As the idea of nationalism gripped Europe in the nineteenth century, political ideologists struggled to sway the loyalty of citizens away from particular religions or leaders towards the nation. Politicians and journalists saw the potential of preservation projects as especially effective symbolic social acts, capable of creatively reconstructing the past and re-inventing traditions in order to offer what Benedict Anderson recently called an “imagined community” of modern citizenship. The merchant urban elites engaged in philanthropic preservation campaigns in their native industrializing cities to create regional national identities that could compete symbolically with the national ideologies disseminated in capital cities. The medieval city state, with its fortressed Gothic city and regional power became a powerful image for local elites to call forth a range of new economic, religious, cultural and political identifications under the guise of reviving tradition. Alfonso Rubbiani (1848-1912) saw his native Bologna as the symbolic center of the Cisalpine national identity. He is emblematic of a new breed of preservation activists, mostly journalists by training like him, who became spokesmen of powerful regional political interests, actively persuading public opinion to invent historic city centers by “restoring” a medieval aesthetic unity to them. Rubbiani distinguished himself as one of the few such activists with the organizational and theoretical wherewithal to lead preservation campaigns, overseeing teams of artists and architects who executed his visions. Others included Charles Buls (1837-1914), Mayor of Brussels (1881-1899), whose most lasting achievement was the preservation of the city’s medieval center, in opposition to the urban schemes proposed by King Leopold II’s central power; and also Victor Balaguer (1824-1901) journalist, historian, liberal politician, and preservation activist for medievalizing Barcelona’s center into a Gothic neighborhood to serve as the symbolic seat of Catalanian patriotism.

Rubbiani studied law at the University of Bologna before turning to journalism. Through his newspaper articles he crafted and disseminated his preservation ideas, and in 1883 was invited to join in the restoration of the Castello di San Martino dei Manzoli near Bologna, the seat of Conte Francesco Cavazza. Three years later, he lead the restoration of Bologna’s Basilica di San Francesco, a 20-year project. In 1889, Rubbiani and Cavazza co-founded Aemilia Ars, modeled after the British Arts and Crafts Movement, and the following year, the Comitato per Bologna Storica e Artistica, working with architects and craftspeople to restore an idealized medieval character to the city’s buildings. By the 1900s he was in charge of, or associated with, almost every major restoration project in Bologna, including the Palazzo di Re Enzo (1244-46, restored 1905), the Palazzo dei Notai (restored 1908), the Palazzo Comunale, or Accursio (1293, restored 1908), and a 1910 master plan with Gualtiero Pontoni for the historic center. As an outsider to architecture, Rubbiani ignored academic rules of preservation and historiographic conventions. He saw the city in picturesque terms as an aesthetic composition, which he medievalized freely, adding pointed arches to windows and replacing classical cornices with crenellations. Seldom interested in studied reconstructions, his restorations invented harmonious cityscapes in the Gothic spirit with a palate of surviving fragments. He articulated a creative theory of preservation based on close study of exemplars, but quite distinct from archaeological exactitude.

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