An application of memory studies to museology: the case of Pinacoteca Ambrosiana between the 1960s and the 1990s
Silvia Colombo
PhD candidate in Conservation of Architectural Heritage, Politecnico di Milano, DASTU, Milan, Italy

1. The museum as a reflection of spatial memory
When we talk about museums we refer to a particular category of cultural heritage which is considered in its double nature: from one side they are historical buildings and from the other places for exhibition - both permanent and temporary.
Actually if museums periodically need interventions of conservation and maintenance, they also provide, in turn, conservation to the owned collections. Thus their changes happened throughout the years are made to preserve the building itself, but also to rearrange internal spaces: ‘actions’ that we usually see maybe without considering the significances ‘hidden’ behind them.
According to the definition given by G.J. Ashworth “buildings and sites are especially visible, potent, robust and accessible expressions of pasts” [Ashworth, 2011, 1] and, as a consequence, expressions of human being and his culture in a certain lapse of time.
For example, every room designed for exhibitions is not only a ‘tridimensional container’, but it is a place where we can read between the lines, a space with a message for each visitor: behind every apparently accidental detail there is a conscious decision taken by someone in charge.
As we can see, when history meets architecture and art, the result is a subtext made of different layers of meaning. In other words, we create a new identity, that is “fluid, subjective and multi-dimensional, our sense of place and belonging in the world centres not only on the ways we may (or may not) express our national or cultural identities and affiliations, but is also concerned with expressing and working out a range of other cultural, social and political experiences” [Smith, 2008, p. 160]. We have the possibility to reconnect this identity to the present situation studying historical documents, with the support of the memory studies. Actually, quoting Laurajane Smith “linking memories to objects, or giving them a tangible reality through heritage, means that they can be collected, preserved, lost, destroyed or restored” [Smith, 2006, 61].
So, what are the things (in terms of arrangement, spatial distribution, museum itinerary) to preserve and, on the contrary, what we need to discard?
We have to consider that every decision made by the directors, the museum administration... is a link between the past and the present and is - almost partially - influenced by our memory, or by our will to forget.
In conclusion, the museum is a kind of text, a “text-related space”, following the definition written by Susan A. Crane [Crane, 2000, 18]: we can understand its traces only paying attention to its spaces and, of course, knowing its history.

2. A case study: the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan
2.1. A short introduction
In this essay, more specifically, a peculiar case study will be considered: the
Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan. Actually, the museum we can see today - with all its non-homogeneous parts, all its sudden changes within the itinerary - is the result of a quite troubled history, divided between increases and removals.

Founded by archbishop Federico Borromeo in 1618, the Pinacoteca, during the centuries, was refurbished several times, especially in the 20th century (1905-1907; 1926-1932 and 1938; 1945, reopened after the Reconstruction) and it had also the opportunity to grow larger thanks to the acquisition of new spaces coming from the near Monastero degli Oblati and San Sepolcro church, during the 20s and the 30s.

The main change of the museum occurred exactly in this period, when Prefetto Giovanni Galbiati committed the project for a “remade, enlarged (with 23 more rooms) and a younger” [Galbiati, 1932, 245] Pinacoteca Ambrosiana to a group of professionals between architects (Gaetano Moretti, Ambrogio Annoni and Alessandro Minali), goldsmiths, artists, sculptors and decorators. The result was a showy, considerable arrangement, where the fine and applied arts were finally together - following the ideas of the cultural propaganda promoted by the Fascist regime.

Considered from this point of view, “the museum has become part of an epistemological grid that turns museology into a field of research extending far beyond the limits of museum walls” [Crane, 2000, 17]. A situation occurred more frequently during the 20th century, when the main disciplines of this sector, museum studies, took their first steps and evolved, most of all in a country like Italy.

Actually there, after the bombings of the Second World War (in August 1943, referring to Milan) and during the Reconstruction, a new type of museum was
born: the so-called ‘internal museum’, an historic building then re-used as a place for conservation, storage and exhibition [Huber, 1997]. Finally, after a violent interruption caused by the conflict, public administrations and museum directors restarted a dialogue with the territory and were again interested in the important subjects emerged from the conference of Madrid (1934), Muséographie [Muséographie, 1935]. At this point, though, we have two different stories: one coming from the most of the Italian museums, and the other from the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. It seemed that every cultural institution needed to change2 but the Ambrosiana, reconstructed as it was, according to the arrangement conceived by Prefetto Giovanni Galbiati before the conflict. As we can imagine, that choice put the museum in a sort of ‘countertrend’, lasted at least until the end of the mandate of Galbiati, forced to resign in 1951.

2.2. The Pinacoteca Ambrosiana from the 60s until the 90s: a long path towards a new identity

An article published in 1964 on the «Corriere della Sera» is a clear symptom of the long period of standstill which damaged the Ambrosiana during the postwar years. The author wrote that “The Ambrosiana is the only important museum of Milan not renewed after the Second World War, but it was the most well-cared-for, despite the destructions caused by the conflict. Yes, there is an atmosphere inside the Ambrosiana, but it is not competitive at all. Oppression, sadness, annoyance rule in that scraped rooms, gloomy due to the smog and crowded by artworks set senselessly, the masterpieces together with the worthless paintings, the copies side by side with the originals […] Neither the Leonardo room, previously devastated by the bombs and then
reconstructed in 1950, can be saved” [«Corriere della Sera», 1964, 8].
Right away, just the following year, Aurelio Natali, writing on the pages of
the journal «L'Unità»., affirmed: “Among all the Milanese picture galleries, the
Ambrosiana is the most well-known but - for sure - the less visited by tourists”
[Natali, 1965, 6].
Thus these articles traced a really decadent museum’s portrait exactly in the
same years of a huge museum change. Actually at the early 60s – under the
mandate of Prefetto Angelo Paredi (successor of Galbiati) – with a decade
and more of delay if compared to other Italian cases, the Pinacoteca Ambro-
siana was finally marked by a turning point: Giulia Devoto Falck, a philan-
thropist coming from a family of Milanese businessmen, patronized a new
museum intervention.
She wanted architect Luigi Caccia Dominioni, art historians Lamberto Vitali
and Gian Alberto Dell’Acqua to create a completely renewed arrangement,
“a restoration and a reorganization of the picture gallery”, because “both the
interventions made under [Prefetto Achille] Ratti in 1906, and the one wanted
by Galbiati in 1932, referred to the old schemes used in the 17th and 18th
century: long sequences of artworks, one after the other, hung from the floor
to the ceiling of the rooms” [Paredi, 1969, 22-23].
It is thus clear that the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana needed a different solution,
“a standard already adopted with success in several museums (for example
- referring to the Lombardy - in Accademia Carrara, Bergamo): the ‘second
degree gallery’” [Falchetti, 1969].
In other words, the intention of the architect was to place the most appreciated
artworks in a small number of rooms, while the other collections were put in
different museum spaces. “Caccia Dominioni wanted to give a double nature
- ethic and aesthetic - to the union between sobriety and elegance in order
to create visual conditions more suitable to the social requirements” [Irace,
2002, 408].
Moreover, the head of the Collegio dei Conservatori dell’Ambrosiana, Ernesto

On the left: Raffaello room after the restoration work of the 90s, in Storia dell’Ambrosiana. Il Ne-
vecento, 2002, IntesaBci - Arti Grafiche Amilcare Pizzi, Milan. By courtesy of Intesa Sanpaolo; On
the right: Room 18, De Pecis collection, in Storia dell’Ambrosiana. Il Novecento, 2002, IntesaBci
- Arti Grafiche Amilcare Pizzi, Milan. By courtesy of Intesa Sanpaolo
Moneta Caglio, in 1965 asked the Soprintendenza the permission (then granted) to enlarge the museum with a new room above the Sala Jemale, to be dedicated to the Raffaello’ sketch, Scuola di Atene.

In December 7th 1966 (the day of Sant’Ambrogio, patron of Milan) the renewed Pinacoteca Ambrosiana opened to the public and finally was a modern museum; nevertheless, in a curious way, the project excluded a great part of the itinerary.

Either this ‘counter-reform’ was the result of a different perception of museum studies or a plan reduced due to the lack of money, it is interesting to note that the parts erased and then abandoned were exactly the ones conceived during the Fascist regime. More precisely, the Galbiati rooms were closed and mostly used as storages for the pictures and the sculptures.

It seemed that these spaces were quite affected by a damnatio memoriae which caused their removal; maybe the last, triumphal arrangement, so recognizable and so tied to the personality of Giovanni Galbiati needed to be wiped out, and so did the memory of all the injuries inflicted by the dictatorship.

According to what Paul Connerton argues “forgetting as repressive erasure appears in its most brutal form, of course, in the history of totalitarian regimes […] Repressive erasure can be employed to deny the fact of a historical rupture as well as to bring about a historical break”. Again, he also stated that even non-evident violence, hidden behind an architectural surface, for example, could be a testimony of an execrable time that need to be covered; actually “by walking through the museum the visitor will be prompted to internalize the values and beliefs written into the architectural script” [Connerton, 2008, 60]. Actually this process happens every time we enter in a public, historical place because - whether we like it or not - we unconsciously give concreteness to our souvenirs (heard or lived) and tend to activate a “topic memory” [Montesperelli, 2003, 11], excluding all the pain.

Still the Ambrosiana designed by Caccia Dominioni was a complete success because the architect was able to update the museum standards and to modify the whole environment, transforming the “old picture gallery” in a modern, kind-of domestic space.

He introduced delicate touches of colour on the walls, depicted in pale brown, contrasting with the brilliant dark red of the pieces of furniture – the Azucena chair seats and the sofas –, he completely renewed the lighting system of the art gallery and planned “a pitched roof with four lunettes, in order to create a suggestive, natural lighting system” for the Raffaello’s room [Crippa, 1996, 63], the real heart of the museum.

Despite that, the ‘Pinacoteca Ambrosiana moment of glory’ came soon to an end, and if we glance at the coeval press, we can already find some criticisms in the 80s [Moizzi, 1984; Mazzocca, 1988]. So, the need for a new restoration work led to another - the last - intervention of the 20th century, the so-called ‘Grande Ambrosiana’, carried out between 1990 and 1997.

The project, supervised by Pietro C. Marani, at that time Ispettore of the Soprintendenza dei Beni artistici, and conducted by architects Adele Buratti Mazzotta and Ernesto Griffini, art historians Alessandro Rovetta and Marco Rossi - under the supervision of Gian Alberto Dell’Acqua -, was able to devise for the
museum a new identity, in order to value the whole architectural complex and improve the relationship between the Pinacoteca, the Library, its public and the city. Not to mention that these professionals decided to recover and reopen the quitted environments (the Galbiati rooms), giving back the museum its historic memory.

More specifically “in the ‘Galbiati wing’ it was preserved - and partially re-established - the arrangement designed by Ambrogio Annoni, while in other rooms of the Pinacoteca we made a complete renovation, erasing Luigi Caccia Dominioni arrangement - besides some traces are anyway visible, like the door’s frames and the chairs” [Ciagà, 2002, 422].

In other words the museum was enlarged to allow the visitor a better reception of the art collection - reorganized in a more rational way -, the technology systems were updated (lighting, heating, security), the colours on the wall substituted by a neutral white (with the exception of the Galbiati wing) and the stone-floors removed.

So, if we consider that “the places are an exceptional foundation for a strong sense of identity” [Zerubavel, 2005, 72], it seems that the ‘collective memory’ was ready to accept (by virtue of the time passed) an inconvenient past through the symbolic decision to reopen a forgotten space. From another point of view, as a matter of course, the more recent arrangement of the 60s, perceived as outdated, was completely erased but the pieces of furniture, reused within the museum itinerary.

In conclusion, despite the contrasting opinions appeared on the main national magazines6 and considering that every decision taken in that field is a sort of compromise between a past and a present situation7, we must admit that, with the last intervention, the museum and its cultural heritage were able to acquire a modern appearance. Indeed, the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana is still been preserving - with the exception of some minor changes8 - the same displaying system.

Today, if we enter to the Ambrosiana art gallery, we have the impression to explore many different places, a 'collection of arrangements': that’s because “the present is, most of all, a cumulative stratification of the remains of the past” [Zerubavel, 2005, 67] that we need to preserve.

Notes

1 There is a useful bibliography linked to the memory studies; I write here some of the books and essays studied, that I am going to mention more explicitely in the following references: Ashworth-Graham-Tunbridge, 2007; Connerton 2010; Halbwachs 1980. Kavanagh, 2000; Landzelius, 2002; Lange, 1983; Le Goff, 1992; Lowenthal, 1985. Museums and their communities, 2007; Nora, 1978; Zerubavel, 2005.

2 “The whole situation, in Milan, was tragic, because the Poldi Pezzoli, the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, the Galleria d’Arte Moderna and the Sforza Castle, the Museo del Teatro della Scala were all damaged; as [Fernanda] Wittgens wrote to [Cesare] Brandi: we have five museums to reconstruct […] and we are only three specialized technicians”. From: Maria Cecilia Mazzi, Musei anni '50: spazio, forma, funzione, p. 46. For more details see the references.

3 Ernesto Caglio Moneta, with the request of an additional room for the Raffaello’ Scuola di Atene, clearly wanted to value the artwork. The document containing this statement,
was addressed to the Soprintendenza ai Monumenti per la Lombardia and dated May 15th 1965. Now is preserved within the Archivio Monumenti of the Soprintendenza per I beni Architettonici e per il Paesaggio per le provincie di Milano, Como, Bergamo, Lecco, Lodi, Pavia, Sondrio e Varese; cart. H/4/2249.

4 The intention to convert the museum in a domestic space is quite common in the second half of the 20th century. For example, ten years before, Ignazio Gardella at Galleria d’Arte Moderna, in Milan, characterized the spaces of the Grassi collection, at the second floor of the Villa Reale, “with a style borrowed by a middle-class way of living” [Manfredi, Colombo, 2012, 281].

5 For example the journalist Letizia Moizzi wrote: “The Ambrosiana, even if has a precious collection […] it’s a little bit neglected by the city. One of the scholars of the institution, Monsignor Giuseppe Lattanzi, says: ‘Now we have rickety roofs […] that hold the water with difficulty’” [Moizzi, 1984, 12].

6 Giovanni Agosti expressed a negative opinion: “The reopened rooms of the museum were furnished with a rough ‘branch bank office taste’, while the Ambrosiana designed by Luigi Caccia Dominioni and Laberto Vitali - responsible for the museum arrangement in 1966 - was confined in the memories of who was going to be middle aged” [Agosti, 2011, 20]. On the other side, Carlo Bertelli, in 1997 wrote: the new displaying system of the Pinacoteca “is a great correction of the arrangement made in 1966 […] The differences in the general strategy let us understand the big changes” occurred from that time to the present [Bertelli, 1997, 23].

7 According to what Paolo Montesperelli wrote: “the past and the present tie each other and change themselves. First of all we have to consider the influence of the past on the present: the memories of today are only traces of the past, survived after a selection” [Montesperelli, 2003, 94].

8 The lighting system in the first rooms has been recently modified, giving the museum a more ‘spectacular’ effect; in the same direction, the Canestra di frutta by Caravaggio has been moved in the Raffaello room and hang on a red panel (the arrangement was designed by architect Alessandro Colombini). This last decision, actually, caused the eradication of the artwork from its natural context, the Flamish room, as Federico Borromeo conceived it in his book Musaeum [Musaeum, Ravasi G., 1997].

References
Galbiati G., 1932, Il terzo centenario di Federico Borromeo e l'Ambrosiana rinnovata,


