that water quality is maintained (Noorderkwartier, 2022). Slidrecht, located in the northeastern part of the Waterdriehoek, is recognised as the founding place and centre of dredging. After the Sint-Elisabethsvloed in 1421, people in Slidrecht and surroundings established the first methods of dredging, which soon laid the foundation for innovation in dredging technology (Korteweg, 2018). Big names in the dredging industry, that originated in Slidrecht are for example Boskalis and Van Oord.

Dredging was not only an industrial activity; it was also crucial for maintaining dry land and protecting against the persistent threat of flooding. In the Waterdriehoek area, where natural defences against water were minimal, local communities constantly struggled to keep their land dry. As the demand for land reclamation, navigable waterways, and flood protection increased, dredging companies focused on developing advanced machinery and techniques. These companies became pioneers in creating essential tools and processes for dredging, which not only addressed the needs of Dutch waterways but also set new international standards. Over the years, dredging firms from Slidrecht and the Waterdriehoek area have undertaken projects worldwide, applying their expertise in land reclamation, channel maintenance, and various other dredging activities on a global scale.

The effects of dredging extended beyond the physical changes to the landscape. The industry brought prosperity to many local families and contributed to the creation of a specific regional identity centred around knowledge of water management and industrial innovation (Korteweg, 2018). To summarise, the history of the Waterdriehoek is characterised not only by technological achievements but also by the strong connection between its people and the water that has shaped their way of life.



*Figure 1 - Dredging ship in the Waterdriehoek*



The National Dredging Museum is located in Slidrecht. It is an organisation dedicated to preserving and showcasing the history and advancements of the dredging industry. The building that houses the Dredging Museum is the former director's house of Adriaan Volker, the founder of the Koninklijke Adriaan Volker Groep, which was once one of the biggest dredging companies worldwide. Within its walls are artefacts, machinery, documents, and photographs that narrate the evolution of dredging technology from the Middle Ages until now. (Baggermuseum, 2024).

The preservation of intangible heritage is essential, especially as much of the industry that once characterised this area has moved to more suitable regions over the past few decades. As ships have grown larger, the infrastructure of the smaller shipyards and docks in the area has struggled to keep pace. Economic factors have also driven industries to move to locations with more space and better accessibility, necessary for accommodating the massive ships and machinery required for modern operations. While the tangible heritage of the region's industrial past—such as shipyards, docks, and industrial buildings—remains visible, the intangible heritage is at risk of being forgotten. Stories (oral history), skills, and cultural practices associated with these industries are fading as younger generations grow up without the strong connection to these traditional practices that previous generations maintained.



*Figure 2 - The former Director's House, now part of the National Dredging Museum*

Intangible heritage plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of identity, continuity, and belonging. In a conference in 2003 UNESCO highlighted the importance of intangible heritage (UNESCO, 2003). However, as pointed out in “Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage” by Nikolić Derić et al. (2019), there is still much work to be done in developing methodologies and standards to effectively address this challenge. Derić et al. explain that their book serves as an initial guide for preserving intangible heritage in museums. This research will build upon their findings.

Currently, the Intangible Maritime Heritage is missing from the National Dredging Museum. This research aims to address that gap by exploring how the National Dredging Museum can serve as a platform for preserving the industrial intangible heritage of dredging history, particularly focusing on the Koninklijke Adriaan Volker Groep and its director's house. By integrating personal histories and stories from the Volker family into the museum experience, this research seeks to create a connection between the museum visitors and the region's Intangible Maritime Heritage.

The project intends to add a new layer to the museum by translating intangible heritage into architectural design that resonates with modern audiences. It will provide insights into the everyday lives of those who worked in the industry, allowing contemporary visitors to appreciate the skills, challenges, and accomplishments of past generations. Preserving these stories is crucial for understanding the significant role that dredging has played in shaping the landscape and influencing the cultural fabric of the region.

## ***Research questions & Methodology***

The problem stated in the introduction will be addressed in this research and the main research question that will be answered is: *How can Intangible Maritime Heritage, focusing on the dredging history, be translated into Maritime Architectural Heritage to ensure its preservation for future generations?* This question will be divided into several sub-questions that will be answered through different research methods.

The research begins by examining the history of the dredging industry to form a comprehensive understanding of its practices and significance, both locally and globally. The narrative will centre around the history of the Volker family and their legacy within the dredging industry. Drawing on sources such as Joke Korteweg's *Grondleggers* (2018) for context on key figures and relationships within the industry. Archival research at the Dredging Museum, the Dordrecht Archive, and the online archive of Sliedrecht will supply historical visuals to support this narrative and provide context to broader industry developments.

The research questions and methodologies guiding this research are as follows:

### *1. What is the intangible heritage of the Waterdriehoek, specifically in Sliedrecht?*

This question will identify and define the cultural elements of Sliedrecht's dredging history. To capture the lived experiences, stories and social nuances tied to dredging, the research will conduct interviews with several individuals who have direct connections to this legacy. Among these interviewees are Remco van de Ven, who worked as an errand boy for the prominent Volker family, and Cees-Wim van Ardenne, the owner of a dredging company and a relative of the founder of Boskalis. Their insights will provide personal stories that highlight the social and cultural atmosphere of the dredging industry.

These oral histories will be supplemented by archival research at the Dredging Museum in Sliedrecht to ensure that the personal narratives are enriched by historical context and somehow verified through documented evidence. Also, "The Oral History Reader" by Perks and Thompson (2016) and the reader "Het interview als verrijking van erfgoed: Handreiking Collectie-interviews" by the Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (2023) provide guidance on conducting effective interviews and obtaining the best results. Key literature, such as *Grondleggers* by maritime historian Joke Korteweg, will serve as a foundation, offering an understanding of the dredging industry's social dynamics and key figures in Sliedrecht's history.



In addition, expert insights will be collected from Joke Korteweg, as well as from Lotte Walvius, conservator at Van Oord. Both will contribute perspectives on the preservation of dredging heritage in local and corporate contexts, expanding the research's understanding of the broader cultural and historical significance of the dredging industry. Through this combination of interviews, archival work, and expert insights, the study aims to establish a comprehensive narrative of the Waterdriehoek's maritime culture and social practices.

*2. How can these intangible aspects of dredging heritage be made tangible in an architectural design that engages and resonates with future generations?*

This question addresses the challenge of conveying intangible cultural elements through architectural design, making them relatable and meaningful to contemporary audiences. The research will examine case studies and literature on the integration of intangible heritage within architectural projects, particularly old maritime or industrial buildings are reimagined to have cultural function. It also focuses on successful examples of museums that embody intangible heritage through design.

Through insights from these case studies, the research will identify potential strategies for making the Intangible Maritime Heritage tangible in the National Dredging Museum, especially within the director's house.



*Figure 3 - A. Volker in front of the Director's House*

*3. How can an additional design layer in the National Dredging Museum, specifically within the historic director's house, effectively showcase intangible maritime heritage?*

This question investigates methods to translate the intangible heritage of Sliedrecht's dredging industry into a tangible, immersive experience within the National Dredging Museum, particularly in the historic director's house. To achieve this, the research will first explore personal accounts, archival resources, and expert insights that capture the essence of daily life and cultural practices tied to dredging.

One primary method will involve integrating oral histories, such as the stories shared by Remco van de Ven. His recollections of daily routines, relationships, and family traditions will be instrumental in shaping an accurate and engaging narrative within the director's house. By recreating scenes or atmospheres reminiscent of that time, his personal stories can bring the social and emotional dimensions of dredging culture to life for visitors.

In addition to oral history, the research will also involve examining original floor plans, archival documents, and historical photos available in the Dredging Museum's archives. These resources will help reconstruct the spatial layout and functions of the director's house as it was during its operational years, ensuring that the space's design reflects the heritage it represents. By combining these historical materials with tangible objects or artefacts, the museum can recreate a more accurate environment that mirrors the cultural and operational aspects of dredging life.

### ***Expected outcomes and further process***

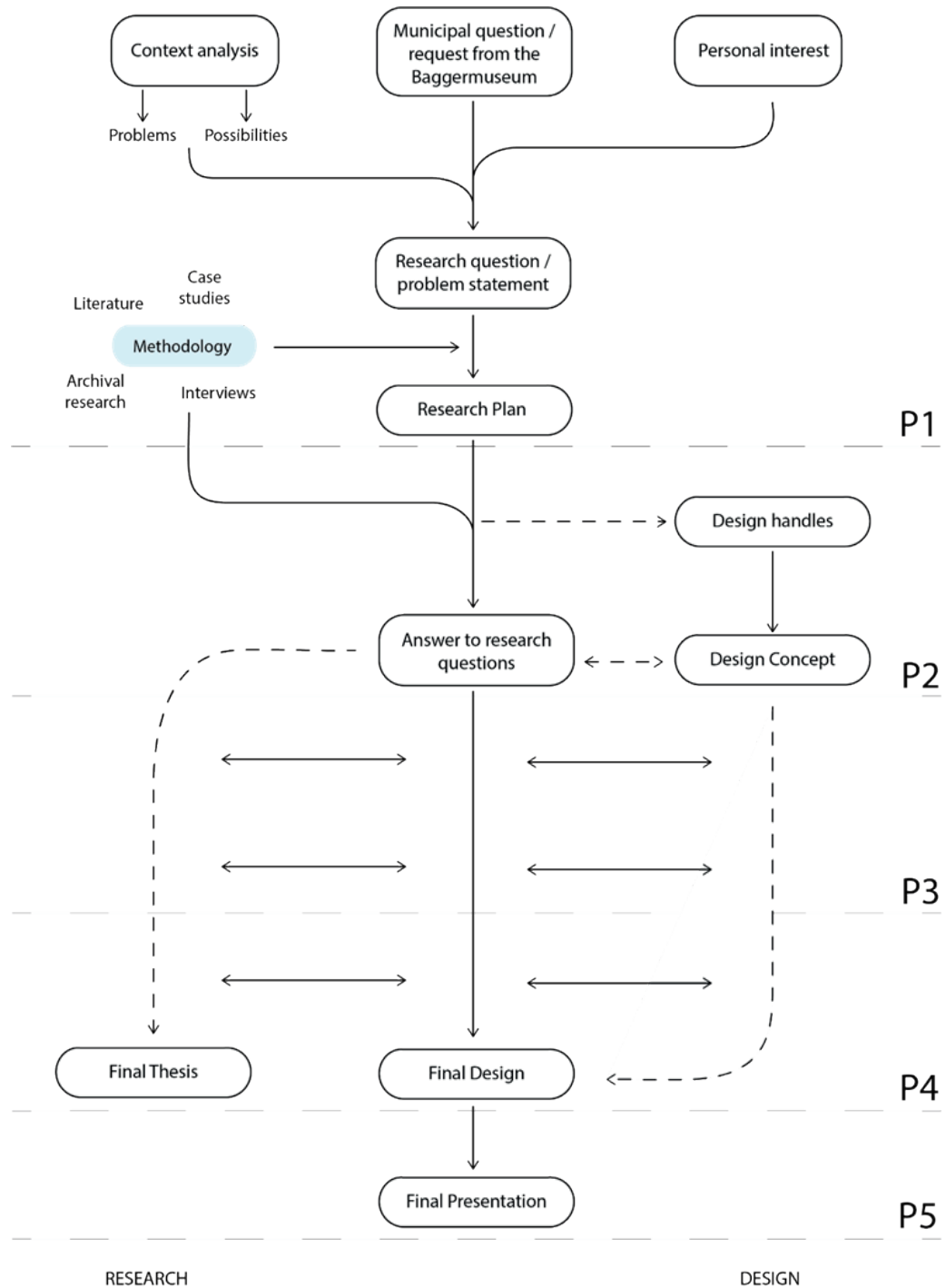
The research aims to achieve several key outcomes. Firstly, it will establish a comprehensive narrative documenting Sliedrecht's dredging heritage, highlighting the industry's significance both locally and globally. This narrative will explore the contributions of the Volker family to dredging, emphasising the importance of the former director's house in Sliedrecht as a symbol of the family's impact and a potential focal point for preserving this heritage. Through oral histories and intangible heritage gathered from interviews and archival research, this account will provide a rich, personal perspective on the industry's historical and cultural legacy.

Additionally, the research will create a framework for translating intangible heritage into a tangible experience within the architectural design of the Dredging Museum. This framework will outline adaptive reuse strategies that make cultural practices, skills, and stories accessible and relevant to museum visitors. By integrating intangible heritage into a physical space, the museum design will serve as a living repository of dredging culture. Potentially, also creating a bigger framework for intangible heritage other than the intangible maritime heritage from the Waterdriehoek.

In conclusion, the proposed design for a museum space will not only safeguard the maritime legacy of the Waterdriehoek but also contribute to the cultural revitalisation of the region, making it a more attractive place to visit. This project lays the groundwork for both the theoretical and practical aspects of preserving intangible heritage, focusing on creating an engaging and meaningful cultural experience for future generations.

The final conceptual design will envision a museum or cultural centre that combines the physical remnants of maritime heritage with the intangible practices associated with dredging, effectively bridging the past with the present to make the Waterdriehoek's and Sliedrecht's unique heritage accessible and valuable to contemporary audiences. The museum will serve as a cultural hub that celebrates Sliedrecht's dredging past while engaging future generations, fostering an environment where the stories, skills, and traditions of the dredging industry are accessible and relevant.

## Research Scheme



## ***Literature***

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## ***Images***

Front page: Archief Nationaal Baggermuseum. (1930a). *Nationaal Baggermuseum in Sliedrecht*.

Figure 1: Watericonen. (n.d.). *Dredging ship in the Waterdriehoek*.

Figure 2: Archief Nationaal Baggermuseum. (1930b). *Voorzijde huis Molendijk 204 te Sliedrecht*.

Figure 3: Archief Nationaal Baggermuseum. (n.d.). *A. Volker voor de directeurswoning*.



