

# ARCHITECTURE AS AN INDICATOR OF MULTICULTURALISM. CASE STUDY: CITY OF BRAILA

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***Abstract:** When trying to capture the historical details of a city, the issue is approached, based on the architecture of civil and institutional buildings. The present study attempts to do so; analyzing the architecture of buildings, specific features, styles and elements of influence that the local population have raised. The author argues based on the method of analysis and observation with frequent links to the themed literature. The results provide a picture of the cultural influences found in a variety of architectural styles and building types - from residential to commercial and production buildings, even factories. However, all of them, preserve the traces of the epoch in which they were built and the ethnicity or cultural movement from the owners. Brăila is the city where eclectic architecture is dominant, commercial and harbour life is visible through decorative and structural elements. The activity that could be developed taking into account these specific features is cultural tourism, historical tourism, due to the load of information that can support the local knowledge.*

***Keywords:** architecture, style, tourism, multiculturalism, culture*

## INTRODUCTION

When trying to capture the historical details of a city, the issue is approached, based on the architecture of civil and institutional buildings. We could even say that the history of a city can be told by simply observing the buildings, the architectural and architectural details, the primate influences from those who have passed or settled here (Teodorescu, 2009). The urban cultural landscape of Braila is a symbol of multiculturalism, through the generous offer of these buildings (Merciu et al., 2022; Zheng Jia et al., 2023; Teodorescu et al., 2016).

The present study attempts to do so; analyzing the architecture of buildings, specific features, styles and elements of influence that the local

population have raised. The richness of the ornaments is evidence of a period when trade and cultural life were in a remarkable avant-garde. The relationship between the two economic areas - trade and culture - seems to be unrelated, but the common element is that of income, of money coming mostly from trade, which was invested in the construction of housing, creating real neighborhoods, after which a certain family or group of families could be individualized. It was also commerce that stimulated the construction of buildings with a cultural function, such as theatres and museums (which are still in use today).

Through its cultural offer, the city of Braila develops today a beautiful tourist offer. People are more and more eager to discover new places, most of them with messages that come from the past (Szemkovics et al., 2018; Mazilu et al., 2023; Lazaro et al., 2022). This type of tourism, a component part of cultural tourism, has gained, especially after the COVID 19 pandemic, a rather large avant. This has been and is possibly explained by the expansion of modern means of presenting buildings of heritage value, monuments or museums. It is precisely these modern means (virtual tours, images, explanations, etc.) that can be used to discover new places and monuments to visit. Braila, by what it offers from an architectural, historical and cultural point of view, is such a place. The results provide a picture of the cultural influences found in a variety of architectural styles and building types - from residential to commercial and production buildings, even factories. However, all of them, preserve the traces of the epoch in which they were built and the ethnicity or cultural movement from the owners. Brăila is the city where eclectic architecture is dominant, commercial and harbour life is visible through decorative and structural elements.

The activity that could be developed taking into account these specific features is cultural tourism, historical tourism, due to the load of information that can support the local knowledge.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of diverse cultural groups within a society, where different cultural backgrounds, traditions, and identities are acknowledged and respected. In the context of architecture, the design and structure of physical spaces can either support or hinder the principles of multiculturalism. Here are a few ways in which architecture can be considered a factor in multiculturalism. The descriptive method is a simple one, combined with that of observation, the study is in an early stage, in which it has only tried to highlight some heritage buildings in the city of

Braila, and methods of analysis and exploitation of this architectural landscape offered by the important buildings of this city, as well as the satisfaction that tourists and the resident population can have, after these buildings enter a tourist circuit of presentation.

Architectural elements can be used to represent and celebrate the cultural diversity of a community. This could involve incorporating symbols, art, or design motifs from different cultures into the built environment.

Designing communal areas that encourage interaction and engagement can foster a sense of community among people from diverse backgrounds. Public spaces that accommodate a variety of activities and events can bring people together.

Architecture plays a significant role in the design of religious buildings. In multicultural societies, the design of religious spaces should respect and accommodate the needs of various religious groups.

## RESULT OF THE STUDY

What does multiculturalism really mean?

Let's start the list with the architectural monuments that gave the shape of Braila. The first is Maria Filotti Theater which is so emblematic for Brăila and its history is, in a way, the history of Brăila. It was an inn and it was called Casa Rally, after the brothers who built it. Then King Charles passed through the city and then it was called the Royal Theatre. Then Dumitru Ionescu, mayor of Brăila, bequeathed it to the city. And finally, it receives the name of the great actress Maria Filotti.

The building of the Maria Filotti (fig 1) theater was originally an inn. The first construction dates from 1850, it was called Casa Rally, after the names of the owners, the brothers Ianache, Demosthene and George Rally, and it was a complex that included a hotel, a theater, a restaurant, a confectionery. The Rally brothers restore and modernize the building – the architect and builder being both Italian – and inaugurate it in 1895. Ianache Rally's daughter, Athena, marries the painter Petre Alexandrescu, the one who painted the Church of St. Nicholas – the conditions Ianache set to allow the marriage are a story in themselves. Athena and Petre have eight children together, including pianist Cecilia Ștefănescu-Goangă, mother of baritone Petru Ștefănescu Goangă.

Five years after the grand opening, the Rally brothers sell the building to Dumitru Ionescu, businessman and local politician, mayor of Brăila between 1906-1910 and one of the city's great philanthropists, along with Nedelcu Chercea. The amount paid by Dumitru Ionescu is almost one

million gold lei, a fabulous amount. Dumitru Ionescu dies in 1919, but, because he has no children, he leaves in his will the building and the rest of the assets of the city of Brăila - a quote from his will sounds like this: "the desire to be as useful as possible to others, to my country and my people, desiring to leave a good example among those with whom I lived".

The great hall has 2 balconies on different floors with carved stone edges. The great hall was restored between 1980 and 1983, with new elements of monumental art: stucco, painting, chandeliers and lighting fixtures. The art elements present: stone models made by Mihai Istudor: they are presented at the edge of each balcony and are composed of flowers and masks carved in stone. On the ceiling: paintings by Nae Moldoveanu, accompanied by sculptures.

A point of particular interest is the curtain, made by Val Munteanu at Decorativa Bucharest. The curtain includes elements related to the architecture and history of Brăila (the houses and ships of yesteryear), the riches of the Danube and Bărăganu, but also the symbols of the theater. The chandelier, installed in 1980, contains over 100 bulbs.

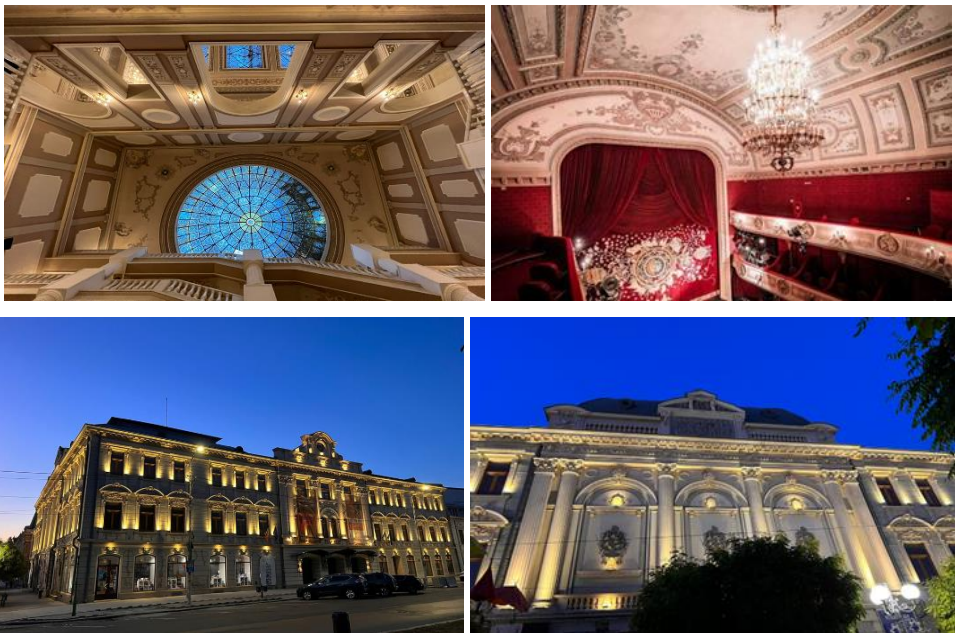


Figure 1. Maria Filotti theatre, the great hall (personal source)

The next construction that made Braila so eclectic is, the Embiricos house was built in 1912 for the Greek shipowner Menelaos Embiricos, with plans by the architect Lazarus Predinger. At that time the Greek community

in Braila was very numerous, about a quarter of the city's population, and Mr Embiricos was one of its leading members. The shipowner moved to Braila from the island of Andros in order to oversee his various businesses related to the transport of people and goods, export of cereals and coal supplier. Such a pillar needed a house to represent it. The place has a troubled history, but it has managed to survive so that it can be restored to its former glory. After the First World War, Embiricos' activity in Braila declined and he sold the house in 1927. Shortly before, he had already built a larger house in Constanta which became the centre of Embiricos' business. Between 1930 and 1937, the building housed the headquarters of the Brăileni Craftsmen.

After 1944 the Embiricos House became a hospital and polyclinic. In 1987 the first restoration was carried out and the House of Art Collections, a section of the County Museum - Brăila, moved here. In 1998, the Canadian sculptor of Romanian origin Nicăpetre (originally from Braila) exhibited in the courtyard of the house, then a section of the Museum of Art, some of his works, works recovered after he emigrated to Canada. In the old house of the Greek shipowner, the Nicăpetre Cultural Centre was opened in 2001. The building is now enjoying a new period of glory. Looking at the residence of Menelaos Embiricos, it still impresses us today with its elegance. Also by the architectural lines reminiscent of French architecture of 1900. The building was designed to serve both as the headquarters of M. Embiricos & Co's firm and as his family home.

The building is one with four main facades and consists of a basement, ground floor, first floor and attic. During the period when it was inhabited by the Embiricos family, the ground floor housed the firm's offices. In the basement was the cellar, the kitchen and the laundry, the first floor was dedicated to the family. After the Nicăpetre Centre was set up, the artist's works are exhibited both on the ground floor and on the first floor, in the rooms and common areas. After the exhibition of the Nicăpetre collection, the attic was set up as an exhibition space.

At its end an elegant staircase leads upstairs. Generously sized windows, an oval skylight and a beautiful stained-glass window add light to the space, adding to its elegance. The stained-glass window, which catches the visitor's eye from the very entrance to the central hall, depicts Hermes, the Greek god of trade. The work is impressive in size, occupying almost the entire landing wall. Integrated in the historical style, with four main facades, composed of basement, ground floor and attic, the interior space of the house is organized around a central hall developed on two

floors, with rooms arranged around the perimeter and from which one reaches the first floor by the monumental marble staircase.

The impression of opulence is accentuated by the crystal-glazed doors and the ironwork of the entrance gate. The ironwork found on the staircase and first-floor landing railings, windows and skylights gives the house a personality and adds an Art Nouveau touch.

It is an open house. In the social area it is ample and well articulated in the assembly of the house, seeming to invite communication.



Figure 2. Exterior of Embiricos House, (personal source)

Its history begins in the middle of the 19th century, being closely linked to the history of the Greek community in Braila. Initially on the site of the church there was a small wooden chapel where the service was held in Greek and where Braila's ethnic Greeks and some of the craftsmen of the same origin lit candles. A committee of 311 Greeks met in February 1863 and decided to establish the Greek Community, whose main objective was to build a church where services were held in Greek. A request to this effect was addressed to the ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza, who approved it, and on 8 September 1863 the foundation stone of the church building was laid.

The plan of the church was drawn up by the architect Avraam Ioanidis from Brussa. He also supervised the work, which took nine years and was carried out by craftsmen of Italian origin. The church is built in the Byzantine style, with a round dome and a cross-shaped plan with two spires. The construction also has some ancient Greek and Renaissance influences. The building has impressive dimensions, measuring 43.40 m in length and 21.55 m in width at its base. The entrance to the church is through a porch with a balcony above, both with four white marble pillars, and above them is the bell tower, equipped with a Swiss clock and a large bell (1878), by donation of Gheorghis Simon. They were cast in Bucharest, in the workshop of "Frații D & V Popescu" and assembled in 1923.

Inside, the central dome is in the Byzantine style, resting on four white marble columns, plus eight more columns supporting the church itself. Inside there is also a very large balcony where the church choir sings.

The church has three altars. The central altar is dedicated to the Annunciation. Above the Holy Mass you can admire the canopy which has six tall columns, so beautifully carved with real lacework. Another altar is located on the south side of the church and was dedicated to St Nicholas. The last shrine is located on the north side and was built in honour of St. Gerasim of Kefalonia. Just below this altar is said to have been the spring of miracle-working water.

In the courtyard of the building, under the altar, at a depth of 12 metres, a well was dug during the construction of the foundation, in which water from a spring is captured. Legend has it that on the day of the feast of the 'Spring of Healing', the water turns into holy water and gushes out from under the altar.

While in the last century there was a boys' school next to the church, built in 1902, today there is only a social canteen. The St. Phanurie Philanthropic Centre has been operating in the parish since 2003, where 20 low-income parishioners who are lonely, neglected or in danger of being abandoned receive material support, assistance and occasionally hot food.

A symbol of Braila, the clock-tower was built more than a century ago, based on the idea of a philanthropist who loved the port city on the Danube. It is a unique monument in Romania, both for its appearance - on the border between Neo-Baroque and Art Nouveau - and for its height of over 11 metres. The monument, called "The Danube Clock", was built in 1909 as a fulfilment of the dream of one of the city's honorary citizens.



Figure 3. Greek Church interior and exterior (personal source)

This was Petru Naum who, in 1898, donated 8,000 gold lei to the municipality in his will for the erection of "a metal tower with a large clock on top, in the Square of St. Archangels Michael and Gabriel". The beautiful piece of urban furniture in the centre of Braila is made of metal and was produced by the Czech company Carol Sakar. The clock has four dials pointing to the four main streets of the city. Pure blue, the historical monument mirrors the colour of the Danube water. The sailing ship - the sailboat that has brought fame to Braila on all the seas and oceans of the world - is the symbol. A ship is painted at the base of the monument as a reminder that Braila is a port city.

"Of monumental dimensions, with a height of 11.5 meters, it is a piece in neo-baroque style with a decorative character. The former councillor Petre Naum Petru, who lived between 1842 and 1898, bequeathed to the town hall, through his will, the sum of 8,000 lei for the purchase of a public clock, located in the Tiriplic garden, with four dials. Ordered from Vienna,

the clock was brought in 1909 with the plates that were to form the base. Then the plates were assembled, as can still be seen today: the year 1909 is written in three parts on the top of the dials, and on the fourth side is written, in honour of its commissioner, 'Donation PetreNaum Petru"', says historian Ionel Munteanu. The special mechanism was made in Munich by Johann Neher - a weighted mechanism, designed to arm every three days. Because of the strength structure of the supporting tower, the weight system cannot make the full stroke, so the four-dial clock has to be turned more often. The old clock in Traian Square was damaged by the earthquake of 22 November 2014.

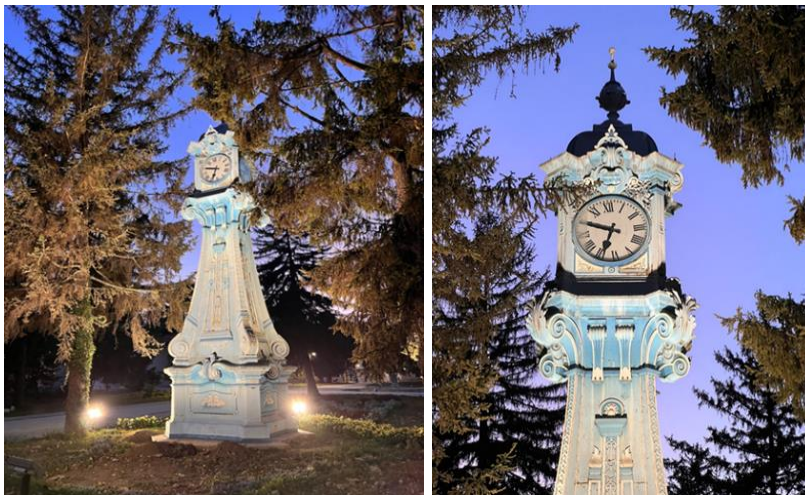


Figure 4. The Danube Clock (personal source)

The dial facing Emperor Trajan Street broke in two and the City Hall has taken steps to replace it. The dial in question has been replaced, using inscriptions that match the original ones from 1909. So, the "Clock" of the people of Braila is a clear proof of our integration in Europe, of the fact that we are actually following the course of Western life.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Braila stands out as an eclectic city, boasting a rich tapestry of diverse cultural, architectural, and historical elements. The city's unique character is shaped by its blending of traditional and modern influences, creating a harmonious coexistence of different eras and styles. From its well-preserved historical landmarks to its vibrant contemporary

developments, Braila showcases a dynamic fusion that appeals to both residents and visitors alike. This eclectic nature not only contributes to the city's aesthetic appeal but also reflects the resilience and adaptability of its people in embracing a diverse range of influences. As Braila continues to evolve, its eclectic identity remains a testament to the city's ability to integrate the past and the present, making it a captivating and multifaceted destination. The multiculturalism present in the city of Braila could be a source of inspiration for a series of cultural activities, such as: organizing painting workshops, festivals (Ducman et al., 2019), or guided tours, with explanations of buildings of great attraction and interest (Ducman et al., 2021). A city can be brought back to life, awakening the past and being presented to everyone, but especially to the young population, in the form of an educational tourism, perhaps through playful workshops, so that all the notions are learned, retained through play. Most of the notions and information are retained through repetition and visualisation, but what makes them attractive is the way the information is transmitted. Tourism, through its almost inexhaustible forms, can offer the future such an offer, and Braila deserves to be discovered!

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