

A common vision for the Dabube Region: chance or risk for a tourism oriented urban development of Brăila.

Mihai Alexandru

“Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urban Planning of Bucharest, Faculty of Urban Planning,
e-mail: mi.alexandru@yahoo.com

Cătălina Ioniță

“Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urban Planning of Bucharest,
sustained by the POSDRU 107/1.5/S/80765- European Social Found, Sectorial Operational Program
for the Development of Human Resources 2007-2013
e-mail: catalina.ionita@yahoo.com

Abstract

The advancement of the tourism phenomena, in the specific context of the EU expansion towards the Black Sea, opens up new possibilities for east-european cities, currently struggling to reinvent themselves in times of post-industrial decline. Taking the Romanian city of Brăila as a study case we are interested in pointing out the role that top down approaches have on engaging new local energies, but also in explaining a paradigm shift consisting in that the city is no longer approached as the main focus of a strategy but as a component of a larger geographical context. In 2010, in order to develop the huge economic potential of the Danube river, the European Commission has initiated the Strategy for the Danube Region, on which we question the ability to become an incentive for a creative re-development of the city.

Keywords: Danube, Brăila, waterfront, gate-city, diversity, identity.

In search for an identity

Brăila is a romanian city located in the south-eastern part of the country at the crossroad of two historic regions. In 2010 the city counted 211.161 inhabitants distributed on a 77ha surface which accounts for a moderately dense city compared to the rest of the country. It is the withholder of a six centuries rich and eventful history and a special geographic context. Having been a frontier city for some part of its history made it a key strategical point of the country, thus leading to an alternation of Ottoman, Russian, and Romanian governance with visible traces in the current city.

Its unique position presents a rare particularity in that the city is settled at the meeting point of the maritime and the fluvial Danube and by this the city gains a privilege as an important transfer point for large vessels. Apart from that, its geographical context is also spectacular as it constitutes a gate to preserved natural areas such as "Balta Mică a Brăilei" or the "Măcin Natural Park".

In 2010 Brăila possesses the elements of a powerful identity, "composed on the basis of a disjunction, between an interesting and prestigious history and that of an unsettled recent period" (General Urban Plan of Brăila, 2010) characterised by a decreasing of its urban life conditions under the pressure of

speculative real estate developments and short-term political decisions, thus concluding in an overall loss of its quality of life.

Many of the city's actual problems are due to the lack of a coherent project of spatial organisation based on a central idea capable to orientate and to lead the city towards a common aim represented by a reinforcement of its identity, a term that is already worn-out by wrong uses, especially in the political sector. The identity that the city is looking for is one that can resume the inner quality of space and urban life, a "sum of individual and collective perceptions, of crystallized recollection" (General Urban Plan of Brăila, 2010), and in the same time a gesture of daily concern and care for its own space.

What the city is currently fighting is an uncontrolled peripheral extension which is affecting very rich natural habitats, a constant alteration of its historical urban tissu, a ghettoisation of its residential collective neighborhoods and the almost complete downfall of its economic activity which threatens to open up a complete series of social problems.



Figure 1: The navigation route: Danube - Rihn - Main

From city-and-water to *city and water*.

If the Danube is the future driver of the city's recovery a questioning of the relation between the city and the water is necessary. In order to do this we will cite the work of the American geographer J.H.Bird, with regard to a historical evolution of European city-port relationship that distinguishes three main phases summarising their interaction.

The first phase is characterized by the establishment of the city as a settlement at the water; we can imagine a great degree of dependency of the city as water represented not only the source of water supply but also food, trade route, and of course the main source of its economical development. The water's character was generally aggressive, imposing serious constraints on the expansion of city's limits as floods occurred; it wasn't until the 19th century that technology allowed for the construction of bridges and surpassed water as a barrier.

The second phase was powered by the industrial revolution when large areas were occupied by docks and storage facilities as well as naval yards. This is a moment where the attitude towards the water course migrates to a more dominant one, as man has taken upon the role of an organizer ... water is contained, channeled, in a word, mastered. But this comes at a high cost for the city; the city-water relation is fractured, as the water is no longer a place for leisure and fishing activities.

"Most of the European cities, except maybe Bruges, Venice and Amsterdam kept their distance from the water and turned its back to it. The port was not a mediating element between them" (Prelorenzo, 1993:5).

In the third phase, triggered by technological developments - mainly containerization - ports became the places where huge activities took place and so they couldn't fit the old site near the city centre where they were initially established. A displacement was thus unavoidable so as a result of the ports' migration where wider areas were available, the relation city-water is again open but this time it is facing another barrier: the displacement left behind a derelict industrial site with serious problems regarding the image and pollution.

"The opening up of large tracts of land in these zones creates tremendous opportunities to re-engage historic city centers with their adjacent water areas. Waterfront redevelopment allows for new civic expressions that can reinforce the character and quality of the historic core"(Marshall, 2004:138).

Brăila uses, contemplates, uses and finally forgets the Danube.

Brăila follows more or less the same route as Bird resumes it, with some particularities.

The reason behind the foundation of the ancient settlement of Brăila was double: its location was a convergence point of commercial routes and a good access to the Danube and its peripheric positioning had defensive premises. Before 1540, when Brăila is conquered by the ottomans and governed for almost three centuries, its relation to the water was based upon the functional and trading purpose that the Danube possessed. The built area was longing the river and was intimately connected to it. The main axis of the settlement that structured its planimetric organisation was tightly connected to the port.

The city was famous for its trading and fishing activities, being the main fish supplier of Moldavia and Poland but also of Braşov, at that time a very important cross border city between Valachia and Transilvania,. During the ottoman governance the city was fortified and became partly introverted. However the main streets converged to the river banks and opened a linear perspective on the boats docked in the port. "The city was open towards the water as it stood tall on the left bank, dominating the river, fact seen only here"(Giurescu, 1968)

In the second period, following Bird's classification, the factor that contributed the most at the development of the city was the Porto Franco status received in 1836, and along with that a independization from the Ottoman Empire. The city, freed from tributary standing due to trade privileges, amplifies its economical power. It is also a period of "embelissement" that produces a lot of public monuments, namely a theatre and some schools, and an urbanistic concept of the city that is still regarded as visionary. Some of the public facilities, such as the Violatos mill, are built on the river bank together with an arrangement of the river banks that reinstate the relation to the Danube as a socializing space. The city's essor is also the occasion for experimentation and concrete silos are built that reflect the image of the industrial epoque.

A gradual technologization takes over on the naval port situated north of the the commercial port and new industrial areas begin to emerge in this part of the city comprising a gaz plant and a cement factory. The northern industrial area becomes more and more a structurant element of the city. The riverside is occupied by entrepots, silos, cereal containers...etc.

Starting from 1949 a new naval yard built to the southern part of the city polarises most of the industrial activities previously situated in the northern part.

A necessary reconsideration of the waterfront

According to the three steps described by the geographer J.H.Bird, European cities find themselves confronted to a new stake: how to make value of something that has a great location but necessitates a major investment. The answers to this question comes quickly as cities all over Europe try to revalorize these areas in order to re-launch their economy or reinvest their image, but mainly to make water a part of the city.

The reasons of each intervention differ; in the case of Lyon the "Confluence project" is aiming at giving a new impulse in the southern part of the "Presqu'île" whilst solving some structural problems of the city; in the case of Nantes, the "Ile-de-Nantes project" puts a high value on the industrial heritage and on its traces on a 330 hectares site, while trying to blend in old and new; for Hamburg the Hafencity project constituted an opportunity to reconnect the southern and northern banks of Elba river in the proximity of the central area but also to propel Hamburg's visibility on an international level (although with good quality architecture, "planning was confounded with marketing and with the interests of private investors" (Petrin, 2007) which affected the result).

"Next to other interpretations, the waterfront redevelopment has become a tool for giving port-cities a new economic and cultural impulse, and the exposure they need to take an ever more global urban competition - a requirement and struggle already quite common to ports in their own right" (Daamen,2007:20). Most of the interventions are now criticized for the discontinuity they institute with the existent urban fabric, for promoting social exclusion and mainly for having a much too globalized image, thanks to employing star-architects, which answer mostly to economic and consumer needs. "Despite the intentions of developers and planners to create integrated mixed-used development, combining residential, recreational and cultural developments, the result is often a gentrified space largely occupied by strangers to the city"(Smith, 2007:6).

"In spite of all the obstacles, urban waterfronts have the potential to create unmatched opportunities for redevelopment – the creation of new uses in place of the blighted, abandoned property that once held the city's industrial heart"(Marshall,2004:77).

In Brăila's case however, all intentions of an integrated development stagnated, delayed by the late fall of the communist regime, which succeeded in ensuring a certain functionality of the industrial port, and then by a twenty year period of confusion that allowed for some industrial buildings to be demolished and for others to decay. From the point of view of its relation to the water course, it is now in the situation that characterised European cities twenty years ago. The downside of this is that the economical conditions have changed and these two decades allowed for a chaotic development of the city that ignored tradition and culture, nevertheless Brăila can learn from the mistakes of foregoer cities.

A top-down approach has its risks but also its virtues.

So what is different now? If for twenty years the city grew only by its internal logic, in an incremental process and without any unifying vision, this may no longer be the case. *The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region* brings about a radical change of perspective; not only it opens the possibility of approaching the city from outside, thus leading to a comprehensive view of its large scale functioning, but more than that, it constitutes the chance for Brăila to come out from a certain "hiding". By doing this the context in which Brăila is to be considered is completely shifted from a previous regional level (the county of Brăila) towards a level on each it will be looked at as city on the Danube river along with other European cities like Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest...etc.

Once these cities are "present on the same map" the issue of identity immediately comes to our minds because competitiveness does not reside only in the economic potential but also in what each place has to offer.

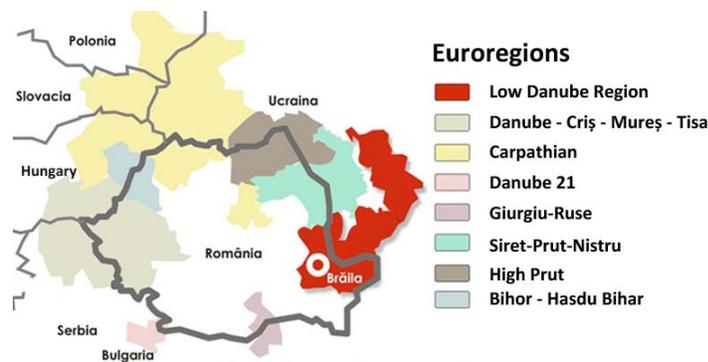


Figure 2: The Low Danube Euro-Region was established in 1998 and comprises as partners: Tulcea, Brăila and Galați Countys from Romania as well as Cahul and Cantemir Countys from Moldavia and Odessa County from Ucraina. Brăila's position in this Region unveils the opportunity of comercial and cultural exchanges through common projects and programmes.

For such a strategy to be implemented it is essential that in its path the Danube acts as a revealer of specificities of places, which are distinguished by their different ability to offer profitable investment. The spatial or geographical productivity of a touristic destination cannot be lasting from the moment that other place offers the same type of product with better comparative advantages of localization.

To remain attractive, cities must make use of material resources and intangible seeking to enhance their virtues through their inherited or recently developed symbols. If unable to define this specificity cities are rendered unequally capable of capitalizing a tourist production.

The Danube is without doubt a natural element that is at the very base of the creation of a very diverse heritage both natural and man-made. The landscape it constructs is an open air exhibition of a great cultural richness but it is also the materialization of working techniques, agriculture, rural life, urban life, climate....etc.

Starting from this generator element a profound irradiation in the depth of the land took place as the development of settlements spread out in the territory. There exists a discontinuity in the relationship between city and water, and at some moments in which the activities related to the water were slowed down or too specialized, perpendicular directions such as trade roads were preferred.

Nevertheless, even if it is mainly the creation of this natural element, the consideration of this macro-region as a single element in a unifying gesture has a lot of upsides, but does not lack downsides either. Apart from some principles that are more or less general what the EU Strategy for the Danube Region proposes, presents the risk of compressing this whole diversity into one thin vision.

One of the aims of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is the improvement of mobility and multimodality through the development of sustainable metropolitan transport systems and mobility, a very complex subject with focus especially on rail and road connectivity of the riverside cities. One of the most serious problems of Romania's development after the communist era is the infrastructure, with a total of 200km of motorways, thus we would plead for a reinforcement of the longitudinal development of the Danube area as the "navigation path" is already in place, and not for an extensive development that can hardly be achieved.

Probably the most practical because its concreteness is the idea of creating a river-bus and other connections between urban centres along the Danube (Danube Express Project). "The project aims to create river-bus connections between the big metropolises along the Danube and their satellites. The riverbus should be a solution especially for the longitudinal travel needs and for the areas where there are no bridges across the Danube. That would improve the mobility of people and could also be used for tourism purposes. The project should help increase the intermodal passengers transport leading to an optimal and sustainable utilization of resources"(EU Strategy).

Another key element is tourism and culture. With regard to using tourism as an incentive for regenerating the Danube Region the third article of the strategy "to promote culture and tourism, people to people contacts" raises a question towards the balance between preservation and consumption.

The idea "to develop the Danube region as a European brand" (EU Strategy) means a clear application of a filter to the landscape diversity, means a deformation of its value. The employment of the term "brand" implies a system of significance that for Baudrillard relates to consumption. The landscape itself would become a "product", or even worse the sign of an object that needs to be consumed.

Furthermore the strategy aims at the "improvement of the quality of tourism products and the supply chain by the development of regional sustainable tourism strategies and the definition of quality criteria, and by the development of eco-labels and certification schemes. The counter-arguments to this approach are that the diversity of this landscape, and especially its productivity, is the very result of an organic process that responded to the local conditions, to the inhabitants' knowledge and to a progressive and slow process of sedimentation, in other words to a cultural phenomenon. Imposing norms and certifications over this sedimentation would only reduce its complexity.

However, let alone these menaces, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region can foster the economic development of the concerned area by creating employment, promoting valuable natural or urban areas that are presently less known, and ultimately by strengthening the local identities there where they exist but are very discrete. The improvement of planning and infrastructure for tourism should include "accommodation and hospitality facilities, port tourism infrastructure, walkways and paths, infocentres, cycling routes and their networking in the Danube area including their linkage to the network of routes along the rivers. It should also emphasise protected areas and locations of natural and cultural heritage as well as theme parks, wine roads, view towers, grounds and equipment for sports and recreation"(EU Strategy).

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region is also emphasizing the role of exchange in arts. Measures taken into the arts domain can animate local traditions, such as theatre or music festivals. In cities with a rich tradition, Brăila included, this connection can help build a prestigious urban and cultural image capable of playing a crucial role in the waterfront regeneration along with its insertion with new types of activities such as leisure port for yachts and cruise ships.

Last but not least: people. The strategy is aiming to enrich the cultural diversity and to "enhance cooperation and contacts between people of different origins, to encourage creativity, and provide a driving force for cultural innovation and economic development, based on heritage, traditions and tourism".

What comes out from the hiding?

The way in which Brăila is disclosing its identity on this new path depends in the first place on the reconsiderations of its intrinsic values and also on the affirmation of those components that make it unique when compared with other European Danube cities.

Doubtlessly, the urban structure of the city constitutes a strong characteristic. The geometrical semi-concentric disposition of the streets that was designed in 1830 by Riniev and re-drawn by Borroczyn in 1834 embraces the Danube and invests the city with a powerful image. "The urbanistic plan is a master-piece. By regulating the medieval settlement it embodies in its composition the memory of a past stage and offers the possibility of a natural future continuation based on a pre-established plan, without making any modification in the planimetric structure of the city"(Candea, 1997:96). At the core of the city lies the city centre with a valuable urban system of boulevards, squares and footpaths doubled by a rich architectural heritage.

The footprint of the industrial past is one of the main assets of the city. From silos, storage buildings to old mills the now deserted industrial heritage that is longing the river front possesses an enormous potential of reconversion. Coroborated with an ample unbuilt waterfront this heritage can contribute to Brăila's image as well as act as leverage for its economy as the space offer is very suitable for creative industries.

Another possible path of revitalization is Brăila's tradition related to culture; starting with the XIX century Brăila became an important center for theatre and opera concerts, tradition that is still carried out in the center of the city but which can expand in relation to the Danube.

Added to the idea of cultural events is also the multicultural character of the city. In Brăila live several communities such as the Greeks', the Armenians', the Jews' and the Russians' from Lipova which imprinted their tradition in the city's cultural diversity.

Last but not least, the natural environment of the city constitutes one of its most spectacular attributes. Even after the embankment of the Danube between 1960 and 1970 the artificial islands formed as a consequence display a very rich biodiversity and compose a unique landscape.

In the meantime the General Urban Plan of Brăila, which is in the making, aims at disclosing the city's values, as well as trying to remake a consumable image through the reaffirmation of its multiculturalism, rehabilitation of public spaces, the implementation of urban projects, the incentive to leisure, entertainment and commerce.

The convergence between the General Urban Plan and the implementation of the UE Strategy offers the possibility of both an opening up of the city at an international scale and a reconsideration of its inner values. By so doing, Brăila is likely to re-gain its status of important river node and port and cultural hub whilst not becoming a consumer product.

The Danube can thus become a founder element but its success depends on how well a global balance is instituted between the Danube cities in order to potentiate their role and vocation.

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