

Creating Alternative Flagships: Case Study of the Salt Pond of Angelochori, Greece



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Abstract Angelochori is a municipal unit of Thermaikos, a Municipality in Macedonia with coastlines of 52 km, two protected wetlands and a population with no real identity not only due to its villages' intense regionalism but also due to the rapidly increasing population. Angelochori has operating salt ponds and the surrounding environment is quite interesting. The Salt Pond's Guard House was left to ruin, but thanks to an idea by the President of the Educational Association of Angelochori, and in agreement with the Municipality, it has evolved into a flagship landmark (on the saltworks A.E. website where their salt ponds' location is on the Greek map; on Google, you will find the Guard's house location; this doesn't happen to their other facilities) and a meeting point for creative people from the surrounding area of Thessaloniki, amplifying the Municipality's reputation.

Keywords Salt ponds · Alternative flagships · Sustainable development

JEL Classification Y · Z

1 Introduction

This paper attempts to *present* the Salt Pond's Guard House in the Municipality of Thermaikos. A qualitative research was conducted including interviews with the President of the Cultural Association of Angelochori, an executive of the Municipality of Thermaikos and with one of the first artists to present their work in the Guard's house.

Also, secondary sources were used, websites and pages from social media.

The results accentuate the reuse of a space and its transformation into a cultural meeting point for people with environmental quests; a space which can become a flagship landmark for the Municipality.

The purpose of this paper is to

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- Showcase the benefits of mild human intervention on nature;
- Showcase the relations between civilization and environment;
- Showcase a way to create alternative flagship landmarks with a reference point to nature and civilization;
- Investigate the impact of actions aimed to upgrade the natural environment in cultural cohesion.

2 Culture—Space—Place

Braudel (2002) mentions that the meaning of culture is impossible to be defined “as one defines a straight line, a triangle or a chemical element”. A widely accepted definition is that by ‘culture’ by which we refer to the amount of material and spiritual values that were created by man in time (Bitsani, 2004). In another approach, the term is referred to as spiritual, moral and artistic expressions of life (Adoniadou, 2015).

One aspect of culture is that in today’s time of identity and value crisis, it can become a consistency factor in local communities. The cultural process is a process of reciprocation and interaction between people. Collectivity exceeds subjectivity and a person becomes worthy from the collectivity he obtains in his reciprocation (Poulios et al., 2015: 24).

According to older perceptions, a space could be reenacted objectively and culture would develop in it. However, culture isn’t something we talk about, but a special dimension from which we talk. It’s something from which we see but rarely what we do see (Hastrup, 2011: 353). Therefore, space is not objective. It is created by the way it is perceived through a specific—every time—cultural view. Space is a cultural creation as a place and a landscape and does not define culture (Boeschoten, 2021: 201).

Another definition of this ‘non-space’ (Auge, 1995) includes expressions that are formed socially as experiences in a space that transform it into a place, and are transferred spatially to be manifested outside of the borders in unfamiliar places. Such are globalized airport spaces, malls and traditional tourist destinations.

3 Identity and Reputation of a Place

In the competitive international environment, a place’s reputation is created through six (6) communication channels (Anholt, 2007) including tourism and its visitors’ experience, the policies that can affect its reputation due to publicity and the cultural interest they present: organizing high-level cultural activities, exporting artworks and artists and athletic achievements.

Important elements of a place’s materialistic character are the **First Rate Flagship Landmarks** (Deffner, 2012: 44). It is about symbols of material civilization which

often define a town's image and amplify its reputation. According to Clarke: "A place—a Region, a town, a neighborhood—blends a synthesis of historic, economic, social and political processes into a simple cultural image" (Kourliouros, 2001: 97). For that reason, any intervention on a town's image or attempt to create a new one cannot be ignored. History can not only create a new narration for the town but can also express the 'place's spirit' in words.

4 Sustainable Development

According to the standard definition, 'sustainable development' is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Defner, 2012: 46). Viable cultural development must preserve its identity and have only positive outcomes. It is also considered successful when policies are based on a cost-benefit analysis aimed to protect the environment and maintain its prosperity.

Establishing a powerful identity contributes to a place's attractiveness and visitation. It creates alternative forms of tourism, such as sea-related tourism, cruising tourism, conferences, cultural based on consuming the tangible or intangible cultural attractions and attracting high-level visitors (Lagos, 2005: 70; Velissariou et al., 2000: 41). One of them is organizing cultural activities for the residents and visitors of a town. Residents' participation in development is important so as not to alienate a place's character. The characteristics which a place's identity consists of relate to its abiotic components such as climate and geomorphologic elements as well as the natural environment, the intervention in space and how it's expressed. Alternatively, a place's identity is the foundation of a person's identity, consisting of knowledge and emotions that evolve in natural spaces (Giesecking et al., 2014).

Culture is included in the 'environment' section: structured or unstructured. In sustainable development, the local community plays a significant role given not only the fact that culture management and preservation are its responsibility but also because it's the immediate receiver of its results (Poulios et al., 2015: 17). Places which are advertised for their enwrapping atmosphere or their events and overall entertainment are the ones that win over their visitors.

5 Case Study

5.1 Methodology

A qualitative research was conducted including interviews with the President of the Cultural Association of Angelochori Mr. Evangelo Micho, the visual artist and supervisor of the Legal Department in the Municipality's Cultural Organization

Mrs. Androniki Rapti and composer and educator Mr. Petros Satrazanis. Secondary sources were used, but it is impressive that when I asked for a book about the local history or anything else that might refer to the salt ponds from my informants, after looking into it they didn't find anything relevant. The research conducted included websites of the Municipality, the Region of Central Macedonia, Saltworks A.E. and other Social Media.

6 Profile: The Municipality of Thermaikos

"A wonderful place to live", these are the words a visitor is greeted by on the Municipality's website. The Municipality of Thermaikos is a part of the Region of Central Macedonia and is subdivided into communities, with Peraia being the primary one. It was established by the Kallikratis programme in 2011 in the merging of the already existing Municipalities of Epanomi, Nea Michaniona and Thermaikos. Its population has increased over the last two decades by approximately 157%. This is due to the fact that some settlements were transformed from resorts to suburbs of Thessaloniki. The population in 1991 was 19,492 residents, while in the last population census it reached 50,264 local residents.

It is a seaside Municipality with coastlines reaching 52 km and two wetlands of high ecological significance, one in "Fanari" Epanomis and one in Angelochori. Both are enlisted in the "Natura 2000" programme of the European Union. The beaches in Peraia, Neon Epivatou, Agia Triada and Nea Michaniona, during the 1960s–1970s, were tourist resorts. There were also some establishments built in the area and it was used for scenes in a movie titled "Kati na kaii" by Giannis Dalanidis. In Agia Triada, there was also a functioning camping site (Kouziniopoulos, 2016). It is worth mentioning that today the Thermaic Gulf is a very burdened area.

We can also draw data about the Municipality of Thermaikos, on a Regional level, from the annual competitiveness and structural adjustment report on tourism written by Insete for the year 2019 for the Region of Central Macedonia. The report was published in 2020 and co-funded by the European Union. We notice that the municipality of Thermaikos does not have any traditional settlements and as it is clarified, settlements with any particular "historical, town planning, archaeological, folkloric, social and aesthetic" physiognomy. There aren't any in the museum directory either. On the contrary, it is a Municipality with the most beaches and blue flags in the regional unit of Thessaloniki.

In the Municipality's Strategic Planning for 2015–2019 which is posted on their website, a S.W.O.T. analysis is included. In the strong points section, there is a reference to **the coastal zone, the remarkable natural beauty and high residential development**. It is worth mentioning that civilization is not mentioned in the form of events or in the existence of a specific flagship landmark in the area. In the opportunity section, we find the development of domestic one-day tourism from Thessaloniki and the potential for alternative tourism. According to the study, the inadequate protection of the Thermaic Gulf, the coast erosion, the pressure for

non-environmentally sustainable practices created by the arbitrary housing development, the variable tourism market and the intense competition in coastal tourism are an immediate threat. Furthermore, the promotion of alternative tourism along with protecting the natural and cultural environment is considered a very pressing matter.

In terms of action planning, it is rather interesting how the cultural identity is being reinforced through “organizing and conducting events to **strengthen cultural identity**, improve institutions and events already operating, establishing new cultural institutions”. In an interview given by an employee of the Legal Department of the Municipality of Thermaikos, we detect the diversity in identity and, by extension, the cultural activities’ character in the eight local communities of the Municipality. From these communities, seven are constituted by refugees and only Epanomi has ‘local’ residents. The villages have intense localism even though they are beside one another. The Municipality organizes the annual events of each community based on the local elements. When asked about a local flagship landmark, she referred to three temples and the Angelochori Lighthouse which is not open to the public.

7 The Guard’s House: A Landscape, a Deserted House, an Idea That Became a Landmark

7.1 *The Salt Pond of Angelochori*

Since 1902, next to the lagoon in Angelochori, there has been an operating salt pond owned and monopolized by the government. In 1987, the salt pond of Angelochori, just like the others on Greek lands, belonged to the company “GREEK SALT PONDS A.E.”, controlled by the government. The area which hosts the salt ponds, the lagoon, the saltwater marshland and the sea life creates a unique wetland. From the 178 documented bird species, 48 are protected by the 79/409–85/411 Community Directive. Other species of mammals, amphibians and reptiles are protected by the 02/43 Directive, while 11 types of habitats have been documented.¹

On their website, the company states that the salt ponds’ uniqueness and their attraction to bird fauna is that in these areas, hunting is banned more effectively. So, they became an attraction pole for birds, whose protection is the company’s main concern: “the challenge in Greek salt competitiveness never stops. It keeps moving forward to where the growth and protection of the environment do not cancel each other out.”² The slogan on the website’s homepage is: “Producing salt, we conserve nature throughout Greece”.

¹ <https://www.thermaikos.gr/episkeptis/fysi/#limnothalassa-angelochoriou>, access on 28/4/2021.

² <https://saltworks.gr/page-34.html>.

Apart from the natural environment, on the Hellenic Railway Heritage website, the Angelochori salt pond railway, founded by the B.Δ/5-3-1918 (ΦΕΚ 51/Α/9-3-1918), has been listed in the Industrial Archaeology ‘monuments’ of our country.³

7.2 *The Salt Pond’s Guard House*

On the beach of Angelochori, near the salt ponds, there is a small building. For years it was a home for the Salt Pond’s Guard’s family until the 1980s when salt was no longer a monopoly. Since then, it has been left to ruin, doors and windows were stripped off and part of the roof was destroyed. The surrounding environment presented the same abandoned scene.

The man who wished to make better use of the house not only for its history but also for the area’s energy Mr. Evangelos Michos, President of the Educational Cultural Association of Angelochori, gave an interview about his idea⁴: “when I reached Angelochori, I came across an abandoned area and decided I would start, even on my own, with the house as a reference point.”

8 Findings

8.1 *Benefits of Mild Human Internation on Nature*

Evangelos Michos: “In this house, your soul rejoices. I know that the aura begins from the salt pond waters and you are ‘embraced’ by the calmness of the lagoon and the sea. In the West there is visual contact with mount Olympus and in the North with the Lighthouse. The light coming from the Lighthouse showers the house with disturbing”. He explains that he tried to ensure that the natural light wouldn’t be disrupted (by using candles) and neither would the fauna (producing sounds without amplifiers)”.

On 23 August 2018, the first event themed “fairytales about salt” took place at the Guard’s House. 150 people watched while sitting on boards over bricks. The screening was a ‘small miracle’ according to our informant, when he transferred the piano from his house to the House. On that night, people from the Upper Town Festival also came to see the event, while five photographers advertised the House on social media with their pictures.

Petros Satrazanis, a composer and educator, was the artist of the night. He participated, as he admitted, after being invited by Evangelos Michos to present something

³ <https://railwayheritage.blogspot.com/2015/04/aggelochori-saltworks-railway.html>, access on 2/5/2021.

⁴ Evangelos Michos, President of the Educational Cultural Association of Angelochori, gave an interview about his idea to make better use of the house.

‘of his’ and he accepted the invitation because the idea of being on a beach with a piano, playing and talking to people was particularly enticing.⁵ His answer about the space and the feeling it created is quoted as such:

“I often look at pictures of that summer night in 2019 and even though they travel me back to that location and its unquestionable beauty, they need my own memories to complete the ... transfer...I remember we started playing as the sun was setting ... the sounds of the natural piano disappeared in the salt ponds and people arrived with anticipation in their eyes, as if they were expecting to see and hear ‘everything’ in just a few hours even though there wasn’t enough light or sound support. Perhaps, in the end, the stillness of those moments is what can’t be recorded and ‘saved’ on any digital recording unit?” “For the purpose of connecting the events to the environment and the environmental consciousness, it is worth mentioning that during the quarantine period the House, and the areas surrounding it, was a reference point for families and friends. It was used to organize children’s parties. House chores were loved and from February 2021 until the spring, many actions took place all of which ended up at the Guard’s House for a meet or a Dionysian gathering, as our informant mentions. The actions are organized by the Educational Cultural Association of Angelochori and are followed by environmental organizations such as ‘Save your Hood’ in Thessaloniki. At this point, we should point out that the Municipality supports all of the actions. As far as the audience at these events is concerned, according to Michos, it is 80% people from the town of Thessaloniki and Peraia and few from Angelochori because they are just now beginning to embrace it.

The Salt Pond’s Guard House has a Facebook group with 1,275 members. The members post pictures from their visit to the house or different pictures representing the beauty of the scenery. In all of the landscape pictures, there are ‘likes’ and friendly comments which demonstrates an intimacy. The administrator posts event programmes and actions concerning mostly cleaning the shores.

9 The Alternative Flagship

9.1 *European Maritime Days and Their Connection to the Guard’s House*

European Maritime Day is celebrated each year on May 20th and seeks to emphasize the important role seas have in citizens’ lives and the European effort for sustainable development.⁶

The Municipality of Thermaikos, through its Legal Department, organizes annual events from April until June. It is worth mentioning that at these events, the Guard’s House was used as a cultural space and not just as a place for cleaning. Specifically,

⁵ Petros Satrazanis, a composer and educator participated in a concert at the Guard’s House.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/maritimeaffairs/maritimeday/index_en, access on 10/4/2021.

on 12 May 2019, an installation art exhibition was held titled “collap” (sea) with big sea sculptures by the artist Stella Varna.

In that spirit, the events for 2021 started off with a web conference about “The Salt Pond’s Guard House in Angelochori”. The Municipality mentions in their press release: “Angelochori, the Aegean, London and our pioneers narrate new practices that love the sea”. At the conference, amongst others, a few words were shared by Mr. Evangelos Michos who talked about the House’s history and the present, composer Petros Satrazanis, a photographer who is fanatic about the place Mr. Chrysostomos (Tommy) Courtis and representatives of the environmental organizations.

9.1.1 The Poster

Androniki Rapti, designed the poster for the European Maritime Days for 2021 themed “The Guard’s House”, emphasizing its importance and the impact people who thought of using it as an event space had. In the poster, we see a man leaning over and cleaning. Mrs. Rapti mentions that the man who appears on the first level is Vangelis (Evangelos Michos) because in his face she saw people with a conscience and for that reason she used the Guard’s House as a background. Vangelis is leaning over and holding the house on his back so the new generation, a young boy on the top of the poster, can “step on it”. The child holding a trowel wants to contribute.

Over the child, the map of Europe corresponds to the world’s environment. She believes that the house, which has no particular architecture, could be located in any country.

10 Conclusions

Everything we obtained from the interviews and the conference proves that the Guard’s House is not an ‘interpreted’ version of the virtual representation as highlighted by Scarles (2004), but a virtual intervention in the transformation of material landscapes in order to be used in the tourism industry. It is not a space occupation by the public which seeks an escape from reality. People live in this space, care for it and save the time spent for its care and maintenance of the ecosystem that has hosted and entertained them (entertainment in the sense of lifelong learning). All of these activities are communicated through the European Maritime Days and their accounts on Facebook and Twitter. Promoting the events and the area enhances the Municipality’s reputation while giving it an alternative landmark oriented towards civilization as well as the natural environment.

The joint activities and the care for the Salt Pond’s Guard House can become a common meeting point and new memories can form a mutual identity.

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