

# CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ACTION

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## ANALYTICAL DOCUMENT

ONLINE PEER-LEARNING VISIT  
HOSTED BY ROTTERDAM CITY  
ARCHIVE IN COOPERATION WITH  
DIG IT UP

# ARCHIVE FOR AN INCLUSIVE CITY: THE ROTTERDAM COOPERATION MODEL

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Focus of the “Archive for an inclusive city” online peer-learning visit

The online peer learning visit «[Archive for an Inclusive city](#)» hosted by Rotterdam focused on cooperation between the city archive and DIG IT UP. DIG IT UP is a grassroots cultural heritage organization which, together with the city archive enables a formalized cultural heritage collection process allowing inhabitants to record, describe, give attribution and context to elements of culture and identity which otherwise could have been overlooked by formal government records.

Rotterdam’s culture plan 2021-2024 puts emphasis on interconnectivity between institutions and creative partners in the city. The partnership between the city archives of Rotterdam and DIG IT UP is an example; it also facilitates a participatory governance model.

### DIG IT UP

DIG IT UP seeks to excavate and exhibit Rotterdam urban culture, with and for the Rotterdammers. The organisation actively works with the public to unearth image and sound material to share with citizens through exhibitions, documentaries, publications, talk shows and online platforms. DIG IT UP shows a new and different side to city history.

### Background of “Archive for an inclusive city”

DIG IT UP started 10 years ago as a small initiative collecting things from the attics of the people and exhibiting them (window exhibition). DIG IT UP could use for free an empty place that became a working and exhibition space. Through the exhibit people became aware they own similar things to share, and the project started “snowballing”. DIG IT UP then developed new community projects and themed exhibitions.

A municipal archive cannot keep track of all that is happening across the city; but with the support of DIG IT UP they can do it better and be as relevant as possible to citizens of Rotterdam. DIG IT UP is closer to citizens and has better access to them. The municipality gave a grant to archive the material that DIG IT UP received and gave DIG IT UP an initial push.

### Main features of the “Archive for an inclusive city”

DIG IT UP is based on a participatory archival method, where crowdsourcing is at the heart of the approach, with citizens contributing their own heritage items, stories and testimonies. The initiative was introduced to different groups, communities and individuals in Rotterdam who collected videos, photos and audio. The crowdsourced material is then presented as an exhibition (online or offline).

Open place: in the workshop space of DIG IT UP, individuals can have their old recordings preserved. Photos can be perfectly scanned, digitized and edited. This also serves the crowdsourcing process and helps the team collect materials and exchange with contributors.

DIG IT UP also works with digital tools and makes them accessible by developing user-friendly templates for collecting and archiving personal memories, using the international cultural heritage description protocol and formats, and creating an instruction manual. DIG IT UP also trains volunteers.

What is special about DIG IT UP is that it doesn’t only collect things from the past but also the “heritage of today”, when people are still “alive” and can tell their stories. By this they make them co-authors

of the city's heritage and make the history of Rotterdam visible through the eyes of its own citizens and their stories.

The conservation and preservation of the inhabitants' cultural heritage and their stories is assured by the collaboration with the city archive, as citizens' heritage is added to the city archive.

**For an introduction to Rotterdam's archives for an inclusive city and 'DIG IT UP', please watch this [video](#) or check the DIG IT UP [website](#).**

### **Main takeaways on working with communities, developing partnerships and building up a support ecosystem**

- **Identify the communities you want to reach and involve and understand their needs.**
- **Take your time to approach communities, to build trust with them and to develop partnerships;** good collaboration requires good foundations.
- **Ensure that cooperation with communities is mutually beneficial** by developing events and/or contributing to their activities.
- **Seek volunteer support:** approaching communities, collecting stories and materials and archiving it needs time.
- **Provide communities support.** Provide them with support that need to do the work with you, especially when working with archives that require adequate metadata standards.
- Be aware that each "institution" has its own priorities and working rhythm, so plan accordingly.
- Co-create and enable **co-decision making** as much as possible.
- Seek support when you are unexperienced in partnership building and co-creation processes or when dealing with sensitive topics.
- Intermediary body, e.g. independent NGOs or arms' length public bodies can also help bridging issues of trust and convey the right messages to their communities.

## ANALYSIS

### Local partnership for crowdsourcing public archives

The special feature of Rotterdam's 'Archive for an inclusive city' is the partnership, bringing the official public cultural heritage institutions as the city archive and the public library together with the grass-root community organisation DIG IT UP, a community gallery and heritage lab. The common goal of the partnership is to collect and safeguard city history, especially everyday city history from the perspective of those involved, from the perspective of the inhabitants of Rotterdam.

The partnership brings together the stability, permanence and power of public institutions and the agility, openness and flexibility of grassroots organisations. Public institutions contribute with staff to sustain the partnership, funds, and spaces to exhibit the heritage collections. They also add results of DIG IT UP crowdsourcing collections to the public archive and thus make them accessible to a larger public.

Without this partnership the city archive would not be able to keep track of the "new" city's history and to add the citizens' heritage to the city archive, safeguarding it for future generations.

**For further information, see the [video](#) about building Dig it Up, archives for an inclusive city.**



## Findings and recommendations

During discussions in parallel groups, participants came up with following recommendations on building partnerships between public and community-based organisations.

### **Do not rush – take your time to build up trust in the partnership and the people that work together.**

When starting a new partnership, explain well the reasons why you want to cooperate. Demonstrate your honest interest and be open to learn from each other. Base the partnership on the needs and interests of the partners. Agree how information is shared and can be used by the partners.

### **For efficient partnerships...**

- ... work together towards a shared goal. Define the goal together. Have clear goals.
- ... have flat hierarchies. In best case the partnership should be on eye-level.
- ... have a strategic decision-making group in the public institutions that allow to come to faster decisions and facilitate engagement across different institutions.

### **In partnerships, co-create and enable co-decision making so far possible.**

Public institutions and councils are often not used or experienced in co-creation and co-decision making. Capacity building is helpful for staff to better understand what co-design and co-decision making are and can effectively be implemented.

### **Seek support when you are unexperienced in partnership building and co-creation processes.**

When being unexperienced in partnership building and co-creation processes it is advisable to seek support of a neutral and professional person or organisation to build up and facilitate the partnership – at least at the beginning. Some institutions have developed helpful guidelines that can be used a starting point for partnership development (e.g. [Community archives](#)); conversations with staff of other organisations offer a lot of informal learning and insights as well.

### **Through partnerships you gain new “resources”.**

In a partnership, one should look for partners who complement each other with their resources and skills with a view to achieving the common goal. This can create synergy effects that allow more to be achieved than alone. I.e. community organisations can bring in new ideas and perspectives.

### **Be aware: each “institution” has its own priorities and working rhythm.**

Each organisation has its own priorities and working speed. Plan sufficient time for coordination and decision-making to be able to work together and ensure there is a right match between the activities you plan and the funding you get.

### **Building trust in local authorities**

Ensure that there are “open spaces” for discussions, with free communication and open language. Otherwise, websites and official documents become the point of reference to start the partnerships and discussions, where language is often very institutional and distant from other organisations.

## Engaging communities in archiving Rotterdam’s “recent” city’ history

**DIG IT UP defines the themes for collections** through three different ways:

1. Brainstorming within the team and volunteers about untold stories in Rotterdam that could be of interest to the citizens and the city;
2. Finding interesting material from which derives a theme for a collection;



3. Being directly approached by citizens proposing a theme.

The proposed themes should be very tangible, specific and present untold stories in Rotterdam.

**DIG IT UP activates citizens, associations and local organisations** to share their stories and material. This is usually done **through following approaches**:

1. DIG IT UP connects with communities and calls to bring material and stories with regards to a pre-defined theme.
2. DIG IT UP starts to gather material from untold or personal stories based on predefined theme, presents them, and asks citizens to share their related stories and materials.
3. Through volunteers, DIG IT UP connects with other organisations, initiatives and citizens to share their “heritage” stories.

**DIG IT UP connects to communities** using social media channels, its [website](#) and the local press (by providing tangible stories); staff from DIG IT UP goes to places the theme is about, they animate other people and initiatives to inform via their communication channels for which theme they look for stories and material and they approach directly local initiatives and persons that can be related to the theme.

Another important approach of DIG IT UP is that it does not **work FOR** the communities, but **WITH the communities, making them co-authors of the collection and archive**. To do so, they involve the people from which the material and stories come from (or who are key persons with regards to the theme) in the decision-making on how the material is archived and defining the metadata. They animate the people to describe their material based on the defined metadata, thus giving context to the collected material (see “Metadata and technical solutions for crowdsourcing archives”).

This has improved the collection of “new” heritage material and cataloguing the inhabitants' memories and stories. It also has helped to raised awareness on its own heritage and the importance to preserve it for future generations.

**Two videos present how DIG IT UP has engaged communities in the collection and archiving of “personal stories”:**

- [Baroeg](#) - From pop podium to archive
- [Dona Daria](#) - Archiving women history
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## Findings and recommendations

During discussions in parallel groups, participants came up with following recommendations on engagement of communities in heritage projects.

### **Define the communities you want to reach**

Brainstorm and define the communities you want to reach and involve for sure. Think about how to reach them best. Use the social media channels of the community groups to contact them. For community archiving try to get different communities involved to have different perspectives and stories told about the theme (not just the usual suspects).

### **Take your time approaching communities**



Good collaboration needs a good foundation. So take your time to build up trust at the beginning. Use liaisons and organisations that are already in touch with the community groups or active in particular neighbourhoods you want to reach, to approach them. Reach out to community leaders. Visit them at the places where they are, go to community events, instead of inviting them to come to your place. Make them feel valued and respected. First when they trust you, they will collaborate and share material for a public archive. Be ready to collect information informally (have materials with you) – if you set up appointments and make a formal interview, this may deter participants.

### **Navigate key challenges through external support**

Sometimes intangible heritage and collective stories deal with very sensitive topics. In such cases try to work with professionals and ensure the staff involved in the project is familiarised with the right approach and methodologies. Involving diverse communities may also raise language issues and difficulty to get first-hand insights. In such instances working with community leaders or organisations close to these communities will help, but it is not always sufficient. Taking time and building trust then becomes essential to develop a dialogue.

### **Animate the communities to work with you**

People and communities will work with you when it is in their interest. Thus, ensure that their commitment is benefiting them, that the involvement bases on their interest and motivations. So find out about their interest and motivations by asking them and showing how it could be linked to the project you want to engage them (how it could be beneficial for them). Get them excited about what you want to do. Make them talk about it to their peers. Sometimes giving back something tangible can help for this sharing or snowballing process (e.g. collect stories in a publication people can show to their friends and families).

### **Community archiving needs time – seek volunteer support**

Approaching communities, collecting stories and materials and archiving it, needs time. Try to get volunteers to support you. Best volunteers are people that relate to the theme, to whom the theme is important or who have been part of the theme. They can also add their experience and stories.

### **Provide communities support**

The engagement is not about doing the work for them. Provide them with support so they can do the work with you. For community archives provide them with a clear idea what they can do, help them to channel their energy in one direction to work on a concrete output, provide them with assistance during the process of archiving the material (see “Metadata and technical solutions for crowdsourcing archives”).

## Metadata and technical solutions for crowdsourcing archives

Archives are our collective and personal memory, a unique and irreplaceable part of our heritage. They nonetheless represent challenges in terms of collecting materials, preserving them, and making them accessible to the public. The presentations and discussions revolved around the types of digital solutions that can be set up and their relevance in making archive materials available and reusable, and notably the tool used by Dig it up: Omeka-S. [Omeka](#) is a free, open-source content management system for online digital collections.

**Archives are “natural crowdsourcers”** in many ways. By law, they receive or collect many different types of materials (legally required deposits), and archives and collections are also donated directly to institutions. Beyond these automatic or “passive” acquisitions, archives develop more proactive

approaches to address the gaps identified in collections, or simply to follow up on ideas, projects put forward by local communities (e.g. a story is mentioned by several people, materials around a common theme are shared by different individuals or organisations).

This more active acquisition approach also promotes the social role of archives, as they act as **anchor points to reassemble shared memories of citizens**. Participatory archiving relies on three main steps:

- 1) Appraisal or value to the community. This first phase entails discussing the narratives that should be put forward, and the type of items that forms an archive collection (often mixed between objects, testimonials, recordings).
- 2) Provenance or tracing back the origin of the item: who are the authors, how the items were created.
- 3) Ordering: understanding the interrelationships between the different items collected, how they are connected to each other.

**Use the right tools** to collect and organise materials matters as it **conditions the way you can design participatory approaches** to collect, assemble and open access to digital archives. Several aspects were brought up:

- **Open data and collaborative software solutions.** DIG IT UP uses a very open licensing system, with the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 (CC BY-SA)<sup>1</sup>. DIG IT UP and the Rotterdam City's Archive identified the features needed for a digital tool to develop a participatory model for archives. The chosen open-source software, 'OMEKA-S', is adaptable and facilitates digital exhibitions and data sharing: [OMEKA - Dig it up](#)
- In this context the discussions highlighted the **importance of well-designed metadata standards** prior to starting any data collection. In simple terms, **metadata is the type of information you will collect and assign/tag to all types of archived materials**. Having clear and streamlined guidelines is an important prerequisite to ensure coherent information is collected for all items. The quality of information provided is also particularly important. DIG IT UP works with a mixed approach when involving communities: volunteers can input information based on the templates and guidelines provided, and the DIG IT UP team then reviews the information provided, liaises with volunteers to make any adaptations required, and collects additional information. Additionally, DIG IT UP highlighted the importance of regular trainings, discussions and exchanges with volunteers ("**value your volunteers!**").
- The use of international standards is recommended to ensure compliance with regulations, as well as benefit from templates and guidelines developed by other archives in Europe. It also facilitates data sharing when developing international cooperation.
- Beyond the technicalities, the language used should be accessible when working with communities so that everyone feels comfortable. The whole technical design should be done before onboarding communities and volunteers.

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<sup>1</sup> This licensing system offers the following features (see also: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>):

- Material with this license may be copied, modified, distributed with an attribution to the author/creator or licensee.
- Derived works are allowed to be distributed as long as it is also made public.
- This is the most open license besides materials in the Public Domain.
- With this license you can carry all projects, platforms, hackathons and commercial initiatives.

## Findings and recommendations

Based on the group discussions, participants came up with the following recommendations on building inclusive partnerships.

### Map out the needs

Identify the requirements for the digital platform you want to use: different types of cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) means that different types of information have to be collected. Building partnerships also require understanding **who should get involved and when** (e.g. cultural heritage experts for appraisal of items, staff of cultural institutions and archives to manage the digital tools you set up, and the general public who may provide items, information, stories. For each of the partners that will be involved, **identify their skill development needs** (IT skills, community management, skills in heritage appraisal, legal skills).

### Build up a public engagement strategy

Make sure you do with the people as they are the ones who actually give value to heritage. This is also particularly important when dealing with sensitive heritage and memories. Participants flagged how passionate and invaluable volunteers are. They can do a lot and actually provide a lot of the content/information. Designing a public engagement strategy also means providing an easy and accessible solution for them to share content and inputs (e.g. develop an API or simple web interface for contributors to your digital solution).

**Develop training schemes** that are designed for the different types of users (possibly with technical support), based on the needs initially identified. Ideally you should build up curricula with different levels so you can both work with more experienced partners and involve new ones as you go along. There are plenty of existing options to support you in this endeavour: shared practices, guidelines, toolkits, templates, resources.

When starting collecting items, stories, etc.:

- Get proper permission how to use /archive them; i.e. CC licensing
- Make a contract that allows you to use the information provided i.e. when a contributor gives an interview (of course they can put conditions to it); make sure the contract is understandable for both parties (avoid using too much of legal wording).
- Give proper names on items and be consistent in the naming.
- Store it in a public and durable way

When defining key words for tagging collected object/items:

- Look for an existing list of that topic and check which key words are used.
- When you receive items, brainstorm and define with contributors what relevant key words could be used.
- In general: it is always good that not one single person describes the items; this should be a team work, ideally with different perspectives to describe items / define tags, etc.

## Feedback from hosts and participants

City/Region/ Stakeholder	Main learning points	Future use of ideas and knowledge gained – Projects that were shared and that could be transferable to other contexts
City of Leuven	I have learnt to strengthen the collaboration between the city archives and the heritage department Use metadata always Motivation to continue our work	
Aarhus University	My main take away was about the process of gaining trust - a slow but important process. I've learnt that it is not simply the use of social media etc but a more active and personal process	Methods of training community members Methods of engagement and building local connections Social inclusion and the balance of ethics
University of Pavia	- Web systems for crowdsourcing collection of CH data - Privacy statements regarding CH data - OMEKA platform	Organizing some crowdsourcing collection of data on the story of historical centers to document the evolution of urban architecture.
City of Nantes	This peer-learning visit was enriching for us because the City of Nantes conducts a similar project that promotes local heritage. It was interesting to know more about the partnership between Dig it up and Rotterdam City Archives, how they work together on a technical level to manage archives. Furthermore, Omeka is easy to use while it can be difficult for people to look for documents at the archives or to use research engine to find digitised archives online.	Omeka could be a relevant tool for the City Archives of Nantes to manage their data We also lack the manpower to digitise our archives so it could be helpful to have people directly uploading documents.
City of Brussels	-technical issues, metadata - participatory way of working - importance of good partnerships	with colleagues I will closely look into the case of dig-it-up and imply some of their methods in our work
Independent researcher	I learned about metadata and got some tips and tools on how to use this in the future to make my work and research and collecting easier. It gave me confidence to continue what I do and to stand my ground and look for more support. I got encouragement by other people who have been at the start like I have. I learned that presentations don't have to be rigid and stiff - they can be packed with laughter and spontaneity I got a kit of links to dive into and to follow projects I found inspiring to keep track of their strategies and ideas. I know now that Rotterdam has a lot to offer, many innovative ideas on how to archive cultures	The archiving of the night club inspired me to contact venues in Switzerland I know that are important to their area or subculture, and to nudge them into thinking about archiving their history. I would be open to set up a project like that if the right people agree to pull the same strings. Having a project to show them will help me make them realize that they matter and that it's worth fighting for. Subcultures unfortunately don't have much recognition in CH.

Cantabria Region	Developing and reusing community oral histories and the data and technical approaches to the community making a more participatory governance has been quite interesting topic and approach.	Ideally would be restructuring the database and metadata of archives.
City of Dublin	Learned more different methods used in public engagement and archives across Europe, learned more about the metadata aspect of documenting said archives and received very helpful information regarding how to start documenting oral histories.	It will allow me to start creating our own metadata records for oral histories.
City of Budapest	Importance of proper planning. It is crucial to involve volunteers in the project, and the most important is choosing the right volunteers for the right tasks. History is not boring; enthusiasm drives these projects.	Working on an oral history project I am trying to use the ideas I have heard.
Fortress of culture, Sibenik	Consent of participants is very important Networking and good relationship with local community is essential It's advisable to have a local "ambassador" in every part of town for the purpose of collecting more data	We'll be implementing a similar project soon and the inputs from DIG it UP, especially the methodology of collecting data, will be very useful to us.
City of Gent	The fact that things can be simple, and you don't have always to put up complicated computer applications to collect data and stories	For our participative project the km <sup>2</sup> we were looking for a good tool to collect the data, that can be linked with the museum and archive systems, Omeka seems to be working for this kind of work
Urbanalytica	- The importance of understanding that heritage is not only "something of the past" but rather a valuable asset for our present. - How bottom-up participatory heritage and culture mapping is a powerful tool for filling cultural voids that often result from top-down or formal methods. - A great example of how to co-create memories/heritage through citizens' lead.	

## LIST OF PROJECTS SHARED

### Local projects mentioned by participants:

City of Rotterdam:

- [DIG IT UP](#)
- [Pandora's music box collection](#)

City of Dublin:

- The [Dublin Core Metadata Initiative](#) supports innovation in metadata design and best practices.

City of Amsterdam

- [Maagdenhuis 2015](#) Archive. An archive to discover the programme of the Maagdenhuis 2015 occupation day by day.

City of Leuven

- [Leuven, European Capital of Innovation 2020](#)

City of Ghent

- [STAM](#), the Ghent city museum presenting the story of the city of Ghent.

City of Belfast

- [10-year cultural strategy](#)
- [Belfast cultural strategy](#)

City of Budapest

- Budapest City Archives: [Memory of rape in wartimes](#)

### Best practices from the Cultural Heritage in Action catalogue that were mentioned during the visit:

- [Dublin](#), Conserving story, history & architecture
- [Revitalisation of Šibenik's Fortresses](#)

### Other projects/Information shared

- Information on the new [standard for the description of records based on archival principles](#)

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