

Urban Resilience and Adaptation in Brăila: From Citadel to Socialist planning

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

Cities remember. Not through monuments alone, but through street alignments, parcel rhythms, infrastructure traces, and the spaces people continue to use long after the original political systems disappeared. Brăila is a good example of this layered persistence. Its urban form was not produced by continuous growth, but by abrupt historical ruptures followed by imposed spatial reorganizations.

The demolition of the Ottoman citadel in the early nineteenth century radically altered the city's logic of expansion and its reason of existence per se. Defensive architecture became obsolete once Brăila entered European commercial networks and the Danube port gained economic relevance. The new radial–concentric structure was not only a formal planning gesture. It optimized access between the port, administrative areas, and emerging commercial routes. That intended efficiency still explains why the historic core remains spatially active today.

The socialist period operated differently. Speed mattered more than adaptation. Housing demand generated by industrialization required repetitive construction systems and simplified zoning strategies. The Hipodrom neighborhood reflects this approach clearly: large residential slabs, oversized open spaces with weak programmatic definition, and circulation systems designed primarily for functional separation rather than urban continuity.

This paper examines why these two planning models aged differently. Some urban structures absorbed change over time. Others resisted it. The research aims to understand how both historical architectural and morphological decisions continue to shape Brăila's capacity to adapt to contemporary pressures such as mobility demands, infrastructure degradation, and fragmented land use.

METHOD

The research uses a diachronic urban morphology approach focused on spatial continuity rather than historical narration interpretation alone. The intention was not simply to document how Brăila expanded, but to identify which physical structures remained stable and why certain forms proved more adaptable than others.

Several layers of material were compared: historical maps revealed shifts in street hierarchy and parcel subdivision, archival plans clarified the planning intentions behind major interventions and modern satellite imagery exposed current patterns of density, circulation, and spatial fragmentation.

Also, field observation mattered a lot here: some spatial problems only become evident at pedestrian scale: undefined public edges, residual open spaces, or abrupt transitions between urban tissues.

The analysis concentrated on four elements: street networks, parcel structures, building typologies, and land-use distribution. These components were studied across two moments of accelerated transformation:

- the nineteenth-century development of the city after it lost its military character, after the citadel demolition
- the socialist expansion between the 1960s and 1980s, centered on industrial growth and social fast-paced massive housing needs.

The comparison was less about style and more about urban performance. How easily can these fabrics absorb new uses? How do they support movement? Which structures encourage continuity, and which create isolation? Those questions guided the interpretation of the spatial data into relevant information.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The nineteenth-century restructuring of Brăila introduced a surprisingly resilient urban framework. The radial–concentric street system created multiple directional connections toward the port and commercial center, allowing circulation patterns to remain functional even as transportation technologies changed over time. Buildings changed function without requiring major spatial reorganization. That flexibility matters because urban resilience often depends less on monumental planning and more on whether a city can absorb gradual adaptation without losing coherence. In Brăila's historic center, the street network still supports mixed activities because it was not over-specialized from the beginning. The socialist expansion followed another logic entirely. Industrial production methods influenced urban form directly. Standardized housing blocks reduced construction time and simplified infrastructure provision, yet this efficiency produced repetitive spatial environments with limited adaptability. Large distances between buildings weakened street definition. An entire neighborhood illustrates this contradiction well. Density exists, but urban intensity does not. Residential concentration alone was expected to generate social vitality, although the spatial structure offered few mechanisms for mixed-use interaction or gradual transformation. Many of these areas now struggle because the original planning model assumed stable demographic and economic conditions that no longer exist and it offers little to none modern adaptation to economic development.

An important difference emerged during the analysis. The nineteenth-century fabric was built through accumulation. The socialist fabric was built through brutal replacement. One allowed continuous modification at small scales. The other depended on centralized control and large-scale intervention. This distinction may explain why some parts of Brăila adapted naturally over time while others became increasingly fragile.

CONCLUSION

Resilience is not simply a contemporary planning objective. In many cases, it is already embedded — or constrained — within inherited urban form. Brăila demonstrates how the long-term performance of a city depends heavily on the spatial assumptions built into earlier planning decisions. The historic center continues to function because its structure permits negotiation between old and new uses. Streets connect rather than separate. Parcels can change incrementally. Spatial hierarchy remains legible. These characteristics were not designed explicitly for resilience, yet they produced it over time. The socialist neighborhoods reveal the opposite condition. Their difficulties are not only technical or economic but morphological. Large-scale zoning and standardized residential layouts reduced the city's capacity for gradual adaptation. Regeneration therefore becomes more complicated because interventions must overcome the rigidity of the original spatial framework and This shifts the discussion away from preservation versus redevelopment.

FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES

The paper is part of a larger doctoral research that investigates these questions through quantitative spatial analysis and comparative urban studies. Different methodology mapping will be used to examine how connectivity, density, and land-use distribution influence resilience across different urban tissues in Brăila. Another direction involves space syntax analysis. The goal is to better understand how street configuration affects movement patterns, accessibility, and the activation of public space. There is still limited research connecting historical morphology with contemporary resilience in Eastern European contexts and such the long-term objective is practical as it aims to support regeneration strategies that work with inherited urban structures.