

Mudurnu: The Realities of a Small Turkish Silk Road Town vs. UNESCO World Heritage

A. Ege YILDIRIM

Terra Mudurnu Culture Tourism and Real Estate Inc., Evliya Çelebi Mh. Sadi Konuralp Cd. No:5/2, Nejat Eczacıbaşı Binası, Beyoğlu 34430 İstanbul, Türkiye;  egay@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper presents the story of a heritage management professional's journey through her various roles, from the academic, consultant, administrator, and property owner through to entrepreneur, to support the cultural and natural heritage-led sustainable development of the Historic Guild Town of Mudurnu, a small town inscribed on Türkiye's UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List and located on the northwest Anatolian section of the Silk Road. The author first provides the background of her doctoral dissertation on urban conservation projects and governance, the Mudurnu Cultural Heritage Site Management Plan preparation and implementation periods, the nomination file prepared for the UNESCO World Heritage List, and the context in which it failed to be inscribed on the World Heritage List. She then presents the experiences of the following civilian entrepreneurial period, where she founded Terra Mudurnu Culture Tourism and Real Estate Inc. with her partners, restored a historic building in Mudurnu called Madanlar Mansion, and started operating it as a boutique hotel. The author shares her interpretation of events and situations in Mudurnu from the perspectives of the "people," "economy," and "politics" challenges in heritage management and destination development. She juxtaposes the historical trajectory of the town—its rise, decline, and potential future recovery—with contemporary global trends like climate-driven tourism shifts and neo-ruralization, linking these macro perspectives to localized challenges and opportunities. While acknowledging the resilience of cities and their tangible heritage in the context of the "longue durée," the author testifies that the creative and persistent search for new and improved models in the path of culture and heritage-led sustainable development needs to be humbly reconciled with local realities, seeing the mix of successes and failures as a learning experiment on the limits and possibilities for heritage professionals contributing to broader society.

Keywords: Mudurnu; sustainable development; UNESCO World Heritage; tourism destination; economics of conservation; community engagement.

Introduction

With this paper, I take the opportunity to reflect on my experiences and the current state of affairs in Mudurnu, a small historic town located on the northwest Anatolian section of the Silk Road, in the modern-day Bolu province of Türkiye (Figures 1-2). I write in "first person single," as it is a profoundly personal and in-depth account, which I believe has its unique value from a documentary point of view, as a first-hand narrative, and as a primary source of information. On the occasion of this journal issue being on sustainable management of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS), I will attempt to place these experiences of heritage management in the context of Mudurnu's aspiration to be inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (WHL). As can be detected from the paper's title, where the site's "realities" are placed "against" the WH prospect, there are specific challenges of heritage management in Mudurnu that make inscription on the

How to cite

Yildirim, A. E. (2024). Mudurnu: The Realities of a Small Turkish Silk Road Town vs. UNESCO World Heritage. *Culture. Society. Economy. Politics*. 4(2), 75-91. <https://doi.org/10.2478/csep-2024-0012>

ISSN (online) 2810-2010

<https://website.sciendo.com/publication/culture-society-economy-politics/>

<http://www.facultateademanagement.ro/culture-sep/>

WHL a highly ambitious proposition, with much work that still needs to be done. As a heritage professional, I have done everything in my power with great commitment, thus seeing the limits of what can realistically be achieved under the current circumstances.

The approach and methodology of the paper are to provide readers with an understanding of what these efforts of mine as a heritage professional (in an official capacity and beyond) have been, how the heritage management process has interacted with local socio-economic dynamics, and what remains at the end, as lessons learned and future forecasts. I first provide the background of my doctoral dissertation on urban conservation projects and governance, the Mudurnu Cultural Heritage Site Management Plan preparation and implementation periods, the nomination file prepared for the UNESCO World Heritage List, and the context in which it failed to be inscribed on the World Heritage List. I then present the experiences of the “civilian entrepreneurial” period that followed. I founded Terra Mudurnu Culture Tourism and Real Estate Inc. with my partners, restored a historic building in Mudurnu called Madanlar Mansion, and started operating it as a boutique hotel. I share my interpretation of events and situations in Mudurnu from the perspectives of the “people,” “economy,” and “politics” challenges in heritage management and destination development.

This account can be valuable to fellow heritage managers and other stakeholders interested in their local heritage, as it fully addresses the complexity and multi-faceted nature of heritage management, using one site as a laboratory and coherent case study. My experience spans over fifteen years and covers academia, consultancy, bureaucracy, politics, and business enterprise. While inherently subjective, this self-reflection is sincere, transparent and analytical at the same time, offering insights that cannot be reached through an academic research approach alone.

As for the foundational questions driving the investigation, I suppose they are as follows:

- How far can a heritage professional go to preserve and “save” a site, particularly regarding policy implementation?
- How should we define our responsibilities as heritage managers toward society, particularly balancing scientific/professional principles with the realities of the actual communities of heritage sites?
- How can successful “sustainable development” models be developed for small historic towns and landscapes, with consideration for their regional contexts?



Figure 1. Mudurnu landscape with Clock Tower. © A. Oguzhan, 2017;

Figure 2. Mudurnu landscape with mosques and Armutçular Mansion. © S. Parlak, 2014

Author's history of engagement in Mudurnu

A summary of my trajectory in Mudurnu is as follows: My doctoral research (2008-2011) at Ankara University on “urban conservation projects and the organizing of actors” featured Mudurnu as a case study for the “small town typology,” through the fieldwork of which I came to know the town (Yıldırım, 2011). Afterward, a post-doctoral research fellowship from the AnaMed Research Center at Koç University in Istanbul in 2013 helped kickstart the process for the Mudurnu Cultural Heritage Site Management Plan, prepared by me and my inter-disciplinary team with a fund of the East Marmara Development Agency and officially adopted by 2014 (Yıldırım et al, 2014). To help implement the plan, I worked as a site management consultant for Mudurnu Municipality, afterward being appointed as Site Manager by the municipality (2015) and later (after a legislative amendment) by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MoCT) (2016). Together with various public, private, and community stakeholders from the region, we undertook numerous projects from 2015 to 2019 to implement the management plan vision for a “protected and developed Mudurnu,” during which I also acted as the UNESCO World Heritage (WH) nomination file coordinator (Figure 3) (Yıldırım, 2016). My site manager duties ended in 2019 after our attempt to inscribe Mudurnu to the World Heritage List failed, and the local elections resulted in a new mayor, who did not have the same interest in heritage management.

At this point, I had been deeply committed to Mudurnu's community, being a founding member of a local non-governmental organization (MAKDER, the Association to Protect and Develop Mudurnu Historical Bazaar). I bought a one-third share of a historic building (nicknamed Madanlar Mansion) near the historic town center. I founded the company Terra Mudurnu Culture Tourism and Real Estate Inc. in 2021. After our joint undertaking as co-owners to restore Madanlar Mansion, Terra Mudurnu became the tenant and operator of the new boutique hotel housed within this building. Since June 2022, I have been residing in Mudurnu, having moved here from Istanbul, and continue supervising our operations at Madanlar Mansion and under Terra Mudurnu to support the town's cultural heritage and overall cultural tourism development.



Figure 3. Front and Back Cover Pages of the 2018 annual Mudurnu Site Management Bulletin (SM Directorate)

Mudurnu's UNESCO World Heritage nomination

Mudurnu is a deep-rooted, ancient Silk Road town in the Western Black Sea region. An important trade, craft and cultural center of the early Ottoman period, Mudurnu offers beautiful examples of monumental and civilian architecture and an impressive landscape developed with the cultural accumulation of the Akhi tradition (Ottoman trade and craft guild system). The settlement, located in a narrow and quiet river valley, contains many tangible and intangible cultural and natural assets, including Sultan mosques, the bazaar where the 700-year-old Merchant's Prayer still continues to be practiced, and a rich texture of timber housing. In 2018, the district center received the title of CittaSlow (Slow City).

"The Historic Guild Town of Mudurnu" was inscribed on Türkiye's UNESCO WH Tentative List in 2015 as part of efforts to implement the site management plan (SMP). This was an atypical approach, as the MoCT policy is for the preparation of site management plans only as part of the World Heritage track, in line with the legislative reform of 2004 following UNESCO WH Centre's advice to the State Party of Türkiye, but contrary to the legislation stating that these "management plans are prepared for any registered conservation area" in Türkiye (article 3, paragraphs 10 and 11; additional article 2) (Turkish Republic, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 1983/2006). The Mudurnu approach departed from the latter point, and the management plan came before the emergence of WH on the town's agenda. I find this to be noteworthy, as I believe professionally that heritage site management planning is a fundamental tool that should not be exclusive to WH sites but rather be mainstreamed across the country for the sustainability of all its heritage sites. Nevertheless, Mudurnu currently remains included in the country's UNESCO WH and site management portfolio.

The proposed Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) in the WH nomination file titled "Historic Guild Town of Mudurnu: Testimonies of Akhism" can be summarized as follows: *"Observed uniquely in Turkish communities, Akhism combined moral manners with arts and crafts, considering work as a form of worship and providing social justice and cohesion to Seljuk and Ottoman society. This way of life took root in Anatolian towns like Mudurnu, where its legacy survives in the most intact and longstanding manner, both as a living tradition and in the physical milieu"* (Turkish Republic, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2018, 2019).

Mudurnu is a uniquely preserved historic town representing a legacy fundamental to Turkish and Ottoman culture. So why did it not get inscribed?

While the technical merits of the nomination may, of course, be argued at the intellectual level, I believe a large part of this result was the matter of institutional capacity. Mudurnu is a tiny municipality, and it has not had the robust patronage of a public or private actor to help provide what it takes for successful nominations: budget allocations and investments for research, conservation, and lobbying at the national and international levels. A small makeshift team of experts and volunteers – organized by me as a site manager with some support from the Municipality and the MoCT – made a tremendous effort to assemble an adequate nomination file and play their part in the evaluation process. The final Advisory Body recommendation of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), however, stated that *"Unfortunately, the nomination dossier (...) ha[s] not succeeded in conveying in what way the architectural and urban fabric of the town can be said to illustrate physical attributes which are exceptionally or uniquely linked to the traditions of Akhism"* (ICOMOS, 2019).

The State Party of Türkiye decided not to pursue the path of contesting this recommendation, as is sometimes done to have the WH Committee amend a decision of "non-inscription" (N) to a "deferral" (D). Factors such as the lack of familiarity with the Akhism culture within the European-dominated ICOMOS WH evaluation community, the

profile of the evaluation mission expert being heavily material and architecture-oriented, and the lack of a sufficiently clear message from our part on the site's unique values—perhaps we needed a strategy of defining the OUV with more focus on the cultural landscape elements—must also have played a role. Furthermore, the breaking news about the bankruptcy of the gigantic Burj Al Babas thermal resort project just a couple of kilometers outside of the town, beyond a hill to the southwest, may very well have sabotaged Mudurnu's image as a preserved historic landscape.

Can Mudurnu be nominated again and be successfully inscribed? This is a possibility, in my view. However, it would require a meticulous OUV study—involving a competent research team with relevant knowledge coordinated by an expert with a good understanding of the WH inscription process—and a long-term (maybe 10-year), concerted, resolved, and well-funded effort by both the local and national government (Mudurnu Cultural Heritage Site Management, 2019). A new attempt for nomination may be coming up as part of the site management plan update coordinated by the new site manager (also the Bolu Province Director of Museums) as per a 2023 directive from the relevant General Directorate of the MoCT in Ankara.

My professional opinion is that the WH nomination process raised the profile of Mudurnu to a certain degree nationally and internationally (Figures 4, 5). It also caused enthusiasm among the local community in the first years of the attempt, but this widespread enthusiasm was lost after the unsuccessful first nomination. The UNESCO label did not have enough time to influence tourism or the cultural and economic activity in Mudurnu in a lasting manner. The fact that Mudurnu is still on the Tentative List causes the MoCT to periodically show interest, perhaps to renew the nomination strategy, as Tentative Sites are always part of the ministry's future planning in the field of UNESCO work. This official interest and continued monitoring must be harnessed for a serious technical work package in the foreseeable future, while the state of conservation of the site and the institutional memory of the first nomination still provide favorable conditions for a second nomination attempt.



Figure 4. Silk extraction demonstration during the European Open Doors Day, 2015.

© E. Yildirim;



Figure 5. Archaeology workshop for schoolchildren during Museums Week, 2019.

© E. Yildirim

After “official” site management”: the “civilian” life of a heritage manager

In what could be considered an unusual experience, what started in Mudurnu as “normative work” was followed and complemented by a second “deep implementation” period. Normative principles formulated in research and site management planning and administrative decisions made for project coordination within the site manager's duty

gave way to the direct execution of construction work and private business operations within the historic built environment.

The impetus driving the creation of Terra Mudurnu and Madanlar Mansion as its pilot project was demonstrating a best practice example where repairing and reusing of cultural properties is economically feasible and rewarding. At the same time, the authenticity of the cultural fabric and ecological principles are also respected (Figures 6-7) (Madanlar Konağı, n.d.). Further to this cultural property, Terra Mudurnu has taken steps to organize the other tourism businesses, provide tourism information services, promote Mudurnu's heritage in the national media, social media, and heritage/culture/tourism sector events, and conduct outreach to potential investors to buy, repair and revitalize cultural properties in the town (Figures 8-11) (Terra Mudurnu, n.d.; Yildirim, 2024c).



Figure 6. Terra Mudurnu logo. © E. Yildirim;
Figure 7. Madanlar Mansion logo. © E. Yildirim

As stated in my intervention in the international SDG Nugget Hour webinar earlier this year, “Terra Mudurnu envisions a model of development for the ‘Historic Guild Town of Mudurnu,’ a UNESCO World Heritage candidate and a Cittaslow, which ensures a sustainable economy and quality of life, based on conservation of local culture and nature, to make it a high-end tourism destination, and a community where young people would want to live. Our first cultural property project is the Madanlar Mansion Boutique Hotel, a historic Mudurnu house accommodating ecologically responsible heating, energy use, and waste management. Terra Mudurnu also prioritizes female economic empowerment, engaging with SDG5, with its female founder and all-female staff, including two local women working at the hotel” (Yildirim, 2024b).

Shifting from the “expert” (academic and professional) to the “entrepreneur” (company founder, property owner, and hotel manager) persona has been fascinating, challenging, and humbling, as if I had embarked on an entirely new career, having to downplay many of my existing skills and accepting to be a novice, learning new things every day. On the one hand, the Terra Mudurnu work was an opportunity to play an idealist, ambitious, and social-minded leadership role; on the other hand, it proved how difficult it is to run and keep a business afloat, managing relationships with local community members on an everyday basis. The ambition of Terra Mudurnu to create a successful model of cultural and natural heritage-led sustainable rural regeneration through a private investment platform encountered the realities of how much financial, human, and time resources are needed, raising questions on whether we could succeed. Our main lesson so far is that an excellent understanding of how businesses operate is necessary to successfully implement property and destination development. Idealist normative advice from heritage professionals should be tempered with a humble recognition of socio-economic parameters and complexities within a local community.



Figures 8-11. Photographs shot in Madanlar Mansion for the Business Channel Turk magazine. © Ö. Basaran, 2024

The “people” challenge: community dynamics

One of the tenets of contemporary heritage discourse is the centrality of communities, particularly local ones, in the concept of “people-centered” approaches. While faithfully pursuing this principle in our work in Mudurnu, I have come to think after all my years in the profession that communities are not necessarily altruistic or optimistic but reflect both the good and bad traits of the human condition. In other words, communities can be problematic and struggle with issues, making heritage conservation problematic.

In Mudurnu, the challenges related to the community can primarily be attributed to demographic changes resulting from a declining economy and employment opportunities, firstly over the last century – with the rise of modern capitalist production systems, new regional highways, etc. – and secondly, the last two decades, when the 2001 economic recession in Türkiye caused the town’s leading employer, Mudurnu Poultry company, to close down. Historically a highly educated, urbane, and industrious community, Mudurnu lost its more qualified residents to larger cities in the country; these families occasionally visited the town on holidays or short periods in the summer.

The quality of human resources, in terms of education, skills, and worldviews, has unfortunately dropped in these last decades, as influx from surrounding villages created a more rural and conservative population. Mudurnu’s socio-economic human development level fell back among the districts (the administrative regions that include towns and their hinterlands) of Bolu province, and much of the population is still preoccupied with basic needs such as heating and road infrastructure, social services for children and the older adults, street cleaning and control of stray dogs. This citizen profile does not appear to prioritize the topics of culture, heritage, and tourism. While the merchants and other town residents desire tourism to develop in Mudurnu and complain of the lack of progress, neither the municipality nor private groups are taking serious steps to invest in and prepare for tourist visitation.

During my site management work between 2013 and 2019, I found a very supportive environment with Mayor Mehmet Inegöl and district governor Kerem Süleyman Yüksel, which in turn helped other stakeholders, including local townsfolk, public agencies, non-governmental organizations, and universities to coalesce around the site management process. In the subsequent mayoral term (2019-24), the community mobilization for cultural heritage and tourism also lost momentum with the municipality's loss of interest. After the last local election in March 2024, the new mayor Dogan Onurlu and his administration have created a new expectation for this mobilization to be revived, as yet awaited to unfold.

After this snapshot of the “local” population, it is worth looking at some stakeholders from “outside Mudurnu.” Mudurnu has always drawn the interest of architects and art history scholars, with its wealth of Black Sea timber-frame vernacular architecture, the large and intact urban conservation area nestled in a narrow green valley, its Ottoman-era monuments such as the sultan mosques of Yıldırım Bayezid and Suleiman the Magnificent, and its local folk culture and crafts connected to the Akhi guild heritage. Our work with the site management and UNESCO WH nomination produced several publications and paper presentations, drawing national and international collegiate community interest. References to some of these are given at the end of the article. It may even be that the heritage of Mudurnu is appreciated more by those outside of the town than those living in it..! Localizing the interest and ownership of this heritage remains a goal that has yet to be reached to a satisfactory level. Some stakeholders at the province level, such as the Bolu Province Directorate for Culture and Tourism and the Western Black Sea branch of TÜRSAB (Turkish Union of Travel Agencies), stand ready and willing to support Mudurnu’s cultural tourism development but do not seem positioned to create a noteworthy change by themselves, without the local authority in Mudurnu reaching out to them for collaboration.

There are also incomers to Mudurnu, people from Istanbul or elsewhere buying homes here – some historic buildings in the old settlement (conservation area), and some flats in newly built social housing projects to the south and north of town – as a summer residence or for a new life in a calmer, quieter town after the crowded, expensive metropolitan life with its earthquake and pandemic risks become too tiresome. This may eventually change the demographics of Mudurnu, bringing in a more urban mindset with both its positive and negative effects.

Speaking of the “urban-rural mindset” duality, I have experienced this as an interesting challenge. The calmer, friendlier, more walkable, logistically easier, less expensive town life in Mudurnu, also with cleaner air and easier access to natural food sources, is welcome in contrast to the hectic and tiring urban life; however, the professional manner of conducting business and the social facilities afforded to a single female individual are limited here. I moved to Mudurnu by myself and have since been supervising the daily operations of Terra Mudurnu more or less single-handedly. It has been a radical change in lifestyle to reside in this small town and stay busy with mundane operational work at Madanlar. I have tried to keep this balance by continuing my involvement in national and international professional networks, periodically traveling to Istanbul, other cities in Türkiye, and abroad, often for invited speaker roles.

Over a decade of working in Mudurnu has given me a rich network of social relations and familiarity in the town, which is a valuable resource (Figure 12); however, the network of people I collaborate with can only provide limited help and companionship in the complexities of managing the work here. Madanlar Mansion boutique hotel has two local staff and several local vendors who are able and helpful within their scope of work; the Terra Mudurnu staff/ consultants based in Istanbul and Bolu – a young urban planner, a hotel marketing and reservation management company, the accountant team and the web designer – provide support from a long distance. The co-owners of Madanlar – the head of the family from Mudurnu who originally lived in the house, an elderly gentleman who resides in Ankara and whose sons reside abroad, and a fashion designer from

Istanbul – are all supportive of the project in spirit and check on the state of affairs periodically, but are not involved in the daily operations. The partners of Terra Mudurnu, i.e., close to thirty company shareholders, are similarly supportive from afar, occasionally providing financial contributions, albeit not enough to cover all costs, which I compensate with personal financing. Among our partners is the Black Sea Sustainable Tourism Program, an emerging initiative targeting North American and European visitors. This highly qualified, urban group of “Terra Mudurnu/ Madanlar team members” is valuable, but their absence in local operations keeps us a relatively weak actor in the Mudurnu ecosystem.

What can be gathered from this picture is that community stakeholders are diverse in profile and attitude and change over time. At the time of the site management (2014-19) and UNESCO WH nomination, many of these diverse stakeholders worked together toward the goal of inscription. After this period, this synergy lost the critical mass of strong and willing partners to continue heritage management and nomination follow-up, with only a smaller group within the community maintaining interest. It is necessary to keep the momentum of collaboration through hard times and long periods, withstanding fluctuations and incidents, so that heritage management gains are not lost again. Interest can be revived, but at higher costs, both human and heritage-wise.



Figure 12. Madanlar Mansion Opening Day. © L. Evdüzün, 2022

The “economy” challenge: developing a sustainable tourism destination

Another well-known principle in heritage management is the “conservation-use” or “conservation-development” balance, and much of the literature and advocacy is about defending the conservation of authenticity and heritage values in the face of development threats. The other side of the coin is when neglect and lack of investment or economic vitality cause the eventual decay and loss of heritage sites; this is a more relevant challenge in Mudurnu.

The town's economy has suffered since the 2001 recession and the closing down of Mudurnu Poultry Company; certain efforts emerged in the early 2000s to revitalize it through cultural tourism. This initially brought me to study Mudurnu's heritage conservation and site management works, including the UNESCO WH candidacy and CittaSlow status, which provided an additional chapter in this journey. The town has yet to reach a threshold of economic activity in tourism to create a change in its quality of daily life or the state of maintenance of its built environment. This is where Terra Mudurnu aspires to present a solution as a private initiative, bringing in investments for good practice. This can be done at the level of single cultural properties, building by building, starting with flagship sites. It can be done at the destination level, where the authorized and capable entities organize the community and bring tourism services and infrastructure, then invest in marketing and promotion to attract visitors, in a virtuous cycle of "supply and demand" (see also Figure 13).

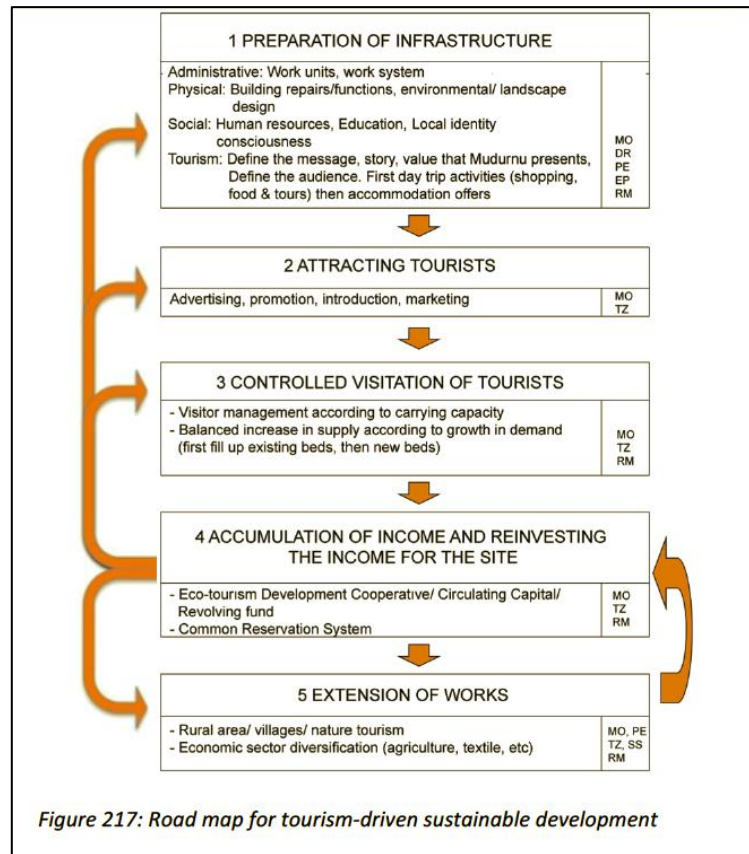


Figure 13. Flowchart of a strategic road map for tourism-driven sustainable development from the SMP (SM Directorate, 2014)

At the single property level, Madanlar Mansion has been a successful initiative in terms of "saving a historic building," i.e., restoring it according to high conservation standards and reusing it with similarly high boutique hotel standards for the time being. The hotel can be considered new, just as our company can be viewed as a start-up, as they are only 2-3 years old. Our occupancy levels are pretty low but are increasing slowly, and we hope that the operation income and expenditure will break even in the next couple of years as we improve our marketing and find more ways to optimize costs. There may very well be a limit to how much profit can be gained from a boutique hotel or any other tourism business in Mudurnu, owing to limits of how much visitation Mudurnu can draw as an entire destination.

With Madanlar Mansion, we have discovered the many challenges of operating a boutique hotel in a rural area, including infrastructure (maintaining the architectural features of a timber building, insulation, heating system maintenance, sewage, pest

control, garden works, etc.), finding and managing suitable technicians and hotel staff, managing reservations, marketing events and bureaucracy (Sustainable Tourism and Zero Waste certification, taxes, etc). We have also seen that without proper road and waste services from the municipality, our business cannot function adequately, and the tourism community must access municipal leadership to hear out our problems and needs, and provide solutions.

Individual cultural properties and businesses depend in one way or another on the overall state of the town, and the need to develop Mudurnu as a tourism destination at district scale is undeniable, especially as cultural tourism seems to be the most obvious way forward for a town like Mudurnu, given its cultural and natural heritage wealth and the broader socio-economic trends. However, inspired by some cases one observes, one asks: Could one “attraction point” make a difference for a whole town or region?

Through Terra Mudurnu, we have been organizing events at Madanlar, for both visitors and locals, and we often collaborate with neighboring hotels, restaurants in the bazaar and other local vendors. These include yoga retreats, academic Turkish culture immersion trips, English language learning workshops, wine tasting, mushroom picking, garden parties for vocational school students, group dinners, cinema workshops, film screenings, and nature walks. While these are often labor-intensive to organize, may not draw enough participants, and have small profit margins, they are bound to help Madanlar’s visibility and increase in quality and quantity over time. Alternatively to the boutique hotel, we are also exploring new models to keep Madanlar active: perhaps as an artist residency or exclusively an event space, depending on finding suitable sponsors and partners.



Figure 14. Mandalar Mansion Yoga retreat. © E. Yildirim, 2023

Both Madanlar and other tourism businesses in Mudurnu are small-scale operations and need to be complemented by more significant investments by financially powerful actors, to undertake the repair and reuse of important historic buildings like the impressive mansions of Armutçular and Haytalar (dating from the late 19th c.), museums (the award-winning Akhism Museum, the City Museum, the archaeological park, etc.) and industrial heritage sites (the old Tanneries from the 1940s and the Electrical Power Plant from the 1920s). Alternatively, a successful restaurant that markets a regional gastronomic specialty with an innovative and attractive concept branding may trigger tourist interest in the town.

Based on the idea that cultural tourism should be the primary driver and investment channel for sustainable development in Mudurnu, our efforts under Terra Mudurnu have focused on this sector. However, just as a change of the model for Madanlar is in question now, it is true that, as a matter of good sustainability practice, other lines of development should be considered to diversify beyond tourism, particularly regarding the Slow City principles. Projects for revitalizing cultural properties can extend to education, youth, arts and culture centers, youth hostels, general public or commercial offices, or simply housing, which can all have a more substantial urban-level impact and public benefit when considered within an urban design framework, to include their surroundings, and consider accessibility, mobility, and functional relations. The heritage site management plan and the conservation and spatial development plans in force for the entire town, come into play at this point, providing a ready system and foundation for building these projects.

In any case, a small town like Mudurnu requires much institutional support, which may come from public and private sources. The MoCT has created various public funding schemes for cultural property repairs, although these are stretched thin among the thousands of properties in need across the country. Ministry grants have been used in Mudurnu for several historic buildings over the last decade, which remains a symbolic amount (Figure 15). In Türkiye, we see some cases of institutional patronage, i.e., the Geyre Foundation of Koç Holding for the ancient site of Aphrodisias, or the decades-long support by the academic community and public agencies of the WHS of Safranbolu, the OUV of which also involves being a Silk Road Ottoman town. Some other well-known cases serve as warnings of the dangers of uncontrolled tourism development, like Alaçatı near İzmir on the West Coast (gentrification), Sapanca to the east of Istanbul (inflation of overpriced bungalow type hotels), and Uzungöl in Trabzon (overdevelopment around the lake catering to wealthy Arab clients that has degenerated the local landscape). This is why socially responsible investors, kept in check by an informed local community and visionary local leadership, are important to providing the “right kind of financial and institutional resources” (Yıldırım, 2019, 2024a).

In the meantime, Terra Mudurnu is continuing efforts to find such investors, through a new partnership with real estate consultants from Istanbul who are working under the Coldwell Banker system. Some of the above-mentioned cultural properties are on sale (Figure 16), and our consultants are preparing to advertise them on their vast global network.



Figure 15. A traditional house in Mudurnu being restored with a Ministry of Culture and Tourism grant. © E. Yıldırım, 2019;

Figure 16: Haytalar Mansion for sale. © E. Yıldırım, 2024

The “politics” challenge: local government elections

Besides these efforts to access financial resources that would trigger the cultural heritage-based sustainable development of Mudurnu, I decided to try to access decision-making powers for the exact cause by going into politics. I joined the People’s Republican Party (CHP), Türkiye’s main opposition political party, in early 2023 and was elected to the board of the CHP Mudurnu district branch later in the year. I then submitted my candidacy for a councilor’s seat but was nominated by the party only in sixth place (the highest ranking female, with two others after me), failing to be elected, as CHP won the mayorship and took five seats in the municipal council (Figure 17).

My main goal was to be able to influence decisions related to cultural heritage and tourism, so I then sought to be an advisor to the mayor, but due to some unfortunate and “inexplicable” political dynamics, I was rejected. This disappointing outcome proved the harsh reality that political currency is not based on meritocracy—as an internationally recognized expert in the field and having studied Mudurnu for years, one would assume the municipality would be eager to benefit from my services—but on long-standing local patronage relationships, not to mention the patriarchal social norms (Figure 18).



Figure 17. Poster of CHP candidates for mayor and councilors, including the author (top row, on the right end). © E. Yildirim, 2024;

Figure 18. Public Open Day of the municipality, when the new mayor, Doğan Onurlu, presents what his administration has done since he was elected for CHP in March 2024. © E. Yildirim, 2024

Slowly recovering from this blow, I saw that focusing on developing Terra Mudurnu and Madanlar Mansion as a private initiative was the way to go. The municipality did agree to quietly partner with Terra Mudurnu for a grant application to the Ministry of Industry and Technology for a cultural tourism capacity-building project, but this was not selected for funding. The current site manager has been hostile toward collaboration with me, while the Province Director for Culture and Tourism has been more open and supportive. While we remain open to partnering with the public authorities, pursuing our independent agenda to be an exemplary business and community resource will have to suffice for now.

The lesson that could be drawn from these experiences is that “political capital” is essential to achieve successful outcomes for heritage management, as with any other social topic. This can take various forms, i.e., through access to different types of stakeholders in robust decision-making or influential positions or by becoming an influential stakeholder through access to economic resources or ownership of businesses and capital. “Social capital,” in the form of popularity and respectable reputation, is valuable, too. However, “material/ financial capital” is a safer route to gain this influence, especially when it can be demonstrated to bring community-wide economic benefits such as employment and more business for local merchants. For the time being, such a positive political force has yet to take effect in Mudurnu.



Figure 19. Mudurnu Arasta, shopfront of ironsmith Emin Ince, now the Akhism Museum.

© Y. Karakasoglu, 2018;

Figure 20. Mudurnu, residential fabric. © A. Oguzhan 2017



As conclusion: the “Ups and Downs” of a town, projections for the future, and resilience of heritage

After all the above-mentioned trials and tribulations, it is a relief that experts in architectural and urban heritage conservation can still find solace in tangible heritage – “the beauty of architectural ruins” – however neglected it may be. Mudurnu’s cultural significance remains in place: as a historic town and cultural landscape, with all its physical textures and layers, modest way of life, and many of its traditional ways preserved. For heritage preservationists, maintaining the physical heritage sites is still a fundamental aspect of our work. While the political economy and sociocultural ecosystem are what personally concern me more, I also appreciate lately the idea that we can always “go back to the architecture,” studying and documenting buildings and exploring ways to repair them, without “overthinking” about the social fabric around them. When social dynamics do not support heritage management, heritage sites can withstand and outlive these circumstances as long as their physical conditions are kept sufficiently safe until social dynamics return in their favor. This is a prime example of resilience.

Historians and scholars of urbanism often point to the “rise and fall” of cities and settlements, when they expand or shrink, when their economy booms or declines. In this respect, heritage is evidence of the better times of a place, reminding those in the present day of past glories, their knowledge, and lessons connecting the past to the future. The realities of Mudurnu today show that a once wealthy and important center of trade, crafts, and culture is in decline and undergoing cultural shifts. One way to see it is that the town is experiencing a “down” period in the “ups and downs” of its history, and this is not to be taken too heavily from the perspective of the “longue durée.”

Can we help Mudurnu get back on its feet and back on track for sustainable development? With the great potential found in the virgin state of its cultural and natural landscape, great opportunity can be detected. Macro trends are supporting this potential, such as the advantage of the cool weather (with climate change, the patterns of favored regions for tourism and investment can shift from the Western and Southern Riviera to the Black Sea) and what is termed “neo-ruralization” (urbanites moving away from metropolitan life into more rural settings to live a more sustainable and healthy life). Despite the local inertia, it can be assumed that outsider interest in towns like Mudurnu will continue.

There is also the question of “whose heritage” this is. Ownership and attachment to places and heritage sites can change as communities change and actors come and go. It is wise to remember that none of us can claim sole ownership or responsibility for the heritage. Sometimes, an individual agency can make a difference, while many other

processes need more considerable, collective efforts. As the highest level of collective heritage effort exists, the UNESCO WH process should be examined in this light.

As the Madanlar Mansion hotel experience has recently approached a point of fatigue, I am slowly shifting back to my career beyond Mudurnu. However, I do not intend to close down the operations here. The search for new and improved models in the path for the culture and heritage-led sustainable development of Mudurnu continues with creativity, imagination, hope, and persistence, but set in a more realistic context (e.g., of what to expect, from whom, and when; and how much time and resources this will cost). The meaningful efforts we have been making are producing some successes, but they may not have resulted in our reaching all our goals.

Although the point that our experiences have brought us is one of humility and acceptance in the face of brutal realities, what could be derived from them as recommendations and practical implications include the following, which brings us back to the questions posed in the Introduction:

- As heritage professionals, we should not be afraid to “go further” than customarily expected to save sites dear to us; the more exposure and involvement in implementation, the more realistic and, thus, stronger our policies become. The tests that setbacks put us through make us even more equipped to handle complex challenges.
- Our responsibilities as heritage managers toward society are indeed dependent on a reasonable balance between scientific/professional principles and the realities of the actual communities: staying true to the former while finetuning them according to the latter. We should measure our achievements by considering heritage sites’ social, economic, and political parameters. We should keep using our professional toolbox, the UNESCO WH nomination being a strong tool in it, despite socio-economic setbacks, by viewing these processes in the long term, being persistent, and navigating the ups and downs of the heritage communities.
- As sustainability is really about keeping the long-term view in mind, the way to develop successful “sustainable development” models for historic towns, landscapes, and regions appears to lie in exploring the available resources and applying them whenever opportunities allow, empathizing with and engaging with the available stakeholders (local governments, public and private institutions, community members, etc.), some sooner and some later within these long-term processes.

As an experiment and learning process, the Mudurnu experience is already full of valuable lessons and insights as to the limits and possibilities for us as professionals and citizens contributing to broader society and the resilience of our heritage as assets for a more sustainable future.

References

- ICOMOS. (2019). Mudurnu (Turkey) No 1600. In *Evaluations of Nominations of Cultural and Mixed Properties*. ICOMOS Report for the 43rd Session of the World Heritage Committee.
- Madanlar Konağı. (n.d.). <https://madanlarkonagi.com/>
- Mudurnu Cultural Heritage Site Management. (2019, June). *Kamuoyuna Bilgilendirme: Mudurnu Tarihi Ahi Kenti'nin UNESCO Dünya Miras Adaylığı* [Public Announcement: World Heritage Candidacy of Historic Guild Town of Mudurnu].
- Terra Mudurnu. (n.d.). <https://terramudurnu.com/>
- Turkish Republic, Ministry of Culture and Tourism. (1983/2006). *Law on the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property* (Law No. 2863).
- Turkish Republic, Ministry of Culture and Tourism. (2018). *The Historic Guild Town of Mudurnu: Testimonies of Akhism* [UNESCO World Heritage Nomination File, main submissions].

- Turkish Republic, Ministry of Culture and Tourism. (2019). *The Historic Guild Town of Mudurnu: Testimonies of Akhism* [UNESCO World Heritage Nomination File, Additional Information report].
- Yıldırım, A. E. (2011). *Kentsel koruma projelerinde aktörlerin örgütlenmesi: Gaziantep, Kuşadası ve Mudurnu örnekleri üzerinden Türkiye'nin tarihi dokularında uygulanabilir örgütlenme modellerine yönelik bir araştırma* [Urban Conservation Projects and Governance: An Investigation toward Developing Applicable Organizational Models for Turkey's Historic Towns through the cases of Gaziantep, Kuşadası and Mudurnu] [Doctoral dissertation, Ankara University]. YÖK Open Science. <https://acikbilim.yok.gov.tr/handle/20.500.12812/519255>
- Yıldırım, E. et al. (2014). *Mudurnu Kültürel Miras Alan Yönetim Planı 2014-2018* [Mudurnu Cultural Heritage Site Management Plan 2014-2018]. T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı. <https://www.kalkinmakutuphanesi.gov.tr/dokumanflipbook/mudurnu-kulturel-miras-alan-yonetim-planı/356>
- Yıldırım, E. (2016). Aspirations for sustainable development: The case of the Mudurnu site management process. In Z. Ahunbay, D. Mazlum, & Z. Eres (Eds.), *Conservation of cultural heritage in Turkey* (pp. 181-196). ICOMOS Turkey & Ege Publications.
- Yıldırım, E. (2019). *Случај Мудурнуа Паралелни наративи за одрживи развој у једном историјском граду у Турској* [Parallel narratives for sustainable development in a historic Turkish town, the case of Mudurnu]. *Модерна Конзервација* [Modern Conservation], 7, 123-140.
- Yıldırım, E. (2024a). Culture and Nature-Based Local Economic Revitalization - The Terra Mudurnu Model. *Heritage Magazine 2024: Catalogue of the Heritage Istanbul Fair*, 46-57. <https://expoheritage.com/heritageistanbul/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/HERITAGE-ISTANBUL-2024-SON-2-1.pdf>
- Yıldırım, E. (2024b, March 25). 27th Session of the Global SDG Nugget Hour [Video]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/elizabethmullard/videos/2769304763218426>
- Yıldırım, E. (2024c). "Sürdürülebilir bir yaşama yatırım yapıyoruz": Ayşe Ege Yıldırım, Terra Mudurnu Kültür Turizm Gayrimenkul Tic. A.Ş. kurucusu ["We are investing in a sustainable life": Ayşe Ege Yıldırım, founder of Terra Mudurnu Culture Tourism Real Estate Inc.]. *Business Channel Türk*, 200, 76-81. <https://businesschanneldergi.com/business-channel-dergi-200-sayisi-cikti/>

Further reading

- Brown, S., & C. Goetcheus (eds.). (2023). *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Landscape Practice*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315203119>
- ICOMOS. (2011). *The Valletta Principles for the Safeguarding and Management of Historic Cities, Towns and Urban Areas*. https://civviih.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Valletta-Principles-GA-EN_FR_28_11_2011.pdf
- Labadi, S., Giliberto, F., Rosetti, I., Shetabi, L., & Yıldırım, E. (2021). *Heritage and the sustainable development goals: Policy guidance for heritage and development actors*. ICOMOS. <https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2453/>
- Schuster, J. M., de Monchaux, J., & Riley, C. A. (Eds.). (1997). *Preserving the built heritage: Tools for implementation*. University Press of New England.
- United Nations. (2024). *Sustainable Development Goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Received: November 13, 2024

Accepted: December 21, 2024

Acknowledgments

I would like to dedicate this paper to my doctoral thesis advisor, the late Emre Madran, who urged his students to engage in policy work with local governments so we could make a change in the real world. I would like to thank Scott Redford, then director of AnaMed, for encouraging me to apply for the Koç University fellowship that facilitated the site management plan process to begin; Evrim Ulusan, former MoCT staff, and later independent expert, for a close collaboration and solidarity during the site management, UNESCO WH nomination and afterward; and all my shareholders and partners in Terra Mudurnu for providing various degrees of moral and material support.

Author biography

Ayşe Ege YILDIRIM, PhD, is a heritage planner with 25 years of experience working in Turkey and internationally. Her interests include cultural policy, governance, UNESCO World Heritage, and sustainable development. Among her academic affiliations are the Fulbright (2006-2007) and Salzburg Global Seminar (2019) fellowships. Her previous positions include conservation planner at KA-BA Architecture Ltd, Ankara (2000-2006), conservation coordinator and heritage planner at the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage (2008-2012), heritage site manager and UNESCO World Heritage nomination coordinator for the Historic Guild Town of Mudurnu (2015-2020); ICOMOS Focal Point for the SDGs (2016-2020) and key expert at the EU-Turkey Anatolian Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Institute project (2019). Ege has been an independent expert and activist since 2013, and entrepreneur since 2021, having founded Terra Mudurnu, a social venture for cultural and natural heritage-based development. She has provided consultancy to various municipalities, universities, and public institutions, including United Cities and Local Governments, Global Parliament of Mayors, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, ICCROM (Sharjah office), and UNESCO entities (World Heritage Centre, Almaty office, UK and S. Korean National Commissions). Ege is a member of the Istanbul Citizens Assembly, ICOMOS, Europa Nostra Türkiye and the Climate Heritage Network, among other organizations.

© 2024 Faculty of Management (SNSPA), Author(s). This open-access article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).