

DISSOLUTION OF CENTRALITY IN PENINSULA AREA CONSTANTA – BETWEEN POST-COMMUNISM AND POST- MODERNIZATION

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Abstract: Cet article explore les relations spatiales et de causalité entre la dilution des attributs de la centralité et la dégradation physique de l'espace bâti et du paysage dans le Vieux Centre de Constanta. Le processus de dissolution de la centralité sera analysée à la fois conceptuel et par des instruments quantitatifs, par l'analyse de l'évolution morphologique, fonctionnelle et démographique de l'espace étudié. Par conséquent, on prend en compte les éléments suivants : l'état de dégradation physique de l'espace bâti, la dynamique des activités économiques et des institutions publiques et le niveau de civisme de la population, exprimé par le taux de participation aux élections locales. L'hypothèse de notre étude est justifiée aussi par la compensation spatiale du processus analysé, à travers de la migration des fonctions centrales vers l'axe Constanta Nord-Mamaia parallèlement à leur pulvérisation dans le tissu urbain, dont le résultat est l'apparition des micro-centres spatialement dissociés, qui sont caractéristiques pour le paradigme fonctionnel de la ville post-moderne. La problématique de cette zone est d'autant plus actuelle au moment où la régénération urbaine engendrer plusieurs formes, tel que la gentrification, la réinsertion au circuit touristique ou même la démolition complète. Dans ce cas l'orientation vers les décisions les plus adéquates exige des évaluations préliminaires, à la fois descriptives, conceptuelles et quantitatives. Cet étude essaie de capturer ces dynamiques sur le Vieux Centre de Constanta, en employant plusieurs angles d'approche (planification urbaine, aménagement du territoire, géographie et analyse spatiale) et de comparer les solutions possibles pour la régénération, des solutions qui peuvent servir comme un point de départ pour des futures politiques de planification urbaine.

Keywords: *centrality, post-modern city, degradation of built-up space, functional decline, gentrification*

1. Introduction

Throughout the last three decades, the society has been facing a rapid transition to “a new form of socio-technical organization – an informational manner of development” triggering major changes and revolutions in almost all fields of activity and at all spatial scales, as “productivity is now derived primarily from knowledge generation, information processing and their technological transmission and exchange” (Rutherford, 2009). In this context, as the city represents “a concentration of people, needs and all kinds of opportunities, having a great organizational and transmission capacity” (Beaujeu-Garnier, 2006) these changes have had an important impact on urban spaces all over the world. The rapid socio-economic, cultural and spatial shifts occurred due to the informational revolution, to the shift

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from a fordist to a flexible accumulation and to the diffusion of capitalism and neoliberalism as ideologies, represented the main backgrounds of the postmodern city concept development. This concept is linked to multiple definitions and frameworks, being generally referred as “an architectural aesthetic, an urban social condition, an epistemological stance and an intellectual subculture” whose main characteristics are: “economic restructuring, demographic upheaval, the death of public space, the disneyfication of urban space and environmental degradation” (Warren, 2009). One important spatial mutation highly connected to the informational revolution and postmodern city is undergone by the city centre and by the concept of centrality, as “the city becomes polycentric” (Vance, 1964) and the newly-emerged centres develop in less central communication nodes, becoming highly accessible and holding a greater availability of open-space and a lower exposure to traffic congestions (Claval, 2007).

Apart from partially assimilating this universal result, Romanian cities followed a more particular trajectory, imposed by the influence of two main processes that characterize the Romanian space: the post-communist transition – creating a mixed and complex landscape, where typical capitalist city areas overlap zones of socialist urban landscape (Sykora & Bouzarovski, 2012) - and the persistence for centuries of the “*entre deux*” context of evolution, marked by frequent and violent changes, mostly imposed by external forces, which determined a unique adaptation of the population, through an increased creative potential (Rey & Groza, 2008).

Taking into consideration all these transformations which have shaped the Romanian urban space and the global trends described by the new dynamics of the city landscapes, the present study focuses on analyzing the dissolution of centrality in the Old City Centre of Constanta, which is a representative example for examining a post-modern and post-communist city centre decline. The study intends to highlight both the physical and the functional decline of Constanta city centre and the trends of these main types of degradation in order to present, in the end, a brief critical analysis of the possible directions assumed by the future planning policies.

2. Literature review

Recent literature has paid attention to the specific structure of urban settlements, especially to the inner core, the centre, the “heart” of the city. The American anthropologist M.S. Low considers that “contemporary anthropological studies of the city focus predominantly on the centre, producing ethnographies of culturally significant places such as markets, housing projects, gardens, plazas, convention centres, waterfront developments and homeless shelters that articulate macro- and micro- urban processes” (Low M. S., 2001). This idea is confirmed by the numerous studies that were conducted in order to explore the particular relations within a city. The urban settlement should be analysed taking into consideration all parts that characterize it: “The concept of city centre has a spatial, historical, sociological and functional meaning”. (Beaujeu-Garnier, *Le centre des villes a-t-il encore un avenir*, 1972) The origin of the superposition of the concept of centrality with the downtown is also explained in the literature: “this confusion of city centre with what urban centrality represents resulted from a long process initiated since the 19th century in relation to the industrial revolution of specialization and selective concentration of tertiary activities in conjunction with a discharge of residences and less noble activities to the suburbs” (Chaline, 1980).

Several studies examined the trajectory of important cities in the world and concluded that the dissolution of centrality in big cities had started before 1975, being a part of an “urban crisis”, characterized by the growth of new central business quarters and by the development of large peripheral residential estates (Bonnet & Tomas, 1989). Many studies emphasize the

new centres on the outskirts after showing that the renewal of centrality is not limited to the city centre or to its expansion area (Godard, 1982).

Arnaud Gasnier shows that the importance and strength of the city centre lies in the diversity and complementarity of its functions: shops, services, administration, leisure, tourism and residential spaces – forms of urbanism that are not specific to peripheral commercial areas, mono-functional or remote residential areas. According to him, the need of revitalizing and reinforcing the centre is an important objective and its accomplishment should lead to the reassertions of city identity (Gasnier, 2000). Consequently, many studies approached the problem of city centre revitalization focusing on different aspects: cultural-architectural heritage renovation and spatial inequalities of the rehabilitation process (Jucu, 2012); proposal of different categories of interventions on built-up heritage, infrastructure, socio-economic problems of the population and environmental quality (Bar-Kolelis & Dopierala, 2012); elaboration of holistic revitalization strategies, including recentralization of the city, revitalization of historical areas by re-functioning buildings, reconsidering the public spaces and reorienting events and creating a network of public spaces (Radoslav, Branea, & Găman, 2013). A different approach of urban revitalization, realized in the city of Prague, focuses on the negative influence of this process on the ordinary lives of the indigenous residents – the elderly and low-income population, in particular (Temelova & Dvorakova, 2012).

Other studies focused on the city centre identity: “Urban identity represents the unitary set of characteristics which are capable of expressing the same signification for each citizen of a city” (Brunet, 1993). Related to this definition, it is proven that the brand image of a city cannot be maintained based on a single symbol, as it is necessary and desirable to support the urban identity on the entire symbolism crystallized over the years or centuries (Groza, 2001) (Stoleriu, 2008).

As referred to by the postmodern geography, “its first insistent voices (...) appeared in the late 1960s, but they were barely heard against the then prevailing temporal din (...) nevertheless (...) the development of (...) postmodern geographies has progressed far enough to have changed significantly both the material landscape of the contemporary world and the interpretative terrain of critical theory” (Soja, 1989). Jean-François Lyotard is considered the first postmodern philosopher who introduced the term “postmodern” in his work – “The Postmodern Condition” (Peet, 1998). The notion of “spatiality”, introduced in the geographical vocabulary by Edward Soja can be defined as “the created space of social organization and production which exists in both substantial forms (real spatialities) and as a set of relations between individuals and groups, an “embodiment” and a medium of social life itself”. (Soja, 1989). Michael Dear attempted to distinguish between postmodernism as an epoch (in terms of a radical break with the past), postmodernism as a style (as in architecture) and postmodernism as a method (revolt against the rationality of modernism) (Warf, 2006), (Peet, 1998). David Harvey “situates postmodern urban forms within a set of deeper economic and political transformations” and reconsiders the interference between the logic of capitalism and the urban spatial evolution, as emerging in the `70s (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, & Whatmore, 2009). Many of his remarks are more present than ever in the context of the nowadays economic crisis. He sees postmodernism “as a configuration of new sentiments and thoughts that define the trajectory of social and political development”. (Peet, 1998). The term of “postmodern city” attempts to define and shape the city that emerges out of the twentieth century modernism (Kitchin & Thrift, 2009).

3. Study area

The city of Constanta, situated in the south-eastern part of Romania, on the Black Sea shore, is one of the most important and dynamic cities in the country. Over the centuries, this particular location has conferred the city many privileges and opportunities in relation to other areas; this idea is strengthened by the long history of the city, which is one of the oldest settlements in Romania, founded in the sixth century B.C. The peninsular site of the city favoured the recent expansion of the harbour, developing a strong commercial function (ZMC, 2010).

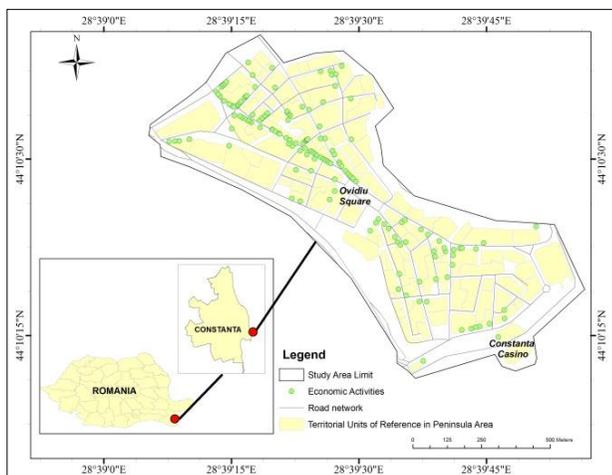


Figure 1: Study Area

The Peninsula Area (Fig. 1) is a part of the downtown of Constanta City and represents its historical core; according to the Zonal Urban Plan of Constanta City – the Central Zone, the Peninsula, the Old City is declared “an area of national interest in terms of architecture and archaeology” (Stefan & Balan, 2002). The urban structure is organized under the shape of a convergent road network, joining at Ovidiu Square. Most of the built-up environment includes buildings dating back to the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, alternating with four-floor blocks of collective dwellings, built during the communist regime (especially in the southern part of the area). Despite the numerous inadequate interventions made during the last decades, the identity and the symbolic value of the Peninsula Area are indicated by the coexistence of constructions built in various architectural styles from classic, eclectic to neoclassic, neo-Romanian, art-deco and modern, including oriental style (Stefan & Balan, 2002). This architectural heritage symbolizes the former socio-economic force of the area, suggesting its complex, central functionality while the present physical and functional decline of the Peninsula Area may be due to the progressive loss of these central functions.

4. Data and methods

The present study is based on the data acquired during fieldwork in 2013. The fieldwork consisted in an inventory and diagnosis of the TURs (Territorial Units of Reference), according to the Zonal Urban Plan of the Peninsula Zone (Stefan & Balan, 2002), including: the physical state of buildings, the dynamics of economic activities and the visibility of public institutions. The physical state of the buildings was assessed taking into account two aspects: the quality of frontage – as being renewed, normal or decayed and the glazing – as being double-glazed, classical or totally absent – both indicators being expressed in percent for each category. For the economic activities, two attributes were recorded: functionality – as being functional, apparently functional or closed and service area – local, neighbourhood or municipal/over-municipal. Finally, all the public institutions mentioned in the Zonal Urban Plan were located and qualified as visible, detectable and undetectable/disappeared. The resulted spatial database was processed using different GIS software.

The analysis of this datasets was performed using only a part of this database: the frontage quality of the buildings, the functionality and the service area of the closed economic activities and the disappeared public institutions, as being relevant for highlighting the dissolution of centrality in the Peninsula Area. The relative evolution of the luxury hotels in the area since the inter-war period was also added to the database. In order to focus on some demographic components, statistics describing the presence to local elections in 2004 and 2008 were employed. (Fig. 2)

The datasets were integrated in GIS environment where advanced spatial analysis and geo-statistical methods (Moran's I and Hot-Spot Analysis Tools from Spatial Statistics Extension) were employed in order to identify the spatial patterns of the considered elements.

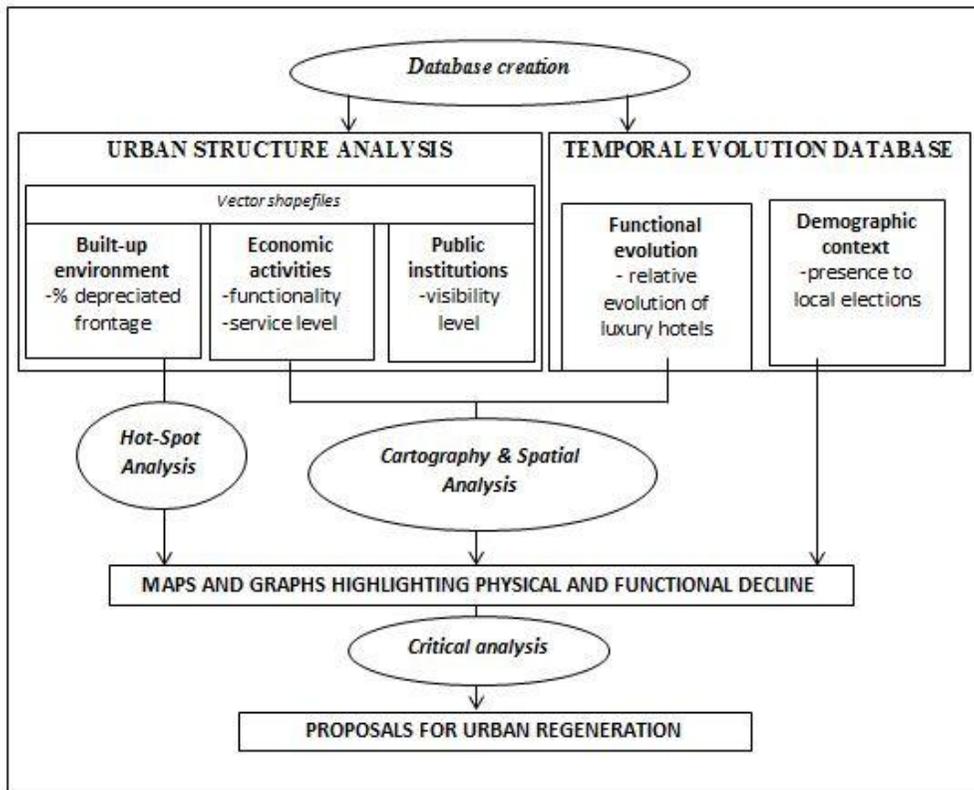


Figure 2: Methodology

5. Results and discussions

a. Physical degradation

The physical decline of the Old centre of Constanta, as an attribute of the dissolution of centrality, is obvious in the landscape by observing the great amount of architectural heritage in an advanced state of decay. Their degradation is due to the age and to the low level of strategic and financial involvement of the authorities and owners. Furthermore, the uncertain status of property leads inevitably to a poor maintenance and to a delay in the implementation of necessary rehabilitation projects. Only a reduced number of buildings have been renovated and have received residential, economic or cultural functions.

The coexistence of buildings in different conditions generates many portions of conflict that create an unpleasant visual impression on tourists and locals such as disorganized spaces (that have not been subject to any planning actions lately), empty spaces (caused by

demolitions), scale and form breakings (created by the mix of structures of different heights, volumes and architectural styles inserted into the urban landscape). This mix is enhanced by the trivial communist buildings, that “fractured” the architectural heritage and put a strong landmark on the landscape, especially in the southern part of the Peninsula Area, on Revolutiei and Remus Opreanu streets; interventions were made in the built-up space by the construction of many two or four-floor blocks of buildings.

In order to consistently capture the condition of the built-up space in our study area, we implemented two methods of geo-statistical analysis: the spatial autocorrelation coefficient (Moran’s Index) and the Hot-Spot Analysis. The two methods complement each other: Moran’s Index is a pattern detector, able to characterize the distribution as being clustered, dispersed or random while general G (from Hot-Spot Analysis) measures the concentration by attributing values to the clusters (ESRI, 2011).

Thus, the spatial autocorrelation coefficient applied to the TURs (using the percentage of depreciated frontage) records a value of 0.06, suggesting that the data is partially clustered, but the general pattern reveals a random distribution. On the other hand, the Hot-Spot analysis highlights several small clusters of degraded TURs in the north-eastern part of the Peninsula Area (Fig. 3)

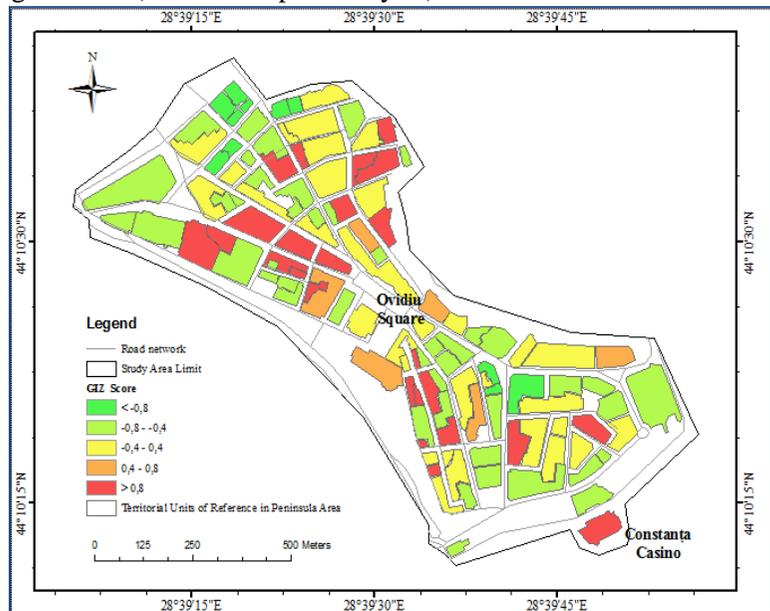


Figure 3: Spatial distribution of GIZ Score for physical degradation of buildings

The explanation could lie in the socio-economic structure of the population that lives in those buildings (unemployed, disadvantaged families, ethnic groups-gypsy, elderly, or simply low-income people who cannot afford investing in the rehabilitation of the frontage). The same reasons also apply to the south-western part of Ovidiu Square, where there are a few TURs in a severe state of decay in Ovidiu and Nicolae Titulescu streets. It is important to mention that many buildings in the area present a high risk of falling in case of a major earthquake (red-dot buildings), representing a serious danger for pedestrians and dwellers.

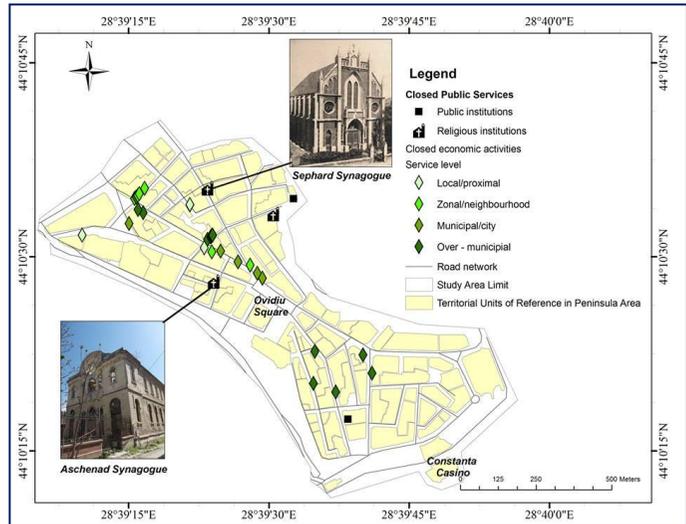
Hence, the general pattern of the physical degradation of the buildings follows a north-south gradient, as the northern part of the Peninsula hosts most of the architectural heritage, which is more affected by degradation than the buildings of the socialist era.

b. Functional decline

The functional decline of the Peninsula Area emerges from the numerous institutions and economic activities which were closed in the last three decades.

The majority of closed institutions represent religious establishments for minorities; their disappearance probably dates back to the beginning of the communist regime, when the massive emigration of the economically active minorities took place.

The spatial distribution of the closed economic activities reveals a concentration in the northern part of the Peninsula, along the axis of Tomis Boulevard. Among these, there are several activities with local or neighbourhood service area, dating back to the period before the '90s. The disappearance of this first category is explained by several factors: (1) the demographic decline of the area (absence of demand for proximity services), (2) the decrease in the



living standard of the inhabitants (lower addressability to different types of services), (3) the changes in the practice of urban space (in the context of an increasing population mobility and the appearance of large shopping centres at the periphery), (4) the lack of space to convert former neighbourhood activities into modern shopping areas. Meanwhile, the municipal and over-municipal closed services are generally represented by restaurants and cafes opened after 1990, suggesting a first post-revolutionary trend of converting the zone into a touristic area.

Therefore, there is a well-structured functional degradation in time: an initial dilution (after the second World War) of ethnic mosaic that played an important economic role in the area in the second half of 19th century and in the first half of 20th century, the emigration of ethnic groups severely altering the service area of small commercial activities, followed by the installation of new specific services during the communist period - also disappeared in the early 90s - and the third stage of transition to tourism and service functions/conversion into touristic and services, which also witnessed a deterioration at the beginning of the 21st century.

The dynamics of the high-class hotels in the area reveals the functional decline, too. First, there is a sharp decline in the number of hotels during the studied period (1924-2013). As this absolute decline might have veiled certain mutations faced by the touristic activities during this period, the evolution of the percentage of the high-class hotels located in Peninsula Area out of the total number of high-class hotels in Constanta city (including Mamaia) - ranging from 54.54% in 1924 to 1.86% in 2013 - highlights the dragging of the touristic function from the Peninsula to Mamaia resort.

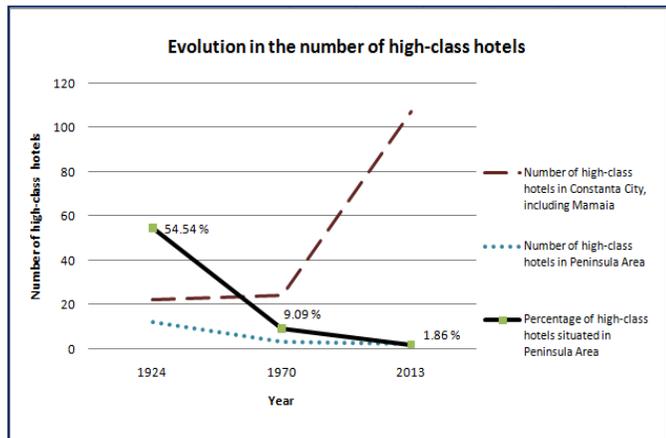


Figure 5: Evolution of the numbers of high-class hotels

c. Demographic aspects

Another aspect that was taken into consideration and employed in our study is the presence at vote in the Peninsula Area and in the whole city of Constanta, as being an expression of the involvement of citizens in community issues. The degree of civism and all the issues related to it could be simultaneously a cause and a consequence of the loss of centrality in the study area.

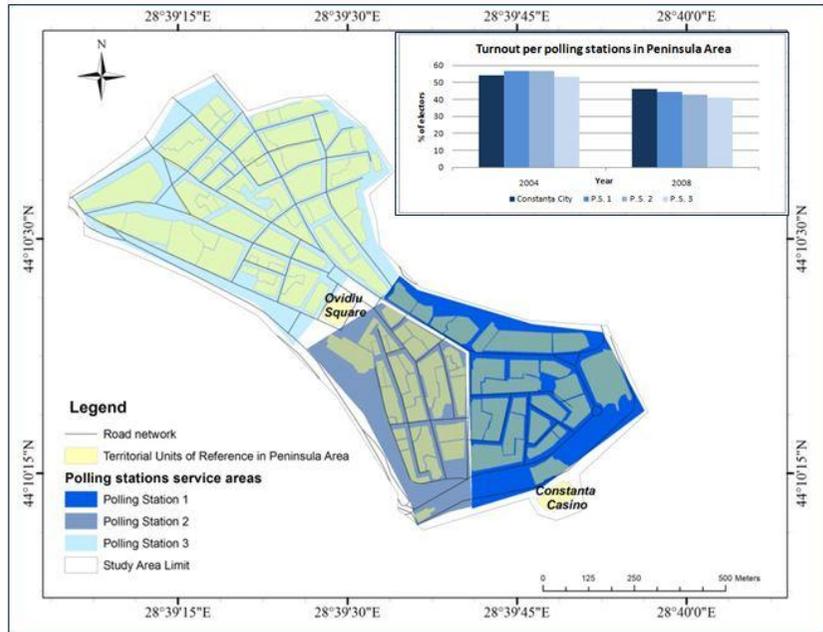


Figure 6: Presence at vote by polling stations in the Peninsular Area

Figure 6 shows the discrepancy between the total number of electors in Constanta city, which rose from 1996 to 2008, and the total number of recorded votes, which varied in time.

Figure 6 captures the situation of the Peninsula Area, whose territory is shared by three polling stations. The presence at vote constantly decreased in the Old Centre. The lowest values were recorded in the northern half of the study area, in the case of polling station number 3. The south-eastern part of the Peninsula (polling station number 1), recorded the highest values of votes in the entire area. The area belonging to polling station number 2 extends in the south-western part of the Old Centre and recorded medium values of votes. These inequalities between the three polling stations reveal almost the same spatial pattern as the physical and functional degradation of the area, suggesting an obvious connection between all the three elements taken into consideration in the present analysis.

The overall low values of the recorded votes reveal that the low presence at vote is generally related to the poor economic, social and cultural conditions of the inhabitants, which might become obstacles against any own initiative of revitalizing the surrounding area (beginning with the rehabilitation of the buildings and ending with the improvement of the neighbourhood public space). The reduced private investments in the community put pressure on the local authorities, which cannot afford investing in the area on their own. This situation leads to the reorientation of funds and projects to other areas that are more attractive for private investors and to the abandonment of the Old centre.

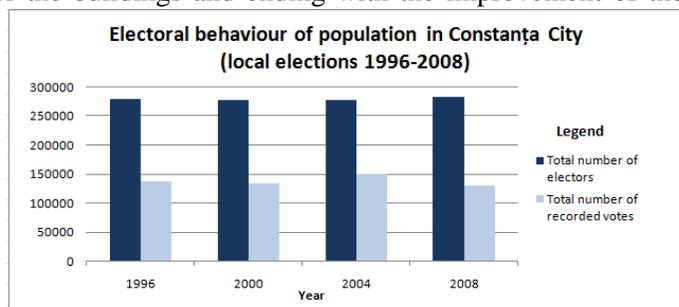


Figure 7: Presence at vote of the population in Constanta City

d. Synthesis of centrality dissolution

The scheme in figure 8 is a synthesis of the phenomenon of centrality dissolution in the Peninsula in relation to its neighbouring territory. It also reveals the migration of the various attributes of centrality from the Peninsula to other areas of the city. Thus, many commercial poles are distributed in the urban tissue (Tomis Mall, City Park Mall) or at its periphery (Doraly Mall, Tom Shopping Centre).

In terms of administrative functions distribution, there is a compact area in the north of the Peninsula (around the City Hall Park and along Tomis Boulevard). The strongest pole of attractiveness of the city, overlapping an extended area in the northern part of Constanta towards Mamaia, strongly developed in the past years and became a complex pole, with various functions, especially touristic and luxury residential ones, with the greatest economic power and a real estate pressure. This area absorbed most of the former attractiveness of the Peninsula (the main south-north direction tropism).

In the above mentioned context of poles and tropisms, a vulnerable zone is outlined in the Peninsula Area, delimited by two landscape breaks: the southern break, in the northern part of the seafront – the Casino area - which is increasingly integrated into the tourist axis Constanta - Tomis Port - Mamaia and the northern break - at the southern limit of the administrative area of the north of the Peninsula. Between these breaks, in fact, an extended problematic area is outlined, where many destructive forces converge: rapid degradation of architectural heritage, functional diversity dilution, pronounced economic decline, depopulation followed by squatting.

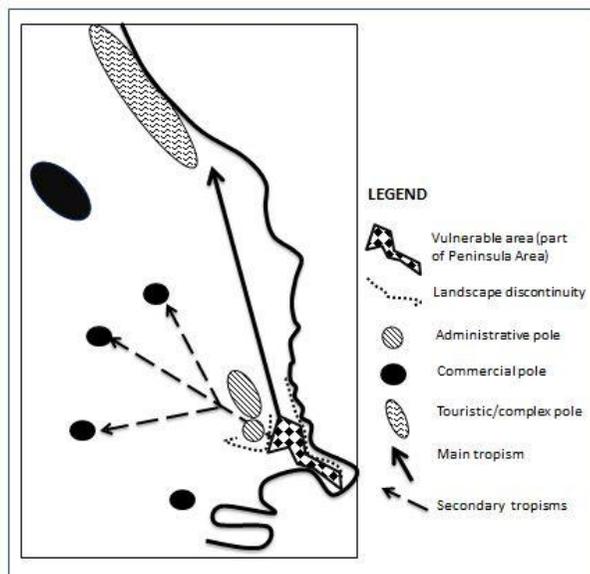


Figure 8: Scheme of the territorial context of the Peninsular Area

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Peninsula Area Constanta represents, in spite of its indisputable historical and architectural value, a vulnerable urban sequence, a gap in the investments and urban development of Constanta City. The advanced state of decay is explained by complex historical, legal, economic and administrative mechanisms, often forming feedback loops, where it is difficult to dissociate the cause from the effect. At the same time, by sliding down the scale of approach, three important discrepancies within the study area are noticeable: (1) a central-north and west sequence, marked by a high physical, functional, economic and social decline, (2) a south-eastern sequence, dominated by the residential-dormitory function, where the population is completely detached from the neighbouring territory and (3) the external flanks (north-west and south-east), partially or totally integrated in the functional areas adjacent to the Peninsula Area.

In this context, an appropriate set of measures is required in order to revitalize the vulnerable area, including both the physical renovation of buildings and a viable functional reintegration. Therefore, the rehabilitation strategy should focus on finding a sustainable and

appropriate function for Peninsula Area Constanta, simultaneously ensuring uniqueness and coherence in relation to the rest of the city. By following the direction of classical formal rehabilitation accompanied by its filling with banal tourist functions (restaurants, souvenir shops etc.), the associated costs and risks must be taken into consideration: (1) massive investment (due to the need for complete and simultaneous rehabilitation of architectural heritage, in order to create a deliverable touristic landscape), with long payback time and (2) the uncertainty on the potential attractiveness of the Peninsula, in the context of the south-north helio-tropism and the absence of a unique, symbolic element to structure the peninsular territory.

Therefore, the study reveals a particular situation for which regeneration should follow a direction able to focus on a functional combination between tourism and cultural-intellectual activities. After the preliminary stage of establishing the exact legal status of all spaces and buildings, local authorities should concentrate on the mobilization of the local financial and intellectual elite in order to insert points with a cultural function: offices of professional associations, headquarters of artistic groups, café- theatres, café-libraries or bookshops, private collections of art objects, antique shops, small showrooms etc. Such activities would attract, in a first phase, a cultural elite, able to give a new identity to the peninsular territory; thereafter, many of these activities may gradually acquire a secondary commercial-touristic function, besides the main cultural function, by providing the customers with a range of unique products. In parallel, the investments of the local authorities in the rehabilitation and modernization of the existent sights in the area (places of worship, museums) - to highlight the history of the Peninsula Area and of the entire city - and in the general infrastructure (road network, street furniture) could gradually restore the touristic tropism directed toward this area. In the final phase, after a certain tourist flow has been created and strengthened by a unique identity and specificity of the place, the investments related to other services will occur: restaurants, small hotels, boutiques with luxury products, exclusive residences on the upper floors of buildings etc. The great advantage of such a direction would lie on the possibility of practicing progressive interventions based on investments from various sources and on a close connection between the formal and functional rehabilitation, allowing a chain coupling of the operations, as every new investment would be supported by the attractiveness gained from the former one.

This final description of the recommendations is a very a brief view of the reality, which may constitute the idea, the concept behind a possible strategy to be adopted. Its effective implementation requires more detailed analyses, also employing quantitative micro-scale data, which would permit to establish actual priorities, objectives, methods, tools and their staging in the urban planning of the Peninsula Constanta territory.

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