

Reflection

My graduation project *Preserving Dredging History* focuses on revitalising maritime heritage in the heritage line *Maritieme Industrie*, through the expansion and transformation of the National Dredging Museum in Sliedrecht. My project aims to translate the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of the dredging industry of Sliedrecht into architectural design, ensuring that the stories, traditions, and identities tied to this heritage are preserved for future generations. Guided by seven reflective questions, this reflection will go into the approach, development and impact of my graduation project and also reflect on what could be done differently.

What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your Master track (A, U, BT, LA, MBE), and your Master program (MSc AUBS)?

My graduation project explores how ICH, such as oral histories, personal memories, and practices from the dredging world, can be translated into spatial and architectural form. This theme strongly relates to the Heritage studio within the Architecture track of the MSc AUBS programme, as it deals with how architecture can respond to context and cultural identity, while also introducing new interventions that strengthen the heritage.

This project aims to blend the architectural design with this heritage research. With adaptive reuse of the old Director's house and a new architectural addition, the existing museum transforms into a vibrant spatial narrative that highlights the importance of the old director's house, which was once a key hub in the Volker dredging imperium. By crafting a clear narrative and a spatial sequence filled with new exhibition spaces and storytelling areas, the project invites everyone to experience ICH in a meaningful way.

In that sense, the project connects directly to the broader objectives of the AUBS programme. It integrates research, cultural analysis, and design into a comprehensive process where architectural thinking serves as a tool to address larger societal and historical questions. The aim is not only to conserve what is already there but also to create new spatial conditions that allow the heritage to speak to future generations.

How did your research influence your design/recommendations, and how did the design/recommendations influence your research?

The National Dredging Museum holds a rich layer of intangible cultural heritage, yet this is barely reflected in its spatial experience. This problem became very clear from the beginning of this research. This revealed a broader issue, a missing link between intangible cultural heritage and architectural design. I hoped that by letting research and design inform one another, I could begin to formulate a framework to address this gap. However, this proved more challenging than expected, as very few existing references or methods translate ICH into spatial or architectural terms.

Through interviews with volunteers and museum staff, I learned how much of the museum's value lies in lived experiences and storytelling. These insights led to design choices such as open, narrative-driven spaces that allow for various types of stories to unfold. While I would have liked to make the research even more directly visible in the final design, this process has been an important first step toward building that connection.

How do you assess the value of your way of working (your approach, your used methods, used methodology)?

The approach I followed throughout the project was iterative and explorative, combining fieldwork, interviews, archival research, and design testing. By working with qualitative methods alongside architectural analysis, I was able to operate across multiple scales — from personal recollections within the dredging industry to the broader cultural and spatial context of Sliedrecht. This approach allowed for a layered understanding of the site, the museum, and the cultural significance of dredging as a profession and heritage.

The interviews I conducted played a central role throughout the project. They not only informed the research phase but also remained a key point of reflection during the design. These conversations revealed deeper layers of meaning, such as emotional ties to the museum, the pride of craftsmanship, and personal memories, which helped shape the spatial narrative of the project. Looking back, I consider these interviews one of the most valuable parts of the process. If the project were to continue after graduation, I would have liked to conduct more interviews, for example, with other former dredging workers, to further deepen the connection between story and space.

Because the research did not offer any framework to translate ICH into architecture, the design process became experimental. This openness created opportunities, but also made it difficult to focus. The surplus of stories hidden in the ICH of the museum and its context and design directions made it challenging to define a clear architectural translation. Making timely decisions was often a struggle, and also the most recurring point of feedback. Still, I believe this process taught me a lot, particularly about how to balance exploration with precision, and how to move from a wide field of ideas toward a defined architectural direction.

How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope and implications of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

Academically, this project contributes to the growing discourse around ICH and architectural heritage by challenging the divide between tangible and intangible heritage. While much heritage research focuses on material conservation, this project foregrounds the social practices, mentalities, and affective dimensions of heritage and asks how these can shape architectural space. The reflection on how volunteers, oral stories, and modest traditions can inform the architectural language of a museum adds a unique layer to the field.

From a societal perspective, the project addresses an urgent issue: the preservation of Intangible ICH, which lacks concrete guidelines or fixed methods for safeguarding. While the importance of preserving ICH is increasingly recognised, especially in rapidly changing cultural and industrial contexts, there is a real risk of losing valuable knowledge and practices if we do not act. My project explores how architectural design can contribute to this effort by creating new spatial conditions that support this continuity, interaction, and the passing on of stories and skills to future generations.

Ethically, the project is grounded in a respect for the voices and lived experiences of those who shaped the museum and its history. I aimed to avoid romanticising or simplifying the past, instead approaching it as a layered and complex set of narratives that require careful and nuanced translation into design. At the same time, I remained aware of my position as an outsider, interpreting these stories through the lens of architecture. It was a meaningful experience to engage with the world of

dredging, a field I had no prior connection to, and to learn how deeply heritage is tied to personal memory, identity, and place.

How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

This project is deeply tied to the context of Sliedrecht, the Volker family and the dredging industry. The approach and the methodology do have a strong degree of transferability. Many small, specialised museums across the Netherlands (and beyond) face similar challenges: ageing volunteer teams, static displays, and limited spatial strategies for embedding ICH. The methods I used, including spatial storytelling, scale shifts, and the use of multi-media exhibition frameworks, can be adapted to other contexts. The core idea that architecture can act not just as a container for heritage but as a collaborator in its transmission is relevant to anyone working at the intersection of design and culture. This projects evokes questions on who tells the stories, how they are remembered, and which spatial cues can support their transmission. Which is important for the future of ICH of all sorts.

What are the challenges and opportunities of designing within an existing cultural and physical context when aiming to add new layers?

Working within the dike landscape and the historical director's house presented both constraints and opportunities. The dike, often seen as a barrier, became a spatial element in the design, offering the potential for a second entrance and visual connection to the industrial landscape. It also posed structural challenges: due to strict regulations, foundations had to be placed at a safe distance, and any additions had to respect the hydrological logic of the site.

The existing director's house, meanwhile, was both a gift and a challenge. Initially used merely as a backdrop for models, the house held untapped narrative potential. By repositioning it as the centrepiece of the museum and designing the new building as a complement rather than a replacement, I could create a dialogue between past and present. One of the key opportunities here was to use contrast — old and new, small and large, intimate and monumental — as a way to stage the story of dredging's evolution.

Yet designing within this context also meant accepting limitations: certain interventions were not possible due to the monument status, and the surrounding maritime industry is still in use, requiring sensitivity and negotiation. Navigating these complexities has deepened my understanding of architectural responsibility.

To what extent can architecture actively participate in preserving intangible heritage, and what does this mean for the role of the architect in heritage-based design?

One of the key reflections throughout this project is the shifting role of the architect within heritage work. Rather than simply restoring what is already there, the architect can act as a facilitator of living heritage. The architect becomes someone who creates space for, for example, stories, memories, and social practices. This requires a broad skill set. It is not about just designing form, but also listening, curating, interpreting, and creating an experience. For the dredging museum, this meant designing spatial sequences that allow stories to unfold, rooms that encourage interaction and reflection, and atmospheres that resonate with the pride and modesty that are present in the dredging culture.

Conclusion and Looking Forward

Looking ahead, the final phase of the graduation project will focus on translating these ideas into architectural detail. I aim to refine the immersive experience of the museum, using multimedia and spatial storytelling in 3d renders to deepen the engagement with ICH.

There is still much to explore, but the foundation is there: a narrative-driven, context-sensitive architectural design for the National Dredging Museum that honours the legacy of dredging while opening it up for future generations. In doing so, I hope the project becomes not only an academic exercise but a real contribution to the dialogue between heritage and design.