



FROM POLTRONOVA TO CENTRO STUDI POLTRONOVA: HOW TO PIVOT ON CULTURAL RESOURCES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL REBIR

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Abstract

Purpose. This article focuses on the role of cultural resources, seeking to shed new light on their pivotal role in organizational rebirth after organizational death. Adding to literature on cultural resources, this study investigates how an organization can leverage its existing cultural resources as primary source to inform organizational rebirth.

Design/methodology/approach. Through inductive single case study approach, this study analyzes the case of Poltronova, an Italian SME in the furniture business, founded by an artist and developed upon the central role of designers and design projects.

Practical and Social implications. The study can inform practitioners on how to navigate organizational rebirth by leveraging internal cultural resources, when other resources are unavailable. Furthermore, it offers new insight on the intrinsic value of artistic efforts and of business involvement with artists to provide favorable conditions towards both economic and cultural development.

Originality of the study. Our findings highlight the emergence of what we label artist-based enterprise and project-based model, which can secure organizational success through restoring its historical origin, while ensuring economic profitability in the contemporary context.

“Archizoom design furniture like anarchists would disseminate bombs”
(Isa Vercelloni, 1969, Vogue Home, Italian edition)

1. Introduction

This article seeks to highlight the role of cultural resources (Dalpiaz et al., 2010; Rindova et al., 2011) in organizational rebirth after organizational death (Sutton, 1987a; Walsh & Bartunek, 2011). Organizational rebirth is defined as the reenactment of valued social patterns of organizational life in novel context (Walsh & Bartunek, 2011), while organizational death is defined as the ceasing of the organization's main activities, and/or situations in which "the set of activities comprised by the dying organization are no longer accomplished intact (i.e., all activities have halted or been dispersed among two or more other organizations)" (Sutton, 1987, p.543). Previous studies on cultural resources have shown how the latter are understood as tools derived from cultural repertoires, to create strategies and make strategic decisions (Rindova et al. 2011), these resources inform entrepreneurial narratives, which are crucial for maintaining legitimacy and securing other resources (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Rindova et al. 2011). Furthermore, the role of such "toolkit" is crucial in resolving tensions arising from conflicting logics, which are typical of organizations where artistic vocation and business goals needs to be both secured, although possibly conflicting (Glynn, 2000; Lounsbury et al., 2019). In this scenario, cultural resources become essential in aligning different logics and resolving conflicts between these contrasting objectives (Dalpiaz et al. 2016). Such tensions are typical of the cultural sector (Demartini et al., 2021), within cultural entrepreneurship (Piber 2020), in cases of Artisan cultural entrepreneurship (Ratten et al., 2019), and highly relevant variables to be considered by any management and governance model for cultural ventures (Bonet & Donato, 2011).

Despite the importance of cultural resources in informing innovation and strategy (Rindova et Al. 2011; Dalpiaz et Al. 2010), the literature lacks in-depth exploration of their role during organizational crises or existential threats (Bonet & Donato, 2011; Pencarelli et al., 2021; Sutton, 1987a; Zell, 2003). The latter are defined as "a condition or event that has the potential to profoundly threaten or jeopardize the survival or stability of an organization, often with significant and irreversible consequences." (Norris et Al. 2020, p.2118).

More in detail, the cornerstone study by Walsh and Bartunek (2011) on organizational rebirth, suggests that, in the wake of an organization's death, members may form *ex morte* organizations, new entities that preserve key elements of the original organization. The rebirth process follows distinct stages—Disintegration, Demise, Gestation, and Rebirth—during which founders or members carry forward valuable aspects of the defunct organization. However, in cases where founders and former colleagues are absent, the role of cultural resources in driving rebirth remains unexplored.

This study aims to shedding new light on the pivotal role of cultural resources in organizational rebirth, especially in contexts when other strategic resources (e.g., financial, human) are depleted, by asking the following research question: How do cultural resources contribute to organizational rebirth after organizational death? Indeed, assessing the role of cultural resources as a primary source of organizational rebirth can be crucial to understand processes tied to innovative organizational frames for arts and culture, which rely on the value of past cultural repertoire.

It also seeks to explore how organizations navigate the tension between innovation and a returning to past values, offering insights into the strategic use of cultural resources during an organization's vulnerable moments (Gerstrøm, 2015). In order to reach the aim of the study, we performed a qualitative study using an inductive approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), to engage in the discussion of a single case study (Yin, 2009). To develop theory from our case study (Eisenhardt, 1989), we traced Poltrona's evolution to examine the role of cultural resources in its rebirth. We draw an historical account of the company's evolution in phases (Langley, 1999) and employed a grounded, iterative approach to move between data and theory. Poltrona reached success in the mid 20th century, and its history is intertwined with the history of designers working for and with it, participating actively in the emergence of what it is now widely recognized as "made in Italy" industrial design. Other cases of such design-based enterprises can be found in Kartell (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2007), Alessi (Dalpiaz et Al. 2016), Olivetti (Brennan 2015; Pinheiro and Franqueira 2022). Nonetheless, Poltrona has been smaller in size compared to above-mentioned other cases and highly influential in the artistic design scenario. At the 1972 New York MoMa exhibition "Italy: the new domestic landscape", the cornerstone exhibition marking the origin of the "made in Italy", 11 articles exhibited were made by Poltrona: the single company most represented in the venue. Common to other cases, Poltrona experienced tensions between artistic and commercial logics throughout all its history (Dalpiaz et al., 2016; Pache & Santos, 2013), however it represents a revelatory case in how reached organizational rebirth after prolonged crisis. A key factor in this rebirth was the renewed emphasis on the intrinsic artistic value of its design pieces and the strategic revitalization of its original cultural resources, which once again became the defining element of the company's identity (Ravasi and Lojacono, 2005).

Our findings contribute to elucidate how internal, already existing cultural resources can play a crucial role in organizational rebirth, especially in cases where organizations recover and reorganize by drawing on their internal cultural assets rather than external or innovative resources. Furthermore, our findings highlight how, within the process of organizational rebirth, the role of founders and former co-workers can be overcome by

relying on such cultural resources. Instead of turning to external or innovative resources, organizations often focus on recovering and reusing these pre-existing cultural assets, ensuring that the organization's foundational values continue to influence its revival and future direction. Furthermore, our findings highlight the emergence of what we label artist-based enterprise, which is supported by a project-based rebirth phase. The later secured Poltronova return to its historical vocation, while ensuring economic success in the contemporary context. By this way, we also contribute to current literature on the role of the arts and the artists (Pless et al., 2017; Szostak, 2023; Zsolnai & Wilson, 2016). More in detail, we contribute to the later literature by envisioning how art and artists represent a vital source of cultural resources within processes of organizational rebirth (Ravasi, D., & Lojacono, G. (2005). Overall, our contributions can inform managerial practices in SMEs, especially in cultural entrepreneurship contexts (Piber, 2020), as well as in traditional SMEs with strong ties to artistic products and ventures (Masè, 2020; Ratten et al., 2019; Zsolnai & Wilson, 2016), when experiences existential threats. Indeed, the emergence of design-based organizational rebirth can serve as a model to inform decision making over cultural resource management and how to address cultural resources as an internal source of organizational rebirth (Maurer et al., 2011).

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: Section 2 presents an overview of the theoretical background. Section 3 presents the research setting and empirical periodization. Section 4 summarizes the methodology and data collection and analysis. Section 5 summarizes the main findings. Section 6 presents discussion of the findings and conclusion, as well as listing some of the main limitations to the study.

2. Theoretical background

cultural resources are defined as resources used by organizations to develop strategies and inform strategic actions towards different goals (Rindova et al., 2011). More in detail, literature has underlined how cultural resources can be understood as a “toolkit” drawn from cultural repertoires, upon which individuals can rely to develop strategies and which play a central role in organizations in strategy formation and change. Furthermore, such repertoires inform entrepreneurial narratives, crucial to gain and maintain legitimacy and other types of resources (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Rindova et al., 2011). Cultural resources have been discussed as particularly salient in organizations with an artistic vocation, belonging at the same to the manufacturing and cultural sector (Piber, 2020). Indeed, business organizations with an artistic vocation often combine different logics, thus suffering tensions between artistic exposure and professionals' pas-

sion, and business goals and economic targets (Comunian, 2008; Ginburgh & Throsby, 2006; Glynn, 2000). Cultural resources can be essential to combine different logics to overcome such tensions (Dalpiaz et al., 2016).

Furthermore, cultural resources belonging to such artistic organizations display a distinct relevance in affecting both the organization's rationale, its purpose and its impacts on external stakeholders (Dalpiaz et al., 2010). Several cases of Italian manufacturing businesses, all created and grown in the mid of the XXI century, display a distinct role for cultural resources, due to essential features of their artistic driven business model (which founded and shaped the Italian industrial design, Verganti, 2006): Alessi (Dalpiaz et al., 2014), Kartell (Comunian, 2009; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2007), Olivetti (Brennan, 2015; Del Baldo, 2018; Iandoli, 2021). Such cases are relevant not only to inform theorizing from historical cases, but also to inspire many businesses aiming to combining both artistic vocation and economic success (Zsolnai & Illes, 2017; Zsolnai & Wilson, 2016). However, the need to find innovative organizational frames for art and culture, requires additional investigation on the role that cultural resources can play in such cultural business context. More in detail, while literature discusses the need for organizations to rely on cultural resources to inform innovation and enhance their repertoires, there is a dearth in the literature concerning how organizations can use cultural resources to address existential organizational crisis. Indeed, while cultural resources are discussed as key to reshape or redefine organizational strategy and identity (Dalpiaz et al., 2010; Rindova et al., 2011), tied to the need to expand and acquire other resources, literature does not yet enquire into the role of cultural resources understood as the only resources upon which the organization can rely.

To address this research question, we discuss the role of cultural resources within processes of organizational rebirth (Walsh & Bartunek, 2011; Zell, 2003). The death of an organization is often felt in a manner similar to the loss of a family member or close friend (Sutton, 1987b). These experiences of loss can lead to what has been described as a "conservative impulse" to restore cherished aspects of the past (Wolfram Cox, 1997). Instead of simply dispersing, members of a failing organization may engage in what is referred to as "postdeath organizing" where new entities, called *ex morte* organizations, are formed to preserve important elements of the previous organization. These *ex morte* organizations arise directly as a consequence of the death of the original organization (Walsh & Bartunek, 2011). According to Walsh and Bartunek, through processes of Disintegration and Demise, Gestation and, lastly, Rebirth, founders of the original organization can preserve its most valuable aspects, while giving birth to new organizational forms. However, in current research, rebirth is closely tied with both founders' intervention and social bonds between former colleagues. Indeed, the implementation of restructuring activities mark the start of a

new phase, during which ex morte organizations are officially presented as new entities. Organizational rebirth goes beyond the mere creation of a new organization, it represents the reformation of important social structures among former members though now in a different context (Walsh and Bartunek, 2011). Following such model by Walsh and Bartunek, founders and former colleagues hold a pivotal role in recreating the legacy of the original organization, while the specific role of cultural resources remains yet to be discussed. Furthermore, when a process of rebirth unfolds, unexpected consequences and scenarios may open (Pusceddu et al., 2022), eliciting a response from the new organization which require innovation and new strategies. In the same facet, the role of cultural resources as already existing internal toolkit remains less discussed. As organizations may witness contexts of loss of founders' direction and former members availability, further understanding of the role of cultural resources may highlight how to pursue organizational rebirth. Current knowledge conceptualizes the use of cultural resources in organizational context as the introduction of new practices and the integration of novel cultural repertoire to pursue innovative and unconventional strategies, culminating in new identity definition (Rindova et al., 2011). However, as authors recognize cultural resources as crucial for strategy formation (Dalpiaz et al., 2016; Maurer et al., 2011), it remains somewhat obscure how organizations can use original past cultural repertoires instead of acquiring new ones.

To overcome such gaps in the literature, in the next paragraph we present the case of Poltrona as suitable to theorize on the role of cultural resources, within a context of organizational existential threats (Sutton, 1987a; Zell, 2003).

3. Research setting and methodology

3.1 Research setting

To address our research question, we performed an in-depth inductive case study of Poltrona, an Italian company operating in the design and furniture industry since late 50s. The case study of Poltrona has been identified as a revelatory case study, ideal for single in-depth analysis, following established research (Yin 2004; Eisenhardt, 1989). We focus on the case of Poltrona as it represents a rich setting to investigate how an organization underwent existential threats and overcoming it through the use of cultural resources. As this study seeks to understand the role of cultural resources in organizational rebirth, the case is identified as suitable empirical setting to address their role before and after the organizational death, which occurred in the period of 1983-2000 (for details on the timeline please see data analysis).

Poltronova was founded by a sculptor based in Agliana (Tuscany) in 1956. Sergio Cammilli was widely known for being an artist-entrepreneur (Borin & Delgado, 2018; Pagano et al., 2021). At that time, Poltronova was established as a furniture business, which developed thanks to the blending the art and craft of textile and marble furniture artisans in Tuscany, with the projects provided by both Italian leading designers, as well as designers who - at that time - were unknown, but soon-to-be globally recognized. Right after founding Poltronova, in 1957 Cammilli met with Ettore Sottsass, a designer whose name is now considered a synonym of “made in Italy”: the unique blend of art, industrial production and identity, born in those years. Sottsass became Poltronova “Art Director” before the role of art direction existed as an official role in coeval organizations. Thanks to the sodalite between Cammilli and Sottsass, Poltronova soon became more than a furniture firm: young designers, coming from the Architecture faculty in Florence, started to use it as a place to propose their ideas, experiment and exchange with others. The famous studios Archizoom Associati and Superstudio, known for their provocative idea, considered outside the coeval tendencies of Italian design, found in Cammilli and Poltronova the perfect opportunity to apply their abstract projects to real-world industrial design production. Poltronova grew thanks to such connubium with designers but, at the same time, thanks to it underwent a deep period of crisis: when visionary projects became too “visionary”, both the critics and the customers, started to criticize and neglect them. Within these almost 20 years of crisis, the company was dismantled in several different companies, producing many furniture lines, attempting a transition to a more “traditional”, Northern Italian, model of furniture business. Only in the early 2000s the firm was taken over by current CEO Roberta Meloni. Meloni leadership helped in rediscovery Poltronova’s original history and opening a new phase in the organization life, envisioning a new governance and a new production strategy. Poltronova transitioned from being an artist-driven company, focused on niche design products, to an attempt at commercialization with a shift toward office pieces targeting a more mass-market audience. In this context, the company experienced a profound crisis culminated in company’s dismantling and death.

When walking into Poltronova headquarters today, in Tuscany, it is suddenly clear that designers, architects and people with a background in cultural development are in charge of running every aspect of its business (Schiuma, 2011). When looking at its balance sheet and interviewing key informants, it is impossible not to notice its marketing strategy: by allocating no resources on advertising, while displaying a specific budget allocated to publishing, Poltronova seeks to establish the organization as a well-known center for design experts. Its very name was changed into “Centro Studi Poltronova Per Il Design” in the rebirth phase, to highlight

the contribution of the firm to the academic debate on design, beyond its own production and commercialization of design pieces. Such vision had informed Poltronova recognition in 2013 of its archive of design projects “Archivio di particolare interesse” from the Soprintendenza of Regione Toscana. Such recognition allowed Poltronova to claim its original contribution not only to the history of Italian industrial design, but also a direct role in cultural heritage management (Demartini et al., 2021; Summatavet & Raudsaar, 2015). By this way, the Poltronova archive is both, at the same time, the cultural resource upon which drawing inspiration for production (right now CSP only replicates archival pieces), and a publicly available source for research and consultation. This rebirth occurred by steering clear of the commercial strategies employed during the years of crisis. In this sense, Poltronova represents a revelatory case because it implemented a clear strategy of leveraging the cultural resources linked to the company’s original identity to navigate organizational death and drive its rebirth. In fact, the Centro Studi Poltronova, established in early 2000s, today represents the highest expression of the centrality of culture in the company’s success that, over the past twenty years, it has followed a path of progressively abandoning traditional commercial logics.

3.2 Data collection

To build our case study, we collected data from different sources. First, we relied on extensive consultation of available documents on financial statements on the platform *AIDA*, together with *TELEMACO* (Registro delle Imprese) to create a chronological description of Poltronova (Yin, 1998), from 1956 to today. We then conducted four in-depth interviews with key actors: we gathered insights from all four people currently involved in the company management. To triangulate the information received from the informants, we relied on secondary interviews conducted by third parties with actors involved in previous management of the company, as well as on archives made available by the company for the purposes of this study, public available data (newspaper, magazines, press releases), a variety of media sources (youtube, recording of conferences etc.), secondary sources drawn from specialized literature, books and written testimonies.

3.3 Data analysis

To generate theory from our case study (Eisenhardt, 1989), we followed the evolution of Poltronova over the years to unpack the evolution of cultural resources and how their use enabled the company’s revival. Therefore, we divided our analysis of the company’s evolution throughout its history

into different phases (Langley, 1999), and adopted a grounded approach to iteratively move between data and theory, inductively extrapolating the theory (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). We began our analysis by drawing on the chronological history of Poltrona. We identified three key periods: from 1956 until 1983 “historical period”. From 1983 to 2000 “crisis period”. From 2001 up to date the “Centro Studi Poltrona period”. We identified 1983 as the starting point for organizational crisis, evolved in organizational death over the following decades. We then recognized the year 2001 as the organizational rebirth. By this way, we were able to draw an historical account of the different periods of Poltrona; this step was crucial in making sense of the evolution of the use of business versus cultural resources in the company over the years (Langley, 1999).

From our analysis of the data, we witness the three distinct periods as follows: first, from the foundation to the founder’s leave with contrast within the Poltrona governance; second, the emergence of a plurality of legal and business entity linked to the Poltrona holding, which aimed to transforming the company in fundamental dimensions, such as market targeted, artists’ presence and territorial production; third, the foundation of Centro Studi Poltrona, led by actual CEO Roberta Meloni, which recollects the history of Poltrona and aims to re-actualizing its historical catalogue and archive of projects.

3.1 [1956-1983] *Original Period*

Poltrona was founded by Sergio Cammilli, a sculptor based in Tuscany, in 1956. The original headquarters, as well as the actual one, is to be found in Agliana, nearby Pistoia. The area is today under scrutiny for its artistic potential (Samuk et al., 2022), while being a neglected rural area back in the original Poltrona period. After suffering a severe physical illness, which caused him to abandon the work of sculpture, Cammilli transformed his passion for art and design into a business venture (Pagano et Al. 2021). At the time Tuscany was a territory rich in craftsmanship tradition, but not as developed as a furniture district as other Italian regions, such as Lombardy (Lazzeretti & Capone, 2015; Verganti, 2006). Years after, Cammilli will admit in an interview with Kartell’s founder, that his entrepreneurial vision was based on the passion for design rather than on profit-making as an end:

“I believe that my main ‘flaw,’ if you can call it that, has been focusing my energy primarily on the project; I liked creating a continuous dialogue with the designers. When the company grew, it became difficult to control the situation. I had to call a company from Milan, Orga, to plan the management of Poltrona. They set up the sales office, the purchasing office, and the administrative office, but the

sales office was always lacking. There were administrative directors who came and went. Nonetheless, the company always managed to move forward." (G. Castelli, P. Antonelli, F. Picchi, Skira, Milano, 200, p. 214 – our translation)

Cammilli's vision blended Tuscan craft in textile industry with knowledge brought in Poltrona by designers. Among them, a key role was played by Ettore Sottsass as art director; he was at the time a promising designer and would have afterwards become the name associated with other globally renewed Italian businesses, such as Olivetti (Brennan, 2015; Del Baldo, 2018; Iandoli, 2021). Cammilli also decided to invite to Poltrona young designers, who were associated with Archizoom Associati and Superstudio, two significant architecture studios in Florence (Arista, 2006; Aureli, 2013). By this way, he was able to connect with young talents mobilizing within the Architecture Faculty of Florence to bring about a new idea of experimental design. The latter movement is now known as the movement of Radical Design. In 1972 Poltrona changed its legal form from S.r.l. to S.p.A., signaling a transformation and expansion of its organizational form. However, soon tensions started to arise: In 1974 Ettore Sottsass left, following a disastrous release of its new design "mobile grigi" (grey furnitures). One of the most renowned magazines in the field "Abitare", in 1970 had labeled Sottsass (and Poltrona) idea as outrageous. This elicited a damaging response from the critics and the audience, thus representing the culminating event opening a deep crisis concerning the organization's vision and leadership.

3.2 [1983-2000] Crisis Period

We identify 1983-2000 as the crisis period. At that time, Poltrona was growing in size, revenue and audience, but found it hard to promote adequate change in its structure and management:

"Poltrona is now a company that employs over one hundred and fifty people, operates on a surface of thirty thousand square meters, and has a distribution network of over one hundred sales points. These are dimensions that have become difficult to control, and require Cammilli to make radical administrative updates. In the early 1970s, the corporate structure changed with the entry of a new partner who brought in new capital, and a company from Milan, Orga, was identified to plan the commercial activities. One of the first decisions made by the new management was to discontinue the collaboration with Sottsass." Milco Carboni (source C1)

Cammilli left Poltrona governance in 1983, when contrasts between him and the rest of the management became irreparable.

"I left in 1983, at sixty-five years old, when I decided to dedicate myself exclusively to my true passion, which is art. Until the seventies, it was fun to do this job, there were many people who knew what to say to each other. I worked eleven hours a day, without any anxiety." (source D3)

Although Poltronova grew in size and relevance, as well as in notoriety (in 1967 Elio Fiorucci engaged Poltronova in the design of its Milan shop-showroom), financially wise Poltronova navigated troubled waters. On one hand, Cammilli wanted to pursue artistic experimentation, on the other the economic sustainability of the organization was at stake, as experiments were not as profitable as the company needed to ensure financial success (Lampel et al., 2006). By the time Cammilli left in 1983, the idea that Poltronova served as a venue of designers' experimentation was lost. During this period of crisis, we witness a subsequent change in both forms of governance and management, a continuous foundation and failure of different entities. While production was re-oriented towards commercial lines, the organizational crisis deepened; with the declining of the centrality of the artists, leading to a more commercial orientation, the financial performance still did not recover.

Table 1 – Crisis Period

Active Period	Juridical Code (P.Iva)	Registered as	Additional Info
1956 - 1988	89590475	Poltronova S.r.L.	In 1972 became Poltronova S.p.A.
1956 - 1983	89590475	Poltronova S.p.A.	In 1979 Florence and Milan headquarters closed down. In 1985 There is a new registered name as: "Poltronova arredamenti sedie poltrone e divani"
1986 - 2010	554665048	Nuova Poltronova S.r.L.	
1977 - 2019	366010478	Poltronova Arredamenti Settore Mostra S.r.L.	
1991 - 2019	1150940474	Poltronova S.r.L.	1999 Sold to Mobilservice S.r.L. (P.IVA 04649480482)
2019 – up to date	5546650481	Centro Studi Poltronova per il design S.r.L.	

3.3 [2001 - up to date] Rebirth: Centro Studi Poltronova

In 2001 Poltronova started a new phase, culminating in 2004 with Roberta Meloni becoming majority shareholder and CEO. In 2005 it is formally founded the Centro Studi Poltronova which in 2019 will become part

of the Centro Studi Poltronova per il design Srl (source: AIDA). The management is completely renewed and all profiles hired are design experts, scholars and have a deep knowledge of the Poltronova history (either as they studied it or had some previous engagement with its design projects. Trincherini, 2023). [see Table 2]

Table 2 – Governance Profiles

Name	Current Role	Years (from)	Background
Roberta Meloni	CEO	2004	Architecture
Dontatello d'Angelo	Art Director	2014	Architecture
Elisabetta Trincherini	Director of Archive, studies and research	2017	History of Art PhD in Semiotic
Francesco Toselli	Product developer	2017	Engineering, Design
Joyceline Maniscalco	Accounting	unavailable	unavailable

During the pandemic, when exhibitions and other cultural venues were closed, Poltronova kept alive its relationship with the audience by providing a newsletter with narrative accounts on its most beloved pieces, their history and stories from their designers (Khlystova et al., 2022). The third period is defined by CSP decision to re start the production only of pieces which are archival sourced. Some examples are: Superonda and Safari sofas, Ultrafragola mirror, the lamps Gherpe, Passiflora, Cessato allarme and Sanremo, the armchairs Mies. Pieces are all produced upon request.



Ultrafragola
design by
Ettore Sottsass jr.
1970



Mies
design by
Archizoom Associati
1969



Joe
design by
De Pas, D'Urbino, Lomazzi
1970

Source: Poltronova Press Kit <https://press.poltronova.it/>

Poltronova new phase of restoring and recovering its projects archive, culminated in 2013, when the organization obtained the recognition by the Soprintendenza della Regione Toscana of “Archivio di particolare interesse”.

4. Findings

Artist-Based Enterprise

Poltronova's success stemmed from its deep-rooted collaborations with avant-garde designers and its commitment to cultural engagement over traditional marketing methods. Founded in 1957 by Sergio Cammilli, a sculptor with a profound appreciation for the burgeoning design culture in post-war Italy, Poltronova was envisioned as a bridge between art, craftsmanship, and modern design experimentation. The company positioned itself at the forefront of design not through commercial advertising, but

by building a rich network of artists and participating in cultural events, exhibitions, and design publications. Cammilli believed in the power of artists to redefine the concept of living spaces. He actively sought collaborations with architects and designers who were pioneering the Radical Design movement, including Ettore Sottsass, Archizoom Associati, Superstudio. The involvement of artistic figures at Poltrona, whether internally or externally, such as Gae Aulenti collaboration, went far beyond merely designing and producing pieces; they were integrated into the company's operations, as the Art Director explains:

"Sottsass was essential; he was a multifaceted and versatile figure who oversaw the brand's early development (catalogs, logo, trademark). He advised Cammilli on the production of some pieces that later became iconic and acted as a bridge to the Milanese design scene. He was responsible for communication, designed objects, and even conducted talent scouting. For the Radical group, he was a key point of reference within the Florentine context. His role was threefold: communication, talent scout, and designer."

— AD

Poltrona became a hub for these creatives, producing iconic pieces like Archizoom's "Superonda" sofa (1967) and "Mies" armchair (1969) or the sofa "Sofa" (1967-8) and the lamp "Gherpe" (1967) from Superstudio. These designs pushed the boundaries of conventional furniture, embracing bold forms, innovative materials, and provocative ideas. Poltrona's strategy of cultural engagement over traditional advertising further distinguished it. Cammilli avoided commercial publicity, opting instead to showcase the company's work in cultural venues such as the Triennale di Milano, Salone del Mobile, and through features in design journals like "Domus" and "Casa Vogue." These efforts established Poltrona as a leader in design thought and aligned it with the radical movements of the time. The company's showroom in Agliana became more than a sales space; it was a laboratory for artistic exchange and experimentation, embodying a spirit of avant-garde collaboration. Through these activities, Poltrona built a unique cultural capital that made it not just a furniture company, but an influential voice in the design world:

"Like other Tuscan companies, Poltrona tried to find its own identity, almost in contrast with the outside world, and this remains true today: we do not conform to market rules. This applies to our approach to communication as well. We move forward following our instincts, even when choosing products for production. For example, we included the 'Mitzi' sofa by Hollein in our catalog because it was important to have a piece from a designer of that caliber. It's a complex product in the market, but it plays to our advantage in terms of communication. The same goes for 'Cessato Allarme' by DDL, which is very pop and evokes war, yet carries peaceful messages. We chose colors that align with these aspects."

— AD

Moreover, artistic experiments were running on current basis, yielding some pieces which were often difficult to commercialize. Such practice was structural to the organization, despite its ambiguous commercial outcome:

"The experimentation was being done, and here was the peculiarity of Cammilli who, being a man of art, believed in the invention of art, let's call it that. He believed, as we would say today, in creative design. That's why we got along: he let me do things, he made the prototypes, and every now and then I would make something else for him that was 'sellable.' But even this here (flipping through the catalogs) now seems like minimalist furniture... I don't know how many he might have sold... four or five (Sottsass)" – (source D2)

Organizational crisis

However, this dedication to radical design and cultural engagement would soon clash with market realities. In the late 1970s, Poltronova began experiencing financial difficulties. The designs that had defined the company's identity in the previous decades, while culturally significant, struggled to find mass-market appeal. As economic challenges mounted, Poltronova sought to pivot towards a more commercially viable direction, attempting to align its products with mainstream consumer preferences and trends in the furniture market:

"In the 1980s, there was an artistic direction, but later, in trying to chase the market, Poltronova sought to adopt an identity it never truly had. Our catalog was a collection of different styles and languages. There was never a 'Poltronova style' or a 'Poltronova home.' Brands like De Padova, Cappellini, and Zanotta had a clear vision for their way of living. The response back then was to overcome the crisis by becoming like them. As a result, the company introduced projects that had nothing to do with our original ethos. So, we didn't become like the others, and we weakened our own vision. If you have a weak identity, this might work, but when you start with a strong identity like ours, you can't produce things that match the caliber of the past projects."
— CEO

In 1983, Sergio Cammilli left the company, marking the beginning of a two-decade-long period of crisis for Poltronova. His departure led to a loss of the company's original artistic vision and direction, which had been fundamental to its identity and success. This strategic shift marked a departure from Poltronova's original artist-driven ethos. In the pursuit of a new identity that could secure the company's future, Poltronova distanced itself from its roots. It began to lose touch with some of its key collaborators, including Ettore Sottsass. The company increasingly focused on more conventional designs aimed at the contract and office furniture markets, moving away from the experimental, culturally-rich creations that had made it an icon in the first place:

"The relationship with the designers had been lost. The true fuel of the company, more than the products themselves, were the projects, including everything that was never produced. Having the designers with you on this journey is essential."
— CEO

This redirection led to a crisis that went beyond mere financial strain. By attempting to become more market-oriented, Poltronova eroded the very cultural foundation that had set it apart. The loss of key design figures and the push to adopt a different identity left the company struggling to maintain its distinctiveness. The innovative, artist-centric ethos that had once fueled its growth was replaced with a more commercial mindset that did not resonate with its existing audience, nor did it establish a strong foothold in the broader market.

Ultimately, Poltronova's crisis in the 1980s and 1990s was not solely a result of market shifts or the decline of Radical Design's popularity. It was also due to the company's attempt to conform to market demands, which led to the loss of its initial cultural imprint. By drifting away from its core philosophy of artistic collaboration and cultural engagement, Poltronova found itself in an identity crisis, struggling to find its place in an evolving design landscape. This experience would later underscore the importance of cultural resources in the company's revival.

Project-based organizational rebirth

In the early 2000s, Roberta Meloni took over the company with the aim of reviving Poltronova. Inspired by the advice of architect and Professor Gianni Pettena, Meloni's strategy was to begin the renaissance by delving into the company's archives, drawing on the memories of the last remaining employees, and exploring what had been left in the warehouses. This approach centered on reconnecting with Poltronova's roots and rediscovering its original cultural resources.

"In 2000, I was left alone in a valley of things to do. Pettena sent a student to work on a thesis about Poltronova. I told him that the archive didn't exist, and he replied, 'Then you create it.' With Balena, we started working in thousands of square meters that were in semi-ruin. The company had a vast surface area, but it was split into five different properties because, in the 1980s, five companies operated under the Poltronova name. The spaces had been reduced, and everything that was no longer in use was thrown into these abandoned areas. Among pigeons and dead rats, we began recovering items, like fabric samples from the original collections—true industrial archaeology. We did the same with the catalogs and everything else we could find. Meanwhile, we reached out to the designers, who started sending us materials they hadn't given to Parma or the museum. With Francesca, we began visiting Sottsass once a month with a timeline of the projects, organizing and revising the projects together."

— CEO

The process was a long and meticulous journey, taking nearly a decade. It involved numerous meetings with key figures from Poltrona's golden era, including Ettore Sottsass, Gilberto Corretti, Andrea Branzi, Paolo Deganello, and their heirs. Through these interactions, Meloni sought to piece together the company's legacy and rekindle the spirit that had once made Poltrona a leader in radical design. Meloni began to understand the key to overcoming the organizational crisis:

"Numbers are not my best, but a company like Poltrona, given its target market, cannot compete on price or adopt an identity that is not its own. It's not about the increase of 1,000 euros in the price of the product; it's about quality, and it must be executed even better."
— CEO

In 2004, Meloni became the sole director of the company, and in 2005, she founded the Centro Studi Poltrona within the company. This center became instrumental in researching, preserving, and promoting Poltrona's cultural heritage, setting the stage for the brand's revival. In this recent phase of Poltrona, the company's revival was entirely driven by a management team composed of individuals with artistic backgrounds, particularly experts in design and architecture.

The key approach in this new era at Poltrona was to retrieve and reintroduce designs created by notable designers who had collaborated with the company during its earlier period. The strategy emphasized the artistic and cultural value of these works, positioning them as important contributions to design history, despite their limited commercial success at the time, Poltrona capitalized on their artistic significance:

"We no longer recover the best-selling items; we sell the incredible commercial flops like Ultrafragola or Joe, which sold very little." — AD

This was confirmed by the director of the archive in Centro Studi Poltrona, that affirmed:

"The pieces that he (Camilli) didn't sell are the ones that now allow the company to sell." — DOA

This approach seeks to steer Poltrona's resurgence by bringing the intrinsic value of its products to the forefront, thereby restoring the company's identity to its former prominence. The context for this strategy is rooted in the complex relationship with suppliers, the challenges of production, and the difficulties in sourcing materials. In the new vision that leverages cultural resources, a key element has been the relationships with suppliers:

"As much as we can, we try to work with local suppliers because we like to have an ongoing relationship with them. Some suppliers are Tuscan, though there are fewer now than when I started, as some industrial districts have disappeared. However, we want to rebuild that personal relationship."

— CEO

These partnerships became a crucial resource in the revival of Poltronova, as efforts were made to rebuild the lost knowledge and craftsmanship, by re-establishing connections with former artisans, who were identified as a key resource in overcoming the company's crisis. These artisans, many of whom had been involved in Poltronova's earlier years, brought invaluable expertise and knowledge that had been lost over time:

"The seamstress, upholsterer, and assembler are still in contact with us and are essential when we need to reissue a piece or restore something we have never seen or made before. They are the living part of the archive (Rosetta, the seamstress, was 14 when she started working at the company, and she is still fundamental)."

— CEO

Together with the architects, the company would visit each supplier individually, working closely to recover and reintroduce traditional techniques:

"With Dario Bartolini, one of the designers, we went together to the suppliers to see how they were making the pieces. For me, it was wonderful to go with him, and for him, it was emotional to see an object returning to production after so many years. Historically, it's said that they were made by a pharmacist who had a passion for boats and, for fun, created these fiberglass shells. Today, they are made in Livorno by a company that specializes in this work."

— PD

Poltronova faced numerous technical and design challenges in updating vintage projects, particularly those requiring materials that were no longer commonly used. Moreover, the company had to address the practicalities of production, such as producing small batches and purchasing materials in advance without knowing how much would eventually sell. This uncertainty added a layer of risk to the revival efforts, especially for unique fabrics. Many of the original patterns and designs, which were crucial to Poltronova's aesthetic, were not available every year, making it even more challenging to maintain the brand's distinctive style. Despite these obstacles, the company remained committed to its vision, carefully navigating these production and supply hurdles to breathe new life into its iconic creations. As a hallmark of this cultural resource-based approach, the company has chosen to focus exclusively on publishing and cultural participation, deliberately moving away from more traditional business strategies centered on marketing and advertising investments:

"The archive materials are included in the books. The Centro Studi has an editorial code and has decided to invest a significant amount of money in this activity, cutting the advertising budget. The money, the time, and the effort are not the same."

— DOA

By prioritizing contributions to design journals, books, exhibitions, and cultural events, Poltronova reinforces its identity as an influential and authentic voice in the design world. This strategy highlights the intrinsic

value of its products and brand, allowing the company to connect with its audience through its historical and cultural significance:

"All the magazines call us for ads, but what you see is natural and spontaneous, not paid. We prefer to invest in classic publishing. We produce the monographs in-house, and both production and graphic design are not easy. The strategy is to maintain a strong connection with the past; we are contemporary, but it's important to remember that these pieces have a history."
— AD

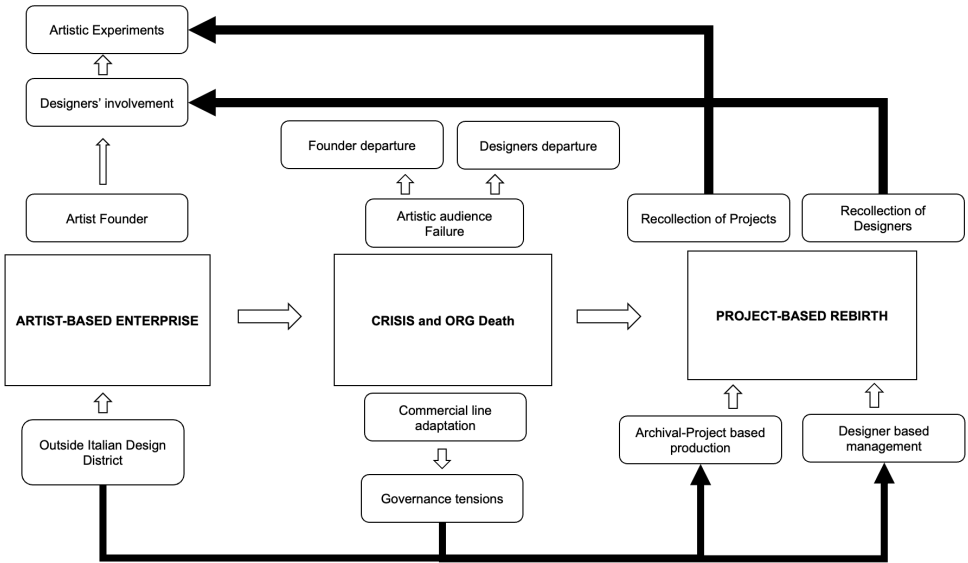
5. Discussion

The findings of this study allow us to witness the emergence of two main cultural resources, crucial to yield organizational rebirth: the relationship with designers and the archive of design projects (Ravasi & Lojacono, 2005).

The first phase sees the origin of the organization as enrooted in an artist-based enterprise: fueled by both the artistic passion of the founder, as well as the involvement of designers at all organizational levels. Differently than what has been labeled as "art based business" (Zsolnai & Wilson, 2016), the artistic vocation of the organization is not used neither for commercial purposes nor for mecenatism and cultural initiatives (Marchegiani, 2018; Schiuma, 2011), rather to use the organization as a space of experiments. Although designers were involved in many similar coeval businesses, the peculiarity of the artist-based enterprise arises from its pursuing of artistic creation as a primary objective, rather than mass commercial outreach. The second phase, opened with the departure of key designers (such as Sottsass) and the founder himself, witnesses the explosion of untamable tensions between the commercial logic and the cultural logic that have been coexisting until that period. Such crisis led to organizational death rather than to alignment in between different logics (Dalpiaz et al., 2016). In this period, our findings show how cultural resources have been neglected, substituted by a focus on commercial lines and commercial revenues. However, such strategy eventually led to organizational demise and failure. The third phase, organizational rebirth, centers around the restoring of the two main cultural resources which were originally developed in the first phase. We label this phase project-based rebirth: first, our findings support the claim that recollection of old design projects led to revaluation of design pieces. The latter, which in the first phase were considered commercial failure, through this last phase, are restored and re-commercialized. Second, in order to achieve re-commercialization of such archival pieces, the relationship with designers has been restored as well. This has been pursued through two drivers: first, by envisioning a management en-

tirely composed by design and architecture experts; second, by restoring, when possible, the original relationship of Poltronova, with those designers who contributed to projects. Findings relevant to the analysis of this third phase confirm previous studies on the pivotal role of cultural resources in strategy formation (Maurer et al., 2011; Rindova et al., 2011). We therefore highlight how cultural resources can be used not to inform innovation or renovation strategies, rather to inform the very organizational rationale of existence. We found that the organization was able to drive its rebirth without enrichment of cultural repertoire, rather by sourcing from the original one in a process of restoration of intrinsic value. Such process finally led to organizational rebirth, building on identity restoration rather than identity redefinition (Rindova et al., 2011). Thus, cultural resources emerge as the primary source of economic sustainability and success, to both overcome organizational death as well as to position the organization within a new context (Rosanas, 2008; Sutton, 1987). By this way, we were able to model what we call artistic and design-based rebirth [see Figure 1]

Figure 1: Artist and project based model



6. Contributions and limitation

This study contributes to literature on organizational death and literature on cultural resources, by enquiring into the key role of the second amidst processes of organizational rebirth, in at least three main ways.

This study elucidates the dual role of cultural resources in organizations, particularly in cases where tensions between cultural or artistic vocation and business goals are not successfully aligned (Dalpiaz et al., 2016; Zsolnai & Wilson, 2016). Cultural resources, such as experimental design projects and relationships with designers, often represent competing logics—artistic aspirations versus commercial imperatives—that create friction within governance frameworks and can lead to organizational challenges. However, our findings demonstrate that these same cultural resources, when strategically restored and acknowledged as central to the organization's strategy, can transition from being sources of conflict to becoming pivotal drivers of success. By resorting to and restoring original cultural assets, organizations can capitalize on their heritage to redefine their strategic positioning and re-establish legitimacy (Dalpiaz et al., 2010; Rindova et al., 2011). This shift highlights the potential for cultural resources to not only address tensions but also foster competitive advantage by aligning artistic authenticity with economic sustainability. Thus, the study contributes to the literature by showing how cultural resources can evolve from being antagonistic forces within an organization to becoming the cornerstone of its strategic renewal and success.

Second, this study bridges the gap between literature on cultural resources and organizational death. While prior research has explored the centrality of cultural resources in strategy formation and strategic renewal in thriving organizations such as Alessi, Kartell, and others (Dalpiaz et al., 2014; Ravasi & Lojacono, 2005; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2007), these cases have not specifically addressed scenarios involving organizational death. Our findings extend this body of work by showing how art-based businesses (Comunian, 2008; Masè, 2020; Zsolnai & Wilson, 2016) can restore their artistic vocation as a primary driver of strategy formation, even in contexts marked by organizational demise (Walsh & Bartunek, 2011; Zell, 2003). This contribution yields relevant insights for SMEs studies, inasmuch literature has extensively discussed the role of resilience or family ties as internal drivers of avoiding organizational death (Mchiri, 2022; Salvato et al., 2019), while we reveal how cultural resources, such as archival projects and designer collaborations, can serve as primary foundation for recovery by enabling the restoration of internal, pre-existing assets, rather than relying on the acquisition of new resources or innovations (Rindova et al., 2011) or family ties.

Furthermore, this study offers several practical implications to managers and

entrepreneurs aiming to yield a process of organizational rebirth. Following the elucidation of the pivotal role of cultural resources, often overlooked in favor of financial or operational strategies, practitioners can focus on the strategic deployment of their intrinsic artistic value. Specifically, the Poltrona case shows how the recollection and restoration of archival resources and legacy collaborations can be pursued as main strategic drivers able to yield organizational rebirth. By this way, practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of how such resources represent not merely historical artifacts or elderly collaborators, but a unique source of competitive advantage, particularly in contexts where traditional market approaches falter. Moreover, the research highlights the efficacy of a heritage-driven business model, suggesting that practitioners can prioritize authenticity and cultural alignment over purely commercial considerations. Additionally, the study sheds light on the importance of integrating designers and cultural experts into leadership roles to ensure alignment between strategic goals and cultural values.

Main limitations to the study can be enlisted as follows. First, the lack of complete documents and records concerning the crisis period, allowed us to gather limited data on management and governance structure and strategy concerning that historical period. This could have impacted our ability to understand tensions and decision-making processes and outputs during the crisis period. Although this does not directly influence the understanding of how Centro Studi Poltrona leverages cultural resources in the present period, we signal such shortcoming in data collection. Second, interviews have been conducted reaching data saturation, as they involved all key informants in the current governance of Centro Studi Poltrona, however, only secondary data have been found available to unpack the historical periods. Third, additional understanding of the role of cultural resources could be gathered from future enquires, which deepen designers' experience and role in organizational rebirth for art and artist-based businesses.

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