

A new approach for an old identity: Soufli, Greece as an open town-museum of silk

Athanassios Gouridis^{1*}

¹Director of the Technical Service of the Municipality of Soufli, Greece

Abstract. Soufli, a small Greek border settlement, presents a widely recognized dipole of tourist destinations, a unique National Park and its silk tradition, including the circle of the relevant economy and its historical-architectural heritage. This prevailing local identity is gradually de-facto structured as a holistic model. Private entrepreneurship plays the first role, other stakeholders being local administration, education, associations and the citizens themselves as active participants. Thus, an open town-museum of silk is formulated, with five complementary museums and collections, two silk factories, an old emblematic factory, in restoration by the Municipality, numerous silk shops, decades of silkworm breeders enterprises, mulberry trees, two public, silk-oriented training foundations, an environmental center, events, International Conferences, workshops and exhibitions by world famous firms, Greek and foreign universities visiting and working on place, in a trans-border and transnational cooperation. In 2021 Soufli was chosen by the World Tourism Organization among the Best Tourism Villages, awarded with a valuable branding, which strengthens its position in the world map of silk.

1 Soufli and its historical route

Soufli, lying on the western bank of the lower flow of the Evros/Marica/Meriç River, today the Greek-Turkish border, is a tiny settlement, of approximately 3.200 citizens, seat of the homonymous Municipality. Nevertheless, despite of its small size, it presents a widely recognized dipole of values, the National Park of Dadia-Soufli-Levkimmi, one of the most important in Europe ecological landmarks, as well as its silk tradition, including both, the circle of the relative economic activities and its architectural heritage [1-2].

Silk in Soufli bears a long history, particularly since the mid-19th century, which was culminated in the mid-war, 20th century period, with four silk factories in function, and a whole economy moving around sericulture and silk production, affecting, besides the economic part, the spiritual, political and social aspects of life as well in the whole region.

After the 2nd World War, the new market conditions, with nylon, artificial silk (rayon) and low, competitive prices led the local economy to a deep decline [1-4].

* Corresponding author: gouridis@0890.syzefxis.gov.gr, nasco_t@abv.bg

2 The reversal of the situation

After decades of a continuous worsening of the situation, recently a new entrepreneurial environment has started to be built, where each stakeholder unfolds its own approach to silk, all converging to the common valorization of this unique heritage [2, 4-5].

3 The participants

3.1 Museums-collections

The Silk Museum of the Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation is sheltered in a 19th century “cocoon-manor” complex, donated by the famous writer and “doctor-philosopher” Konstantinos Kourtidis’ family. The permanent exhibition traces the diachronic history of silk, focusing on the route of Soufli towards its raise to a major silk-production center from the late 19th century on, while it incessantly hosts a series of events, such as theatrical plays, ateliers, or exhibitions (Fig.1).



Fig.1. The Silk Museum of the Piraeus Bank- Group Cultural Foundation.

The Art of Silk Museum, located in the silk producer George Tsiakiris’ Mansion, built in 1886, offers to the visitor an acquaintance with the history of Soufli through art and craftsmanship of sericulture and silk production, combining modern visual means with a direct, experiential touch with the past, while the upper floor shelters events, such as scientific presentations.

The “Gnafala” Bouroulitis’ museum, part of the family silk enterprise, emphasizes the ethnographic element, which “keeps alive, in the passing of time, pictures which have left us” and together with the permanent exhibition in “Koukoulospito”, a typical “cocoon house”, purposely keeping the atmosphere, the mentality and even the smells of a familiar past, emphasize the cultural continuation from yesterday to the future, supported by many events, such as cinema weeks, photo exhibitions etc.

The Brikas Municipal Historical Museum, sheltered in an emblematic, late 19th century “cocoon house-villa”, donated to the Municipality by the family of the doctor, mayor and member of the Greek Parliament, Georgios Brikas’ family, mirrors the history of the town, including music, letters, sports, political life, or arts, seen through their connection with silk, while it hosts a collection of the “Chrysalis” association with old silk articles of clothing (Fig.2).



Fig. 2. The Brikas Municipal Historical Museum.

3.2 Other restoration projects

Cocoon houses” and historical, neoclassic or eclectic buildings from the period 1886-1908 have been restored or are in the process of restoration by the Municipality or the private sector in various, mainly tourism or cultural uses. We could mention, besides the above-described museums, the hotel “To koukouli”, the cafeteria-bar “Haretsi”, the old French Commercial Union, the old 1st Primary School and the Old French Customs House, possibly the first building in the Balkans where reinforced concrete was used [6-7].

The Tzivre industrial silk complex was erected in 1909 by the Italian firm “Ceriano Fratelli”, while in 1920 was bought off and expanded by the Tzivre brothers, Jewish cocoon merchants from Didymoteichon. It is consisted of 14 buildings, which secured the wholesilk procedure, from the drying and storing of the cocoons, to the dyeing of the silk products, the main unit been the reeling proper, where the silk thread was made, its products exported in all Europe. The factory was the heart of the economic, social and cultural life of the whole region. This diamond of the industrial archaeology was bought by the Municipality of Soufli and consecutive European co-financed restoration projects are implemented, rendering its premises to cultural uses, connected to the historical, as well as modern aspects of the economy of silk [4, 6-7]. (Fig.3)

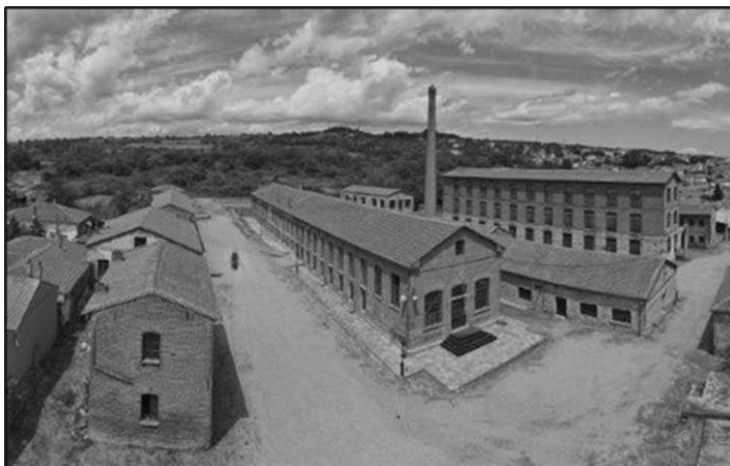


Fig. 3. The Tzivre industrial silk complex.

3.3 Commercial infrastructures of silk

The Mouchtaridis “Silkline” and the “Silk Tsiakiris” Industry are raised to the avant-garde of the silk textile sector in Europe, either through the cooperation with famous fashion names, such as Dior, Zeus-Dione, Rianna and Nina or as the official providers of institutions, such as the Greek Presidency, the Parliament, the Olympic Team, the National Gallery, the Acropolis Museum and most of the Greek Universities. Thus the Soufli silk is already a preferable product in Paris, Milano, New York, California and Tokyo. In parallel, shops, sell silk products actually and electronically, not only in Soufli, but everywhere in Greece and abroad, as well.

New small enterprises, established by local youngsters are focused of alternative uses of the cocoons, such as face cleansing, jewelry or art.

Silkworm breeders count up to 30 firms, with a tendency to grow up in number, producing now to 10 tons/year, while this number is expected to be increased considerably.

Mulberry plantations, summing up approximately to 150.000 trees, although reduces from the recent 200.000 plants, give an impressive number, especially if to this will be added the trees which are expanded all over the town, the villages and the province, while the tendency is again upward.

3.4 Education

The Centre of Environmental Education is for years an insistent factor for the acquaintance of students and their teachers, who visit Soufli from all Greece, with the Evros River, the National Park of Dadia, Soufli and Levkimmi and, mostly, with the world of silk.

In 2022 three State Professional Schools, devoted to Sericulture, Viticulture and Bee-keeping were founded, together with the establishment of a bee-keeping park, the first one in Greece.

The initiatives of the high schools of the region, concerning silk, both in Soufli and the nearby Municipalities are many, from innovative silk management to printing art items on scarves.

Numerous university projects are implemented in a regular basis. The Konstfact, Applied Arts Academy of Stockholm, the Fine Arts Academy of Athens and the New Bulgarian University have a permanent cooperation with the Stakeholders in Soufli. Besides the visits, it is the works they create and the exhibitions, taking place in Athens, Stockholm, Sofia and elsewhere, which promote silk and Soufli. (Fig. 4) Various universities, such as the Aristoteleion University, Thessaloniki, in a Niarchos Foundation project, the Architecture Academy of the same University, the Kapodistrian University of Athens are in a repeated cooperation with Soufli. Some months ago post-graduate designers, from all over the world, sent through the Economic University of Sustainable Development and Cyclic Economy worked in the town.



Fig.4. Art students in Soufli, 2022.

3.5 Events-activities-festivals

Permanent or periodical events take place in Soufli, directly or indirectly connected with the economy of silk, particularly through tourism-oriented activities, prevalent being those related to silk and its architecture, as well as the above-mentioned cooperation with Art and Textile worldwide University Faculties and Academies.

Of uttermost importance is the attraction of critical target groups, with happenings, such as the thematic Christmas Park “Like a fairytale”, sheltered in the Tzivre factory premises, shootings of films, in historical surroundings, or the implementation of mode workshops and presentations, performances and constructions [8].

The most important of the annual events is the silk festival, taking place every year during the days of the silkworm breeding, in May-June. We should add the late September St Tryphon celebration, at the beginning of the new season of viticulture and the festival of tsipouro in the early November, or the numerous festivals and celebrations in the villages of the Municipality, organized by the local communities and associations. The Mulberry trees festival was organized for the first time this year in 14-15, July by the local professionals. revealing and promoting all the possible parameters connected with the certain tree, from food for animals to gastronomy, alternative town-planning, arts and, of course, silk.

3.6 Scientific conferences-meetings

A number of important scientific meetings are realized in Soufli, prevailing been the 10th Basca International Conference, with the theme “Regeneration of the Sericultural Industries in the 21th Century”, held in May, 2023 [9].

4 The “vehicles of development”

Basic “vehicles”, leading to a sustainable management of the local initiatives are.

The proclamation of Soufli as best tourism village, an actual branding for the settlement was promoted by the submission, in 2021, of a candidacy in the World Tourism Organization call and its selection among the Best Tourism Villages, Soufli being the only Greek settlement after two years of contests awarded with this branding honor.

The announcement, from the premises of the Tzivre complex, in May 2023, by the vice-minister of Culture of the establishment a handicraft national network, which promotes Soufli as a national handicraft center.

Besides these, as a de facto branding of silk could be considered the fact that in an international level famous customers already order their silk products with the reference printed on them “made in Soufli”.

5 A de-facto open-air museum

Soufli, this small settlement, disposes with numerous silk museums and exhibitions, 2 factories, actual and virtual silk shops, a strong presence abroad, hundreds of thousands of mulberry trees, decades of breeding silkworm enterprises, three silk-oriented educational-training organizations, numerous relevant events and a participating, active population. Consequently, it could be plausibly considered as a de-facto Open Town Silk Museum. Re composing traditional schemes in an innovative and creative manner, the local stakeholders gradually build a new scheme with a sustainable development perspective.

Several factors permitted this revitalization: favorable external conditions, a positive policy by the European Union and the Greek State against such initiatives, an acquired self-

confidence, due to various reasons (education-training-know-how of the wider financial environment), increased competence of the new generation, convergence of the goals of the various stakeholders, realization of the importance of the location and the tradition that it bears. The small size of the community of Soufli strengthened even more this convergence. Thus, a new “language” is gradually developed, where “community building” “community capacity building”, “community engagement in the planning process”, come to accord with local government’s policies, state interest and EU priorities [10-13].

Consequently, we could develop a model, as a conceptual design and instrument, tracing a phenomenon, already developed in a step-by-step empirical approach. For its formation I we work inversely, from the result to the cause; the de-facto existing “open museum-town”, needs to be theorized, organized and systematized.

6 SWOT analysis [2-3]

6.1 Strengths

- The Municipality has a clearly "recognizable tourist identity", as both the National Park and the settlement are widely known destinations.
- The location of the Municipality on the vertical axis of the Egnatia road in the center of the prefecture of Evros
- The architectural unique physiognomy of the historical settlement of Soufli.
- The preservation of remarkable elements of authenticity in the daily life of the inhabitants of the settlement. The social fabric of the neighborhood and the interpersonal relationships remain largely intact.
- Local products besides silk are known throughout Greece, such as wine products, cold cuts etc.
- The high percentage of acceptance and willingness to participate in cultural and tourism activities among the local population, mirrored on the impressive, active presence of young volunteers.
- Recently, especially after the coronavirus pandemic, Soufli shows a remarkable recovery and development of activities-services-products.
- The area has a low crime rate and offers safety.
- The proximity of the towns of Orestiada, Didymoteicho and Alexandroupolis (maximum distance 65 km), offers accommodation services and transport means (airport, port).

6.2 Weaknesses

- The lack of experience and the insufficient training in the tertiary sector. The lack of highly standardized staff in the sectors of tourism and services, in general.
- The insufficient tourism infrastructures and organization, particularly as far as it concerns accommodation
- The border location of the area, which acts as a deterrent for significant tourism investments.
- The weak general educational and research environment.
- The lack of a wider zoning arrangement for the establishment and encouragement of business and small industry units, directly related to the existing environmental legislation.

6.3 Opportunities

- The opportunity of using European co-financed, particularly cross-border and trans-regional programmes, as well as community sectoral programs for cultural-environmental-tourism, more generally the favorable financial incentives to support productive initiatives.
- The experience gained in the management of resources, which can be valorized properly.
- . The dual cross-border position of the Municipality with Turkey and Bulgaria and its interaction with state, regional and private formations and cultural entities.
- The fact that the potential of tourism resources has so far not been "exploited" or saturated, presenting remarkable opportunities for further sustainable development

6.4 Threats

- The reduction of the population, especially of the young ages, as well as those of a high educational level.
- The unemployment, particularly among the economically active, younger ages of 19-34 years old.
- The further degradation of the built and natural environment
- The competitive neighboring environment, mainly the adjacent regions of Bulgaria and Turkey which are developed on more favorable terms.
- The unbalanced development and accumulation of funds on the prefecture's capital Alexandropolis against the hinterland.

7 The model construction

In order to build the model for the structure of Soufli as an open-town-silk-museum we should first define parameters as

- The model concept.
- What is gone, what is done and what is expected to be done.
- Limits of intervention of the activities of the proposed structure

The proposed model could be considered as a Local Community Development scheme, widened by the umbrella concept. It could as well include concepts, such as community action, community of place and interest, connectedness, community building and capacity building, community organizing and engagement, social asset based and social capital.

The quantified form of the model could be expressed as a function:

$$Flcdm = \Sigma \{fi * si\} / \Sigma fi \tag{1}$$

where fi is the contribution factor, while si is the influence multiplier.

Components are potentially individuals, community needs, local entities and collectivities, financial means, self- or in-coming financing (and their use), general economic environment, as well as more specialized coefficients, such as percentage of commitment to the promotion of goals, development of social capital etc.

The proposed structure, due to its presence, physiognomy, economy, history and perspectives could form an interesting kind of the above-described model form. This could be perceived as a synthesis of three concepts.

1. The concept of an open air, living museum, including places and actions of remembrance such as museums and old architecture, commerce, events, activities.
2. A diffused, extended or widespread museum, which traces the close relations between the territory and its history, as a narrative, tangible and intangible heritage with its

monuments, and of course the living experience, indispensable in the process of creating a memory, conserved and promoted, characterized by expansion in space.[13]

3. The concept of an incubator-nursery under an umbrella approach, which promotes the concept of a central planning and management of all the infrastructures and activities of the proposed structure.

The organization scheme should follow a certain flow:

Object->Goal->Target ->Stakeholder-> Expected result->Perspectives

In this scheme each one of the stakeholders keeps its own context, budget, theoretical tools, programming plans and perspectives, sharing a common goal through working together for the achievement of the specialized and general goals of the structure, which can be defined as a Community Development Model, through the use of the proper theoretical and practical instruments.

Local administration organizes, mediates, creates the necessary infrastructures, prepares and diffuses information cooperates with the local entrepreneurship and formulates terms for the optimal performance of the other shareholders through the use of the proper theoretical tools, such as five-year operational programmes and the local spatial programmes.

The other stakeholders, such as professionals-, particularly tourism oriented, associations and groups of locals, volunteers, tourism firms and educational organizations either specialized or general ones of a local interest, locals or outsiders participate, each one according to its own goals and possibilities.

7.1 Goals of the structure

Goals can be an action, identification of needs/ plan and process, qualitative-or quantitative and short, medium or long termed. They could be defined as general or specialized [1-2, 4-5]

7.1.1 General goals

- An alternative future perspective for the local Community
- The transition to a new economy with a rational use of resources
- The institutional formation of the management of silk economy
- A rebuilt identity
- A continuous readjustment between needs, resources and Community welfare
- The achievement of the maximum possible participation, the increase of the number of stakeholders, individuals-groups-people as communities.
- An efficient service planning and organization
- A long-term planning of the structure in development.
- The achievement of a self-regulating and self-fed economy.

7.1.2 Specialized goals

- The Municipality aims to set in function small incubators, widespread at the center of Soufli, which will promote local, exceptional, products or services, cooperating with functioning tourism entities and connected to destinations and happenings all over its territory, dealing, besides silk, with other fascinating sectors and destinations.

- Indeed, extremely important is the connection with the other destinations and values of the Municipality. Thus, fascinating destinations should be added such as the megalithic monuments, the petrified forest, the alevi tekkes, the stone-masonry mountainous architecture and the post-byzantine churches, in a double approach as an inspiration and a destination [4].

- The organization of the model structure in a coherent form
- The increase in the attraction of external stakeholders
- The increase in the use of the Information Society Technologies and the e-reorganization of the advertisement and sales
- Particularly for the silk factories the function of the reel propers is imperative, since they will produce real silk thread in a perspective of three years.
- A considerable increase in the sales of silk products
- Improvement in the indicators concerning economic and social parts of the Community, in two time-periods, defined by the guidance that a feasibility study will provide, possibly 5 and 10 years period, given in quantitative, measurable and comparable results. More specifically:
 - An increase of the number of registered visitorsAn increase in the numbers of accommodation reservations in the Municipal territory and secondly in the neighboring Municipalities.
- The difference in the average duration of stays.
- The difference in the indicator of unemployment in the active economically population of the settlement and the Municipality and the relevant indicator
- The difference in the aging and replacement indicators.

8 Epilogue

The key concept is Soufli to be established as a point where the Eastern and Western roads of silk will be met.

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