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Placing history: Changing uses of the material past in a historic place

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a polyphonic and contextualized perspective on the uses of the material past, focusing on historic places. Instead of framing material elements of the past as symbolic resources strategically activated by organizational actors, we investigate how uses of the material past in historic places unfold and change as they are negotiated among multiple actors within evolving sociopolitical contexts. Drawing on a century-long case study of a historic café in Padua (Italy), we introduce the concept of the politics of materiality, i.e. an ongoing negotiation process through which material forms and uses are temporarily stabilized, contested, and reworked. We show how negotiations sustain uses or put them into crisis and how misalignment with the historical context triggers change. In doing so, this study advances a more political, processual and nonlinear understanding of the uses of the material past in organization studies and business history.

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1. Introduction

Many contemporary organizations—schools, public offices, cafés, museums, shops, and firms—inhabit historical buildings, including palaces, monasteries, former industrial sites, and other architecturally or culturally significant spaces. These material settings are not empty containers; rather, they are *places* characterized by a material form and a socially constructed meaning tied to a specific location (Gieryn, 2000). Inherited from the past, their meanings are embedded in collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick, 1999), and their pasts may be objects of use in organizational life (De Vaujany & Vaast, 2014; Liu & Grey, 2018). We define these settings as *historical places* and take them as our starting point to expand our understanding of the uses of the material past in organization studies and business history. To date, the literature on the uses of the past has examined how physical artefacts—such as buildings, museum objects, inscriptions, and even natural environments—are mobilized by organizations for present purposes, primarily to construct identity or support strategic aims (Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Ravasi et al., 2019). This body of work shows that

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organizational actors, particularly managers, draw on material traces of the past to inform present practices and shape future directions. Such actors do so by invoking these traces as symbolic cues that evoke continuity (Sadeghi & Islam, 2023) and authenticity (Cappelen & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2021), or by reinterpreting these traces to inspire strategic choices (Crawford et al., 2022; Ravasi et al., 2019).

However, much of this research, consistent with an “early” and present-oriented rhetorical history approach (Lubinski, 2023), has framed material artefacts primarily as symbolic resources (Eisenman & Frenkel, 2021) mobilized by managers or other powerful organizational actors at specific moments and for specific purposes (Hatch & Schultz, 2017). This framing marginalizes the voices of other actors (Foroughi, 2020), who may hold divergent stakes in the meanings and uses of the material past (Decker, 2014; Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018; Siebert, 2024), and, in doing so, obscures the historical contexts in which these uses are produced (Lubinski, 2018).

Historic places offer a particularly insightful vantage point on these issues: such places are expected to preserve the past while accommodating evolving social, political, and economic demands and remaining continuously operational and inhabited over time (Colombero & Boxenbaum, 2019; Siebert, 2024). As a result, they frequently become sites of tension and change in both material form and meaning (Boutinot & Delacour, 2022; Decker, 2014; Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018). However, we still know little about how such dynamics affect the uses of the material past, and especially how they unfold and evolve over time in the presence of multiple actors across shifting historical contexts. These questions are relevant because they allow us to theorize the uses of the material past not as episodic and unilateral mobilizations of symbolic resources, but as historically embedded and politically negotiated processes that shape the long-term evolution of organizational life.

Therefore, this paper develops a polyphonic and contextualized account of the uses of the *material past* by asking *how such uses in historic places unfold and change over time as they are negotiated among multiple actors within evolving historical contexts*.

We address this question through an in-depth case study of Caffè Pedrocchi (Figure 1), a historic café in Padua, Italy, which we conceptualize as a paradigmatic *historic place*. Bequeathed to the municipality with the mandate to preserve it while keeping it operational, the café embodies the tensions inherent in such sites.

Drawing on primary and secondary sources, we reconstruct a timeline organized around three turning points (Hernes & Feuls, 2024), each marked by a major restoration. Around



Figure 1. Caffè Pedrocchi at its founding (from Pedrocchi, D.C., 1881) and today (authors' photo).

these moments, we identify three trajectories of change in material form and use: the Modern Bar (1948), the Cultural Heritage Site (1998), and the Historical Café (2013).

We explain these shifts through what we term the *politics of materiality*: a dynamic process through which forms and uses are negotiated, temporarily stabilized, and reworked by multiple, often conflicting actors, within changing historical contexts.

By tracing this process, the paper advances historical and organizational research by conceptualizing uses of the material past as polyphonic (Foroughi, 2020; Smith & Russell, 2016) and historically embedded (Lubinski, 2018). In doing so, it highlights negotiations among actors with different power balances as central mechanisms through which uses of the material past unfold, endure and change over time. Furthermore, it demonstrates how acknowledging a misalignment between the current use of a place and its broader historical context acts as a critical trigger for new framings and material transformations. Moreover, our analysis reveals that such shifts are neither linear nor inevitable. There may be periods of prolonged crisis in which misalignment persists without producing substantial intervention, which we conceptualize as gaps, as well as proposed but unrealized trajectories of change that fail to concretize. By accounting for the politics of materiality, the paper offers a processual and political understanding of how material pasts are continuously negotiated; temporarily stabilized; and, at times, left in suspension.

2. Theoretical background: the material past, its uses and its social construction

The literature on the uses of the past (Wadhvani et al., 2018) acknowledges the relevance of the material past in the present life of organizations. The material past is embodied in physical artefact, such as inscriptions (Hatch & Schultz, 2017), corporate museum collections (Ravasi et al., 2019), paintings (Giovannoni & Ruggiero, 2023) and other material memory forms (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). The material past is also embodied in the buildings that many organizations inhabit, including the buildings of multinational banks and retailers (Decker, 2014), universities (De Vaujany & Vaast, 2014; Giovannoni & Napier, 2023; Liu & Grey, 2018), public institutions (Siebert, 2024), and art galleries (Sadeghi & Islam, 2023).

The literature on the uses of the past has examined why and how the material past is used in organizations (Blagoev et al., 2018; Cappelen & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2021; Crawford et al., 2022; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Ravasi et al., 2019; Sadeghi & Islam, 2023; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). These tangible elements, in addition to written or oral forms of memory, often instantiate organizational identity and contribute, for example, to its construction and reconstruction in the present by enabling the imagination of past experiences and the projection of future aspirations. In particular, these tangible elements inform organizational decisions and future actions in terms of product innovation, brand communication, and human resource management (Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Ravasi et al., 2019; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Moreover, materiality has been acknowledged as a source of continuity, offering stability and authenticity to organizations (Cappelen & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2021; Sadeghi & Islam, 2023). Therefore, material artefacts provide sensory and symbolic cues that recall the past, even an invented (Pirani, 2024) or a painful one (Crawford et al., 2022), with strategic intentions that are aimed at the future. Taken together, these contributions tend to portray organizational actors as interpreting and mobilizing materiality in relatively unilateral ways to serve evolving strategic and identity needs, in line with a rhetorical history approach that

foregrounds present-oriented narratives while marginalizing historical context and alternative voices (Lubinski, 2018, 2023; Suddaby et al., 2010).

In contrast, studies on institutional change, multimodality, and memory emphasize that both the meanings and the form of material things are continually reconfigured in relation to shifting historical contexts and cultural dynamics involving multiple actors' voices, even nonorganizational ones (Decker, 2014; Giovannoni & Quattrone, 2018; Liu & Grey, 2018). Once regarded as symbols of tradition, buildings can later be reframed as outdated, contested, or even burdensome (Macdonald, 2006), or they may acquire historical and symbolic value and become consecrated over time (Liu & Grey, 2018).

Historical context, in particular, shapes how material forms are interpreted and mobilized, mediating practices of remembering and forgetting and reorienting the relationship between past and future, as for example showed in the case of modernist architecture of British multinationals in Ghana and Nigeria during decolonization (Decker, 2014). At the same time, material artefacts may be incrementally adapted to preserve continuity under changing conditions: studies of the Paris Métro entrances and of listed buildings in Denmark and France show how material forms can be modified to accommodate contemporary uses while still sustaining heritage-related meanings and broader institutional arrangements (Boutinot & Delacour, 2022; Colombero & Boxenbaum, 2019).

This literature also highlights that such processes are rarely smooth or univocal. Materiality is shaped through the intervention of multiple actors who invest artefacts and buildings with partially incompatible intentions, values, and expectations. As a result, material forms become sites of contestation, where competing rationalities confront one another and where change is negotiated rather than simply imposed. Giovannoni and Quattrone's (2018) study of the unfinished Siena Cathedral shows that civic, religious, architectural, and financial intentions could not be fully aligned within the artefact, so that incompleteness itself became an enduring material outcome. Similarly, Siebert (2024) conceptualizes buildings as contested terrains, showing how the redesign of the UK Parliament mobilized competing actors who used material space either to enable institutional change or to defend the status quo.

Taken together, these studies make evident that although the physical form of the material past anchors meanings and practices and exerts durable enabling and constraining effects, it is nonetheless socially constructed by mnemonic communities. Such communities "are not monolithic entities"; rather, they comprise diverse organizational and nonorganizational actors who hold different, and sometimes conflicting, stakes in them (Coraiola et al., 2023:383). Moreover, the material past is always embedded in specific historical and political contexts that shape and reconfigure both its meaning and its form over time (Decker, 2014; Siebert, 2024). As Stoler (2010) argues, material and archival traces of the past should not be understood as neutral residues, but as the outcome of epistemic and political processes through which categories, meanings, and what comes to be considered "common sense" are actively produced and contested within specific configurations of power. If we extend these insights to how the material past is mobilized and used in organizational life, it follows that there are multiple users and multiple uses, which may overlap, compete, and shift in relation to changing social and political conditions. However, we still know little about how and why these uses unfold and evolve over time in the presence of multiple voices (Foroughi, 2020; Smith & Russell, 2016) and within changing historical contexts (Lubinski, 2018), as the literature on the uses of the material past is predominantly present-oriented and managerial in focus.

Therefore, focusing on *historic places*—where the use of the past is particularly salient because they must simultaneously preserve their material legacy and remain functional, relevant, and inhabited in contemporary life—we ask the following question: *How do uses of the material past in historic places unfold and change over time as they are negotiated among multiple actors within evolving historical contexts?*

To address this question, we develop a polyphonic and contextualized explanation of shifting uses of the material past, one that captures both the active involvement of diverse actors and the embeddedness of these uses in historical context. This focus is particularly important because it allows us to understand the uses of the material past not as episodic and unilateral mobilizations of symbolic resources, but as historically embedded and politically negotiated processes that shape, over the long term, how historic places are inhabited, experienced, and governed, with lasting implications for organizational life.

3. Methodology

3.1. The case: Caffè Pedrocchi as a historic place

"I oblige solemnly and eternally the municipality of Padua to perpetually preserve the property and the use of the Building as it is now, trying to promote and develop all those improvements which will be brought by the progress of the times, putting the Building at their level, and not overlooking anything so that it may maintain primacy in its category in Italy" (legacy of Domenico Cappellato Pedrocchi, 1891, in AGCPD, Contratti a repertorio, b. 191, fasc. IV, July 10, 1891)

To understand the changing uses of material past in a historic place over time, we draw on the case of Caffè Pedrocchi, a café in Padua, Italy. Established in 1831 by Antonio Pedrocchi and later bequeathed to the municipality of Padua in 1891 by his adoptive son, Domenico Cappellato Pedrocchi, the building has remained in continuous use as a café in the city centre up to the present day (Figure 1). Its enduring presence in the urban core of Padua anchors the café to a specific location, while its material persistence, social meaning, and continued use render it a paradigmatic example of a *historic place*. This designation is further reinforced by the terms of the bequest (see the quote above), which explicitly mandates that future owners preserve the building's *use* as it was but also develop it according to the progress of time.

The building is not only a historical monument of the Italian Risorgimento but also a café-in-use. Designed by Giuseppe Jappelli in the early nineteenth century in a neoclassical style, it was conceived as a monumental café embodying patriotic and progressive ideals at the heart of Padua (Baù, 2013). Its architectural features, including an exchange room and three rooms decorated in the colours of the Italian tricolour (Puppi, 1980), materially inscribe political and historical meanings into its spatial configuration. This symbolic value was later formalized when Domenico Cappellato (1881), lacking heirs, donated the building to the city to ensure its public function and preservation (BCPD, ACCPD, 1909, December 1922, Capitolato). Today, Caffè Pedrocchi constitutes a historic place characterized by a complex governance arrangement, a municipal property privately managed and under ministerial oversight ("shared public ownership", following Popp & Fellman, 2020). This configuration makes it an "extreme case" (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for examining how multiple, and often competing, actors shape the evolving uses of the place over time. Its long organizational continuity, together with the availability of extensive archival and secondary sources, enables an

in-depth historical case study that traces these changing uses also in relation to broader sociopolitical developments in Italy, particularly from the postwar period to the present.

3.2. Sources and data

We collected primary historical sources from the Padua Civic Library; the Padua Municipal Archive; the archive of *Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio* of Venice and its Lagoon ([Supplementary Material 1](#)). These include Cappellato's bequest and the municipality's acceptance (1891), municipal council acts concerning the café (1891–2021), rental contracts between the municipality and successive managers (1900s–2014), and correspondence among public authorities regarding the first restoration (1930s–1950s). Given that documentation from private managers is limited, our reconstruction may privilege the perspective of public institutions, potentially underrepresenting business-related considerations.

To triangulate these materials, we drew on published sources about the café and the city, particularly newspaper articles ([Supplementary Material 2](#)). With respect to the recent decades, we relied on *Il Mattino di Padova* (2003–2021), extending the search to regional (e.g. *Gazzetta di Venezia*, *Il Gazzettino*, and *La Nuova di Venezia e Mestre*) and national newspapers (*La Stampa*, *Il Corriere della Sera*). Visual materials—paintings, engravings, and photographs available since 1831—were consulted through architectural studies. Archival records also revealed specific artefacts subject to negotiation and contestation, which we further examined through secondary sources (Giovannoni & Ruggiero, 2023). For the most recent developments, we conducted a semistructured interview with the café's director and communication manager (May 2018), complemented by nonparticipant observations and analyses of the café's website and social media. Finally, we situated our findings within the broader historiography of Padua and Italy.

3.3. Analysis

On the basis of the collected data, we reconstructed a timeline ([Supplementary Material 3](#)) and a historical “reportage” of the case, drawing on multiple sources (Wadhwani & Decker, 2017). Among the many events that followed the café's bequest to the municipality, three major restorations (1948–1950, 1998–1999, and 2013) emerged as particularly salient. We interpret these episodes as “turning points” (Abbott, 2001; Hernes & Feuls, 2024; Rowlinson et al., 2014), as they entailed deliberate material interventions and marked three distinct “trajectories formative of change” (Hernes & Feuls, 2024) in the café's use: the Modern Bar (1948), the Cultural Heritage Site (1998), and the Historical Café (2013).

We used these turning points as a bracketing strategy (Langley, 1999) and treated the three periods as comparative case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989) to identify similarities and differences.

[Table 1](#) reconstructs what occurred before and after each deliberate material intervention (first-order codes), how we interpreted these events, actions and behaviours in relation to processes concerning the café's use over time (second-order codes), and how these processes explain changing uses of the material past in a historic place (third order codes). Early in our analysis, it became evident that shifts in the café's use were closely intertwined with broader sociopolitical dynamics in Padua and Italy and with the meanings attributed to the past by influential actors during each period. Accordingly, engaging with historiography became

Table 1 Data and sources inductive and hermeneutic analysis process.

First order	Material Decline	Socioeconomic Decline	Sociopolitical Contingencies	Meaning of the Past	Framing	Main Restoration	Contesting	Compromising
First trajectory	Damages from World Wars; transferral of some areas' property, loss of original furniture (Dal Piaz, 1984, BCPD, ACCPD, 1923)	Social neglect; an empty café; bankruptcy (Baù, 2013)	Faith in the progress and desire to make Padua the Milan of the Veneto Region (Roverato, 2009)	Political values of Risorgimento embodied in the café lose relevance (Lanaro, 1988); no value in preserving the past but some value in transforming it (a city councillor, AGCPD, ACCPD, 1948, ASV II Gazzettino, 1950)	The new use as a necessity to make of the café a lucrative modern bar (AGCPD, ACCPD, 1948)	Modernist restoration (Puppi, 1980; ASV II Gazzettino, 1949)	"Urbanistic and artistic crime" (ASV, Muraro, Director of the Soprintendenza, Il Gazzettino, 1949); "A bar without history" (Ghirotti, La Stampa, 1950)	Repositioning of the Green Room and modifications to the White Room (ASV, CP, 1950); removal of a platform (ASV, CP, RP, 1950, 1953); reintroduction of geographic maps on the walls (ASV, CP, 1954).
	Second order	Crisis of the Current Use	Historical Context		Negotiations	Turning Point	Negotiations	
	Third order	Misalignment between the current use of the place vs. historical context		New use of the place		The Modern Bar		
		Old use of the café as literary political café from the Belle Epoque vs. the postwar modernist vision of the city						

(Continued)

Table 1 Continued.

First order	Material Decline	Socioeconomic Decline	Sociopolitical Contingencies	Meaning of the Past	Framing	Main Restoration	Contesting	Compromising
Second trajectory	Water infiltration (Marchesini, la Stampa, 14th February 1981); spot repair interventions (Baù, 2013; AGCPD, ACCPD, 1989; AGCPD, ACCPD, 1989)	Decrease in the appeal of the café (Baù, 2013); recurrent failures, changes in managers, and controversies with the Municipality (La Repubblica, 1987; Trivellato, 1987; Francica, 1993; La Repubblica, 1993)	Economic instability and social unrest; subsequent rise of the secessionist Lega Nord (Lettieri, 2011)	Public debate on the loss of national identity (Galli Della Loggia, 1996); President Ciampi efforts to relegitimate national symbols, including those related to Risorgimento (Focardi, 2016)	Reinstatement of the café's foundational past as a possibility for its rebirth (La Stampa, 1993)	Restoration of the furnishings and reinstallation of the windows and flooring according to the original design (Possamai, 2000); articles on Il Mattino di Padova, 2004)	"A bruise on the soul" (Aguiaro, 2004); complaints about the closing of the café for summer vacation; critiques to the museum (various articles on Il Mattino di Padova, 2004)	Adapting to make the café alive again (various articles on Il Mattino di Padova, 2004)
	Crisis of the Current Use	Historical Context			Negotiations	Turning Point	Negotiations	
	Misalignment between the current use of the place vs. historical context	New use of the place						
	Third order	Old use of the café as a Modern Bar vs. a context marked by social unrest, contestation, and renewed struggles over national identity			The Cultural Heritage Site			

(Continued)

Table 1 Continued.

First order	Material Decline	Socioeconomic Decline	Sociopolitical Contingencies	Meaning of the Past	Framing	Main Restoration	Contesting	Compromising
Third trajectory	Unfinished restoration; structural deterioration and localized collapses; costly maintenance and temporary room closures (Ferro, Il Mattino di Padova, 2010)	Poor management and high costs (Canetta and Milanesi, 2011); "the café was sick" and "stopped shining" (Ferro, Il Mattino di Padova, 2010)	150th anniversary celebrations of Italian unification amid national debt crisis and debates over economic sovereignty (Il Mattino di Padova, 2011, February 5); urban redevelopment, antidegradation policies, and gentrification of the city centre (Mantovan, 2017)	Ambivalent and evolving meanings of the national past; revival of patriotic symbolism during the 150th anniversary celebrations; politicized uses of national identity in protests against Berlusconi's government and against Lega Nord secessionism (Di Qual, 2018); reappropriation of patriotic symbols by the right through the founding of the party Fratelli d'Italia in 2012 (Bruno & Morini, 2026)	Orientation of the café's relaunch towards hospitality, functionality, and economic sustainability; strict contractual obligations and extended operational responsibilities (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, 2013)	Renovation of piping systems and toilets; tapestry conservation; installation of air conditioning; substitution of window glass; cleaning of the façade; construction of a "hanging" patisserie with new tables and counter services in the Octagonal Room consistent with the original 1837 design (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, 2014)	Criticism of overly modern decorative elements (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, 2014); denunciation of late-night noise and high music volume as incompatible with the café's historical atmosphere (Livieri, Il Mattino di Padova, 2017); relocation of inappropriate furnishings (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova 2018); New Year's Eve party and inappropriate uses of the café as a historic monument (Agugiaro, Destro, Il Mattino di Padova, 2018)	Mediation by the Municipality on terrace use, combining expanded permissible uses with mandatory heritage training for the staff (Malfitano, Il Mattino di Padova, 2017); relocation of inappropriate furnishings (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova 2018)
Second order	Crisis of the Current Use	Historical Context			Negotiations	Turning Point	Negotiations	
Third order	Misalignment use of the place vs. historical context	Old use of the café as Cultural Heritage Site café vs. a context marked by contested national memory, growing tourism and economic pressures			New use of the place		The Historical Café	

essential even during the stage related to the construction of first-order evidence (see codes *sociopolitical contingencies* and *meaning of the past*), allowing us to provide an “explanation through contextualization” (Wadhvani & Decker, 2017). This work required adopting a hermeneutic approach to archival documents and sources, moving iteratively between text and context.

4. Findings

Here, we present a narrative of Caffè Pedrocchi’s history organized according to the three trajectories that emerged from our analysis. Figure 2 provides a visual summary of the findings.

4.1. First trajectory: the modern bar

Following its construction in 1831, Caffè Pedrocchi soon became a vibrant hub for artists, students, and intellectuals, playing a notable role in the cultural and political ferment of the Risorgimento and remaining active throughout the Belle Époque (Toffanin, 1984). The two world wars marked a prolonged crisis, characterized by material deterioration and socio-economic decline. In connection with sociopolitical contingencies in Padua and Italy, this period reshaped the café’s use and informed subsequent debates and decisions, giving rise to a first trajectory of change: its use as the *Modern Bar*.

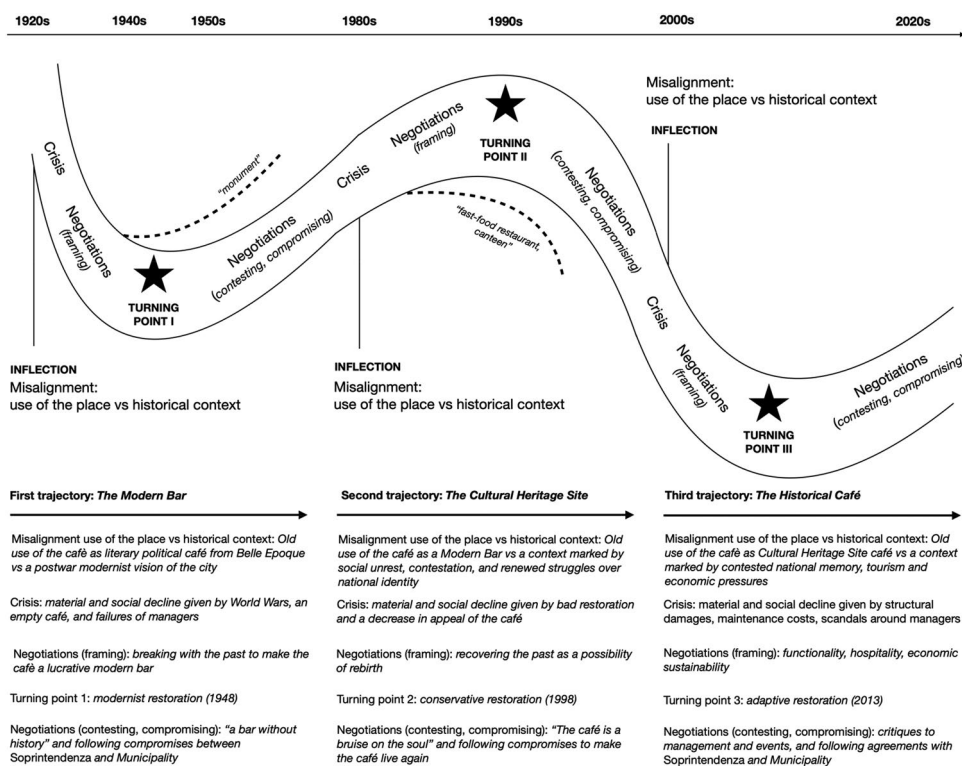


Figure 2. Visual summary of the findings. Source: authors' elaboration.



Figure 3. Pedrocchi's stained walls during fascism (from Baù, 2013).

During the First World War, the café was damaged by bombings, temporary closures, and economic strain (Pavanello, 1984; Possamai, 2000). Under fascism, urban renewal plans reflecting early fascist urbanism (Roverato, 2009) affected the café's surroundings (Franzin & Piccinato, 2004; Saonara, 2011) and the building's interior: some sections some sections were sold off and transferred to different owners (Dal Piaz, 1984; BCPD, ACCPD, 1923), walls were stained by the incursion of fascist squads in the early 1920s, and fascist symbols were inserted in 1926 (Baù, 2013, Figure 3). During and after WWII, the café faced economic collapse and social neglect, even closing in 1948 after bankruptcy, and some of its furnishings were auctioned off (AGCPD, DGC, 1948; Dal Piaz, 1984).

Padua's postwar reconstruction aimed at radical modernization during which it aspired to become the "*Milan of the Veneto Region*" as promoted by two key institutional figures: Mayor Cesare Crescente and University Rector Guido Ferro (Roverato, 2009). Already discredited by fascist appropriation, the Risorgimento tradition, of which the café represented the main material symbol in the city lost relevance as post-war leaders embraced values rooted in socialism, Christian democracy, and Europeanism (Lanaro, 1988). For most of the political representatives of the postwar Padua municipality, the national historical past was understood as something to be preserved selectively and transformed substantially to align with their modernist vision of progress. In this context, Caffè Pedrocchi, as it was used at the time, came to symbolize a bygone era (Baù, 2013). It was perceived as a belle époque café for literati and patriots, embodying Risorgimento ideals that no longer resonated with the dominant political imaginaries of the postwar period. As such, the café's use appeared increasingly misaligned with the emerging vision of Padua as a forwards-looking, modern city, as well as with the evolving tastes and practices of its postwar clientele.

The Café's closure was an opportunity to start debating on the relaunch of the venue:

"If we go back to the causes for which Caffè Pedrocchi had been closed they are indeed because of those character that we had wanted to preserve. I think that also Pedrocchi himself in his last will recognized that with the time and the determination of particular conditions, one may adopt different criteria." (A city councillor, AGCPD, DPCCPD, 1948, December 6, p. 480-481).

The decline of the café was thus reframed by the Municipality as an opportunity for radical restoration (1948–1950). The mandate given to the appointed architect Angelo Pisani involved the relaunch of the café with a new use: a lucrative bar to respond to the fashion of the times and changes in people's habits, *The Modern Bar*.

The restoration marked a first turning point in the material form of Caffè Pedrocchi:

"We faced the serious problem [i.e., the relaunch of the café in crisis] tenaciously [...] considering two objectives: the necessity of making the café a vivid and functioning organism and the opportunity that the amounts to be invested could yield an equivalent income. Therefore, the entire building has been restored, embellished and rejuvenated. [...] This complex work brought inevitable innovations: the new four doors in the Red Room, the windows, the furniture, and the lights. It is true that those modifications were not appreciated by the lovers of ancient things and the old lines of the building. We are sorry, but we need to make a decision if we want a café among the first in the world, so attractive, alive and valued."

(Speech of Padua's mayor Crescente at the inauguration of the new Caffè Pedrocchi, reported by *Il Gazzettino*, November 5, 1950).

As this quote makes evident, the restoration deliberately forged a new use for the café as a fashionable, profitable venue suited to evolving urban life, and this intention materialized through the modernist renovation. Demolitions were made to historical aisles (the patisserie and the restaurant) to make room for a shopping gallery in the adjacent alley and a platform in Pedrocchi's square (Dal Piaz, 1984). In the interior, old instruments were substituted with new instruments (Universon, 1984), and the original furniture was further replaced with a modern bronze lighting system with tubes (Muraro, 1951), a snooker table, plastic tables, a television (Baù, 2013) and a juke box (Gallotti, *Stampa Sera*, April 25 and 26, 1966).

This new use and form disgruntled other actors in Padua's community, who harshly contested the use of the place as a Modern Bar. The *Soprintendenza* condemned the modernist restoration, calling for an unattainable return to continuity with the past, and envisioning a trajectory of change in which the café would be redefined primarily as a monument:

"How is it possible that a private tenant and a municipal owner could violate the law and commit such urbanistic and artistic crime? [...] The triumph of modernity at any cost [...] Pedrocchi's disastrous situation depends only on the fact that the Municipality insisted on making it a source of income. This is the mistake: since Pedrocchi is first of all a monument; to Padua it is more than a museum: a museum of memories, if there can be one! And it must continue to live as it always has. To use it, to insert it in the current times, the only proposal is 'associate' it - and not submit it - to modern life."

(ASV, Letter from Michelangelo Muraro, director of the *Soprintendenza*, on *Il Gazzettino*, December 13, 1949)

Influential public columnists started referring to Caffè Pedrocchi as a "bar without a history" (Ghirotti, *La Stampa*, October 18 and 19, 1950). Neither the *Soprintendenza* nor the general public appreciated the diner counter or the insertion of modern furniture in the old rooms (ASV, *Il Gazzettino*, March 3, 1954; Gallotti, *Stampa Sera*, April 25 and 26, 1966), as they disturbed the café's original nineteenth-century style (letter of the director of Padua Civic Museums Bettini, to the Mayor, December 1, 1948, in AAPC, 1951). A profound friction was thus created between the municipality and the local and national cultural sensitivities (Baù, 2013).

Therefore, some revisions to the modernist restoration were negotiated. A first compromise was reached in September 1950, just before reopening, at a meeting in Rome between the Municipality, the Ministry of Education and the *Soprintendenza* (ASV, CP, 1950, September 28). The *Soprintendenza* secured the repositioning of the Green Room and modifications to the White Room in line with the original design. It later acknowledged that these features were “*what best remained from the ancient furnishing*” and represented a modest success in an otherwise irremediable intervention (ASV, CP, October 24, 1950). A second compromise concerned the removal of a platform, which the Municipality delayed to support the tenant’s economic interests (ASV, CP, RP, September 28, 1950 and February 17, 1953). Only in 1953 did the *Soprintendenza* secure the removal of the modern counters and their replacement with the original furnishings, along with the reintroduction of geographic maps on the walls (ASV, CP, April 1, 1954).

In summary, the café’s crisis and the growing misalignment between the historical context and its established use, together with the subsequent debates and the ensuing restoration, were formative in producing a new trajectory of change in the building’s use along modernist lines. However, the *Modern Bar* trajectory was an unsteady process: the newly prevailing use and even its material form as desired by the Municipality were contested and negotiated by a multitude of actors until an acceptable arrangement was found, at least temporarily.

4.2. Second trajectory: the cultural heritage site

From the 1970s onwards, the café experienced a prolonged state of crisis marked by material and socioeconomic decline. The use of the café as a *Modern Bar* soon proved misaligned with a changed sociopolitical context, thus inflecting the trajectory of change and leading to a new turning point.

During the 1970s, a period marked by economic instability and escalating social unrest, Padua was one of the centres of revolutionary activity in Italy. In addition, the windows of Caffè Pedrocchi were targeted frequently by demonstrators who saw it as a symbol of the bourgeois élite and a meeting point of right-wing militants (Baravelli, 2016). During the 1980s and 1990s, a political crisis emerged, and the secessionist Lega Nord party arose. This party’s success was largely rooted in growing disillusionment with the national narrative. These developments further challenged the legacy of the Risorgimento, prompting renewed reflection on national identity by intellectuals such as Galli Della Loggia (1996). Later, in response to the political crisis and Lega Nord secessionist policy, President Ciampi, elected in 1999, revived key symbols of unity. These included the anthem, the flag, and Risorgimento monuments (Focardi, 2016). Their restoration lent symbolic relevance to sites such as Caffè Pedrocchi in Padua.

In this changing context, the café struggled to adapt to modern tastes. It faced severe water infiltration (Marchesini, La Stampa, February 14, 1981) and a series of piecemeal repair interventions that were not part of a coherent, long-term plan (Baù, 2013; AGCPD, ACCPD, 1989, March 20, p. 897; AGCPD, ACCPD, 1989, July 20). These issues were exacerbated by recurrent failures, changes in managers, and controversies with the Municipality (La Repubblica, July 19, 1987; Trivellato, July 18, 1987; Francica, October 12, 1993; La Repubblica, January 13, 1993).

Following the crisis of the “Milan of the Veneto Region” project and the end of the political season that had sustained it, the use of the café as a *Modern Bar* became increasingly

misaligned with a transformed context. This context was characterized by political radicalization, symbolic contestation, and renewed struggles over national identity.

This context, combined with the general decline of the *café*, led to debates over its new use, paving the way for a new turning point. In the 1980s, for example, rumours about its conversion into a fast-food restaurant or a canteen pointed to an alternative trajectory of change that was ultimately rejected following public controversy (Bianchin, *La Repubblica*, December 7, 1984). In the 1990s, the city's new administration, led by Ettore Bentsik, began to care more explicitly about Pedrocchi and “*the historical value of the café within the city life*” (as the city councillor Boldrin put it in *La Stampa*, August 13, 1993). The city saw in the reinstatement of the *café*'s foundational past the possibility of its rebirth, together with that of the entire city centre.

Amid this prolonged crisis, these debates gradually culminated in a second turning point: the 1998 restoration, leading to a new use for the *café*, the one we refer to as the *Cultural Heritage Site*.

The 1998 restoration was commissioned by the Municipality to architects Riva and Macchietto under the guidance of the *Soprintendenza*. This restoration was explicitly aimed at “*repairing the damage done in the 1950s*” (Possamai, 2000: 82), now judged as “*disastrous*” (Puppi, 1980), “*devastating*” (Dal Piaz, 1984), “*upsetting*” and a “*mess*” (Possamai, 2000).

The architects restored the furnishings and reinstalled the windows and flooring according to the original design (Possamai, 2000), and the spaces for shops in the alley were returned to the *café* (Baù, 2013). The new intervention deliberately recovered some past traditions, such as being open 6 days a week, the availability of national and international newspapers, the gratuitousness of the Green Room, and the traditional eggnog recipe (*Il Mattino di Padova*, October 1, 2003). Furthermore, the upper rooms were reformulated into the Risorgimento Museum. The museum's mission was safeguarding Padua's and Italy's collective memories regarding the unification of the nation to “*promote in a modern way a heritage that is fundamental for the understanding of contemporary times*” (curator Lombardi, *Il Mattino di Padova*, 7th February 2004).

Overall, the 1998 restoration signalled a shift in the *café*'s material form, and, accordingly, in its use: Pedrocchi was no longer treated as a modern bar but as a *Cultural Heritage Site* whose past remnants were to be preserved, both materially and symbolically.

However, the new use soon after the *café*'s reopening was met with contestation, revealing that recovering from the past was far from a straightforward task. Although the conservative restoration was warmly welcomed in the city, the new management was often criticized for reasons related mostly to the quality of service (*Il Mattino di Padova*, November 11, 2003). On the basis of the original grandeur of the *café*'s reputation, people had high expectations about the way in which the *café* should have been managed. When these expectations were not met, the *café* was perceived as “*a bruise on the soul*” (Agugiario, Letter to *Il Mattino di Padova*, December 5, 2004):

Once upon a time, there was the “Café without doors” that [...] was one of the three most prestigious attractions of Padua. [...] Pedrocchi was much more than a retail business: located in the heart of the city that embodied its soul, place of history and memory, it was a jealous custodian of its traditions and of a global lifestyle. [...] Once upon a time. Then time passed until today and Pedrocchi, after a restoration that gives back its freshness but not its splendour, opened again. [...] Where is its grace? [...] It's shabby; its counter is dirty; it has become banal. [...] No more delicious atmosphere or elite initiatives. [...] People coming there just to read newspapers as its founder

wanted [...] have almost disappeared. [...] We want our Pedrocchi. [...] The charm of monuments, their witness, lay into the ability to channel time in a way that the sense of their past can be aroused in contemporary people, proceeding through history. Otherwise, they are papier-mâché revivals, overly ambitious copies without value, panting repeats of Nothing”.

Similarly, every summer, the local newspaper reported complaints about the closing of the café for summer vacation, as opposed to its reputation as the “Café without doors”—that is, a café that was always open (“Pedrocchi closed in August, insane”, *Mattino di Padova*, July 22, 2011). More generally, the café was placed under “a magnifying glass” (Milanesi, *Il Mattino di Padova*, August 20, 2008), becoming a crucial point of observation by which to judge the city’s administration (“Hands off Pedrocchi, hands off Padua!”, *Milanesi, Il Mattino di Padova*, August 19, 2008), particularly during elections. The Risorgimento Museum, which was part of this restoration, was also contested (*Il Mattino di Padova*, 7th February 2004), as the use of the upper floor as a museum would have not been in line with Pedrocchi’s philosophy (*Il Mattino di Padova*, November 16, 2010). In addition, the bequest considered the three floors a unicum that should be managed by only one entity (assessor Boldrin, *Il Mattino di Padova*, March 31, 2011). This issue raised some tension between the Municipal Museums administration and the managers of the café (*Il Mattino di Padova*, October 6, 2010; March 31, 2011).

The discontent arising from the difficult recovery of the past was in part mitigated by the hosting of numerous events addressed to both inhabitants and tourists in the café’s historical rooms: book presentations, scientific conferences, political conventions, ceremonies, fashion shows, gala evenings, gastronomic events, carnival events, art and photography exhibitions, and business meetings (multiple articles on *Il Mattino di Padova*). Through the creation of a social atmosphere of “eating, drinking, flirting” (*Il Mattino di Padova*, April 9, 2004), the café managers brought the café to life again. In doing so, they contributed to the general satisfaction felt among the public (Menetto, Caffè Pedrocchi’s director, *Il Mattino di Padova*, June 20, 2004) and staunch critics, at least temporarily.

In summary, the café underwent a prolonged crisis and was increasingly misaligned between the *Modern Bar* use and a transformed sociopolitical context. This context involved a return to a sense of unity and nation in response to a political crisis. These events triggered a second trajectory of change centred on the reconfiguration of Caffè Pedrocchi as a *Cultural Heritage Site*. The debates that unfolded around the café’s decline and possible future, together with the 1998 restoration, reoriented its material form and use towards the preservation of the past. However, this trajectory unfolded as an unstable process: although the conservative restoration and the reinstatement of past traditions were widely welcomed, the concrete enactment of the café as a living heritage site generated nostalgic expectations and contestation. The use of Caffè Pedrocchi thus continued to be negotiated among multiple actors, resulting in a provisional and continually contested settlement before a new moment of crisis slowly emerged, as described in the next section.

4.3. Third trajectory: the historical café

In the early 2000s, the café underwent a new crisis characterized by another material and socioeconomic decline. Furthermore, another misalignment occurred between its use as a *Cultural Heritage site* and the changing historical context. This new state of crisis inflected the current trajectory, leading to a new turning point.

During this period, the attitude towards the national past was ambivalent and evolving. In 2011 in Italy, participation was widespread in the 150th anniversary celebrations, in which the Café joined (Il Mattino di Padova, February 5, 2011). The celebrations were partly the result of the previous initiatives of the Presidency of the Republic. They were held during a national crisis, when the economic sovereignty of the country was under discussion given the debt crisis. References to patriotic identity were part of the symbolism evoked during demonstrations and contestations against the policies of Berlusconi's government, and the use of a patriotic identity was revived against the secessionist positions of the Lega Nord party (Di Qual, 2018). However, in 2012, a right-wing faction exited the centre-right political group led by Berlusconi and established a new party whose name, 'Fratelli d'Italia,' was derived from the national anthem. This event challenged the left-wing appropriation of patriotic symbolism (Bruno & Morini, 2026). The inflation of political and cultural references to the Risorgimento also affected the success of Caffè Pedrocchi as an attraction in Padua, where the number of tourists has grown since 2000 beyond religious and thermal tourism. In Padua, new urban infrastructural works were realized, and the municipality intervened against criminality and degradation, which implied a parallel gentrification of the city centre (Mantovan, 2017).

This changing context challenged the use of the café as a Cultural Heritage site, centred on the exaltation and appropriation of the national past. The partly forced revival of traditions and the café's renewed public life generated feelings of nostalgia and recognition of a time that no longer existed. The café was required to conform to an idealized past and to its rigid historical structure under strict *Soprintendenza* controls and tight restrictions on the use of spaces, furniture, and walls. Over the years, these constraints led the café to be poorly managed, as evidenced by the pending debts, which derived from the high costs it had to sustain for the restoration (Canetta & Milanese, 2011). Moreover, in terms of material decline, the 1998 restoration remained unfinished, and the building was often damaged or collapsed in certain areas, causing costly maintenance and the temporary closing of some rooms. During this period, "the café was sick" and "stopped shining" (Il Mattino di Padova, November 23, 2010).

Overall, declining social participation, nostalgia and material deterioration reveal how the use of the café as a *Cultural Heritage Site* became misaligned with a context marked by ambivalent and contested engagements with the national past, urban transformation, and increasing economic constraints. This situation paved the way for a new turning point.

In 2013, the municipality launched a call for tender for new management for the subsequent 15 years, framing their intentions for the new café. The goal was to relaunch Pedrocchi with a focus on hospitality and functionality (as Luisa Boldrin said, Il Mattino di Padova, 2011). Rigorous conditions—such as extended hours for the café; the operational management of the museum; the undertaking of ordinary maintenance; and a near-obligation to use all of the rented spaces, including those that had been neglected—were to be imposed on the new management.

The tender was awarded to F&deGroup, a Milanese company specializing in restaurant franchising in Italy. This occurred in part because its competitors dropped out because of the historical-artistic constraints imposed by the structure and the venue's high management costs (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, April 11, 2013a).

The new management moved on from an idea of Caffè Pedrocchi as a piece of heritage while deliberately trying to both honour its past and innovate it as a hospitality venue, in

accordance with the testator's will, the Municipality and the *Soprintendenza* (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, April 11, 2013b). Their interventions aimed to preserve the historical identity of the café while introducing modern elements by *"best combining Pedrocchi's historical components with a touch of modernity"* (from Forti, F&deGroup CEO, in Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, May 8, 2014). In fact, they used the bequest statement as their motivational motto:

"there is a very nice sentence ... in our back office. We have hung a part of the bequest as a motivational sentence. ... It says that the café must be managed respecting its history and its tradition but with all the actions necessary for it to remain in step with the times" (from an interview with the director, 2018).

The new management offered a new gourmet "snackeria," à la carte dinner, and weekend brunches. It also revived traditions such as the "Pedrocchi Hour," when a bell signalled the chef's special, and redesigned the menu to resemble the café's historic newspaper. Products such as the Pedrocchi Cake, mint coffee, and P31 aperitif referenced historic flavours, whereas branded items catered to tourists. The management also fostered a warmer, more inclusive atmosphere, adding friendly service, free coffee for students and free Wi-Fi in the iconic green room to attract younger patrons (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, March 23, 2014; interview with the café's director, 2018).

Consistently, the new management undertook material interventions in the building in 2014. These included, the renovation of piping systems and toilets, tapestry conservation, the installation of air conditioning, the substitution of window glass, the cleaning of the façade, and the construction of a "hanging" (to overcome structural constraints) patisserie with new tables and counter services in the Octagonal Room (Il Mattino di Padova, January 16 and 28, 2014, Figure 4).

Rather than simply replicating the past, the 2014 restoration revived select elements of the past strategically while modern infrastructure and services were introduced to meet present-day expectations. This approach allowed the café to retain the symbolic value it had in the past while restoring its civic and commercial relevance. For this reason, we refer to this new use of Pedrocchi as the *Historical Café*.

However, the attempt to increase both the historical and contemporary value of the café was critiqued by different parties, and further negotiations over its use were needed. Some members of the managerial team "pushing" toward the "progress of the times" were judged negatively by the local community, the Municipality or the *Soprintendenza*. Problematic issues included: fake flowers and an "ultramodern" crystal table in the Red Room (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, September 30, 2014), the high volume of music late at night (Livieri, Il Mattino di Padova, September 13, 2016), a vintage car exhibition (Malfitano, Il Mattino di Padova, November 24, 2017), and a vintage market (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, June 1, 2015). The latter was judged to be *"a serious error"* and as showing *"lack of respect towards Cappellato's legacy"* (Paduano, Il Mattino di Padova, June 1, 2015). Furthermore, the presence of *"out-of-context objects and furniture"*, such as *"Etruscan-style vases, candle holders, abat-jour, lamps, and flowerpots contrast[ed] with the café's history"* (Preziusi, Il Mattino di Padova, May 10, 2018).

Contestations with the *Soprintendenza* regarding the use of the rooms and terraces became so frequent and harsh that, in February 2017, the new management threatened to abandon the café. The Municipality mediated, with the compromise that, on the one

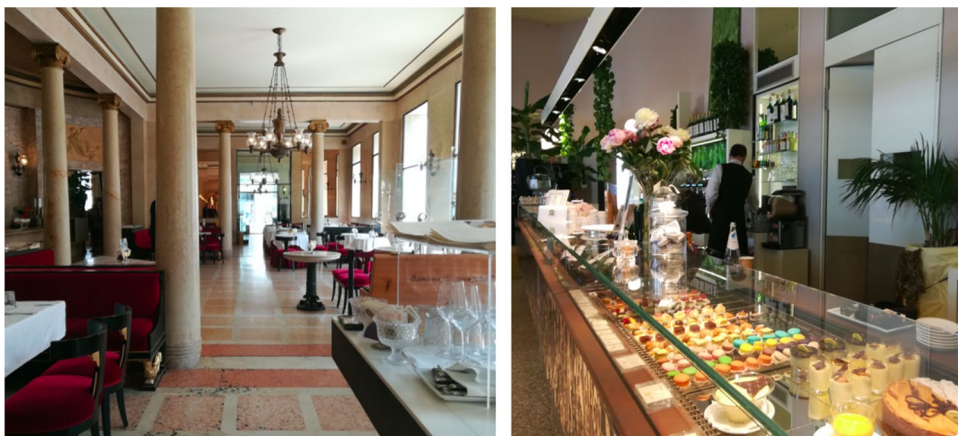


Figure 4. The ‘historical café’ today (authors’ pictures).

hand, the terms of the concession of use would be expanded. On the other hand, the café employees would have to take training courses offered by the *Soprintendenza* (Malfitano, *Il Mattino di Padova*, November 24, 2017). In particular, the Assessor of Cultural Policies stated that *“With the previous administration, relationships were hard; there was neither collaboration nor cultural opening. We have decided from the beginning to work towards enhancing the presence of Pedrocchi in the city. We managed to reach an agreement”* (*ibid*). The Municipality also found a sponsor to fund some of the expensive maintenance works for the White Room (*ibid*).

At times, the serious tensions between café management and the Municipality and *Soprintendenza* drew national attention (Ferro, *La Repubblica*, January 14, 2018). Specifically, in 2018, the use of the café for a New Year’s Eve party triggered harsh criticism because of irresponsible behaviour, the use of forbidden decorations and the theft of two leonine paws from the counter. Public opinion seemed divided between those believing that Pedrocchi was a monument to be safeguarded and preserved and those believing it must be brought to life and used (e.g. Agugiaro, *Il Mattino di Padova*, January 22, 2018; Destro, *Il Mattino di Padova*, February 3, 2018).

On June 9, 2021, Caffè Pedrocchi celebrated its reopening after the pandemic lockdown for a special occasion: its 190th anniversary. The celebrations confirmed the intention both to respect the history of the café (further highlighted by the distribution of a free postcard with the famous sentence from Cappellato’s testament; Figure 5) and to look towards the future. (On the occasion, the café added new products to the menu: an exclusive new coffee blend and a new red aperitif.)

In summary, the café underwent a crisis and a growing misalignment between its enactment as a Cultural Heritage Site and a transformed historical context, characterized by ambivalent engagements with the national past, urban gentrification, expanding tourism, and increasing economic pressures. This process initiated a third trajectory of change centred on the reconfiguration of Caffè Pedrocchi as a *Historical Café*. Debates surrounded its decline and future role and combined with the 2013 Municipality’s tender and the subsequent interventions promoted by the new management. These phenomena triggered a change in the café’s material form and use towards a hybrid use that sought to combine



Figure 5. Postcard offered on the occasion of the 190th anniversary (photo by the authors).

historical continuity with contemporary hospitality and tourism. However, this Historical Café trajectory also unfolded as an unstable process: attempts to simultaneously honour tradition and introduce innovation generated contestations and needs for compromise among multiple actors. As a result, the use of Caffè Pedrocchi continued to be actively negotiated. The result was a provisional settlement that remains open to further reconfiguration.

5. Discussion

The historical in-depth case study of Caffè Pedrocchi provided us with a perspective of the changing uses of the material past, particularly in terms of how this process unfolds over time in historic places, where engaging with the past always entails confronting not only the present but also diverse actors.

Essentially, we find that the material past in *historic places* changes over time through what we define as the *politics of materiality*, an ongoing process through which materiality, both in its uses and forms, is shaped by multiple actors' negotiations and an evolving socio-political context.

In the following sections, we provide a more detailed account of how the politics of materiality unfold, and successively, we outline how our findings contribute to the literature on the uses of the past in business history and organization studies.

5.1. The politics of materiality

The politics of materiality unfolds through trajectories that shape change in an ongoing negotiation among actors over the material past within an evolving historical context.

Specifically, for every trajectory, we observe a period of *crisis* in the use of a *historic place*, given by a decline in both the material and social dimensions of the place. *Material decline* may result from war damage, incursions, adverse weather, or prolonged neglect due to economic shortages. We find that such deterioration often coincides with broader *socioeconomic decline*, abandonment, reduced use, and managerial failure. A crisis becomes critical

when it makes visible to actors a *misalignment* between the existing material form and use of a place and the evolving historical context, including broader sociopolitical contingencies and the meanings attributed to the past associated with that place by those same actors and the overall society. This misalignment eventually prompts debates and reframings of the place's use by influential actors, which inflect the existing trajectory and give rise to a new turning point. We observe that the turn typically takes the form of an intentional *material restoration* (in our case, modernizing, conservative and adaptive restorations) promoted by one influential actor (in our case, the Municipality, *Soprintendenza*, or managers) who reframes the new, different use for the place. However, this new configuration of form and use is rarely uncontested. Instead, it is met with resistance and alternative visions by other actors, leading to a series of recurring *contestations* that involve critiques over the building, e.g. requests for smaller material interventions, public attacks, or denouncements of the uses of the venues. These dynamics reveal the necessity of *compromises*, therefore highlighting that *negotiations* over materiality are not one-off events but rather ongoing processes that occur over the incumbent material form. Nonetheless, the long-term historical perspective adopted in this study allows us to observe that all of the negotiated uses are only temporary achievements. When compromises become more difficult, the contestations become irreconcilable, the place use enters a crisis period, becoming misaligned with its historical context. This phenomenon sets the conditions for the emergence of a new trajectory of change and a subsequent turning point, one that seeks to reconfigure the material form and the use of the place in a way that better aligns with the sociopolitical context, the new societal and political sensibility towards the past, and new power relations among actors. This cyclical dynamic exemplifies the *politics of materiality*: a continuous process through which multiple actors negotiate uses, meanings of the past, and the physical transformations of *historic places* over time.

5.2. A polyphonic and contextualized view on uses of the material past

This paper reconceptualizes the uses of the material past through a polyphonic and contextualized lens (Foroughi, 2020; Lubinski, 2018; Smith & Russell, 2016).

The research has highlighted how the use of the past as a strategic resource eludes the sole control of organizations and constitutes an arena of struggle (Cailluet et al., 2018) as well as a source of power tensions among managers and stakeholders (Popp & Fellman, 2020). Similarly, and echoing Smith and Russell (2016) call for polyphony, Foroughi (2020) demonstrates how multiple and diverse voices participate in the construction of collective memories through the retelling of founding stories, which become localized within distinct mnemonic communities. Building on research showing that rhetorical histories are inherently multivocal and unstable and acknowledging the entanglement of materiality and rhetoric (Giovannoni & Napier, 2023), we argue that polyphony is also relevant when the past is embodied materially and takes distinctive forms. Compared with narratives, the material past is considerably more resistant to unilateral reshaping, retelling, or forgetting (Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Holan & Phillips, 2004). As a publicly visible, spatially shared, and enduring reality, it more closely resembles a public good (Cailluet et al., 2018; Popp & Fellman, 2020), as claimed by multiple mnemonic communities (Coraiola et al., 2023). Therefore, polyphony extends beyond competing interpretations and rhetorics to competing intentions over

material interventions and uses, implying an understanding of who decides what is restored, how it is restored, what is removed, and what is preserved (Nissley & Casey, 2002).

Like Giovannoni and Quattrone's (2018) work on Siena Cathedral, we observe that material spaces embody competing intentions that cannot be fully reconciled. However, their study highlights how the absence of materiality generates ongoing organizing effects. Meanwhile, we show that in *historical places*, the "presence" of materiality and its deliberate change trigger contestation. Indeed, once a restoration is completed, the materiality of the place makes the "fait accompli" visible: a new material form and a new use are enacted. The question then becomes not whether to change again but how to address the new configuration. Therefore, contestation shifts from discursive disagreement on how to frame a possible future use to struggles over how to accommodate, reinterpret, or resist the newly materialized use. However, we show that materialization does not close negotiation; it intensifies it. Although contesting actors may lack formal decision-making power, they exert influence through public debate, media visibility, and regulatory instruments. Because material interventions are durable and publicly exposed, even powerful actors are continuously scrutinized and compelled to negotiate, not despite their authority but because the sustainability of their intervention depends on broader acceptance. Therefore, contestations proceed towards compromise, understood as a provisional settlement in which competing uses and meanings of the past are selectively accommodated in the material form. Compromises stabilize a temporary configuration of the place but remain inherently fragile, contingent on historically specific balances of power and legitimacy. Indeed, the politics of materiality we develop cannot be disentangled from the historical embeddedness of material uses of the past.

Lubinski (2018) urged scholars to move beyond isolated organizational claims and conceptualize uses of the past as embedded in context, identifying three key dimensions of the ways in which context shapes rhetorical history: multiple audiences, the landscape of preexisting narratives, and the social practices that validate historical claims. These dimensions can also be applied to uses of the material past. First, in the case of material past and historic places, audiences are multiple and diffuse, comprising managers, owners, different categories of users, inhabitants, regulatory bodies, heritage authorities, and cultural institutions. Material interventions and changes in use inevitably address all of them simultaneously, making reception inevitably plural rather than something that can be strategically segmented and thus generating a constant need for negotiation. Second, historical places are embedded in a dense landscape of preexisting narratives and meanings sedimented in collective memory. However, unlike rhetorical histories, this landscape is not only discursive but material. As seen in our case, preexisting materiality both enables and constrains subsequent uses of the past: it is enduring, publicly exposed, and difficult to ignore. Especially in the case of historic places, it is more difficult to claim that the material past is latent and merely activable (Hatch & Schultz, 2017). It is already present and persistent, even if it is subject to deliberate transformations such as restoration, microadaptations (Siebert, 2024) or removal (Boutinot & Delacour, 2022) or to nondeliberate processes such as deterioration. Third, the social practices that validate historical claims are not limited to discursive ones but consist of everyday practices of use within the place—traditions, rituals, and even the new adaptations of use that reflect a specific historical moment—through which history is lived, inhabited, and experienced rather than simply narrated (Lubinski, 2018).

Through our study, we build on Lubinski's (2018) conceptualization of context in rhetorical history by introducing three interrelated elements that are particularly consequential for the material past: sociopolitical contingencies, the historically specific meaning given to the past, and the role of misalignment between the current use of the place vs. its historical context. Major sociopolitical events—wars, political movements, and economic crises—as well as gradual sociocultural shifts affect not only the materiality but also the use of the historical place and the actor power dynamics around it. Accordingly, we report that changes in the “meaning given to the past” during a certain historical period are crucial drivers of crises in the use of the material past and of its subsequent reconfiguration. This phenomenon is akin to what has been described in studies on historical culture (Grever & Adriaansen, 2017) and the “relationship with the past” (Sadeghi & Islam, 2023). Furthermore, in material settings, misalignment between inherited uses of the place and contemporary sensibilities becomes especially visible. The enduring “evidence” of materiality may contrast sharply with the values, norms, or political orientations of a given historical moment, making tensions harder to ignore and more difficult to resolve than in purely rhetorical domains.

Capturing these dynamics requires historically grounded research. As shown by studies such as Smith and Simeone (2017), Lubinski (2018) and Pirani (2024), such a research project entails engaging with what Decker et al. (2021) conceptualize as “historical organizational memory.” In other words, the ways in which memory was enacted and negotiated in the past must be reconstructed through archival traces rather than being treated solely as a present-day narrative resource. By tracing how material interventions, uses, and contestations unfolded over time, rather than analysing them only retrospectively, we show how the politics of materiality is shaped by multiple actors' voices (with changing power balances) as well as historical contingencies and cultures. Such an approach allows us to move from a unilateral and present-oriented view of uses of the material past to a processual and historically embedded understanding of how such uses emerge, stabilize, and transform in the long term.

The consequent polyphonic and contextualized historical analysis of the politics of materiality that we conducted allows us to uncover dynamics—that is, gaps and unrealized trajectories of change—that are particularly pronounced in material settings but that are potentially intrinsic to explaining shifts in the uses of the past more broadly. These dynamics reveal the inherently nonlinear character of the politics of materiality, in which change unfolds through branching, stalled, and overlapping trajectories rather than through smooth or sequential transformations.

Gaps correspond to periods in which a state of crisis persists without leading to a turning point, owing to a lack of material resources, limited political attention to the place, or political stagnation, such that incumbent actors remain in power and fail to acknowledge the inadequacy of existing uses. In our case, the most evident gap occurs between the first and second trajectories, when the Modern Bar use rapidly entered into decline, but no substantial material intervention followed, both because resources had been exhausted by the previous restoration and because local political leadership remained unchanged for more than two decades. In rhetorical histories, gaps may take the form of periods of discursive suspension, in which dominant narratives lose resonance, but no alternative account achieves stabilization until new narratives are activated by a change in the organization or in the sociopolitical context.

We also observed some unrealized trajectories and alternative paths of change that were proposed but that failed to take hold. These trajectories did not materialize either because the proposed framing generated controversy rather than convergence among actors, as in the case of the fast-food hypothesis in the 1980s, or because the envisioned use remained misaligned with the broader historical context, as in the *Soprintendenza's* 1950s proposal to redefine the café as a monument. These unrealized paths underscore that while uses of historic places are inherently unstable, they can endure only when their material forms, uses, and meanings attributed to the past are sufficiently aligned and are so perceived by actors. When this alignment fails, the proposed trajectories are rejected, reinforcing the crisis rather than resolving it. In rhetorical histories, an unrealized trajectory may correspond to a narrative reframing that is proposed but that fails to gain resonance among audiences and therefore does not stabilize. Attending to these unrealized trajectories resonates with Stoler's (2010) notion of the "non-eventful," which directs analytical attention to plans, projections, and imagined futures that never fully materialize but nonetheless shape political processes and forms of knowledge. From this perspective, what does not happen is not analytically residual but constitutive of how meanings, uses, and material interventions are articulated, contested and politically negotiated over time.

Gaps and unrealized trajectories foreground the politics of materiality as a process characterized by branching and potentially overlapping trajectories. Uses of the past in historic places are shaped not only by trajectories that stabilize but also by those that are proposed, contested, and ultimately abandoned, revealing the plurality of actors, interpretations, and conflicts through which material form, use, and meaning are continuously negotiated in history.

Conclusion

This paper examined how uses of the material past unfold and change over time in historic places, developing the concept of the politics of materiality to explain these dynamics. Focusing on historic places—defined as buildings inherited from the past, characterized by a material form, with socially constructed meanings inscribed in collective memory, and tied to a specific location—we showed that material pasts are not unilaterally mobilized symbolic resources. Rather, their uses emerge from ongoing negotiations among multiple actors embedded in shifting historical contexts. In doing so, we conceptualized uses of the material past as polyphonic and historically embedded processes shaped by negotiations among actors with unequal positions of power, unfolding within changing sociopolitical contingencies and evolving meanings attributed to the past.

Although our empirical boundary condition lies in historic places as operational and inhabited buildings, the implications of our findings extend beyond this setting. The polyphonic and contextualized perspective on the material past that we advance—characterized by persistent material presence, plural audiences, contested meanings, and branching trajectories—may also illuminate other forms of the materially embodied past, such as monuments, artefacts, former industrial sites, heritage districts, landscapes, and infrastructures that endure over time and remain socially embedded.

Ultimately, the politics of materiality reveals that the past, when materially embodied, cannot simply be activated or forgotten. It persists—visibly, spatially, and publicly—shaping

organizational life through enduring tensions between memory, changing material forms, and historical contingencies.

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