

**CORPORATE HERITAGE BETWEEN HISTORY AND IDENTITY:  
THE ASYMPTOTIC RELATIONSHIP HYPOTHESIS**

**ABSTRACT**

Organizations struggle to cope with increasingly demanding market and/or public pressures while establishing sustainable management guidelines. The complex involved mechanisms not only exploit conventional corporate resources, but also various artifact corpuses made of past and current cultural assets. This conceptual analysis explores their interdependency relationship, through history and identity prisms and the specific ontological role of heritage. This article presents an alternative to the classic view of heritage as a static phenomenon: a dynamic view in which corporate heritage acts as a balanced and dynamic leverage to solve disorganization and produce meaning, as well as a new construct likely to reinforce organizational strategy. The author argues that heritage legitimates the hypothesis of an asymptotic relationship between history misinterpretation and identity building.

**KEYWORDS**

Corporate history – Corporate identity – Corporate heritage – Organizational strategy

Since the early manifestations of complex centralized societies, people and organizations have been closely related to heritage, understood here in its most continuous cultural form. This intrinsic relationship has been so far widely unexploited in the corporate world, in spite of the high potential for positive returns and the growing consumer quest for authenticity (Pattuglia et al., 2015). In a corporate context, where heritage's specific role and influence still requires clarification and

theoretical as well as practical inquiries, we will postulate that *embodied rallying cultural resources* (iconic tools and machinery, places and premises, ethics and values, expertise and know-how, products and services) *contributing to the achievement of the company project* are all characterized by a heritage nature, i.e. *worth identify with, transmissible to and exploitable by oncoming generations of stakeholders*. Being equally trans-temporal (retroactive and prospective) and trans-societal (penetrating and affecting every stratum of the organization), corporate heritage appears as a rather promising yet hardly clarified concept: following recent research works, the particular issue of its plausible interdependency with past artifacts and identity components must then be ascertained. After highlighting the key constructs of the related literature framework (*corporate history, corporate identity, corporate heritage, heritage and organizational strategy*), we will consecutively explore three foundational propositions and theoretical inferences regarding the specific role of heritage in the relationship between history and identity.

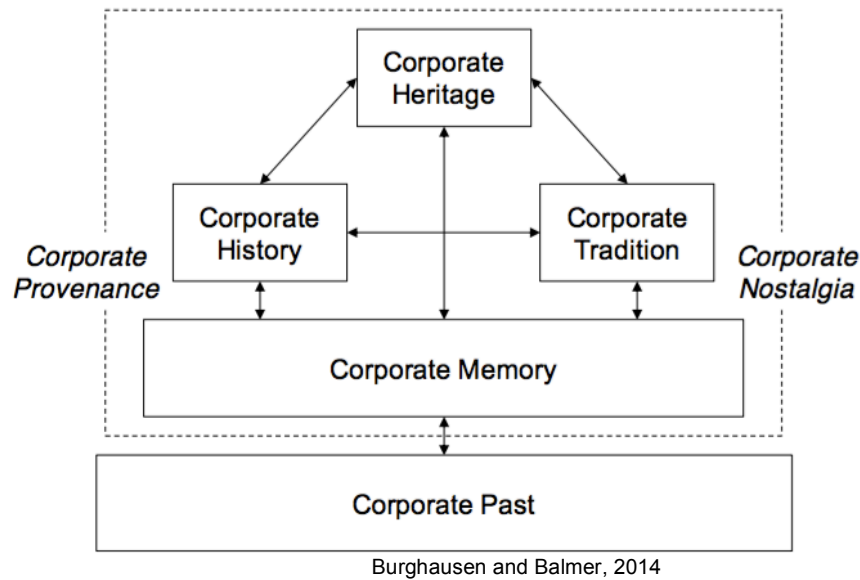
### **Key constructs**

#### *Corporate history*

Pathare (2012) considered history a powerful differentiator that can help to promote organizations outside their accustomed sphere of influence, and motivate employees, especially new recruits, to re-imagine the future. Recordkeeping may be a low-priority task for many business people, but corporate archives are useful for a company's day-to-day business as a tool to inspire today's leaders in management, communications, and more particularly brand management.

If conducted with independence and objectivity, exhuming corporate history in an attractive and understandable way (i.e. using modern technology, like online publishing) is likely to motivate and enlighten actual and future generations of employees, as well as to enhance innovative thinking in a business environment.

For Burghausen and Balmer (2014), past-related artifacts can be *instrumental* (hence of a practical utility for corporate-level marketing and communication purposes) or *foundational* (interrelated concepts composing the company's core dynamic structure). Furthermore, the understanding of an organization's past can be enhanced through a conceptual segmentation; corporate history being part of *a seven past-related modes framework* including corporate past, corporate memory, corporate tradition, corporate heritage, corporate nostalgia, and corporate provenance:



The management of *corporate history culture* (commissioned company histories and other representations) could rely on an analytical four-field table of its external and internal dimensions, depending on whether communications are external or internal, and whether history is external or internal (Sivula, 2014).

### *Corporate identity*

As far as the heritage prism is involved, identity must be considered as a conceptual body of stabilized corporate artifacts, or identity components. The section regarding identity in the Strategor cites the Soenen and Moingeon model (2002), which states that collective identity (in a corporate

sense) stems *from the organization* and is perceived and interpreted *by an external audience* following the “5 facets”:

- Professed identity;
- Projected identity;
- Lived identity;
- Manifested identity;
- Attributed identity.

The *communication* of corporate identity from management to employees is undoubtedly a crucial issue (Agerholm, 2015), and so are its *implementation strategies*.

### *Corporate heritage*

The private sector interacts in various ways with cultural heritage (Starr, 2010), with partnerships creating shared value that generates social and commercial benefits for all parties (Starr, 2013). This “corporate patrimonialization” is hardly an issue for civil society, which is more concerned about conventional religious or military heritage. But industrial heritage has gradually become more attractive, as a new open field for creating and mobilizing restoration projects (Gasnier and Lamard, 2007).

New theoretical prospects (Balmer and Burghausen, 2015) lead to the introduction of the *organizational heritage concept*, drawing both on the now established corporate heritage (which we understand as the *embodied sum of corporate cultural assets*), and on organizational identity. This specific approach could potentially lead to an enhanced understanding of heritage correspondence with organization.

*Heritage and organizational strategy*

The need for a dynamic adjusting process (adjusting to a changing and complex environment) emphasizes the necessary search for reliable patterns in organizations. Accountable for effective change and adaptation capabilities, the patterns proceed from three major elements “strategy, structure, and process” (Miles et al., 1978), potentially interpenetrated by corporate heritage. The incidental question of influential forces behind an equilibrium state between internal management and external environment could also be solved by the heritage phenomenon hypothesis.

Disorganization itself, even read through a *presumed cyclical conception of history* (thus leveraging Giovanni Battista Vico’s early assumptions), can be linked to heritage awareness through an *inverse proportional relationship*, from a stage of prevailing individualities (and disorganization) to a stage of prevailing organizations upon chaos, leading to a productive meaning and a reshaped world (Durand, 2014). Heritage could be then fruitfully interpreted as *an intermediary body inside the organizational body*, whose non-fluctuating legitimacy in the course of action adds to its promising crosscutting nature:

- A constructivist force likely to purposely induce meaning beyond the temporary states of organizations;
- An alternative route intrinsically designed and managed to build meaning and consistency in the long run.

The duality theory of *stability and change* into organizational processes (Farjoun, 2010) does not explicitly refer to the heritage factor: nevertheless, stability (*heritage*) could alternatively be linked to change (*innovativeness in the organization sphere*), thus enriching the theoretical overtime

transition from dualism (mutually exclusive relationship) to duality (interdependency and reciprocal influence), and then to an even more intricate state of merged corporate artifacts.

### Foundational propositions

#### *The equilibrium relationship state between history and identity*

Our hypothesis is that *foundational corporate history artifacts* evolve together with *instrumental corporate identity components*, in a constant, coupled and balanced relationship in the organizational scope:

- Distinctive in nature and in their appropriation by corporate stakeholders, past and identification-related artifacts share a common ontological space directly emphasizing corporate DNA and impacting the production of core meaning inside the organization;
- The equilibrium state originates from the double assumption that 1. *Historical embodiments* have exactly the same influence and operate at the same level of efficiency than *identity corporate signs*, and 2. The distance between their furthestmost nuances remains constant regardless of the type and size of the considered organization (as described in figure 1, vertical dash lines depicting the organizational scope limits).

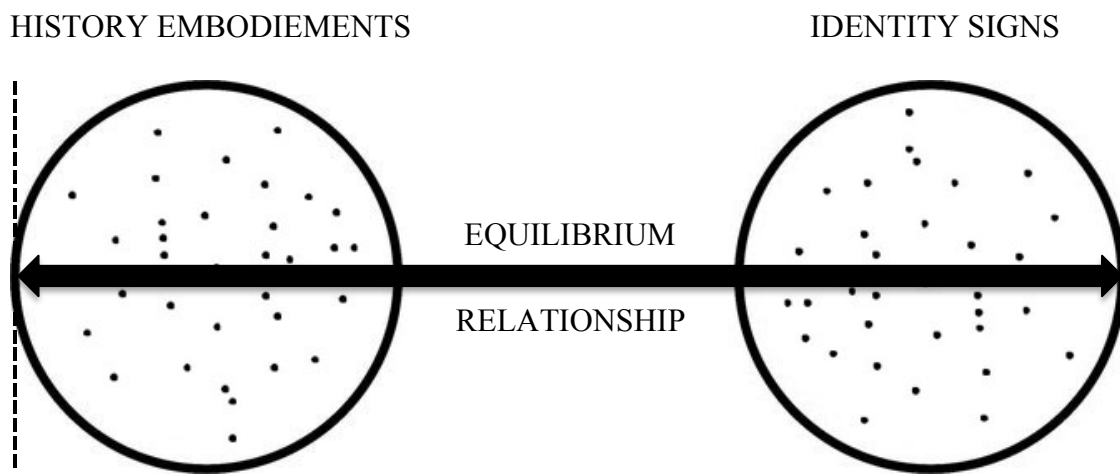


Figure 1. The constant distance between history and identity furthestmost nuances.

*The equidistance of the heritage body regarding history and identity*

Our hypothesis is that heritage (understood as a clear-cut body of cultural assets) does not autonomously act as a third operator inside the organizational body (history and identity being considered first and second), but strictly stands out at the exact center of the *ontological space equally shared by history and identity*.

The mandatory condition of heritage awareness therefore relies on the assumption that the heritage body cannot be closer in its capacity of reciprocal influence to history artifacts than to identity components, and vice versa.

Heritage holds the precise middle place between history and identity, being equally nourished by them with *precarious and unstable meaning*, and since it equally nourishes them with *productive and clarified meaning* in return (as described in figure 2).

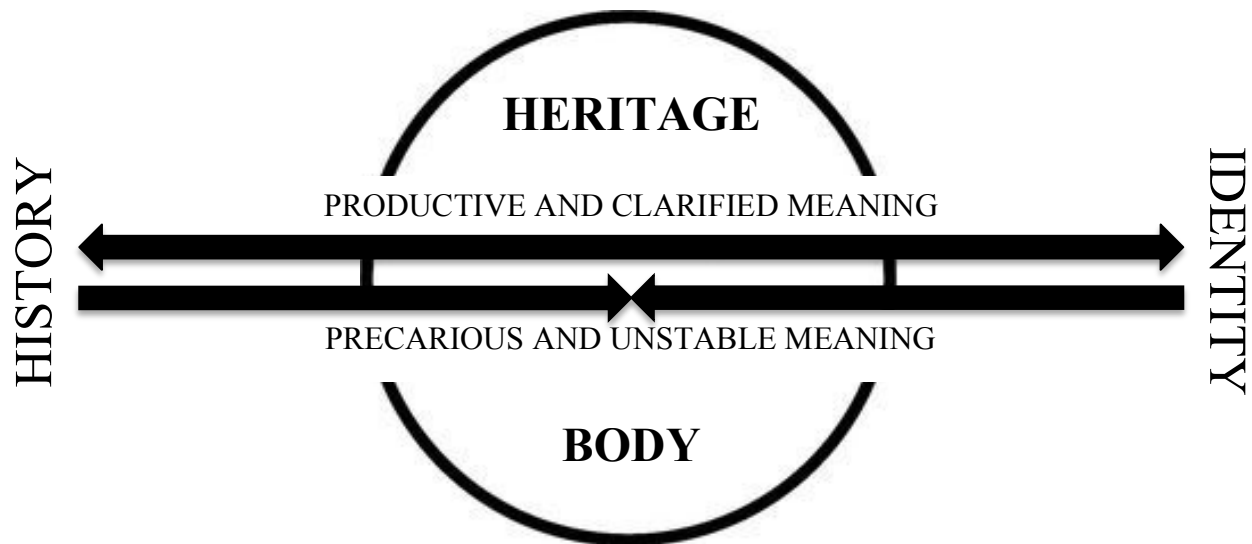


Figure 2. The equidistance of the heritage body regarding history and identity.

*A trans-dimensional influence through organizations*

Organizations derive their global presence (internal and external) from three hypothetical coupled elements (*history, heritage, identity*), *working together as a whole* to ensure a stable influence directed towards every dimension of the organization's perimeter (as described in figure 3), including the consideration of the temporal factor.

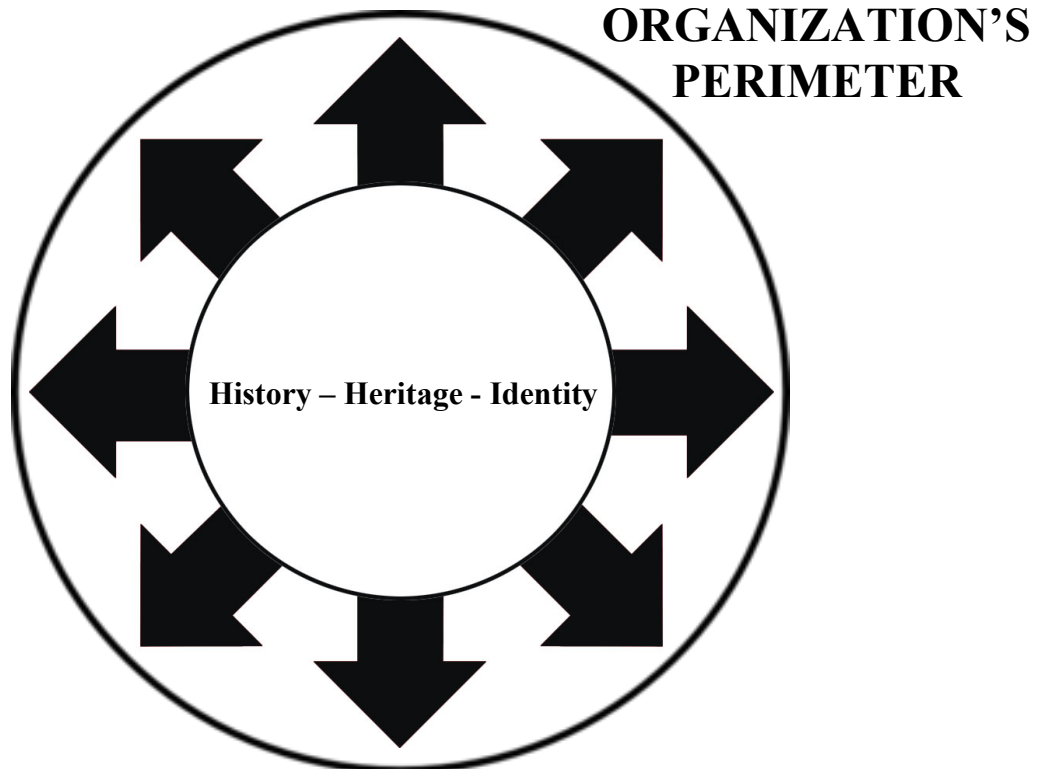


Figure 3. A trans-dimensional influence through organizations.

**Theoretical inferences***The maturity stage in the integration of heritage dimension*

Our postulate, reinforced by a field observation (industrial heritage analysis for Fenwick-Linde, 2013), is that three representative curves equally proceed from the company's "cultural big bang", starting from the early creation stage and converging while evolving synergistically: 1 Precision of historical interpretation, 2 Heritage qualification, 3 Identity building.



The theoretical crossing point of these curves (in a 5 to 10 years process) calls upon a *maturity stage*, a crucial crystallization step (as described in figure 4 & 5) where we argue that: 1 Corporate cultural assets get fully measurable and exploitable for internal (incentive and cohesion of employees) and external (marketing and branding) purposes; 2 Heritage operations can be implemented, either by in-house teams or by a third party; 3 Innovation processes can consciously be inspired and enriched by heritage assets.

- Immaturity/maturity:

Focusing on identity building processes, we infer that immaturity is characterized by *zero to little corporate/brand identity consciousness*, where as maturity is characterized by *effective corporate/brand identity consciousness*.

- Cultural assets compliance with key strategic issues:

Cultural heritage assets are by nature convolutedly in close resonance with the three fundamental elements at the heart of the organization's definition and constantly challenged in the long run:

People – Project - Resources

- Through the organizational prism:

Leveraging Durand's organizations theory (Durand, 2014) and specifically the over time relationship between organizations and production, we infer that all types of organizations successively go through a stage of *heritage of production* (where corporate artifacts proceed partly from corporate memory and past cultural assets) to a stage of *production of heritage* (where corporate artifacts in turn generate new exploitable assets), and that, at a certain point in the organization's life cycle timeline, this specific transition corresponds to the assumed *maturity stage*:

Heritage of production → **Maturity stage** → Production of heritage

*The proportional relationship between heritage qualification and identity building*

We postulate that the *accuracy of heritage qualification* is proportional to the collective production of *interactive identity components* (the process that we broadly describe as *identity building*) (as described in figure 4): the higher the heritage qualification, the higher the identity building.

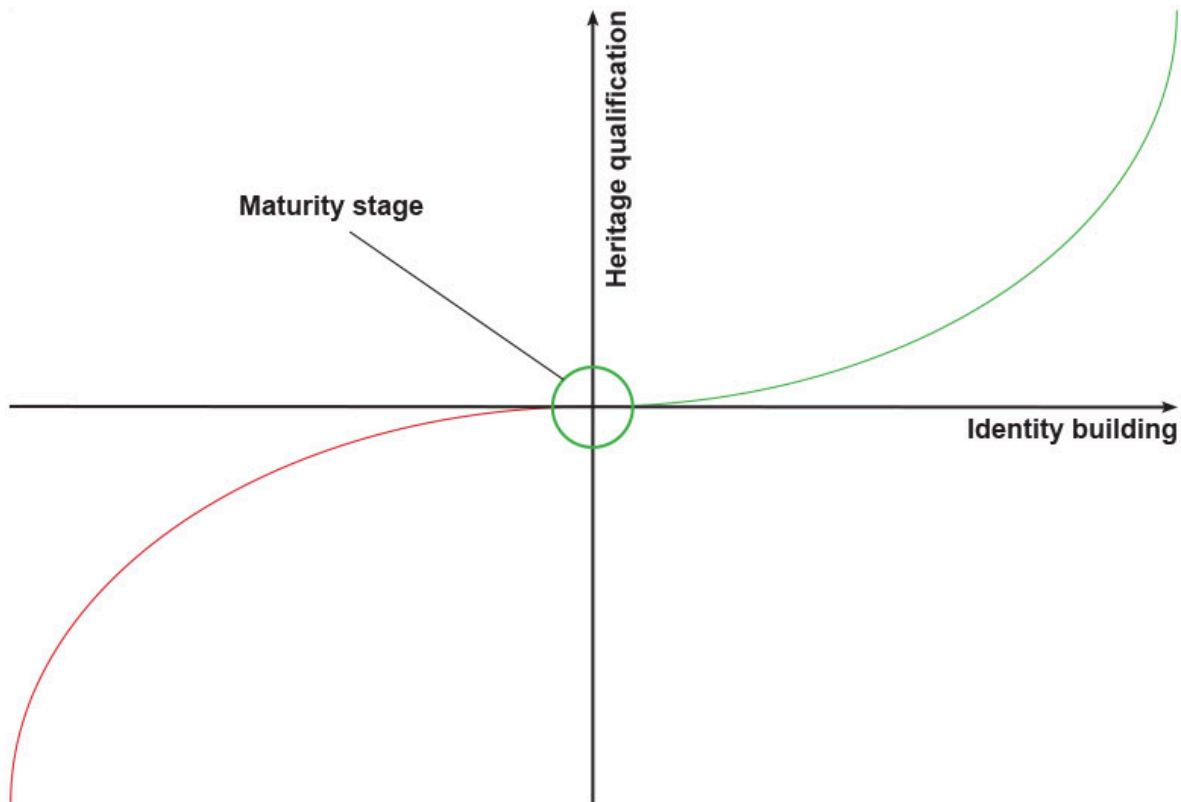


Figure 4. The relationship between heritage qualification and identity building.

*The asymptotic relationship between history and identity*

The transition phase between corporate history and identity can then be described as an asymptotic relationship (as described in figure 5): *identity building increasing indefinitely as misleading of historical interpretation decreases*. Confusion of historical interpretation cannot get to a zero point because there will always be a distortion between tangible reality of past events and their qualitative measurement.

The *integration of heritage dimension* is the theoretical leverage that will help to lower interpretative confusion, while getting through a sort of *equilibrium situation* (the afore-mentioned maturity stage) between immaturity and maturity. Dotted arrows on figure 5 highlight the fact that this equilibrium situation (the crossing point of the asymptote and the line depicting the hypothetical progress of heritage dimension's integration) is likely to vary over time and operations, thus in fine influencing identity building (which could potentially level off at a certain point).

After reaching maturity stage, a synergic/virtuous circle will emphasize the *necessary coherency between collective representation and collective action* from companies' operators and staff.

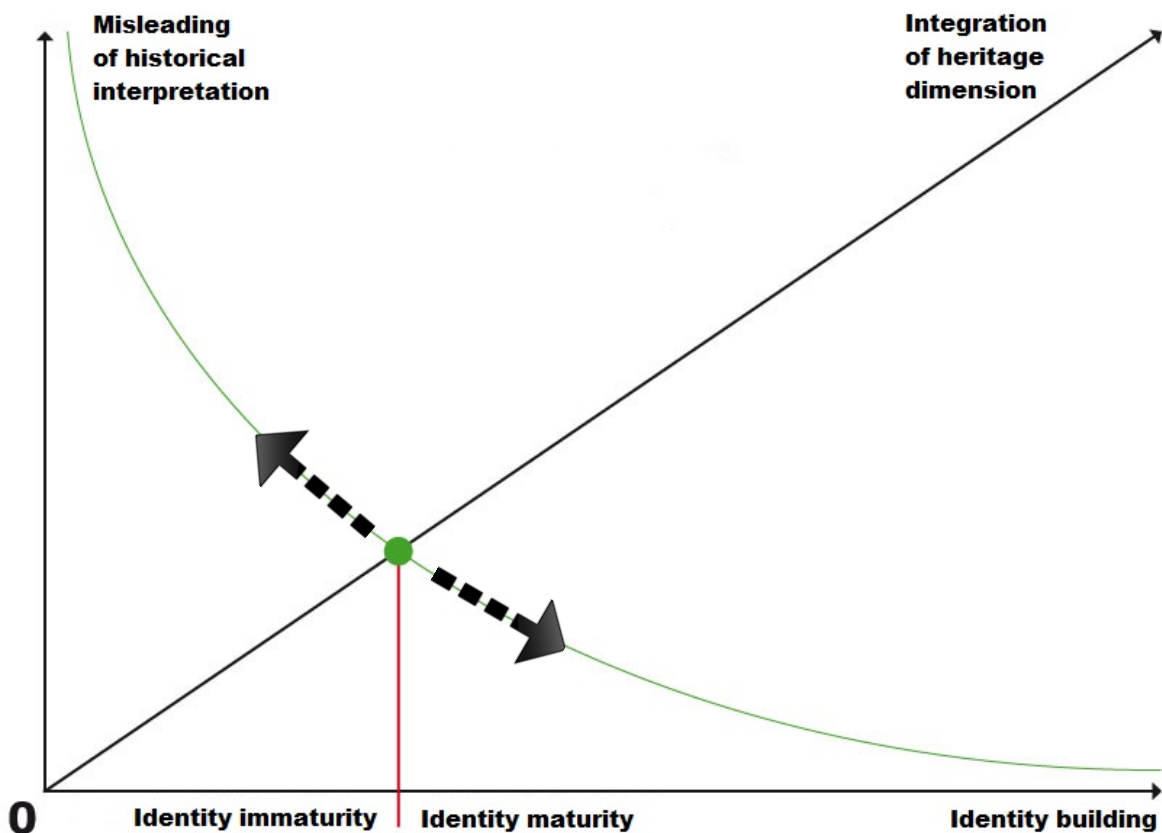


Figure 5. The asymptotic relationship between corporate history, heritage dimension, and identity building.

## Conclusion

We have established conceivable guidelines regarding the *ontological role of corporate heritage*:

- Heritage helping to define the theoretical central body that orbit history and identity and to which their echoing influences converge;
- Heritage enabling and bringing to light the potential influences of the history-identity couple affecting organizational strategies;
- Heritage conveying the conceptual idea that enhanced cultural-driven production of meaning is a step in solving temporary disorganization.

Drawing on corporate heritage awareness and development, the hypothesis of a subsequent organizational performance still needs to be questioned and tested under operational conditions.

## References

- Agerholm Andersen, M., 2015, The strategic communication of corporate heritage identity implementation in a hyper-modal context, Corporate Communication International, Conference (New York).
- Balmer, J., Burghausen, M., 2015, Explicating Corporate Heritage, Corporate Heritage Brands, and Organizational Heritage, Journal of Brand Management.
- Burghausen, M., Balmer, J., 2014, Repertoires of the corporate past: Explanation and framework introducing an integrated and dynamic perspective, Corporate Communications: An International Journal 19.
- Durand, R., 2014, Organizations, Strategy, and Society – The Orgology of disorganized Worlds, Routledge.

- Farjoun, M., 2010, Beyond dualism: Stability and change as a duality, *Academy of Management Review* 35, 202-225.
- Gasnier, M., Lamard, P., 2007, Le patrimoine industriel comme vecteur de reconquête économique, Lavauzelle.
- Miles, R., Snow, C., Meyer, A., Coleman, H., 1978, Organizational Strategy, Structure, and Process, *The Academy of Management Review* 3, 546-562.
- Pathare, V., 2012, The Shaping of History in a Corporate Setting: The Godrej Scenario, *Leveraging Corporate Assets: New Global Directions for Business Archives*.
- Pattuglia, S., Mingione, M., Cherubini, S., 2015, Achieving alignment for corporate brand success: The consumer quest for authenticity and heritage, *Proceedings International Marketing Trends Conference*.
- Sivula, A., 2014, Corporate History Culture and Useful Industrial Past: A Case Study on History Management in Finnish Cotton Company Porin Puuvilla Oy, *Folklore* 57, 29-54.
- Starr, F., 2010, The business of heritage and the private sector, in *Heritage and Globalization*, Routledge, 147-169.
- Starr, F., 2013, *Corporate Responsibility for Cultural Heritage: Conservation, Sustainable Development, and Corporate Reputation*, Taylor & Francis.
- Strategor, Dunod, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 669-732.
- Vico, G., 1725, *La science nouvelle*, Gallimard.

### **About the author**

Since 1984 Guillaume Olivié-Touati has been involved in nonprofit operations regarding cultural heritage protection and valorization. He is the cofounder of the consulting agency *Bilan Patrimoine*

and the founder of *Globe Heritage Institute*, a public policy research and advocacy think-tank project focusing on heritage connection with major global issues (i.e. education, science, politics, economics, management, innovation, sustainability). After an undergraduate degree with a focus on History of law, he studied at Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, Paris, where he was auditor for a Master in History of technology and graduated with a Master in Management and a MBA. Nourished by constructivist, systemic, duality and organizations theories, his research scope and current PhD research project address the ontological dimension of corporate heritage between history and identity, as well as its potential implication in key strategic issues such as corporate sustainability, competitive advantage, innovativeness, and overall organizational performance.