

The Shadow of CIA over the Landscape of Brăila: Architectural and Urbanistic Influence of International Actors in a Complicated Context

La Sombra de la CIA sobre el paisaje de Brăila: Influencia arquitectónica y urbanística de actores internacionales en un contexto complicado

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Abstract: This work identifies certain influences and techniques of international allied and collateral enemy espionage regarding the urban center of Brăila throughout history through the hourglass of Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America after the WWII. This research it is mainly based on declassified information publicly available in various libraries and, through collateral analysis and crosslinked articles create a general image of how the CIA was perceiving the city of Brăila in a rather large period of time, through indirect observation, testimonies, direct espionage or general HUMINT techniques and its importance for local community from an architectural and/or urban planning point of view.

Keywords: Danube river, urban heritage, historic urban landscape (HUL), spatial and social differentiation, espionage.

Resumen: Este trabajo identifica ciertas influencias y técnicas de espionaje aliado internacional y enemigo colateral en relación con el centro urbano de Brăila a lo largo de la historia a través del prisma

de la Agencia Central de Inteligencia de los Estados Unidos de América después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Esta investigación se basa principalmente en información desclasificada disponible públicamente en diversas bibliotecas y, a través de análisis colaterales y artículos interrelacionados, crea una imagen general de cómo la CIA percibía la ciudad de Brăila en un período de tiempo bastante amplio, a través de la observación indirecta, testimonios, espionaje directo o técnicas generales de HUMINT y su importancia para la comunidad local desde el punto de vista arquitectónico y/o urbanístico.

Palabras clave: río Danubio, patrimonio urbano, paisaje urbano histórico, diferenciación espacial y social, espionaje.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last 25 years, there has been extensive work upon the intervention of CIA and its European partners about the influence of this state actor in the local policies worldwide. However, this type of research, based on the FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) (US Government, 1967) gained a new azimuth with the declassification of an enormous pool of information in all fields by the US Department of Justice requests in the last 5 years, and in the 2016 S.337 - FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 (Sen. [R-TX] Cornyn, John, 2015) that created an even broader scope for the declassification of information.

In this article we use an interdisciplinary approach that allows us to conduct a profound investigation into covert and overt interference of external players — primarily the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)— in the city of Brăila, Romania. By utilizing a seminal theoretical framework that combines ideas related to soft power, covert interventions and urban change, cross-referenced declassified documents, lateral work and case study methodology, the article stimulates on processes through which international players have influenced Brăila's urban and social reorganization. Drawing on an analysis of designs, planning schemes and shifts in policy, indirect modes of projection are also examined with respect to dissemination through economic assistance, cultural diplomacy and technical help. Key findings indicate that overt architectural interventions were kept to a minimum —owing in part to the region's political sensitivities— but that the specter of international intelligence work —notably by the CIA— has endowed Brăila's urban morphology with some indelible traces, clearly evident in hybridized built forms, imperial policy shifts, and contested community narratives. The article ends by considering the wider significance of covert influence in urbanism, the ethical conundrums of interpretation and the implications for contemporary urban policy and heritage management.

Based on its urban fabric, marked by traces of Ottoman, Greek, and modern architecture, the article tells the story of a cosmopolitan trading hub whose identity evolved through constant exchange and adaptation. This multifaceted heritage provides a valuable framework for analyzing how contemporary interventions might

affect local identity and social cohesion. By integrating the city's tangible and intangible heritage into a potential impact assessment, decision-makers can better understand how urban transformations interact with community values and historical continuity. Within the framework of UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, Brăila's past is not seen merely as a static backdrop but as an active layer in urban life. The HUL concept encourages a holistic view that connects heritage conservation with sustainable development, acknowledging the dynamic relationship between the historic environment and the needs of present communities. In Brăila, this could mean using the historical port area and old town as living laboratories for adaptive reuse, cultural entrepreneurship, and inclusive planning that respects the city's historical morphology while accommodating new functions.

A primary point of view is the contextualization of Brăila; historical, geopolitical and urban importance, as it is situated on the Danube River in southeastern Romania, strategic among Romanian cities and Danube ports alike within an unstable land - in Eastern Europe. The port, as shown in Figure 1, industrial base and multiracial roots of the city has resulted in Brăila having developed as both the hub of its regional economy and a focus for an array of distinctly European cultural influences, mostly Greek, Russian/Lipovan and German and Austrian (Muzeul Brăila, 2012).

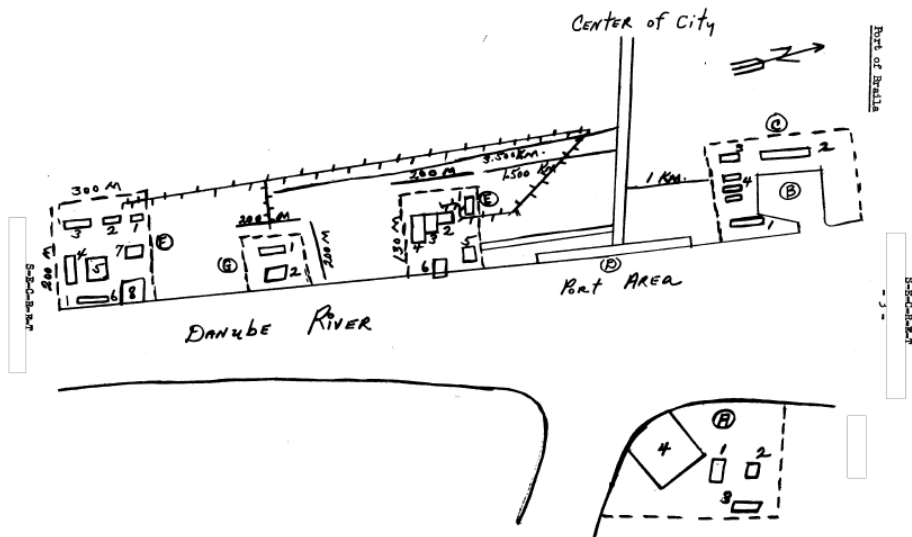


Figure 1: Hand drawn map of the port of Brăila from a local informant of the CIA - 25.03.1955

Up until the 20th century, particularly during the Cold War, Brăila's position close to the Soviet sphere of influence, the Danube's last important mainland port, its Black Sea proximity to seaboard access and a sometimes-stormy political

scene drew attention from local as well as international quarters. Its industrial legacy created by the porto-franco area declared in 1836 (Giurescu, 1996) and continued by the extensive communist investments in local industry hubs such as Promex, Progresul, ICPCB and Chiscani Chemical Complex, made Brăila a target for international interests, in a strategic geopolitical position.

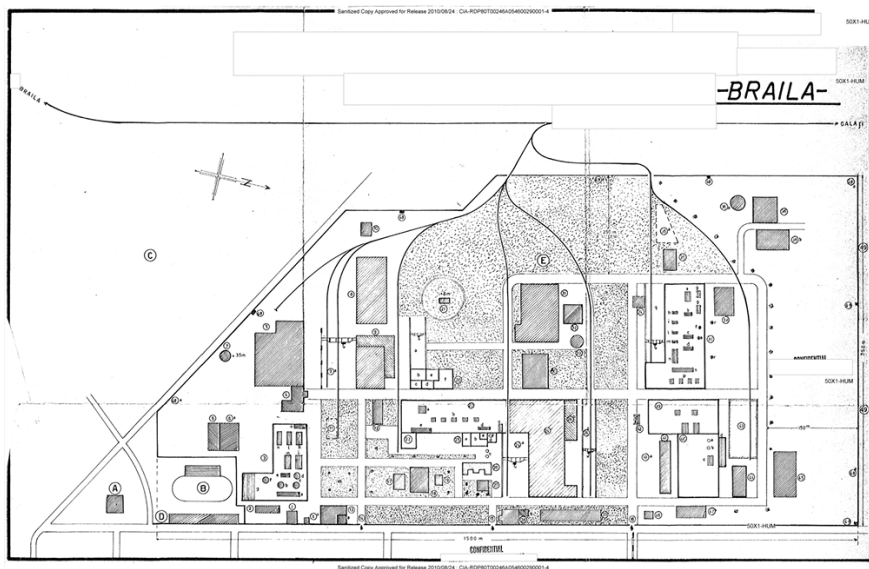


Figure 1: Plan of Progresul Metallurgical Works in Brăila.
Source: CIA-RDP80T00246A054600290001-4

The declassified CIA report in Figure 2 is entirely dedicated to Progresul Metallurgical Works, with a 6-page report about detailed functionality and works as well as a very detailed plan about the placement and destination of each building. This report still has a 4-page section denied from declassification, so the information is probably more detailed than the sanitized document.

This paper implies the following research problem statement, which is the clear overt architectural legacy of Brăila: a hotchpotch of eras and styles, featuring neoclassical landmarks jostling with socialist-realist apartment blocks while sleek modernist slabs and vernacular architecture provide waterfront competition; the covert mechanisms that international actors and its local counterparts have experimented with in attempting to influence its urban expansion rather less so. The covert character of these interventions and their scarcity of direct evidence has, however, made the trace of their architectural and urbanistic effects difficult. CIA had critical and strategic sources that could ensemble such a detailed report such as the declassified confidential CIA report

CIA-RDP81-01043R001000010005-0¹ from 1957, which has 23 pages of very detailed information about the urban area of Brăila and the local population, activities and specific problems and solutions that even parts of the Romanian government wasn't aware of, such as current function, potential function, former function and the maximum capacity of personnel that could be enabled in the respective building or institution. It is very detailed, as much as detailing the entrances and secondary entrances. There is no exact reference that CIA had informants in Brăila but such detailed plans could not be attained without local collaborationists, and perennial ones, as there are details that only locals could know via customization. The report specifically mentions that the Romanian security forces had informers or undercover agents "in great numbers in all professions and walks of life" in Brăila, and while it does not explicitly state the CIA had its own informants there, the level of granular detail in the document—such as the layout of buildings, functions, and internal security operations—strongly suggests the CIA was receiving information from local assets.

The corruption generated by a near-poverty country in East Europe after a terrible Revolution that ended the communist regime has solved many problems that were unsolvable for international actors (Cohen & Ermart, 1992).

In this context the purpose of this paper is to answer the following research questions:

- How has the city of Brăila been monitored directly and indirectly by international actors, including but not limited to, the CIA?
- And what tools—from money and tech support to cultural exchange programs and clandestine activities—were used in this monitoring and covert influence?
- How, in turn, have local actors interpreted these interventions and what kinds of adoptions or resistances emerged?

The goals are to map the landscape of overseas intervention in Brăila, assess its architectural and urbanist legacy, and engage with ethical and methodological challenges when searching for clandestine influence in the city.

The methodology is interpretivist case study informed, based on the analysis of declassified intelligence documents, Freedom Of Information Act (US Government, 1967) policy reports secondary academic literature and comparative research on urban intervention. Sideways interpretation and comparison of archive evidence are used to triangulate, in as balanced a way as possible, an understanding of international impact. The study, where supported by no direct documentation as no foreign power recognizes plainly the intervention on other

¹ The full list of CIA declassified documents that were used in the development of this research is available upon request, the names of which follow the pattern shown in the text.

countries, relies on indirect indices (urban-policy change, adoption of non-local architectural typology and various testimonies) to infer intervention was present and effected.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A formative amount of work explores the influence that international actors exert on urban environments, especially in cities defined by their political volatility, strategic position or rapid metamorphosis. Blanchard & Volchenkov (2010) show that urban space is not only an inert substratum but a terrain of economic and geopolitical contest, in which isolation/interconnection mirror — and feed back into— differential patterns of investment and especially governance. In these environments architecture and urban planning take the form of instruments with which state and non-state actors assert their power, instill loyalty or subvert adversary or even allied but weaker nations.

Soft power is understood as the capacity to shape the wants of others through attraction instead of coercion (Nye, 2019) has been a concept heavily emphasized in recent studies, particularly those that have addressed the urban intervention. Instruments such as culture diplomacy, lobbying, exchange of education and then reintegration in the same environment of the same person but with aligned vision and partial technical knowledge to open the gate for further international technical assistance, are often used to bring about change in policy and practice little by little (Valgañón, et al, 2024). At the same time, secret operations — spying and disinformation to backroom funding of various projects, including architectural and industrial— are what make up a more shadowy, less obvious dimension of international sway. The C.I.A.'s “world tour”, as recorded in declassified files (Central Intelligence Agency, 1967), extends to both overt and covert traditions, with cities being both targets and tools for broader geopolitical aims.

Importantly, Kapsalis shows how computational techniques can be utilized to rebuild, simulate or modify urban form (Kapsalis, 2024); it leaves open the question of the degree to which urban space resists outside forces.

Studies of the CIA in Eastern Europe have most commonly dealt with political penetration, intelligence collection, and backing up dissident organizations that aligned with USA's strategies. For example, demographic trend analysis, satellite images and infrastructure planning techniques taken from practices of the intelligence community are being used for covert and design decisions (Wandeto, et al , 2018). These practices, within the sphere of Romania and Brăila in particular, come together with local privatization and modernization shift, socialist urbanization and post-communist development.

However, tremendous disparities still remain. Although there are plenty of comparative studies (the analyses of American intervention in Latin American

urbanism or the impact of the Soviet system on Central European cities come to mind), specifically, Brăila's case is still insufficiently explored. This gap is addressed by the present article, which attempts to reconstruct and map, by means of a meta-analysis of available data the shadow cast on Brăila's cityscape by an international 'coterie' of players.

The article is based mainly on declassified information and therefore makes it biased as, it is demonstrated further on, only information that doesn't affect international allied relations are published and no strategic or functional operational info is shared.

3. BRĂILA: A STRATEGIC URBAN LANDSCAPE

The development of modern-day Brăila is a palimpsest, influenced by Ottoman and Russian occupation as well as the exuberance of prosperity in the late 19th century and the rigidities of socialist planning. The town's historic center with neoclassical facades and irregular street patterns, gave way to the monumentalism of the communist year's focus on functional housing blocks arranged around civic squares by rationalized circulation. The post-1989 era brought new dynamics, such as privatization, market-led development and a groping toward identity in the ruins of utopian modernism.

The strategic role in the Cold War and postwar periods of the location of Brăila, was that it was positioned where Danube, the major river, and rail routes intersected soviet border and this meant that it was becoming very important in this context. In the Cold War, too, the city operated as both a gateway and a buffer: its port enabling exchange and espionage-fueled expansion; its industry serving local end-markets but also regions beyond. Such issues made Brăila interesting not only for the Warsaw Pact planners but also for Western intelligence agencies including CIA which was monitoring its types of infrastructural installations and inspecting if there were any governance or urban management vulnerabilities that could be exploited (Wandeto, et al, 2018).

Historical control over Brăila, pendulating between governance by the center and local autonomy, experienced numerous changes across time according to the interests of the Romanian state and under influence from external international factors. Urban policy was frequently a fiercely contested domain, one that pitted rival visions of modernization against ideological faithfulness and common sense. Moreover, in many cases, local authorities were more autonomous and sometimes outright opposing the government regarding the implementation of local policies that were not seen with good eyes locally. In such a situation, external influence—from economic assistance to technical cooperation to covert action—had a receptive environment.

3.1. Spatial evolution and foreign influences in the urban and architectural development of Brăila

The modern urban configuration of Brăila, defined by its semicircular historic center and general radial–concentric street network, represents a decisive moment in the city’s spatial evolution. Established after the Treaty of Adrianople (Aslantaş, 2016) and implemented under Russian administrative supervision (1828–1834) (Giurescu, 1996), the systematization plan not only reorganized circulation but also reoriented the city’s architectural and functional identity. Prior to 1829, Brăila functioned as an Ottoman *raya*, structured around military fortifications and an organic, irregular street pattern. The demolition of Ottoman defensive structures and the main Brăila citadel as well as the imposition of a geometric urban plan marked a radical morphological shift. Under the supervision of General Pavel Kiseleff and Russian military engineers, the city adopted a radial layout that facilitated port activity, trade logistics, and administrative control.

The streets linking the harbor to the inland territory, intersected by concentric semicircles, created a coherent spatial hierarchy. This new framework encouraged parcel regularization and the emergence of representative public spaces, redefining the relationship between port, marketplace, and civic institutions. This urban typology created under foreign influence stimulated the development of architectural typologies shaped by both functional necessity and foreign cultural influence.

Commercial buildings and warehouses near the port exhibited functional layouts aligned with Central European mercantile models. Merchant houses combined residential and commercial functions, often adopting neoclassical or eclectic façades influenced by Western European architecture. Public institutions—administrative buildings, banks, and schools—reinforced the image of a modern European city. Religious architecture, including Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian, Greek, and Jewish places of worship, illustrated the multicultural character of a thriving international port. These typologies demonstrate how urban planning decisions created a framework that enabled architectural diversification, while foreign merchants, investors, and communities contributed stylistic and functional influences. The spatial logic imposed after 1829 thus became the matrix within which current architectural identity developed.

However, the influence this article sought to identify was not easily identified with general massive interventions, but more as political influence.

4. THE CIA AND GLOBAL ACTORS: MEANS OF INFLUENCE

CIA’s worldwide operations have included an intricate combination of intelligence gathering, psychological warfare, secret financing, and technical

assistance. In urban space, these took the forms of attempts to manage policy environments, architectonic practices or Western-friendly local actors (Blanchard & Volchenkov, 2010). Agency employed the tools of satellite imaging, demographic analysis, and urban simulation as a means to long-distance surveillance, even forecasting, from afar (Wandeto, et al, 2018). In Romania, CIA operations were driven by two imperatives: the containment of Soviet influence and a drive to present alternative models of development to the regional doctrine.

In this context, a clearer distinction must be established between intelligence observation and direct urbanistic or architectural intervention. In examining the available documentation, it was essential to determine whether external actors actively shaped the urban fabric of Brăila or merely analyzed its existing spatial configuration. The available disclosed evidence indicates that the role of the CIA was observational rather than operational. The documents in question primarily describe, map, and monitor the city's infrastructure, port facilities, industrial zones, circulation networks, and strategic institutions. Their purpose was analytical: to assess spatial organization, economic capacity, and logistical potential within the broader geopolitical context of the Cold War.

Importantly, these materials also identify potential assets—industrial sites, transport nodes, administrative structures, or social groups—that could be leveraged to influence political agendas. However, there is no indication of direct involvement in urban planning decisions, architectural design, or physical transformation of the built environment.

Thus, the intelligence perspective should be understood as a form of strategic spatial reading rather than an instrument of urban intervention. The urban fabric of Brăila was observed and interpreted as a geopolitical resource, not reshaped through direct external planning action.

4.1. Funding as means of policy agenda influence

Loans, grants or technical assistance for infrastructural projects, which in many cases came with the stamp of conditions that would have helped to determine architectural choices or urban policy agendas.

Based on a review of available sources, including USAID reports (USAID, 2025), World Bank archives (World Bank, 2025), and general web searches for historical and recent aid, there is only one documented example of US loans, grants, or technical assistance specifically targeted at projects in Brăila, and that is, in 2005, USAID (USAID, 2025) financed an integrated library system, and the National Collective Catalog of Public Libraries in Romania and the first virtual library in Romania. However, no projects that included conditions influencing architectural choices or urban policy agendas were identified. In context, US involvement in Eastern Romania appears to be more strategically focused than development-oriented. US interest in the region is largely shaped by geopolitical

and security considerations, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine and NATO's eastern flank reinforcement. In this regard, the modernization and expansion of Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base represents a cornerstone project. The airbase—already one of the most important NATO logistical hubs in Southeastern Europe—is undergoing a major expansion estimated at approximately \$2.7 billion (Wellman, 2024).

4.2. Cultural diplomacy

Exhibition sponsorship, academic exchanges and cultural programs designed to induce pro-Western leanings among urban planners, architects and civic leaders (Valgañón, et al, 2024).

“When, in 1969, Romania and the United States signed an accord to open a Romanian Library in New York and an American Library in Bucharest, it was a big deal indeed. In the complicated Cold War circumstances, the decision created a unique institution to manage the Romanian-U.S. cultural relations, unprecedented even among other countries caught in the Soviet orbit, and kicked off 55 years of Romanian professional cultural diplomacy in the United States”. (Romanian Cultural Institute, 2024).

4.3. Covert operations

There is no direct data that exposes covert operations in Brăila but there are cases such as in CIA-RDP82-00457R011100300005-4, from 27 March 1952, there is a mention that

“Numerous guerillas in Brăila who are bitter about life under the Rumanian Communist Regime and wish they could be repatriated. [...] most of the [...] guerrillas are dressed in what appeared to be American military uniforms.”,

which may indicate a covert type of support for the local guerillas that opposed the communist regime.

4.4. Comparative examples from other regions

The interventionist pattern in Brăila seems to be similar, in several aspects, with that found in Latin America where American agencies supported urban modernization as a way to counteract the growth of left-wing movements (Blanchard & Volchenkov, 2010). In such cases, the confusion of overt assistance and covert manipulation further confused where architecture innovation ended and political overthrow began. More revealing of the evolved nature of contemporary interventions, however, is their adoption of state-of-the art computational methodologies for urban analysis (Kapsalis, 2024), but the

essential dynamics —competition over influence, manipulation of space and contestation of identity— remain remarkably constant.

A very clear example of interventionist USA via the use of CIA was Serbia. As the US sources indicate in the National Intelligence Council (declassified document from 1992) (Cohen & Ermarth, 1992), which analyze the depth of economic sanctions in Serbia, such as “35 – 40 percent drop in industrial production, 2.3 million unemployed and on reduced wages, imports and exports down by roughly two-thirds compared to last year’s level”. The memorandum is an analysis on how to make the sanctions more efficient, and moreover, takes a leap into identifying the illegal and black-market economy connections with neighboring countries, Romania included. A blatant affirmation found in (Cohen & Ermarth, 1992) is:

“The international community will need to provide substantially greater financial compensation to encourage bordering countries to tighten sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro.” And that is completed by “Such assistance will be particularly important in getting greater support from such primary sources of leakage as Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine”

while Ukraine doesn’t even have a land or water border with Serbia or Montenegro. There is even a dedicated Chapter IIA11 (Cohen & Ermarth, 1992) named “Legal authority and consequences of shutting down transshipment through Serbia”, which is backed in the same document by “*What possibility is there for weakening or breaking the link between Montenegro and Serbia?*”.

In this context, the interference is of greater importance for the US decision makers that the casual reader may understand, and these CIA declassified documents only strengthen that belief.

5. TRACING THE SHADOW: EVIDENCE AND HYPOTHESES IN BRĂILA

Analysis of available evidence for involvement resulted in the retrieval from CIA’s electronic reading room of more than 850 declassified documents regarding the city of Brăila. Direct evidence of CIA involvement in Brăila’s urban development is, by necessity, elusive—shrouded in secrecy, obfuscated by layers of plausible deniability, and dispersed across fragmented archives. These documents are also sanitized, as the policy was always of not exposing certain information, as provided in internal regulations (Central Intelligence Agency, 1967), such as: “*The CIA takes exemptions under the FOIA to protect sources and methods and national security information*”.

CIA will neither confirm nor deny the existence of records on:

- CIA operational activities.

- Specific confidential or covert relationships (i.e., classified source).
- Foreign nationals.
- Numbers of personnel employed by CIA.
- Data relating to CIA budget and/or expenditures.
- CIA facilities.
- CIA liaison relationships with foreign governments. Information provided by a foreign government.

In essence, all the info is available but connections have to be made, as, at times, specific information is sanitized, thus compromising context or eliminating critical details.

Declassified materials, released under the FOIA (US Government, 1967), reveal patterns of interest in Brăila's infrastructural capacity, demographic evolution, and governance vulnerabilities. Intelligence assessments tracked the construction of housing blocks, the expansion of port facilities, and the modernization of transport networks—data that informed both strategic planning and, potentially, operational intervention (Wandeto, et al, 2018). In CIA-RDP03T02227R000100070004-6, a declassified document regarding Mission Oak 1965, the only reference to Romania is in the final list, Kogalniceanu Airport, but no other references, as many pages were denied from publishing, as presented in Figure 3 - Example of “Page Denied”.



Figure 2: Example of “Page Denied”. Source: CIA-RDP03T02227R000100070004-6

At page 23 of the CIA-RDP78B03817A000600020015-1, regarding Mission Oak 1967, there is an entry about Brăila Harbor, that has the text presented in Figure 3: Mention 1 about Brăila harbour facilities and equipment.

```

BRAILA PORT FACILITIES RU 4517N 02759E
VESSELS -- 2 OCEAN-GOING-TYPE MERCHANT VESSELS 01 IN
BASIN AND 1 IN MID-CHANNEL, APPROXIMATELY 70 LARGE
RIVER BARGES, NUMEROUS SMALL BARGES, TOW BOATS, TUGS,
AND RIVER PASSENGER BOATS.
AT THE SHIPYARD -- 1, AND PORTIONS OF A SECOND, VERY
WIDE BARGE UNDER CONSTRUCTION ON DIRECT SIDE-LAUNCHING
WAYS, 12 SELF-PROPELLED BARGES UNDER CONSTRUCTION ON
BUILDING/LAUNCH WAYS, AND 2 PROBABLE TUGS.
PORT FACILITIES INCLUDE A BASIN WITH BULK CARGO
HANDLING EQUIPMENT AND AN IMPROVED WATERFRONT FOR CARGO
HANDLING AND VESSEL MOORING. A SHIPYARD IS AT THE
SOUTH END OF THE URBAN AREA. FACILITIES INCLUDE A LONG
SIDE LAUNCHING/CONSTRUCTION WAY WITH AT LEAST 8 LATERAL
BUILDING WAYS, 1 DIRECT SIDE-LAUNCH CONSTRUCTION WAY,
10 MAJOR BUILDINGS 01 QUONSET-ROOF BUILDING, AND OPEN
STORAGE AREAS 01 WITH GANTRY CRANES.
    
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Figure 3: Mention 1 about Brăila harbour facilities and equipment. Source: CIA-RDP78B03817A000600020015-1

In the report it is mentioned the way the harbor is built, its facilities but the source and other details are whited out. So, in this image from 1967, the port of Brăila is in the same document with launching sites such as Kiev, Moscow, Magadan and others. The interest of CIA in this matter is of peculiar importance, as there are another harbors closer to the soviet border but yet they consume their resources to map Brăila.

In CIA-RDP78T04562A001000010019-7, KH 4 Mission III, Oak Supplement 1970, at page 67 it is a mention that the shipyard has been extended to a very big detail and redacted for release extensively as seen in Figure 4 Mention 2 about Brăila harbour facilities and equipment.

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BRAILA PORT FACILITIES DATA 45-17-N 027-59-E
STATUS: OPERATIONAL
REMARKS:
THE SHIPYARD HAD BEEN EXTENDED TO THE SOUTH BY THE ADDITION OF
FIVE BUILDINGWAYS AND A TRANSVERSER AND SIDE LAUNCH SYSTEM.
D NAVAL ORDER OF BATTLE:
6 FREIGHTERS 33 CARGO BARGES
ID 5 POSS BARGES ON BUILDINGWAYS
D 25X1D
25X1D
    
```

Figure 4 Mention 2 about Brăila harbour facilities and equipment, Source: CIA-RDP78T04562A001000010019-7

Several episodes in Brăila's postwar urban history bear the hallmarks of external influence:

- modernization of port facilities (1960s–1980s): while formally under communist control, these projects exhibited design features and operational protocols reminiscent of Western models, suggesting indirect transfer of knowledge or influence.
- housing and urban renewal initiatives (1970s–1980s): the adoption of prefabricated construction techniques, rationalist planning, and standardized typologies paralleled trends observed in cities targeted by Western aid and consultancy.
- post-1989 urban policy shifts: the rapid pivot to market-driven development, privatization of land, and engagement with international donors in the early 1990s reflected broader patterns of post-socialist transition. Here, the role of international agencies—whether overt (World Bank, EU) or covert (intelligence-linked NGOs)—was particularly pronounced.

Indirect mechanisms of influence often left more durable marks than overt intervention. Cultural programs, from architectural exhibitions to academic exchanges, served as vectors for ideological and aesthetic influence, subtly reshaping the parameters of what was considered modern, efficient, or desirable in urban design (Valgañón, et al, 2024).

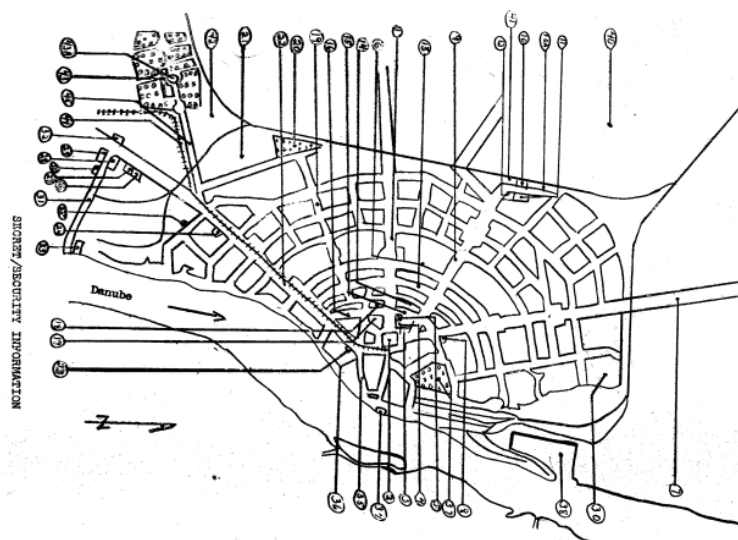


Figure 5: Map of Brăila 1928 - CIA reports. Source: CIA-RDP82-00047R000100490004-2

The architectural landscape of Brăila exhibits a complex layering of influences, such as the adoption of modular apartment blocks, the introduction of green belts, or the emphasis on connectivity. Comparative analysis with other cities subject to Western influence reveals striking parallels in the deployment of urban forms designed to foster mobility, surveillance, and social control (Wandeto, et al, 2018). For example, in a map published in CIA-RDP82-00047R000100490004-2, presented in Figure 6: Map of Brăila 1928 – CIA reports, there are 45 Points of interest with details such as capacities, destination, use and social or local significance details.

6. ARCHITECTURAL AND URBANISTIC OUTCOMES

The cumulative effect of these reports and potential line of interventions, be it CIA or Soviet interference, was to reshape Brăila's urban fabric along lines that privileged functionality, visibility, and strategic utility. Housing estates were sited to optimize access and oversight, public spaces were rationalized to facilitate crowd control, and infrastructural arteries were engineered to support both economic and security objectives (Munteanu, 2011). The result was a landscape characterized by both modernization and alienation—a tension mirrored in the city's social dynamics and collective memory.

Local actors did not passively accept external influence, as it was presented earlier in CIA-RDP82-00457R011100300005-4, 1952. Instead, they engaged in processes of adaptation, resistance, or hybridization, selectively appropriating foreign models while asserting local priorities and identities. Instances of architectural bricolage—where Western typologies were fused with indigenous motifs or adapted to local climatic and social conditions—abound. More often, however, hybridization produced a landscape that was neither wholly local nor entirely foreign, but rather a negotiated synthesis of multiple influences (Academia Română Institutul de studii de sud-est Europeene, 2014).

7. THE COMPLICATED CONTEXT: LOCAL, NATIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL INTERPLAY

Interactions between local authorities, national policies, and international agendas has always been a subject of potential corruption or public outcry. It has always been characterized by both cooperation and contestation. At times, local officials embraced external support as a means of securing resources, technical expertise, or political leverage, even for personal or public motives. At others, they resisted perceived encroachments on sovereignty or cultural autonomy.

The ambiguous source of some projects, the presence of foreign advisors with unclear mandates, and rumors regarding espionage or subversion

contributed to an atmosphere of uncertainty and contested narrative. Oral histories and local memory often diverged from official accounts, reflecting the difficulty of disentangling fact from speculation in the shadowy realm of international influence (Wandeto, et al, 2018).

The CIA-RDP80T00246A063200120001-6 report, there is a map in Italian of Brăila but with an extensive legend for no less than 147 points of interest in the city, industrial enterprises, government buildings and military installations as seen in Figure 6: Map of Brăila in 1962 CIA report.

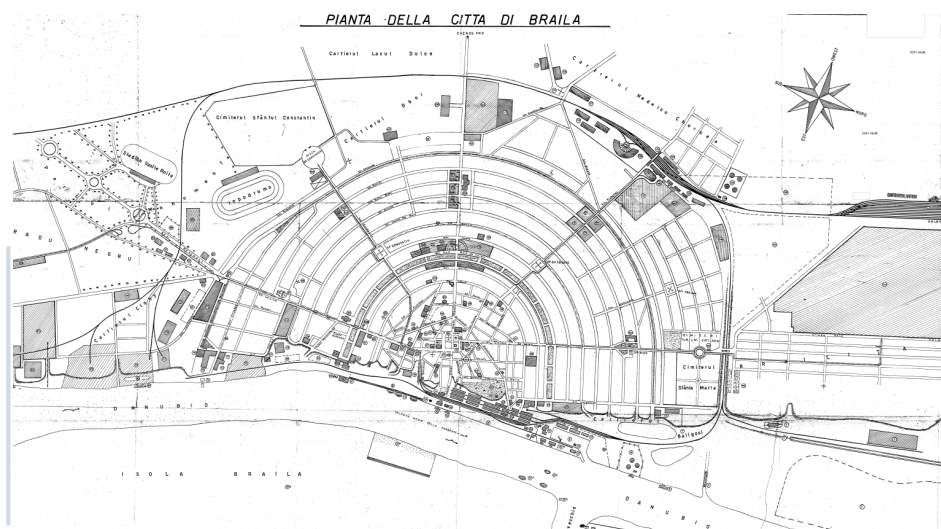


Figure 6: Map of Brăila in 1962 CIA report. Source: CIA-RDP80T00246A063200120001-6

The legacy of international intervention—whether real or perceived—has become embedded in Brăila’s community identity and urban memory. For some, the modernization of infrastructure and the diversification of architectural styles are sources of pride and cosmopolitanism (Stoica, 2009) but for others, the sense of external manipulation are enduring wounds (Avramescu, 2013).

In a historical city such as Brăila it should be taken into account UNESCO’s take on the HUL concept, where the Historic Urban Landscape is a certain reference to a.

“holistic approach to managing and developing cities, considering urban heritage in its entirety and recognizing that it is the result of natural, cultural, and social processes. It is not simply the conservation of isolated buildings but seeks to integrate historic heritage into a broader framework of urban development, prioritizing sustainability, resilience, social inclusion, and the livability of the city.” (UNESCO, 2023)

In this context, it is a framework aimed at preserving the historical character of cities while accommodating contemporary needs. When applied to Brăila, the HUL approach encourages a balanced integration of heritage preservation with urban development. Brăila's historical architecture, characterized by its neoclassical and Ottoman influences, tells the story of its past as a flourishing trade hub and the HUL approach advocates for not only protecting these structures but also enhancing them through sustainable urban planning. As it was presented, external influences have played a significant role in shaping the city. This framework supports leveraging these influences to promote cultural tourism and economic growth, ensuring that development respects the city's historical essence and by implementing the HUL approach, Brăila can actively enhance its diverse heritage.

8. DISCUSSIONS: IMPLICATIONS AND CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The case of Brăila underscores the importance of attending to both visible and invisible dimensions of international intervention in urbanism. Covert influence, while difficult to grasp, can exert profound effects on the material and symbolic landscapes of cities. The blending of overt aid with clandestine manipulation of politics and local communities' perception complicates efforts to assign agency or attribute causality, demanding methodological rigor and ethical sensitivity. The experience of Brăila suggests that resilience lies in the capacity for critical engagement, adaptive reuse, and participatory planning—approaches that recognize the multiplicity of influences while affirming local agency. Heritage preservation, in particular, requires a nuanced understanding of hybridity and negotiation, eschewing simplistic binaries of “authentic” versus “foreign.”

In any way, ethical considerations in researching and interpreting covert interventions must be sanctioned as every international actor, finally, does only what it considers good for its people, so, in essence, it cannot be held accountable by objective others. However, the ethical challenges of researching covert intervention are considerable as the reliance on incomplete or ambiguous sources, the potential for misattribution or sensationalism, and the risk of perpetuating contested narratives all demand caution and reflexivity. Scholars must navigate the line between critical inquiry and respect for community memory, recognizing the power of interpretation to shape both academic discourse and public understanding. Moreover, the level of disclosed information is close to 40% of all the documents this paper has used as reference and base for the study, approximately 850 declassified CIA reports, which in turn may cause false positive deniability cause, or false probable cause, which may bias the research into a false narrative.

However, based on the data publicly available, the interest of CIA for Brăila is undeniable. The details and the resources it used to obtain strategic information during closed regimes is a good indicator of the fact that the US leaders thought about Romania as a local actor to be accounted for in the larger picture, the drive for democracy in a deep communist state.

Regarding the limitations of this paper, any scientific paper based on partially declassified information faces significant structural and epistemological limitations, particularly when the former target of investigation has since become a strategic ally of the state controlling the archives.

Also, because declassification is never a neutral or random process but rather a strategic decision, the body of available evidence is inherently incomplete and selectively curated. Governments typically release information that no longer threatens operational or strategic security, does not compromise intelligence methods, and does not damage present-day diplomatic relationships, while withholding material that could embarrass, threaten or antagonize current partners, reveal ongoing capabilities, or strain international cooperation. This introduces systematic selection bias into the evidentiary record, as politically sensitive information that could undermine the current alliance is unlikely to be declassified. The resulting dataset is therefore fragmented, sanitized, and structurally incomplete, with key details redacted, particularly those involving intelligence tradecraft, covert operations, or joint activities that remain diplomatically sensitive.

Moreover, when the former target state retains extensive classified archives of its own and restricts access to researchers, the evidentiary landscape becomes asymmetrical, privileging one national perspective while obscuring the other. Such asymmetry increases the risk of interpretive imbalance and reinforces reliance on the narrative frameworks embedded in the releasing state's documentation. Heavy redactions further undermine methodological rigor by limiting source verification, replicability, and independent validation—core principles of scientific research. Scholars are often forced to rely on inference to bridge documentary gaps, which heightens the danger of confirmation bias or overinterpretation of fragmentary evidence. The cumulative effect of these factors is that any conclusions drawn from partially declassified materials must remain provisional, contingent upon future archival releases, and explicitly qualified by acknowledgment of political filtering, diplomatic sensitivity, and information asymmetry.

9 CONCLUSION

This article has traced the shadow of the CIA over the urban landscape of Brăila, reconstructing a history of covert and overt influence that extends from the World Wars to the present. Through a synthesis of declassified documents, scholarly literature, and lateral analysis, the study has highlighted potential mechanisms, outcomes, and complexities of international intervention in local

perception. The findings suggest that while direct architectural imprint may be subtle, the cumulative effects of funding, technical assistance, cultural diplomacy, and covert operations have left a discernible mark on Brăila's urban fabric and community identity.

The article contributes to the scholarship on international influence in urbanism by foregrounding the importance of covert mechanisms, the interplay of local and external agency, and the ethical challenges of interpretation. Future research should deepen the comparative analysis of similar cases, expand the methodological toolkit for tracing invisible influence, and engage with the lived experiences of communities navigating the legacies of intervention.

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