

# VISUAL POLLUTION PROVIDED BY BUILDINGS WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF DECAY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE URBAN LANDSCAPE: A CASE STUDY OF BRĂILA CITY CENTER

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## Abstract

The Danube's cities have a long history, a specific culture and an architecture capable of expressing their entire past. Braila is one of these cities, whose commercial history is visually described by a series of buildings whose functionality has ceased, remaining only a message immortalized in walls and ornamental details on the facades. The study tries to show the contrast between the importance that many buildings in the Braila harbour had, their multicultural expressiveness and the unpleasant aspect of their current state of decay. The method of analysis is the empirical one of the questionnaire, applied on a number of 137 respondents regarding the visual pollution and the unpleasant aspect offered by them. The results of the study confirm the role played by these buildings, some of them considered "symbol" by the residents, the unpleasant appearance and the need for rehabilitation. The shortcomings mentioned are the lack of local government funds and the legislation related to their form of ownership, many being privately owned.

**Keywords:** historical buildings, Danube trade, neoclassical style, stucco, rehabilitation

## Introduction

The urban cultural landscape of Braila is a symbol of multiculturalism, through the generous offer of buildings that have been presenting the history of this city for centuries (Merciu et al., 2022; Teodorescu et al., 2016). The city of Braila is a port city on the Danube, with a rich history, and the urban landscape is represented in particular by the numerous elements of architectural style of the buildings, but also by specific elements captured in the masonry, of certain ethnicities or as a result of the functionality that these buildings have had (fig. 1).

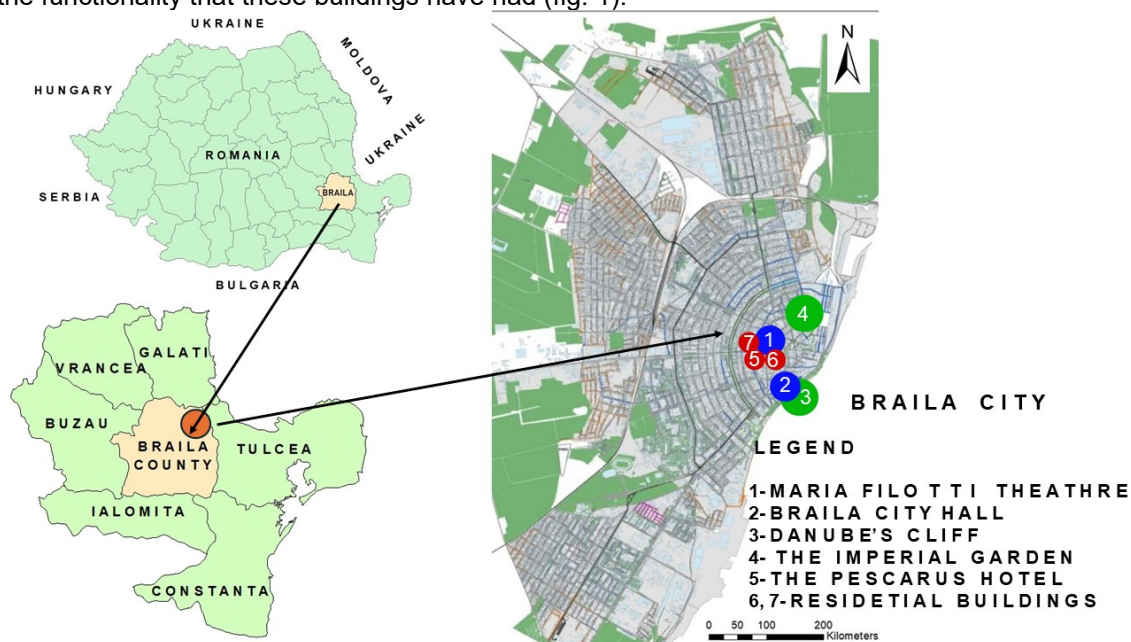


Fig. 1: Braila Location

Through the urban cultural offer conferred by buildings with an intricate history, the city of Braila could develop an impressive tourist offer (Teodorescu et al., 2013). People are more and more eager to discover new places, most of them with messages coming from the past (Szemkovics et al., 2018; Mazilu et al., 2023). These old buildings, over time, have suffered major deterioration, insusceptibly due to humidity (Zeľeňáková et al., 2017) and human negligence through irrational use and lack of consolidation.

## Material and methods

The methodology has several components.

First of all, the study is based on the descriptive method, which is a simple one, combined with the observation method for two symbol buildings in Braila, which today are a major factor of visual popularity. The study is in an early stage, in which we only tried to highlight some heritage buildings in the Braila county, which are in an advanced stage of degradation and represent a real danger for the local population.

The urban landscape dissatisfaction offered by these buildings - a symbol for the Braila city, was empirically analysed through a survey-interview with the inhabitants of Braila and carried out through a word cloud. A total of 137 respondents participated in the survey.

Following the discussions held and the statements told about the role these buildings play for the city and how they are perceived by the inhabitants today, "clouds of words" were made. Each of these "word clouds" comes with two important mentions:

- these buildings should not be demolished, they should not be removed from the landscape, but on the contrary they should be consolidated and rehabilitated;

- the visual pollution offered by the landscape created by these iconic buildings is a major discomfort factor for important areas of the city, especially for the central area, where the park or the theatre could be major attractions.

## Results

The appearance of a city is very important in attracting tourists, but also for its inhabitants. The city of Braila is one of the oldest cities - port on the Danube, where commercial activity has been practiced for centuries. Every administration, every wealthy merchant or merchant with considerable income, has left behind buildings with an important architectural and cultural value. The history of these buildings can be a tourist attraction, but they can also convey important messages about the economic, political and administrative development of this urban locality.

Unfortunately, many of these buildings have deteriorated due to inappropriate use and have not been consolidated and maintained. How did it get to this stage? Several factors have contributed to their deterioration. Firstly, the political regime. The establishment of the communist regime meant the confiscation of these buildings and their inclusion in state property. Later use was diverse, with commercial use, including hotel (fig. 3 and fig. 4), administrative use or social use (used by families with many children or by low-income families). The interior structures have been altered and the exterior has not been maintained.

Hotel Pescarus-former Hotel Bristol was built in 1892 by the merchant H. Hirschhorn, on Regala Street (today Mihai Eminescu Street), according to the plans of the architect Paul M. Mihail (fig. 2 and fig. 3). Hotel Bristol is the first hotel in Braila that inaugurates a new form of architecture for this functionality, that of hotel. Originally it was the fashion house of the Geavide brothers. Later, it was bought by the wealthy merchant Hirschhorn, who decided to convert it into a hotel. The Hotel Bristol was decorated by Sibalis & Rabner with furniture imported from Berlin. On the ground floor were the "Lover cloth shop", the "London City", where models wore English costumes; the "Lucky" lottery and a currency exchange office. The building has long been an emblem of the city, featured on many old postcards.

Renamed Hotel "Pescarus" by the communists, sold in the 1990s by O.J.T. The hotel is claimed by the former owner in dispute with the current owner. The only certainty is the physical condition of the building, which looks pitiful and from which, from time to time, bricks fall. The former hotel is not guarded by anyone, its windows are destroyed, the touching is damaged and most of the time it is missing, it has been ripped out and the ironwork destroyed. The general condition of the building is deplorable and could collapse at any moment.

Braila's old housing stock is badly affected by the passing time. The owners have changed hands, but none of them has rehabilitated or consolidated these dwellings, which have become ruins. The badly cracked fronts or balconies that are barely holding on to a few rusty wires, as well as the facades masked by a broken mesh, are also a danger for the inhabitants passing through the area (fig. 4).

The old residential area, where once there was an active life, a commercial flow and a cultural animation, is now just a place where the urban landscape shows only the bricks and the risk of their weight in possible free fall.



Fig. 2: Pescara Hotel building - former Bristol Hotel, facade



Fig. 3: Pescara Hotel building, framed in - central urban ensemble

### Discussion

In the analysis of the perception of the population of the town of Braila regarding the visual population and the importance of the buildings (today ruins), two different aspects are recorded:

a. The perception of the inhabitants regarding the security degree or that related to the general appearance or visual pollution is summarized by the cloud of words showing the obvious danger that these buildings offer. The term "danger" is frequently mentioned along with "discomfort", "ugly" and others (fig. 5).

b. On the other hand, many of the inhabitants are aware of this negative from landscape point of view, but are equally convinced that the Historic Centre of Braila has remarkable architectural features, which give it a unique position in the Romanian national cultural heritage. The old historical centre of Braila is of outstanding value from an urban and architectural point of view. Braila has a complete set of historical buildings and monuments, heritage assets, and a historic centre full of ups and downs history. That is why it considers that there is not too high a cost for the rehabilitation of these buildings considered by most "symbols of local culture". "Local culture" and "symbol", to which are added the links with Greek, Armenian and Jewish culture, are terms mentioned by those who supported the rehabilitation of these buildings (fig. 6)

### Conclusion

The visual pollution of the old buildings in the urban centre of Braila is a discomfort for those who live here and for those who visit the city. The cultural importance of these ruined buildings should be taken into account, especially by the local authorities and by those who have acquired them as property. The legislative framework unfortunately prevents many of the owners from doing so. There are disputes between former and current owners, but the ones who really suffer are the residents and tourists or visitors, who unfortunately "benefit" from this unpleasant aspect and the risk of being hit by materials that may come off.





Fig. 4: Facades of residential buildings in the investigation area



Fig. 5: Interview result - visual pollution of dilapidated buildings



Fig. 6: Interview result - the importance of decaying buildings in the view of residents

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## Souhrn

Město lze oživit tím, že se odhalí jeho minulost a představí se všem, ale až po obnově budov. Formou cestovního ruchu, která by mohla nabídnout další šanci, je ten vzdělávací, který prostřednictvím workshopů může podnítit touhu po poznání minulosti tohoto města. Většina poznatků a informací se uchovává prostřednictvím vizualizace. Když jejich vzhled zanechává stopy a hrozí nebezpečí zřícení, stává se z emblematické a atraktivní budovy pro kolemjdoucí odpuzující. vzhledem k historii a architektuře tohoto města si zaslouží dostat šanci.

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