Remembering Materiality: A Material–Relational Approach to Organizational Memory

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Abstract
In this paper, we develop a material–relational approach to understanding organizational memory. We focus on the inherent materiality of mnemonic devices—material artifacts that anchor shared memories of the past. Mnemonic devices work to constitute social groups of organizational stakeholders bound together by mutual affinities to these devices, known as mnemonic communities. While we know that the materiality of mnemonic devices represents information about the past that is interpreted by members of the mnemonic community as a narrative that is important in the present, our approach focuses on how engagement with the material aspects of mnemonic devices can create relationships of affinity among people remembering together. To develop our conceptualization, we first apply insights from the literature on materiality and its emphasis on how materiality is the basis for non-verbal and relational communication. From this, we theorize four material attributes that affect how mnemonic devices constitute relational connections that create embodied, cartographic, and temporal boundaries for organizational mnemonic communities. We then conceptualize how these distinct material attributes accumulate, intersect, and interact with each other and with the narrative representations of mnemonic devices and how in turn these interactions may bind stakeholders together. By emphasizing the material–relational aspect of mnemonic devices, our paper theorizes a broader and potentially more powerful set of affinities between stakeholders and organizations and, on this basis, enhances extant research by articulating different paths to the emergence of mnemonic communities.

Keywords
materiality, mnemonic communities, mnemonic devices, organizational identity, organizational memory, relationality

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In recent years, organizational scholars have sought to understand how shared representations of the past construct stakeholders’ understandings of the organization in the present. These representations of the past, termed “organizational memory”, are increasingly used to understand how organizations and the interest groups within them engage and activate stakeholders by creating shared meanings and cultures that connect stakeholders to the organization in affective and emotional ways (Casey, 2020; Foroughi, Coraiola, Rintamäki, Mena, & Foster, 2020; Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010; Rowlinson, Casey, Hansen, & Mills, 2014). In particular, organizational scholars build on three related ideas developed by social memory scholars: (1) the concept of collective memory—the shared representations of the past that are in the service of the stakeholder’s present goals (e.g., Halbwachs, 1980, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Schwartz, 1982); (2) the idea that these memories allow people to remember the past socially, as a collective rather than individual experience, as they form mnemonic communities, that is, groups and sub-groups of organizational stakeholders that feel an affinity toward each other (e.g., Halbwachs, 1980, 1992; Zerubavel, 2003); and (3) the notion that collective memories are anchored to mnemonic devices—discrete material artifacts that convey meanings and trigger sensory and embodied responses that frame what is remembered and what is forgotten individually and collectively (Connerton, 1989; Zerubavel, 1996). In this paper, we contribute to understanding how mnemonic communities emerge by theorizing how the materiality of mnemonic devices constitutes the relationships that underlie these communities, an approach we term material–relational. Doing so allows us, first, to explain how materiality can construct affinities among members of a community and, second, to suggest an initial set of potential interactions among these material attributes that constitute the formative relationships that underpin mnemonic communities.

More specifically, our proposed approach offers a more nuanced understanding of organizational memory than extant scholarship provides. Organizational memory researchers have long studied how mnemonic communities coalesce around the representational aspect of mnemonic devices, for example by studying objects in a corporate museum. They have analysed how mnemonic devices provide a material medium for narrating ideas and meanings central to the identity of the organization—meanings that are of value because they express a set of central, distinctive, and relatively permanent traits that characterize the organization (e.g., Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Humphries & Smith, 2014; Mena, Rintamäki, Fleming, & Spicer., 2016; Nissley & Casey, 2002; Ocasio, Mauskapf, & Steele, 2016; Ravasi, Rindova, & Stigliani, 2019; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Scholars have also studied how mnemonic devices lend material presence to the relationship between the organization and its past, which narrates events, ideas, or meanings or references them semiotically (e.g., Decker, 2014; Do, Lyle, & Walsh, 2019; Hatch & Schultz, 2017). This predominant focus on the materiality of mnemonic devices has been the basis for a representational orientation that conceptualizes such devices as explaining what we remember. The significance of the representational orientation lies in explaining how organizational stakeholders develop shared cognitive interpretations of their identities as members of the organization. These interpretations are important for understanding how they engage with the organization or act in relation to it.

We argue here that this representational orientation offers only a partial explanation of how mnemonic devices activate shareholders’ engagement within organizations. We suggest that it is the inherent materiality of mnemonic devices that constitutes the basis for embodied and sensory affinities among stakeholders—material–relational affinities, in our terminology. Taking this approach, we are able to integrate the relational aspects of collective memory into our understanding of organizational memory. Collective memory is inherently a social process, as much of what we remember is based on how we remember together as a
mnemonic community (Halbwachs, 1992; Zerubavel, 1996). Remembering together allows members of a mnemonic community to reaffirm their membership in the community (Olick, 1999). Hence, collective memories not only constitute mnemonic communities but are constituted by them, such that collective memories and mnemonic communities mutually amplify and sustain each other (Foroughi, 2020). Here, we posit that, by taking such a material–relational approach, it is possible to theorize how mnemonic devices explain with whom we remember and how we do so.

To elaborate, we contend that these relational interpretations rely on the inherent materiality of mnemonic devices rather than on a representational orientation. We develop this argument and expand our understanding of how mnemonic communities form by drawing on insights from the rich body of work on materiality as aesthetic, spatial, and embodied properties that convey information in a sensory rather than cognitive way. Materiality, therefore, stands to explain how mnemonic devices’ material attributes enable members of a group to relate to each other and to organizations in non-verbalized ways (e.g., Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Creed, Taylor, & Hudson, 2020; De Vaujauny & Vaast, 2014; 2016; Eisenman, Frenkel, & Wasserman, 2019; Gagliardi, 2006; Stephens, 2020; Stephenson, Kuismin, Putnam, & Sivunen, 2020; Strati, 1999; Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011, 2015). More specifically, we examine four attributes of the materiality of mnemonic devices—their aesthetic richness, topographic salience, contemporary design, and durability. We explain how the reactions these material attributes elicit affect how members of an organization understand their affinities to each other. We suggest that these affinities are the basis for the constitution of organizational mnemonic communities tied to embodied, cartographic, and temporal boundaries. We initially present these material attributes as ideal types that are distinct in the context of developing our theory. After establishing our framework, we examine how these material–relational attributes may accumulate, intersect, or interact with each other and with representative (textual, symbolic, narrative) attributes of mnemonic devices. Doing so enables us to address the question of how we can understand the emergence of mnemonic communities around mnemonic devices and how materiality—in confluence with relational properties—is central to the affinities binding members of the community more fully.

In this way, our overall aim is to unpack the inherent material richness of mnemonic devices and to demonstrate that these devices not only lead to the emergence of mnemonic communities, but also bind members of such communities together in ways that are non-verbalized and embodied. Binding of this kind is important because, according to the materiality literature, it is potentially more powerful than binding that occurs in response to cognitive understandings of meanings (e.g., Strati, 1999). In examining the potential for interactions among various material attributes of mnemonic devices and their representational and relational outcomes, we open a discussion about how these two distinct manifestations complement or contradict each other. Moreover, this discussion allows us to begin to understand how embodied affinities may perform an additional function: to organically bind individual cognitive interpretations into shared meanings. Far from positioning this theorization as exhaustive, we view it as a starting point for a deeper inquiry into the richness of these devices and their potential interactions. And, while we highlight a broader set of affinities that bind stakeholders, we leave future work to tie these affinities to various means by which organizations can use them to enroll stakeholders into communities.

The paper proceeds as follows. To set up our arguments, we first review the organizational literature on the representational perspective commonly used to study mnemonic devices. We then continue our review by explaining how social memory scholars (e.g., Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992; Schwartz, 1982; Zerubavel, 1996) have highlighted the relational significance of mnemonic devices but that this significance has been under-studied in organizational
research. We then discuss our rationale for addressing this lacuna, explaining how insights from work on materiality are useful for studying relational processes in a way that allows us to link mnemonic devices to the mnemonic communities that emerge in response to them. Having framed the literature in this way, we then theorize about a set of material attributes that affect relationality by showing how materiality may determine with whom we remember and how we do so and, in so doing, may constitute mnemonic communities along embodied, cartographic, and temporal boundaries. Next, we expand these ideas further by using a specific representational context (i.e., statues on university campuses) to theorize both the cumulative intersections and interactions among the material attributes as well as those between the representational and material–relational interpretations of mnemonic devices. We end the paper with a discussion of the significance of our theoretical framework and its contributions to answering questions about how mnemonic communities are constituted by mnemonic devices and how the integration of the material–relational dimension of this relationship contributes to the study of organizational memory.

**Mnemonic Devices as Representational**

Our point of departure is the existing organizational literature dealing with mnemonic devices. This body of work approaches such devices from a representational orientation, which views them as narrative material “containers” that reference events, ideas, values, or meanings from the organization’s past which have present-day relevance as well as the potential to activate groups of stakeholders in the context of these meanings. This representational focus is most evident in studies of corporate museums or commemorative portraits in which a curated set of artifacts is used to represent those traits the organization considers central and distinct by highlighting key events from the past. That is, these artifacts act as signifiers for these events (Cutcher, Dale, & Tyler, 2019; Nissley & Casey, 2002). Establishing a museum assumes that the organization can control how its identity is constructed by stakeholders by carefully selecting the mnemonic devices it curates, on the premise that these devices will be interpreted as it intends (e.g., Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, & Wiebe, 2011). Belief in such control also pertains to the relationship between mnemonic devices and forgetting, because the elimination of the device stands also to eliminate references to aspects of the past, which shape organizational identity (Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Mena et al., 2016).

Other studies have used the representational focus to tie memory to identity by describing trajectories of discovery and emergence that have led to strategic decisions. Here, the emphasis has not been on the organization’s control over the selection of the mnemonic device, but rather on how members engaging with a device from the past have interpreted its relevance to the present. Often, this relevance manifests itself as attributing certain values of founders or earlier generations to the mnemonic device and using these interpretations to develop strategic orientations in the present that are perceived as allied to the enduring aspects of the organization’s identity. For example, Schultz and Hernes (2013) showed how a wooden plaque from the office of the founder of Lego, inscribed with the words “Only the best is good enough”, helped organizational strategists to articulate a new strategic direction for the firm. Ravasi et al. (2019) showed how Vespa’s management had turned to the design archives cultivated by the organization to understand the essence of Vespa’s design in a way that allowed the organization to connect with its historic customer base as well as to acquire new customers. A study by Hatch and Schultz (2017) explained how a stone carving, featuring the expression *Semper Ardens* (“Always burning”), found on the wall of the Carlsberg Brewery inspired the rebranding process of a new beer developed by the firm. Being carved in stone suggested to all the organizational members interacting with the mnemonic device that it was authentic. Brewers drew on this shared understanding of authenticity, as distinctive and
central to their understanding of the Carlsberg identity, to guide a process of creating a new label for a beer they were developing when they discovered the carving. Taken together, these studies suggest that the ability of a mnemonic device to contain the past does not require upfront intentionality. Rather, it needs merely to evoke common interpretations.

The representational aspect of mnemonic devices is important because it allows us to understand how an artifact can make a story or event from the past vivid in the present. Another group of studies also highlights this representationality but, simultaneously, hints at the importance of the relationality these devices elicit as they evoke the past. While these studies focus on how the past is represented, they indicate, often implicitly, that mnemonic devices also shape the very mnemonic communities that emerge in relation to the device itself and in doing so foster a shared interpretation of the past. For example, Decker (2014) studied how banks in Ghana wanted to establish a post-colonial identity that was distinct from their colonial identity and showed how they achieved this by designing their buildings using architectural values that were visibly in contrast with the style of the colonial banks that had characterized the previous era. These banks understood how the architectural style of their physical fabric represented their past associations with colonial powers. Thus, they consciously selected new architectural features that would communicate their “breaking away” from their past. In another example, Do et al. (2019) examined how buildings left vacant after the demise of a corporation that had been central to the city’s economic vitality were mnemonic devices that elicited stories about the glory days of the corporation’s vibrancy and contrasted with the economic hardships that followed its demise. When discussions began on the potential development of the buildings as part of an urban revitalization initiative, members of the community gravitated toward these stories to bolster their respective arguments for or against the move. The stories allowed them to explain the many ways in which memories of the corporation and the city in which it was rooted were interrelated—thereby tying different city communities to each other. However, both Decker (2014) and Do et al. (2019) focused on the narrative content of the shared interpretations of the past and did not ask how these devices influence the emergence of these mnemonic communities in ways that were not based on a narrative interpretation of past events.

In summary, in organizational memory research, scholars have centered on the question of how social memories constitute mnemonic communities of people engaged with the organization according to their shared interpretation of the past and its relevance to the present (see Foroughi et al., 2020; Ravasi et al., 2019). Accordingly, these mnemonic communities emerge when organizational stakeholders identify with groups within the organization, typically on the basis of how they understand the ideas and events that mnemonic devices represent (Foroughi, 2020; Foroughi & Al-Amoudi, 2020). In the next section, we explain why this representational focus is incomplete and highlight the potential of integrating a material–relational approach to explain a broader set of affinities between stakeholders and organizations. This approach, therefore, allows us to explain different paths to the emergence of mnemonic communities.

**Enriching the Understanding of Mnemonic Devices Through Materiality**

As this brief review of the existing literature suggests, mnemonic devices contain information about the past that members of the organization can evoke and reference in the context of current goals. This information also allows external stakeholders to evoke the past as they interact with the organization. The implicit assumption in these studies is that remembering the past in similar ways gives people a sense of community. This distinction is important because, as Halbwachs (1992) argued, while the underlying psychological process of remembering is an individual one, social memories are
collective and they reflect the imagined perspectives of a social group and the imagined relationship of this group with the past. In this way, social memories confine and bind individuals to each other in a mnemonic community.

Memory scholars have highlighted that the inherent materiality of mnemonic devices may take on not only representational memory forms but also memory forms focused on non-verbal relationships and attachments to material objects (Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992; Schwartz, 1982; Zerubavel, 1996). For these scholars, the past is not neatly packaged for a clearly defined present-day use. Rather, the formation of mnemonic communities is an ongoing and open-ended process based on our attention to how our experiences of objects and places shapes, and is shaped by, our interpretations and reactions to these scattered images (Allen & Brown, 2016). This understanding has led social memory scholars to articulate a variety of memory forms that bind people to memories and to a focus on mnemonic communities that share such memories.

A foundational idea here is the prioritization of material and mental spaces in the (re)production of collective memory. People do not need to have experienced the past themselves; they can evoke it through their connection to a space that contains it or represents it (Halbwachs, 1992). This space is material, in that it is a specific physical space, but also mental, in so far as memories are not personal but rather part of a broader context of an interrelated web of memories (Connerton, 1989). These spatial connections are often also embodied. Connerton (1989), for example, pointed to the liturgical traditions of the Jewish religion—such as the position assumed for prayer and the emphasis on facing East—that exist across all liturgical traditions despite other differences between them. The act of prayer then becomes a commemorative ritual that is inscribed in the body and thus creates a mnemonic community among observant Jews who pray. These rituals, then, are effectively performed utterances that create a bodily language that allows those who “speak” it to remember collectively their connection to the past, and in this sense they are both material and relational.

While organizational memory scholars have highlighted the significance of mnemonic devices, until recently they have not paid particular attention to their specific material attributes and how these might affect the social dynamics of memory and identity (e.g., Crawford, Coraiola, Dacin, forthcoming; Cutcher et al., 2019; Smith & Humphries, 2017). Some work, however, has started to articulate such a more holistic experience of organizational memory, as seen in Crawford et al.’s (forthcoming) study describing how a Grand Canyon outfitter was able to connect Grand Canyon visitors to the Canyon’s past and to questions of environmental conservation by offering tours rich in sensory stimuli evoked both through discursive storytelling and through embodied experiences of boating through the canyon. However, these initial studies do not yet emphasize the material–relational aspects of these sensations in ways that were separate from their narrative interpretations: for these authors, materiality is a discursive layer that supports the primary (narrative) interpretation of the mnemonic device.

A material–relational emphasis is also already somewhat present in other areas of organizational research where it has been used to illuminate important organizational processes that we can apply to our understanding of how organizational memory operates. Useful examples in this regard are studies by De Vaujany and Vaast (2014, 2016) researching how the spatiality of the Dauphine University campus shaped the relationship of various stakeholders to the university. They describe a process by which the university campus underwent extensive renovations in the context of strategic change. As part of these renovations, management was cognizant of how certain rooms stored information about the founding of the university and its social role. Management worked to preserve aspects that contained certain representations that the organization wanted to retain and, conversely, to renovate others that represented ideas or values that it wanted to hone or change. These actions deliberately linked the material design of
the space to the identities that management wanted to espouse.

Another useful example is the work of Wasserman and Frenkel (2011, 2015), who explored how the spatiality of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs shaped the various intra-organizational affinity groups that formed within it. They showed how the design of offices and corridors that was intended to instill professionalism by adopting a “clean” and “cold” design language evoked different reactions among various groups (Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015). For example, higher-status professional women found this new design appealing and made no attempt to personalize it, because it only fortified their identities as professionals. Clerical workers, by contrast, were repelled by it, perceiving the organization as having made changes that made them uncomfortable; they expressed their opposition by bringing in personal objects that undermined the architectural design language. Through these visual and spatial behaviors, Ministry workers created distinct communities that manifested their affinities and coalesced around their different interpretations of the organizational change process as conveyed in the material design of the new building. In another study, Wasserman and Frenkel (2011) showed how a new lobby represented the contemporary, more professional, direction of the Ministry and was the subject of many conversations and internal jokes mocking this new direction and longing for the past. These conversations did not focus on an interpretation of how elements in the lobby worked to directly represent ideas but rather on how the visual demarcation of the newly designed lobby was used as an artifact defining a clear boundary between the “old” Ministry and the “new” one. Through these conversations, members of the Ministry could form communities that were aligned with the changes or in opposition to them.

Thus, while social memory scholars have understood mnemonic communities to be relational and claimed that this relationality is constituted by the materiality of mnemonic devices, organizational scholars have not yet integrated these material–relational dimensions into scholarship on organizational memory. Rather, they have continued to tie memory and materiality together through an emphasis on mnemonic devices as essentially holistic material artifacts that can be interpreted as semiotic referents (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Nissley & Casey, 2002; Ravasi et al., 2019). As such, these studies do not acknowledge, in the context of organizational memory research, that materiality is richer and more complex than a mere semiotic representation. In the following section, we integrate our broader understanding of materiality in organizational studies into our understanding of organizational memory processes. Doing so allows us to show how materiality enriches our understanding of mnemonic devices as relational, and not only as representational. More specifically, we theorize that material attributes are potentially capable of shaping the affinities that bind stakeholders to each other. Incorporating this material–relational view, therefore, offers a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of mnemonic communities because it highlights that the shared understandings that bind members of a group together need not be solely interpretative but can also be embodied and sensory. Conceptualizing these attributes as distinct, we explicate the type of mnemonic communities that may emerge in relation to these material attributes and subsequently examine how they can accumulate, intersect, and interact.

**Toward a Material–Relational Lens on Mnemonic Devices and Mnemonic Communities**

The inherent materiality of mnemonic devices may evoke a particular imagination-based perspective on the past that can orient an organization’s members in ways that connect, confine, and bind them to each other and to that organization. We develop this argument by explicating how four material attributes can affect the formation of organizational mnemonic communities. The mechanisms we propose are based on non-verbalized, embodied, or sensory reactions to the
material attributes. Thus, we emphasize how materiality is perceived sensorially and how these sensations allow members of an organization to identify with others who have had similar sensory reactions to a mnemonic device, creating an affinity out of which mnemonic communities evolve. We also explain how materiality contains information that allows for comparisons that help members of an organization to identify with each other in various ways. Thus, previous scholarship has articulated affinity-led processes that are based on a mnemonic community forming out of shared cognitive interpretations of meaning emanating from a mnemonic device (e.g., Do et al., 2019; Foster et al., 2011; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Members of the mnemonic community then act or engage on the basis of their shared interpretation, and organizations in turn often use this interpretation to activate stakeholders, as did brewers at Carlsberg for example (Hatch & Schultz, 2017). By contrast, our material–relational emphasis articulates an affinity-led engagement that is based on shared embodied experiences and explains how members of the mnemonic community are moved to act or engage as a result of these shared, lived experiences, as distinct from their cognitive interpretations. We suggest that, when affinity is embodied—as opposed to cognitive—it is potentially stronger and make this point by drawing from literature on materiality in organizations.

The four chosen material attributes about which we theorize (and which are well theorized in studies of organizational materiality) are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Rather, they enable our initial theoretical development from a relational–material perspective, and, in this sense, our mnemonic devices are “ideal types”. We describe the general tenets of these devices and how they may give rise to embodied experiences that underpin the formation of mnemonic communities as affinity groups. We conceptualize how the formation of such group ties happens and further illustrate these formation processes below with an extended example. We now look at each attribute in turn, linking each one to a particular type of mnemonic community.

### Aesthetic richness and embodied mnemonic communities

The first material attribute we have chosen to highlight here is **aesthetic richness**, defined as an abundance of aesthetic qualities such as color, shape, spatiality, and so on. These qualities offer material information that people interpret in an aesthetic, sensory way and that enables a holistic sensory interaction with different environments (Stephens, 2020; Taylor & Hansen, 2005). Furthermore, we sense heat, light, motion, or our own physical exertion or discomfort in haptic or kinesthetic ways. This embodied information is derived from the overall structure of the space and from artifacts within it, such as forms, depth, volume, and visual mass and textures that can be more or less pliable, ornamented, or salient, for instance. These artifacts and aspects of artifacts are processed by individuals’ visual–spatial, temporal–aural, and bodily–kinesthetic capabilities in the context of daily interactions in the built environment; hence they affect the embodied perceptions of the space (Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Dale & Burrell, 2008; Harquail & Wilcox King, 2010, p. 9). Aesthetic material information is therefore sensed by those interacting with the materials; and these sensations, often inchoate and un-verbalized, guide their affective responses to the material (Gagliardi, 2006). For these reasons, such embodied and affective responses are often more potent in terms of their influence on behavior and interpretation than conscious cognitive interpretations (Strati, 1999).

In an organizational context, these responses operate both through individuals’ sensory reactions to a material artifact and by allowing individuals to experience a spontaneous socio-somatic reaction that helps them sense one another and coordinate as a group in an organic, un-verbalized, and unconscious manner. Attention to aesthetic and embodied ways of knowing also highlights the relevance of organizational space—the built environments that emerge from organizational activities, objects, arrangements, and social practices (see Stephenson et al., 2020, p. 797). From this
perspective, material information can be interpreted in a relational way (Taylor & Hansen, 2005).

Scholars have observed that knowing and understanding through the body constitute the root of tacit coordination among group members who are able to sense one another (e.g., Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Samudra, 2008; Stephens, 2020; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015). Thus, a mnemonic device with a high degree of aesthetic richness can trigger a sensory and embodied reaction among those interacting with it and thereby create a tie to the device that is perceived as intimate. For example, Cutcher et al. (2019) showed how the set of aesthetic stimuli contained in the artwork in a commemorative garden created an emotional reaction among visitors to the space. While their study did not focus on the relationality of these reactions, their analysis indicated the broad range of ties that aesthetic attributes can engender and the potential of these ties to shape collective behavior by eliciting interactive engagement independent of any cognitive interpretations of the artwork. A further example of this process is given in the study by Howard-Grenville, Metzger, and Meyer (2013) describing the sensory reactions of spectators from a certain town when watching exciting track competitions. These reactions were based on the physical sensation of being in relationship with the mnemonic device—a packed sports stadium—and simultaneously exposed to multiple sensory stimuli (e.g., seeing the race, hearing the cheers of others in the crowd, feeling the collective body heat, smelling the body odors of those around them, and so on). As these authors were studying the identities of these individuals in relation to their memories of the town’s past glory, they did not interrogate the role of these sensory processes. However, we argue that, from a material–relational standpoint, these devices have the potential to elicit strong reactions that are, at one and the same time, highly personal as well as profoundly collective. They therefore have the power to create memories that are subjective yet able to mediate the social world.

We conceptualize the mnemonic community oriented by aesthetic richness as one based on embodied relationality. We suggest that this mnemonic community orientation has the potential to link organizational stakeholders to each other by eliciting affinities based on intimate embodied experiences while engaging with, and reacting to, mnemonic devices high in aesthetic richness. While such experiences are internalized by individuals, it can set in motion unconsciously coordinated activity that is expressed through the body rather than verbalized, such as movements among dancers, martial artists, or choir singers (Samudra, 2008; Stephens, 2020). Although these sensations do not necessarily require explicit communication processes and are expressed from within the body without any direction from powerful external agents, they can be remarkably powerful (Connerton, 1989; Kleinman & Kleinman, 1994).

**Topographic salience and cartographic mnemonic communities**

The second material attribute to which we attend here is **topographic salience**—an attribute associated with mnemonic devices that are visibly salient, such as a tower or a statue. Salience is the outcome of a device having large dimensions and being located on a higher plane or line of sight, for example, or it is achieved by zoning—being positioned centrally in the space to receive continuous exposure (Dale & Burrell, 2008). Relational salience conveys information. Jones (2019) observes that the tallest material presence in a community reflects its importance: a high-rise building in a capitalist city or the crescent on a minaret occupying the highest, most visible, location in a topographic area. This idea is important not only on a symbolic level but also materially. As practicing and potential worshippers are able to see the minaret from multiple locations, they are reminded of its importance relative to other religious buildings in the city.

We posit that these architectural features as mnemonic devices visibly demarcate an area as being part of the organization or as external to it,
lending the organization a clear identity as a place (e.g., Jones, Lee, & Lee, 2019). This demarcation physically locates the organization in space and gives a sense of what is inside and outside of the organization’s geographical boundaries. In this way, these mnemonic devices create a clearly demarcated mapping of an organization’s physical borders that is then internalized by those who are exposed to them (e.g., Ratner, 2020). Importantly, these sensations can define what and who does (and does not) belong to the organization as a place, to the extent that they link the organization, as a corporeal, geographically bounded area to a phantasmatic space that only exists in members’ perceptions of the organization (Crawford et al., forthcoming). This definition is driven by the topographic salience of the mnemonic device. And this demarcation is ideational, in the sense that an individual does not need to be in the physical presence of the mnemonic device but need only understand it as a cartographic marker of the physical presence of the organization (Halbwachs, 1992; Zerubavel, 1996). Subsequently, these spatial demarcations can generate the affinities that orient mnemonic communities such that members perceive the organization as a space in which they participate.

In an illustrative example, Crawford et al. (forthcoming) show how outfitters set out to create identification with and commitment to their environmental goals. They did this by organizing tours of the Grand Canyon including boat trips deep into its hidden crevices and night-time campfires in the shadow of its walls. These activities rendered the canyon highly salient as a unique topographic formation and drew on its natural grandeur to create a strong bond between visitors and the canyon as a place. In another example, Do et al. (2019) describe the monolithic presence of the Studebaker Corporation in South Bend, Indiana, and how its long-abandoned buildings continued to orient members of the city decades after it ceased to exist as a business entity. These people were not members of the organization and many were born after its demise, but they were able to sense specific parts of the city as associated with the identity of Studebaker. Here, material structures represented Studebaker in a shared social system of referents, this information being interpreted cognitively. But, at the same time, they also conveyed information about Studebaker relative to the scale and scope of the city—that is, in relation to other material elements. This relationality, we contend, is perceived sensorially rather than processed cognitively.

We conceptualize the mnemonic community oriented by topographic salience, then, as an expression of cartographic relationality. We suggest that this kind of mnemonic community can be harnessed to connect organizational stakeholders to each other and produce affinities among people who define themselves in relation to others whom they perceive as being within or outside the mapped demarcation signaled by the mnemonic device. These devices can also affect external stakeholders who may be outside these boundaries or who may enter these boundaries less frequently. Such mnemonic communities might be useful for tying members to the organization as an entity with a physical, tangible manifestation—that is, developing a sense of belonging based on identification with the organization as a place they inhabit or in which they live.

Contemporary design and contemporal mnemonic communities

The third material attribute that enables comparisons to be made is that of contemporary design. This aspect of materiality was referenced earlier in the context of Decker’s (2014) study about how designing a bank in a different architectural style conveyed, visually, a break from the past. Thus, even when materiality transmits information on the basis of using a shared social system of referents, it can also convey concepts that hinge on how material elements relate to each other. Again, stakeholders perceive this relationship sensorially rather than process it cognitively. This relationality is significant because it explains how mnemonic devices attract attention and how different types of attention may demarcate mnemonic communities in different ways (Taylor & Hansen, 2005).
In particular, contemporary design is a material attribute that can orient organizational stakeholders on the basis of having aesthetic features that anchor a mnemonic device as more or less current. People are able to innately identify whether the types of materials of which a mnemonic device is comprised are current and on-trend by making sense of the aesthetic stimulations they encounter within a given context. These understandings are based on innate sensory responses that enable stakeholders to evaluate their surroundings (see Creed et al., 2020). Individuals align their innate responses with a learned capacity to evaluate everything they encounter on the basis of ingrained, cultural codes defining what is beautiful or ugly, (un)desirable, (un)worthy, and so on. As people are embedded within common institutional contexts, such aesthetic cues are likely to be similar (Gagliardi, 2006; Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary, & Van Leeuwen, 2013). Furthermore, this evaluation is responsive to aesthetic information and therefore affective and emotional, but is analytically distinct from rational–analytical cognition (Creed et al., 2020). These institutionalized aesthetic codes have a temporal component as well, such that different aesthetics resonate as desirable and appealing at different times—a phenomenon that lies at the heart of fashion dynamics (Blumer, 1969).

In an organizational context, mnemonic devices with contemporary designs have the potential to generate affinities among contemporary organizational stakeholders who are linked to present manifestations of organizational identity. Moreover, as we have seen, contemporary designs can be useful in terms of signaling a break from the past and a potential reorientation of identity. In the study by De Vaujany and Vaast (2014), spaces that were daubed with graffiti elicited negative sensory reactions because, in that temporal and cultural context, graffiti was perceived as negligent. In other temporal and cultural contexts, however, graffiti may be perceived as “cool” and appealing. On the Hebrew University’s campus, for example, the figure of Albert Einstein, a university founder, is presented both in photographs and in cartoonish figures that “pop up” in various locations scattered throughout the campus. The use of cartoons is a time-embedded graphic form, perceived as normative, yet “edgy”, in a culture in which graphic novels are becoming an increasingly established genre and digital forms of artistic expression are growing in interesting ways.

More generally, we conceptualize the mnemonic communities that may be fostered through such contemporary design as con-temporal. When organizational stakeholders engage with a mnemonic device with a contemporary design, they sense that the device is current and only recently came into existence. Such mnemonic devices, therefore, have the potential to position the group of current stakeholders as members of the same mnemonic community and highlight their affinities toward each other. Relatedly, these current members may sense that they are differentiated relative to past organizational stakeholders who could not have engaged with this mnemonic device. Thus, organizations may themselves turn to materials with contemporary designs that are likely to resonate as current or renovate older structures using contemporary sensibilities when they want to actively align members with a new idea. This may be a particularly powerful strategy when seeking to suggest a break with a potentially negative event or identity-related aspect or as a path for re-orienting members around future-focused ideas or identities (e.g., Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011).

Durability and cross-temporal mnemonic communities

We end with durability, a material attribute that suggests endurance on the basis of the material’s ability to weather depreciation (e.g., Jones, Meyer, Jancsary, & Höllerer, 2017). When mnemonic devices are highly durable, they render the past as extant in the present. Therefore, when stakeholders engage with a durable mnemonic device belonging to the organization, they can potentially imagine its past uses and the engagement of past stakeholders with it. In particular,
materiality enables comparisons such that durable devices orient stakeholders along a temporal axis because some materials are easily identifiable as being older—as having endured, where other materials have not. Making this comparison allows members of an organization to identify ideas and meanings that lead back into history and yet are continuously present, even if dormant. For example, when Carlsberg employees discovered the *Semper Ardens* stone carving, they sensed it was a mnemonic device that tied them to stakeholders from the time of the organization’s founding and to various chapters in its history since the founder carved the phrase. This sensation is based on the durability of the stone, which suggests that the device existed in the past, exists in the present, and is likely to survive into the future.

With the enduring mnemonic device acting as a touchstone beyond time, organizational stakeholders may find themselves imagining all those who have gone before, and all those yet to come, for whom this device is or was a discovery that elicits an emotional response. We conceptualize this imagination as cross-temporal. In an organizational context, therefore, durable mnemonic devices could be useful for attuning stakeholders to the organization’s past and for identity-related processes that evoke a sense of continuity between its past, present, and future (Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011, 2015).

To summarize, by linking the material properties of mnemonic devices to the boundaries of the mnemonic community that may orient around them, we theorize a set of relational reactions to mnemonic devices that emanates from their materiality. Rather than think about these reactions in a processual way, we accept the presence of a material artifact that may or may not have been created with the intention of its being a mnemonic device. We theorize why, when an organization’s stakeholders are exposed to one of the four material attributes—aesthetic richness, topographic salience, contemporary design, or durability—this exposure can potentially trigger socio-somatic reactions that are not cognitively verbalized and are often entirely sensory and perceptive. We suggest that these reactions may foster affinity toward the organization, or an aspect of it, that is tied to an intersubjective impulse that can serve as the basis for forming an imagined mnemonic community. We characterize these communities as embodied when they align affinities based on shared sensory reactions to the device, as cartographic when they align affinities based on what and who is within or outside the geographical boundaries of the organization, as contemporal when they suggest a strong affinity to present members of the organization, and as cross-temporal when they allow members of the organization to sense an affinity to past (or future) members.

As noted earlier, to develop these ideas, we present them as a tight coupling between materiality and mnemonic communities and we take no stand on when these communities form or whether they change. We turn next to addressing how these material attributes may accumulate, intersect, or interact as well as how they might interact with the representational expressions of mnemonic devices. This allows us to further understand how the emergence of mnemonic communities is based on embodied and sensory reactions to mnemonic devices alongside cognitive interpretations of distinct narratives. We focus on explicating the conditions that may foster these material interactions and how the materiality of mnemonic devices influences the emergence of mnemonic communities. Our analysis here is suggestive, exploring possible dynamics of how mnemonic communities form and offering a set of stylized arguments which further research may empirically explore in more detail.

**Possible Patterns for the Emergence of Mnemonic Communities**

To theorize the possible accumulations and intersections in the context of the material–relational dynamics we propose, as well as the interactions of these dynamics with the representational aspect of mnemonic devices, we
draw on an illustrative vignette. This vignette covers a real-world case, but we use it here as an idealized example to demonstrate how our framework might be harnessed to better understand at what point mnemonic communities form and how they might change. Specifically, we develop our ideas using the example of university statues representing founders associated with slavery or racism and the contemporary desire to remove them. Many venerable universities have centrally located statues depicting important founders or benefactors, and we can characterize them in line with the attributes we defined. Thus, a statue will have relatively little aesthetic richness and is unlikely to be the direct source of strong embodied reactions as a mnemonic device. It will probably enjoy topographic salience, as such statues are typically prominent and located, for example, on raised areas or main quads. Thus, proximity to the statue, be it actual or imagined, will create a cartographic demarcation of being “on” or “off” campus. The statue will also be a clear marker of contemporary vs. historical design: in this case, the style—typically classical, using bronze or marble and offering a realistic rendering—is clearly non-contemporary. Thus, walking past the statue will not resonate as currently relevant or pertaining to university stakeholders’ daily lives. Finally, the statue is, of course, durable, an attribute that suggests to stakeholders that it has had, and will continue to have, a constant university presence. In addition to these four material attributes, we can also observe that the statue represents a particular person associated with the university’s history in a way that is direct: it is an actual rendering of the person, often a founding member. The shared understanding of this figure and its significance can be narrated both by the lifelike rendering and by additional discursive devices such as a plaque mentioning the person’s name and some of their key activities.

How might this statue evoke affinities among university stakeholders? To address this question, we create a (somewhat artificial) demarcation between two periods separated by an exogenous event. We take as a starting point a campus with the statue of a key founder featured prominently. Its central location is reinforced through the desired interpretations the university puts forth to highlight the values this person espoused. The significance of the person’s actions and contributions shapes the university’s identity as a set of distinctive and permanent traits (Albert & Whetten, 1985). This interpretation, rooted in a tight coupling between the statue and the narrative surrounding its subject, may be conveyed, for example, via high-profile events such as orientations for new students and the campus tours they often include. Building on our arguments in the previous section, we can suggest a potential set of reactions to the statue as a mnemonic device. We do not hypothesize here on whether these reactions adhere to certain configurations or follow a particular sequence, other than to propose that they are activated when students see this statue as they approach the university enclosure and associate its presence with being “on-campus”. As a set of individuals walking past the statue, the students might share this sensation and form a cartographic community. Similarly, they are likely to form temporal communities in relation to the statue: they may develop a shared sense that the statue does not echo a current aspect of the university, on the basis of its lack of resonance as contemporary. In this sense, the statue is unlikely to bind present students to each other in ways that extend the cartographic community described above or extend the con-temporal ties they may form around different on-campus mnemonic devices that do resonate as contemporary. However, the durability of the statue’s material indicates that it has been a campus presence for many years (perhaps, in older universities, even several centuries). This durability demarcates the statue as an aspect related to the campus that existed for past generations and which will exist for future ones as well. This innate understanding ties present-day stakeholders to past and future stakeholders. How might these material–relational affinities interact with the interpretation of the statue as representing something about the identity of the university? Here, the
articulation of the founder and their values, as depicted in a lifelike representation of the person, is likely to shape the understanding of the organization’s key values. So if, for example, the person represents values of industrial fortitude and perseverance, present-day stakeholders may realize that these traits were espoused in the past and will be espoused in the future. And, when students are “on-campus”, they might feel more connected to these values.

To offer some structure to our ideas, we posit that the flow of such interactions might be altered by an exogenous shock and we use this (artificial) shock to suggest a potential, albeit not exhaustive, sequence. For example, the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 could be perceived as an exogenous event that may lead university stakeholders to reevaluate their identities in relation to the organization and each other. Because exogenous shocks may bring up aspects of the past that are emotionally challenging or complex, and therefore repressed, they may become potential mnemonic resources that allow us to see how an organization can repurpose its past actions (Crawford et al., forthcoming). In this example, the killing of George Floyd heightened the public’s attention to extensive protests and demonstrations calling for an end to racism, some of which demanded the removal of statues of historical figures associated with racism and, in many cases, figures who were slave owners. The underlying logic of these attempts at elimination was that the commemoration of a person who was implicated in slavery (and who therefore symbolizes the antithesis of racial equality, particularly in the United States) is inherently problematic because it works to reproduce the travesties of the extant social order. When members of an organization are repeatedly exposed to a mnemonic device, they are likely to perceive it as an accurate representation of social facts, institutionalized as “truths”, which shape perceptions of the organization’s history and the “facts” that it carries over to its interpretations of the present (Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Casey & Olivera, 2011; Jones et al., 2017; Meyer et al., 2013; Ocasio et al., 2016). As the centrality of these statues gives the ideas and values they represent frequent exposure—thereby reproducing them at the expense of other ideas that can affect mnemonic communities (Mena et al., 2016; Ocasio et al., 2016)—it is easy to understand why stakeholders opposing these values would seek to remove them.

We use the notion of the exogenous shock to illuminate a set of potential dynamics surrounding the emergence of mnemonic communities by pointing to the role of such a shock in surfacing aspects of the organization’s past. Once visible to stakeholders, such aspects may prompt them to evaluate the values carried by the mnemonic device more carefully. We suggest that these potential evaluations could lead to the formation of new or altered mnemonic communities. Take, for example, the case of people who oppose the commemoration of persons linked to the perpetuation of slavery and racism. Physically eliminating the device can erase the organization’s association with activities related to racism and allow its members to forget this aspect of its past (Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Crawford et al., forthcoming). That is, the demand for the device to be removed is a demand to free the mnemonic community from the events the statue represents. In this way, by voicing this demand, members of the organization are able to construct an identity that actively disassociates them as a group from an aspect of the past that is undesirable in the present. This echoes the experiences described in Do et al.’s (2019) study. There, the respondents wanted to disassociate from the negative outcomes of Studebaker’s demise by calling for the corporate buildings to be demolished. Importantly, this idea ties the narrative aspects of the statue (the centrality of a past slave owner to the university’s identity) to the material aspects (whereby removing the statue is equated with physically eradicating a stain from the university’s past or at least with not venerating it). It also ties the mnemonic device to the changing nature of the mnemonic communities that emerge—from a group of people oriented around the importance of this figure to their identity and to their sense of belonging to the
university, as a geographic and temporal entity, to a group working together to eradicate racism and to push their university to take responsibility for problematic periods in its history.

This idea is important in that it accentuates the role of the distinct material attributes we theorized. When current stakeholders see such a durable mnemonic device—the students seeing the statue on their campus, in this example—they understand, by virtue of its very durability, that it has enjoyed a continual organizational presence over many years and that they are therefore tied to other organizational stakeholders who have engaged with this statue throughout the decades or centuries (regardless of how they interpreted it). Such sensations may lie dormant until the exogenous event turns a spotlight on the device, rendering it especially prominent in a particular political moment. For example, the killing of George Floyd may have increased the likelihood that some students felt the impulse to publicly express their negative feelings and interpretations vis-a-vis the statue in the days and weeks following the event. This externalization by some organizational stakeholders would constitute the foundation for an intersubjective response among them (Eisenman et al., 2019), and such intersubjective affinities in this case would be cross-temporal.

In our campus example, current students sharing their sensations and interpretations of the statue might also form a cross-temporal mnemonic community. What could link these people is the understanding that the statue is an enduring campus presence that orients the organization’s attitude toward slavery and racism in various ways. While attitudes may have evolved, the ongoing presence of the statue could suggest that the question of racial tension and slavery is a central aspect of the campus identity (see Hatch & Schultz, 2017). Moreover, because the identity-related traits characterizing the organization in this context are perceived as extremely negative in the present, these statues could potentially lead people to critically question an organization whose touchstone may be aligned with a complacent attitude towards racism.

Another type of interaction here is between aesthetic richness and the representative aspects of the mnemonic device. While a centrally located statue is a mnemonic device relatively low in aesthetic richness, as we have explained, the actual or imagined act of eliminating a mnemonic device—in this case, “statue-toppling”—is extremely high in aesthetic richness. Statue-toppling is primarily an embodied experience that involves physical cooperation. The coordination required among people working together shoulder-to-shoulder to perform a demanding physical act, such as destroying and removing a large and heavy statue, gives rise to a highly sensory and embodied experience involving bodily contact, fluids, and odors. Thus, joining forces to bring down a statue is an act that engenders a powerful, embodied imprinting that will remain as a vivid memory shared among those who participated, tying them together. The kind of material-relational connection felt by “statue-topplers” could also potentially arise among people who have never participated in an actual statue removal or even witnessed it first-hand, because it is not difficult to imagine the strong sensory reaction to this activity. An imagined version of this event is based on memories of common images of similar political action, such as other dramatic statue removals (e.g., that of Saddam Hussein). In this way, the actual or desired removal of a statue might constitute mnemonic communities that share a clear understanding of the inherent wrongness of certain values and a desire for their organization to express a clear statement condemning this wrongness. The removal of the statue could also constitute other mnemonic communities, ones that exceed organizational boundaries, because current university members removing or desiring to remove a statue share a past with others from various points in history who once engaged in similar practices in the context of fighting for a just society. More generally, we suggest that such aesthetically rich acts of engagement with the materiality of a mnemonic device can trigger affinities among stakeholders that tie them to each other in ways that are particularly potent. In this sense,
drawing in ideas from the potential of material attributes to affect people in ways that are socio-somatic and therefore stronger than cognitive effects (e.g., Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Creed et al., 2020; Strati, 1999; Taylor & Hansen, 2005) highlights the significance of attending to the material attributes of mnemonic devices.

Turning to our third material attribute, the (non-)contemporary design of a mnemonic device may also interact with the ideas it represents, such that this design renders the affinities sensed by members of the mnemonic community more or less relevant to the present moment. In our example, students would likely evaluate the statue’s design as non-contemporary. Perceiving the statue as not current, in our framework, might detach the students from this device and signal a break between people currently associated with the university and those from the past who were present at a time when the statue was contemporary. This distancing would perhaps assume that, in these earlier periods, the presence of the statue was neither political nor ideologically negative. Perceiving themselves to be members of a new and distinct mnemonic community, the students may take a degree of comfort in this disconnect—and, arguably, this knowing separation is what has allowed major universities to continue accommodating such statues while also feeling entirely disassociated from the values held by these early figures.

The topographic salience of statues is also important in our example as the symbolic manifestation of systemic racism. The desire to remove the statue in this sense is also a desire to detach the figure from the central and enduring aspects of the university’s identity. In the context of cartographic mnemonic communities, these statues might orient mnemonic communities that share an affinity to the campus as a distinct place associated with an idea. In this case, the idea manifests as racism (past or present) or, at the very least, signals a space that was once devoted to commemorating a slave owner. Further, it may allow members of a mnemonic community to coalesce around the question of the organization’s relationship to an idea when they are in the geographically marked place. So, for example, students might pause to reflect on systemic racism when they are on-campus but distance themselves from wrestling with this question when they are off-campus. Or they might identify others who also find themselves in this demarcated setting and are therefore also wrestling with the question. This identification underlies the emergence of mnemonic communities as people feel affinity toward each other based on shared imaginations of such a clearly bounded geographic place. As topography is fairly permanent, it is quite possible that the statues orient those mnemonic communities that are tightly coupled to them as mnemonic devices—meaning that the ways in which the statues demarcate the geographical boundaries of the mnemonic community are likely to be stable. In this context, the removal of a statue in a way that alters the topography of its environment is an extreme material act that is likely to have a profound effect on the identity of stakeholders and the mnemonic communities they form relative to the organization.

Our focus on how the narrative (i.e., representational) and material (i.e., relational) elements of the mnemonic devices interact illuminates how mnemonic communities may form and develop the potential to engage stakeholders and even prompt them to perform various actions. Their formation may follow several paths. They may hinge on a non-contemporary design that fortifies an affinity based on perceiving racism as a value of the past that has no place in the present. Or they may wish to see this statue removed to further solidify the distinction between present-day organizational stakeholders, who cannot accept such a device, and past stakeholders, who were able to rationalize its presence. They may focus on its durability, orienting around the idea that a problematic relationship with racism and slavery is an issue the university wrestles with continuously. Here, their desire to remove the statue can express the taking of a clear stance on this relationship and address potential complacency. Erasing any material marker of this complacency helps create a campus, for future generations, in which mnemonic communities can form without visual exposure to this founder’s values.
Finally, some stakeholders might not support the demand for the statue’s removal. Those who openly oppose it may be articulating a preference for continuity and stability of the organization’s identity at the expense of adapting its content to the present. In this case, a mnemonic community could form between people who revere the traditions of the institution as a venerable historic actor and who can decontextualize the figure from its actions in the context of slavery and racism. In a material–relational sense, this position would manifest as accepting the presence of these mnemonic devices and disapproving of any move to retain their material presence.

In sum, we have used the context of statues depicting historical figures to examine how the material attributes and the material–relational affinities we theorized may intersect and how they might interact with the representational aspects of mnemonic devices. These statues, in so far as they are fairly accurate renderings, have straightforward interpretations, and this well-defined context facilitated our ability to suggest a set of potential interactions. Of course, not all representational elements can be interpreted so clearly, and thus these interactions should be explored further in future work. Additionally, we drew on the context of racial unrest following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 to think through our ideas in the context of an exogenous shock that sets a clear before-and-after demarcation to isolate the representational aspect of statues as mnemonic devices. Again, future work would need to examine these ideas in a less extreme context to build on our initial theoretical investigation.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

In this paper, we set out to theorize the material–relational aspects of mnemonic devices and how they constitute different mnemonic communities. We focused on the inherent materiality of these devices, explaining how they can elicit a set of embodied affinities we term “material–relational”. Specifically, we outlined four types of orientations for mnemonic communities by (1) linking aesthetic richness to mnemonic communities that tie people together through the shared sensory and embodied reactions they construct collectively around their encounter with the device, (2) linking topographic salience to mnemonic communities that map onto a geographically demarcated space, (3) linking contemporary design to present-day mnemonic communities that gather to mark the present and break from the past, and (4) linking durability to mnemonic communities that span multiple time periods. We then turned to explaining how affinities based on sensory and embodied reactions to material attributes can accumulate, intersect, or interact with each other. Using a theoretical vignette (of statues on universities), we explicited several aspects of how these interactions might affect the emergence of mnemonic communities and how they interact with what we termed “representational aspects” in ways that affect these communities and their boundaries. In developing these ideas, we advance recent research that has begun to evoke the concept of mnemonic communities in the context of memory processes in organizations (Foroughi, 2020; Foroughi & Al-Amoudi, 2020; Ravasi et al., 2019).

Our theory emphasizes that mnemonic communities are emergent. This emergence is not fully determined by the mnemonic device, and it is therefore important to recognize that the device can be more or less tightly coupled with the mnemonic community. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, we expect that such coupling can in many instances be tightened on the basis of intersubjective processes of sense-making and negotiation, such as when students discuss their unease with the statue and plan its toppling. In addition, the material attributes we identified are not mutually exclusive; in fact, specific mnemonic devices in context (such as statues) are more likely to share several of these properties. We therefore invite scholars to conduct future work to continue our exposition by further theorizing how these dimensions may interact and by identifying cases to study such processes empirically, such as examining the context of recent cases of statue-toppling.

This paper is in this sense also intended as a call for scholars to continue investigating the importance of mnemonic devices and how they
might be used to activate stakeholders in an organization. Future work may draw on the material–relational perspective that we have developed and explore the circumstances under which the emergence of mnemonic communities is controlled by the organization versus when it is based on organic growth among members of the organization. Other questions could address the extent to which these mnemonic communities stabilize around mnemonic devices or emerge in relation to ad hoc needs and then diffuse. Finally, future work could investigate the boundaries of our arguments by asking which types of organizations are more likely to host the devices we describe. These remaining questions notwithstanding, our paper joins a nascent body of work integrating different modalities through which organizational stakeholders remember, to develop a richer understanding of organizational memory processes (Crawford et al., forthcoming; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Table 1 summarizes the ideas we presented.

Contributions to Research on Identity and Organizational Memory

Our paper contributes to extant research on the interrelation of memory and identity. Organizational memory preserves as well as constitutes organizational identity (Casey, 2020; Casey & Olivera, 2011; Foroughi, 2020; Foroughi & Al-Amoudi, 2020; Foster et al., 2011; Nissley & Casey, 2002; Rowlinson et al., 2010; 2014; Sørensen, 2014; Wadhwani, Suddaby, Mordhorst, & Popp, 2018). Prior work suggests that perceptions of the past need to resonate with organizational stakeholders in the present if they are to affect identity-related processes and that mnemonic devices are central to these processes (e.g., Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Decker, 2014; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Mena et al., 2016; Ravasi et al., 2019; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). In this paper, we tied these ideas to the growing body of work on materiality, space, and aesthetics in organizations to theorize how the materiality of mnemonic devices contributes to the construction and enactment of organizational mnemonic communities and affects their embodied, cartographic, and temporal boundaries. Doing so is important because it unpacks and challenges the implicit assumption that the shared interpretation of a past event is a sufficient basis for developing intersubjective relations among members of a potential mnemonic community. Our conceptualization opens up the question of whether materiality is a different basis for intersubjective processes of interpretation and suggests that, alongside interpretations of mnemonic devices as narrative referents, members of an organization also re-enact and form communities around non-verbalized, sensory dimensions of mnemonic devices that are inherently material.

Further, our engagement with materiality emphasizes the relational aspects of memory and how it can be experienced in an embodied way. This perspective suggests that identities, as perceptions of an organization’s central, distinctive, and enduring traits, are not only cognitive internalizations of particular narratives. They are also embodied internalizations that, as research has suggested, can be sensed by people as common and intersubjective and, in this sense, are quite powerful (e.g., Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Hancock, & Spicer, 2011). Viewing identity through this prism indicates that the sphere of embodied mnemonic communities is an area requiring further research. Possibly, organizations could also use this prism to put in place mnemonic devices that create powerful ties with stakeholders, such as by building a dining area which is likely to trigger various aesthetic responses based on the tastes, scents, and presentations of the food alongside the embodied experience of eating together with other members of the organization. Organizations might use this space to host important organizational events and subsequently evoke memories of these events to secure stakeholder commitment. The notion of embodied mnemonic communities may also be useful for understanding how “sub” communities form and how the strength
Table 1. A Material–Relational Approach to Mnemonic Devices.

| Material attributes | Aesthetic richness | Topographic salience | Contemporary design | Durability |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Relational affinity | Innate sensory reaction in response to aesthetic stimuli | Innate understanding of what is within and outside the organizations geographical boundaries and an internalized sense of place | Innate perception of a device as belonging to the present (or not) on the basis of the degree to which its aesthetic features resonate as current and on-trend | Innate perception of a device as an organizational artifact continually present throughout time |
| Potential mnemonic community type | Embodied: socio-somatic sense that others have had a similar sensory reaction to the stimuli | Cartographic: socio-somatic sense that group members identify each other as belonging to a clearly demarcated in-group | Con-temporal: socio-somatic sense of who the present members of the organization are | Cross-temporal: socio-somatic sense of who could have (or will have) interacted with the device |
| Example of possible interaction with underlying narrative of mnemonic device (a statue depicting a key university benefactor centrally located on a campus) | Statue of founder has little aesthetic richness, but the plans to topple it (in the context of the desired erasing of the university’s association with a racist figure) highlight how stakeholders can materially eliminate a narrative that is problematic. The act of elimination is high in aesthetic richness | Statues are centrally located and therefore position the narrative they represent as central to the university’s identity. Toppling the statue is an attempt to weaken the centrality of this aspect of organizational identity | The statue’s design is not contemporary, highlighting that the association with the depicted founder and their values is not a current one. Stakeholders may use this weakness of association to rationalize the continued presence of the statue because they can believe that the narrative it conveys does not represent current organizational values. On this basis, they may feel able to oppose statue-toppling | The statue is highly durable and perceived as a permanent campus presence. Stakeholders may desire to remove it to break this link when they want the university to permanently disassociate itself from the values attributed to the depicted founder |
of these material–relational ties can be harnessed to resist organizational narratives (e.g., Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011, 2015).

Additionally, by elaborating on the interaction between representationality and material–relationality, we contribute to recent discussions on the fluidity of organizational identity that suggest that identity is malleable and prone to change rather than fixed and constant (see Casey, 2020). To the extent that organizational memory is an ongoing process of reinterpreting, re-enacting, and reframing the past (Olick & Robbins, 1998), identities that form on the basis of memory are also likely to change across time. We suggest that attending to material–relational aspects of mnemonic devices, in combination with their more symbolic, narrative aspects, allows us to understand how different mnemonic communities form and shift within the organization and in response to exogenous shocks. This point is important in that it highlights that the organization is not in full control of how stakeholders interpret mnemonic devices. As our illustration acknowledges, an organization may install a mnemonic device that clearly conveys the preferred narrative it wishes to promote. This promotion has been a central tenet of research on memory and identity that has studied the phenomena of organizational museums and archives (e.g., Nissley & Casey, 2002; Ravasi et al., 2019). By adding a material–relational component to these dynamics, we are able to build a more critical perspective and show that the types of mnemonic communities that may form are more varied than the narrative interpretations a mnemonic device puts forward. An extension of these ideas, that may be explored empirically, is asking how materiality allows for intervention in memory-related processes by people at various levels of the organization. For example, stakeholders may accept a mnemonic device that the organization puts in place, such as a statue of an important founder; they may work to remove it altogether by toppling it; or they may operate at the intersection of these extremes by asking: “Why is the statue centrally located? Who are we if we are not the people who erected the statue? And how do we differ from the people who do not walk by this statue every day?”

**Contributions to Materiality in Organizational Memory Studies**

While new to organizational memory studies, the significance of material–relational processes to social memory is deeply rooted (e.g., Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1980; Kleinman & Kleinman, 1994; Zerubavel, 1996). Our paper builds on this material–relational approach by drawing on scholarship dealing with materiality in organizations. In asking how material properties may lead to the affinities that bind members of mnemonic communities, we show the value of applying material insights to the context of organizational memory. Further, we contribute to broadening the understanding of how materiality is relevant to organizational research by advocating a deeper engagement with the material that is not primarily focused on the use of materiality as a symbolic referent (De Vaujany, Adrot, Boxenbaum, & Leca, 2019; Eisenman et al., 2019; McDonnell, 2010).

Extant research has begun to indicate that material processes, particularly those with a spatial or embodied component, are important because memory is not exclusively the result of cognitive narration but can also be experienced sensorially (e.g., Crawford et al., forthcoming; Cutcher et al., 2019). However, while this research has highlighted the significance of building mnemonic communities through a variety of modalities, and has shown how these modalities are the basis for creating emotional reactions that can potentially create strong ties between stakeholders and the organization, it is yet to expose how these connections are mediated by the materiality of mnemonic devices. Rather, these studies have focused on a narrative explanation of these reactions and assumed that they are inherently based on cognitive processes. Moreover, many studies have made no attempt to distinguish narrative uses of materiality from sensory
ones. In the Crawford et al. (forthcoming) study, for example, the researchers linked the content of the stories about the Grand Canyon to the evocative, embodied material setting in which they were told. But they did not inquire into how the material and the narrative texts interacted or the extent to which one can exist without the other. Sørensen (2014) analysed a famous photograph and a painting as mnemonic devices but focused on how we interpret these visuals in a narrative way. And Smith and Humphries (2017) examined the significance of sports memorabilia, in that case a leather football, and suggested that these artifacts represent sporting events in which the football team won or lost. They explained why the ball represents these memories as a narrative and they also indicated that, in being a material artifact, the ball affects processes embedded in its materiality, but viewed these processes as supporting the narrative representation rather than interacting with it. Our treatment offers a conceptualization for examining materiality as distinct from (yet compatible with) the better-studied narrative aspects of mnemonic devices and adds to the growing body of work in this area.

In this sense, our work highlights the performative potential of organizational memory research (see Foroughi et al., 2020). This perspective highlights that memory is not merely a shared interpretation of the past but a material–discursive enactment of the past. Our study highlights the role of materiality as a complement to the discursive by suggesting that we not only understand or interpret why, say, a ball is important to our organization—we also touch the ball and respond to its aging leather each time we touch it. It is the interplay between how we interpret an artifact such as a ball and how we perceive it sensorially that allows us to form meaning. Knowing how it feels to, for example, caress a leather ball allows members of an organization to imagine other members caressing it, and this physical contact has meaning above and beyond our retelling of the story in which a past team played with this ball and won or lost the game.

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