

THE TIME DIALOGUE-REVITALIZING HISTORIC BUILDINGS - HOW TO HARMONIZE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE WITH CONTEMPORARY NEEDS WITHOUT SACRIFICING THE CHARM OF THE PAST

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Abstract

To revitalize historic buildings or engineering marvels is a complex challenge, which takes into account both the preservation of architectural heritage and the functional needs of contemporary society. The city of Braila, with its streets steeped in history and eclectic architecture with *art-nouveau*, french and neoclassical influences. Now it faces a challenge: how to preserve the charm of the past while offering modern functionalities? This article aims to reconvert the architectural heritage of Braila, analyzing how these buildings can be harmoniously integrated into the current social-economic framework. The research is based on a mixed methodology: interviews with urban planners, architects, city residents along with personal opinion, and analysis of the archive documents. Both the technical challenges of restoration and the emotional and cultural impact on the community are examined. Through the stories of former manor houses transformed into cultural centers, the article illustrates the importance of this process not only for the city, but also for the potential beneficiaries who will feel the direct impact of the revitalization of the buildings by introducing them into the civil circuit under functionalities that were not anticipated in the original projects.

Key words: heritage conservation, patrimonial houses, architectural conversion

Introduction

Each city has a past and a landscape created by each generation (Teodorescu et al, 2023). Human activity has left its mark through the buildings that have been erected, markets or industrial objectives (Trujillo González, 2016; Petrisor, 2010). It has thus created a landscape that makes an urban individualization, which can today be valorized for tourism purposes (Szemkovics et al, 2018; Dincă et al, 2015). Brăila, a city with a rich architectural heritage, is watching its historic buildings in threat of degradation, while the community is looking for solutions to revitalize them. In a changing urban landscape, the central question remains: how can architectural heritage inspire the city's future without losing its authenticity? Architects, urban planners and residents propose solutions ranging from cultural centers and co-working spaces to preserving the historic character of buildings. This article analyzes the reconversion of Braila's architectural heritage, with concrete examples such as the Violatos Mill and the Water Castle, highlighting their potential to become modern landmarks through urban regeneration projects that support the local economy and tourism. The revitalization of these buildings is not just conservation, but an investment in the identity and future of the city.

Material and methods

To accomplish this study, we used a mixed methodology combining archival analysis with field research and qualitative interviews, in order to get a general opinion of the situation at the moment, with some personal predictions and analysis of what could become reality. Therefore, the documentation process included studying archives and historical documents to understand the significance of each building analyzed. The method of analysis is the qualitative one which is based on interviews that addressed the points of view of specialists, urban planners and architects as well as city residents. This mode of analysis was applied in order to be able to understand the technical challenges and solutions applicable in the process of revitalization and rediscovering the sense of belonging.

Results

The Water Castle in Braila (Fig. 1), which was built in the interwar period (1930s) and was realized by the engineer Vasile V. Gârbea, with the purpose of providing water supply to the city and the surrounding area, it is a symbol of the technological and urban development of that period. Originally intended to supply water to the city, the building impresses by its industrial but elegant architecture, which combines functionality with the aesthetics of the time, namely curved lines, stylized columns

typical of the interwar period. At present (Fig. 2), unused and dilapidated, this building has remarkable potential for functional conversion. For the revitalization of the Water Castle and Violatos Moara, obtaining the necessary funds is an essential step in the realization of the project. Following interviews with architects, urban planners and residents, several sources of funding have been identified, including access to European funds for the protection of cultural heritage and sustainable development as one of the most viable solutions. Programs such as ROP (Regional Operational Program) or Interreg Europe support urban regeneration projects and functional reconversion of historic buildings.



Fig.1 Water Castle in 1900



Fig. 2. Water Castle in the present

The Violatos Mill, emblem of the industrial heritage of Brăila (Fig. 3), has a huge potential to be reborn through a functional reconversion that would valorize its imposing architecture and rich history. Inclusion in the National Restoration Program (NRP) would provide the necessary funding for consolidation, restoration and conservation works, protecting the authentic character of the building. To complement this, a well-coordinated crowdfunding campaign, supported by the community and heritage enthusiasts across the country, could bring additional resources for modern interior design and the transformation of the Moor into a multi-purpose cultural center. It could be an engineering museum, host art galleries, creative workshops, spaces for cultural events, or even becoming a luxurious hotel steeped in history with every brick, becoming a meeting place for locals and tourists, revitalizing the area and contributing to the local economy, thus propelling Brăila back to the top of the national economy (Fig. 4).

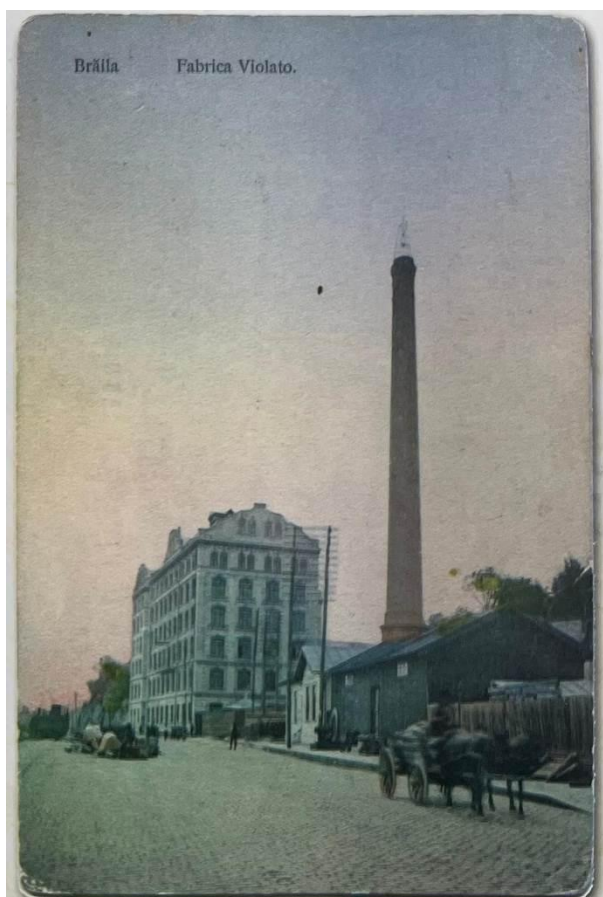


Fig.3. Violatos Mill – archive image



Fig.4. Violatos Mill in the present

These buildings are leading to the emergence of abandoned buildings tourism, also known as '*urban exploration*' or '*urbex*', which is gaining increasing popularity among adventurous tourists with a passion for industrial and architectural history. This type of tourism offers visitors the chance to explore places steeped in mystery and nostalgia, discovering the forgotten stories of buildings which, although abandoned, still retain traces of their former glory. In Brăila, the Violatos Mill and the Water Castle are perfect examples of this phenomenon, attracting curious seekers fascinated by the aesthetics of ruins and the melancholic aura of abandoned places (Merciu et al, 2023). Although this type of tourism can help to promote local heritage and raise public awareness of the need to revitalize these buildings, uncontrolled access entails risks for visitors and potential danger for already damaged structures. The integration of these sites into responsible cultural tourism, through reconversion and restoration projects, could transform informal explorations into an educational and engaging experience, contributing to urban and economic revitalization.

Discussion

The concept of cultural value, once considered an inherent and universal state, is now generally a social construct that emerges from the cultural contexts of time and place. The landscape created by human activities and past experiences, are the elements that shape the identities, traditions, beliefs, values, norms and cultural meanings of place (Petrisor et al, 2020). It is precisely these that offer tourist importance. Nostalgia is the one that is most often imprinted in the minds of visitors when u possibilittaea to see in a direct past-present relationship certain buildings (Teodorescu et al, 2022; Merciu et al, 2023). The study analyzed only some of the important monuments in the city of Braila, a city with an interesting past and multicultural influences.

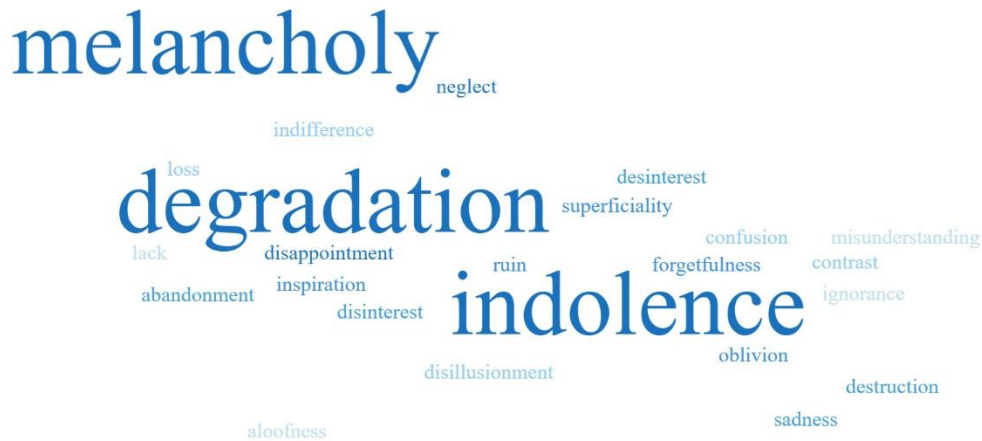


Fig.5. Results of the interview on the feelings of the elderly

For the elderly, the degradation of Violatos Mill and the Water Castle in Brăila provokes a deep mixture of regret, nostalgia and bitterness. For them, these buildings are not just constructions, but landmarks of a bygone era, witnesses to a prosperous, industrial and bustling Brăila. Seeing them in ruin today, the elderly feel a painful loss of urban identity, and their abandonment and forgetting become signs of a dissolution of respect for the past. The feeling of powerlessness in the face of the passage of time and the lack of intervention leads them to regard the situation with an oppressive silence, full of melancholy and uprootedness. For them, each fallen brick is a fading memory, and the transformation of these symbols into ruins produces not only visual pain, but also a void, a symbolic abandonment of the city of another time.



Fig.6. Interview results on young people's feelings

For young people, the forgotten architecture of Braila, represented by buildings such as the Violatos Mill and the Water Castle, awakens a complex combination of admiration and disappointment, emotions that coexist in a contradictory dialog. At first sight, the buildings inspire curiosity and lost glory, provoking an emotional discovery of a fascinating past with the potential to motivate and educate. At the same time, however, the image of ruin, decay and social indifference arouses in young people a deep sense of disillusionment and a sense of collective loss. They perceive the neglect and ignorance of these symbols as a cultural coldness, a lack of understanding and distance from their own urban identity. The contrast between what these buildings were and what they have become gives rise to feelings of sadness, melancholy, but also an involuntary inspiration - an impulse not to

repeat the mistakes of the past. Their emotions oscillate between sincere emotion and confusion, between the superficiality with which the past is treated and a genuine desire to restore its value.

Conclusion

The relationship between the past and the present is necessary in analyzing cultural habitation landscapes. People perceive things differently from one historical stage to another, and messages transmitted from generation to generation may be accepted in different forms. Young people, despite the apparent superficiality offered by their behavior, have a local pride when they are interviewed about the cultural values of their city. They give pleasant, sometimes superlative information about local culture and important buildings. This is perhaps an exaggeration, which can be justified by their age. The elderly's restraint is only in terms of forming and rendering some answers, but the expression is also commendable.

This whole created by buildings, monuments and people makes every city an important tourist resource. The urban residential landscape is a complex one that attracts attention through the age ratio of the buildings. The age ratio is both between buildings and between the people who were interviewed.

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Souhrn

Analýza staveb v podobě dialogu mezi minulostí a současností může být jednou z nejzajímavějších a nejatraktivnějších činností při zkoumání městské krajiny. Současné generace mladých a mladistvých lidí objevují minulost města, ve kterém žijí, nebo minulost města, které chtějí poznat - v případě těch, kteří jej teprve navštěvují.

Pro starší generace, které byly svědky vzestupu a posléze úpadku, je to forma vzpomínání, oprávněné nostalgie - žili zde a prostřednictvím těchto staveb se mohou s místem ztotožnit.

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