

A Home in Berlin
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A Home in Berlin

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We architects are responsible for the design of meaningful places in which people can live and grow. It seems that at whatever level we happen to be working, we are primarily concerned with the creation of places that create or contribute to an existing spirit of place, a *genius loci*. Our concern for indigenous urban qualities comes at a time when many cities have been greatly altered by rapid changes in society. The modern movement in architecture, with its understanding of city planning as the functional organization of zones for various uses, responded to pragmatic demands of the industrialized city. Unfortunately, its legacy has been more place-destructive than place-responsive. More concern for the kind of place-specific qualities that make cities special could help the next architecture repair some of the damage that has been done. By learning to see and hence to understand, we can create meaningful places that belong to their locus.

Berlin is not only indigenous to the nation of Germany, but also to the world's political, social, and cultural situation.

Each individual city is a collection of cultural artifacts in a unique geographic location and in a specific time. No matter how many international style buildings a city may have imposed upon it, each city is a unique being, a living entity with specific needs and opportunities. The qualities that make cities unique are best expressed in transcendental, poetic terms. One vividly remembers the Willamette River in Eugene, Oregon, in a rainstorm, the wharf in Monterey on a foggy spring dawn, a music festival during a summer evening on

Burlington's village green, drinking beer on a Bavarian Marktplatz, or hiking through olive orchards to finally emerge on a white village square in Andalusia. These qualities, which cannot be quantified or mass-produced, much less named, are place-specific and memorable; they play a vital role in how we experience cities.

All cities can be indigenous to their region, but no city embodies the great changes that have occurred in the world in the last century as does Berlin. Berlin is not only indigenous to the region of Prussia and the nation of Germany but also to the world's political, social, and cultural situation. Analysis of how these forces have shaped the city of Berlin can illustrate how similar factors affect the spirit of all places and their consequent character. Understanding architecture and the city as cultural expressions can enrich our design process and assist in the creation of inclusive architecture that responds to the imperatives of time.

Because the spatial art of architecture is reliant on social and political factors, political and economic leaders have used it as a propaganda pawn. This tendency is especially evident in Berlin, a fascinating microcosm of the world where capitalism and communism meet each other in a bizarre way. This city, where the world's major political systems coexist, has a unique *genius loci*. Selected examples of recent architecture on both sides of the Berlin wall reveal how architecture built in a time of peace can be an expression of subtle political battles fought beneath the surface.

The Berlin wall, erected in 1961, symbolizes one of the most tyrannical acts of repression in recent times. Over the past 25 years, the two halves of the city have grown apart to the point that one now finds few similarities. East Berlin, the monumental capital of East Germany, is a built expression of the ideals and failed visions of communism. West Berlin, on the other hand, has become one of the world's liveliest cultural centers and is a monument to the essential freedoms and the inherent

chaos of capitalist democracy. Whereas monotonous, bombastic architecture dominates East Berlin, the neon architecture of the free marketplace has taken over its western counterpart.

In the east, the historic boulevard Unter den Linden, once as lively as the Champs Elysees, now culminates in the overblown Volkspalast, the capitol of the German Democratic Republic. All along Unter den Linden, an allee which had enclosed spaces in the traditional manner, buildings were razed after the war to create barely fathomable urban rooms. These modern spaces have one basic function—to dwarf the individual and to provide plenty of marching space for goose-stepping East German soldiers. The core of historic institutions lies to the east of the Berlin wall; to the west, most of the city is only a century old. Therefore, the Kurfurstendamm, Berlin's commercial artery, has become the center of West Berlin. In contrast to the seemingly dead Unter den Linden, the Kurfurstendamm lives around the clock. It is a neon boulevard of capitalism, which historically culminated in the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. Now it ends in the Europa Center, a highrise with the anonymous character of 1960s corporate architecture. The red star of communism dominates the spirit of East Berlin, while the blinking chrome and plastic Mercedes-Benz star atop the Europa Center is a sign of the commercialization of West Berlin, and of our capitalist world in general.

Below, the Kurfurstendamm, West Berlin's primary thoroughfare. Right, an apartment tower of the Markisches Quarter rises above an adjacent single-family house.



courtesy Landesbildstelle, West Berlin.

Modern Architecture in Berlin: Noble Intentions, Flawed Designs

Since the 19th century Berlin has been a center for progressive thought in architecture and the arts. Many pioneers of the modern movement were motivated by the liberal atmosphere and overcrowded living conditions of early 20th century Berlin. The Nazi regime, suspicious of the avant garde's challenges to tradition, drove out the country's most progressive architects. But in 1945, the objectives of modernism prevailed once again. In both East and West Berlin, architects and their sponsors denounced the historical architecture of the Nazi regime.

The postwar liberation of Germany transformed all aspects of German culture. Hitler's romantic nostalgia and thousand-year Reich was supplanted by an opposite, but equally totalizing (and potentially dangerous) vision. In the 1950s the nation discarded every vestige of the Nazi era, and promoted a new Berlin where tradition was irrelevant, and modernism's faith in a technologically oriented future would prevail. Architects replaced the conventional relationship of the building and the street with the Corbusian ideal of the highrise in the park. In 1957 West Berlin sponsored the Interbau (International Building Exposition), which produced the Hansa Quarter, a district of apartment towers that represents the goals and shortcomings of post-war modernism.

The site, adjacent to the Tiergarten, a wonderful park in the English garden tradition, was the ideal setting for this kind of architecture. The park was essentially extended and the buildings—mostly on stilts or pilotis—were set in a grove of trees. As one walks through the Quarter, he or she senses the energy and vision of Alvar Aalto, Walter Gropius, and Jacob Bakema. In the spirit of the International Congress on Modern Architecture (CIAM), they believed that by maximizing the exposure to nature and the functional utility of each unit, they would produce the ideal urban dwelling.

However, something seems to be missing. What has happened to the street and the square, with their mixture of residential life, commerce, and the workplace? They gave the traditional city its life and diversity. Here the street is a pasture, the square a grove of trees and the centers of commerce and work are in the old city center. But what is most lacking here is the sense of the forum, of the urban room that implies com-



courtesy Abitare, July/August 1984.

munication and contact between people. Traditional city houses are a contiguous enclosure of the street and square, the stage for urban life. These buildings retreat into the trees as individual units independent of each other. In this way they signify the emergence of the detached individual, and the dissipation of the collectivity.

The varied buildings of West Berlin express a support for pluralism and freedom of expression. However, architectural diversity can become chaotic and disunited, like the society that created it.

In East Berlin, the highrise in the park came later. The Stalinallee of 1952, the city's first modern housing district, was a traditional counterpart to the Hansa Quarter. Its planners created grand urban streets, but one senses that all feeling for the individual and for a human scale was absent. The exaggerated proportions of the

Stalinallee and the boring repetition of building types and elements symbolize the failure of East German ideology. The individual is dwarfed by the collective and has little chance for self expression in the rigid grid of these dead spaces. Instead of the vibrancy and variety of the Champs Elysees, one is reminded of Albert Speer's scheme for Hitler's Berlin, a mile-long axis bordered by mammoth monumental palaces—the perfect expression of a totalitarian regime.

While both the Interbau exhibition and the Stalinallee failed with regard to human experience and scale, they clarified at least one major difference between East and West Berlin that still shapes the architecture of the divided city. The varied buildings of the Interbau exhibition express a support for pluralism and freedom of expression, the essential qualities of a democratic architecture. However, architectural diversity can become chaotic and disunited, like the society that created it. A comparison of housing in East and West Berlin leads one to conclude that these risks, inherent in the architecture of a free society, are necessary. The variety embodied in the wide spectrum of solutions possible here add vitality to the city. In comparison, the monotonous architecture that is mass-produced in the eastern block is an urban blight.

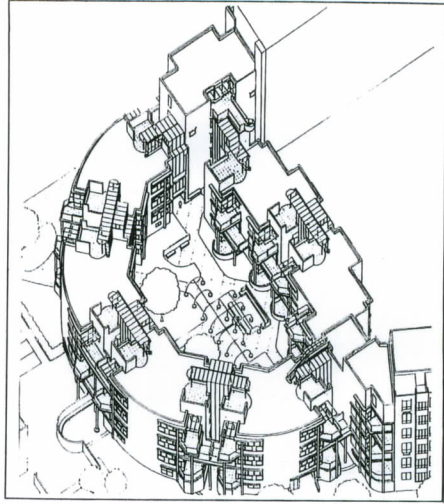
tional design, they have searched for new formal devices which would impart a human scale and a sense of urban continuity.

All of the IBA architects discarded the highrise in the park and returned to the traditional urban block. The resultant street and courtyard spaces create a clear division between the public and private realms. The interpenetration of outdoor and indoor spaces, typical of the ground levels of the Hansa towers, has been replaced by definitively enclosed urban rooms. While they recreate traditional courtyards, these are a vast improvement over the overcrowded housing that precipitated the modern movement. The density here is no higher than in the Hansa Quarter but the houses create a relationship to the city that was lacking 30 years ago. They form clearly defined neighborhoods that respect and grow out of the existing urban context.

The Rauchstrasse housing project has virtues of modern and postmodern housing: it consists of 9 buildings set within a park, while still delineating a consistent edge to the street. The site plan is Rob Krier's winning entry in a 1980 competition. He proposed urban villas situated around a common green, in the spirit of the site's pre-war plan. A variety of architects designed the 20 x 20 meter buildings in order to assure diversity. One is amazed by the individual creativity that has gone into each house, and at the same time impressed by the harmony of the development. Krier's collaborators adhered to his urban vision: the four-story villas are evocative of the modern pavilion in the park. At the same time, they supersede their modernist predecessors; these villas surround a clear, communal space.

As one would expect, the elevations of the Rauchstrasse block are more variegated than those of the Hansa Quarter. The plans, too, are worth study; they offer improved spatial configurations for the apartment. As one experiences the spaces both around and within the dwellings, one discerns a sense of community within the immediate neighborhood and a personal identity with the city.

The Dutch architect Hermann Hertzberger was asked to design a small housing project on a difficult site. His block includes a thirty-year-old church whose skewed corner orientation precluded the creation of a continuous perimeter of apartments. Thus, Hertzberger left the church a freestanding object and connected two ex-



courtesy: Architectural Review.

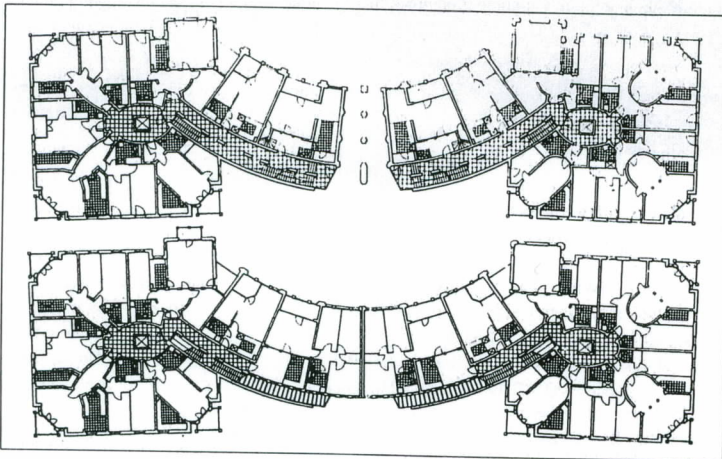
Opposite page, top, Rauchstrasse housing block, site plan by Rob Krier. Opposite page, below, apartment house in Rauchstrasse block by Rob Krier; ground and typical upper level plans, garden elevation. This page, apartment house by Hermann Hertzberger.

isting, adjacent blocks with a half circle of apartments in order to enclose a courtyard.

The project, with its innovative steel and glass stairhouses and pure white forms, is stylistically closer to preceding modern housing projects than are most IBA designs. Here, Hertzberger articulated a human scale and proved that the modern aesthetic, carefully developed, is as humane as any other style. The informal sense that pervades the building is a refreshing counterpart to the sometimes heavy and formal character that typifies the IBA. Hertzberger implemented a user-participation program that allowed occupants to complete the interiors as they wished, with materials and advice provided by the IBA. While the quality of workmanship sometimes suffered, the tenants developed a strong identification with their neighborhood. Although the project is not yet finished, many inhabitants already know each other and have formed a tightly knit community.

The Berlin architects Hinrich and Inken Baller have contributed some of the most unique entries to the IBA. They share some of the goals of the Green party, a populist political movement that questions Germany's faith in technological progress. Thus, the Ballers' housing project on Fraenkelufer Street expresses this recent critique of German society; it also replicates the expressionist architecture Hugo Haring and Hans Scharoun produced in the early 1930s. The structure has irregular forms enclosing a variety of spaces that offer a respite from the highly structured urban realm.

On the facades, sculptural concrete



photographs and plans courtesy *Architectural Review*, March 1986.

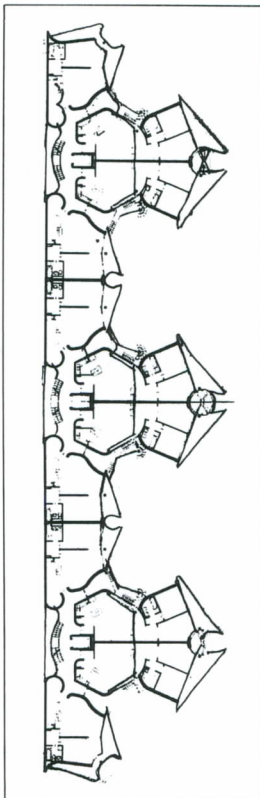
While the elegant Hansa Quarter, with all its inherent weaknesses, is modern architecture at its best, there are many later high-rise anti-cities in West Berlin which illustrate a devaluation of aspirations and design qualities. The Markisches Quarter is a bloated version of the Hansa Quarter. What was projected as a lush park actually became a sea of parking lots with an occasional token playground. Up to 20 stories high, the mammoth concrete bunkers of apartments signify the architect's abandonment of his visionary role. Here, a handful of architects and builders simply exploited the profits of mass production, without regard for the occupants' quality of life. The reduction of the individual to a powerless pawn sentenced to live in one of hundreds of anonymous cubicles was surely not the intention of the modernist pioneers. Scarcely 20 years old, the settlement must now be renovated—at costs nearly equal to the original construction expenditure. One positive point emerges: the failure of this urban housing has long been acknowledged, and districts like the Markisches Quarter are unthinkable in contemporary West Berlin. It is tragic that this kind of building continues to prevail in East Berlin. There, the housing industry has been programmed for mass production techniques that produce abstract concrete slabs.

The IBA: Tradition Rehabilitated

The modernists' lofty intentions were laudable, but many of them failed to recognize the place-specific qualities that had given Berlin its liveliness. Their desire to begin anew and discard tradition ultimately restricted their vision. The unsuccessful housing projects of their less talented and less responsible successors indicate that architects were doomed to fail when they jettisoned the social consciousness of the modern movement, as well as the humane qualities of the premodern city. West Berlin proposed a new International Building Exhibition (IBA) to resolve the faults of the anti-urban architecture of the 1957 Interbau projects. The IBA sites are spread throughout the city in areas that were severely damaged in the war and left to decay in the 1950s and '60s.

A sample of the housing units nearing completion reveals that contemporary European architects have re-integrated the apartment block to traditional Berlin. Having witnessed the shortcomings of purely func-

plan and photograph courtesy *Architecture D'aujourd'hui*, September 1984.



elements give a sense of secure enclosure. The Ballers sought to create a neighborly context for relaxation and communication, segregated from the stresses of the surrounding city. The Fraenkelufer site was bordered by the fire wall of an existing courtyard behind a row of old houses. The Baller's structure essentially grows out of this wall, turning the once derelict courtyard into a lively common area. It is not a formal garden, but a casual playground of irregular berms. The inventive apartment plans have an unorthodox, organic character; the Ballers defied traditional prototypes, and showed that postmodern architecture need not be retrospective. They have proven that this kind of architecture need be no more expensive than normal construction. Precast concrete construction of the components yielded surprisingly low building costs.

On the other hand, this idiosyncratic architecture sometimes seems contrived. One wonders whether the Baller vocabulary can be further developed, or if it may be an isolated episode. Perhaps the architects were overly ambitious in the search for a unique aesthetic object, and neglected to design housing that conforms to and strengthens its environment. But most would concur that this work is some of the most innovative in Berlin.

Otto Steidle's scientists' housing for Berlin's Free University is one of the city's best new housing designs. While this project is not under the aegis of the IBA, it addresses similar concerns: reconstruction of the urban block and the facade, and the search for a housing pattern that induces communality. The housing project accommodates scientists from around the world who convene here for research. Steidle focused on "communication space"—the shared rooms where scientists can discuss their work and get to know each other. He treated the circulation backbone of the building, the main stair, as one elongated communication space; it extends across the entire length of the building. The resultant system of landings and bays provides northern porches that accommodate exchange between members of the household. The lacy steel and wooden framework that supports the stair imparts an informal, welcoming atmosphere. In contrast, the southern elevation, overlooking the street, is massive and reticent. Several large windows admit warm winter sunlight, but much of the facade comprises blank surfaces that absorb the heat of the sun, and radiate it in the evening.

The height, proportions, and colors of the surrounding blocks of the 1890s recur in the new project, though historical forms



courtesy: Archibese, #6, 1984.

Opposite page, courtyard elevation and typical plan, apartment building on Fraenkelufer Street by Hinrich and Inken Baller. This page, street elevation and typical plan, International Meeting Center by Otto Steidle.

are not repeated. New architectural forms appear: the sloped roof has a passive solar energy device and a greenhouse, and steel frames surround windows and porches that harmonize with the older buildings. Steidle's building resolves many of the issues that make housing design difficult, but rich: the creation of a communal place, conservation of energy, and the response to the local building tradition.

The benefits and hazards of modern industry are too great for architects to ignore. Nevertheless, we must resolve the problems we have created without escaping to a nostalgic reverie.

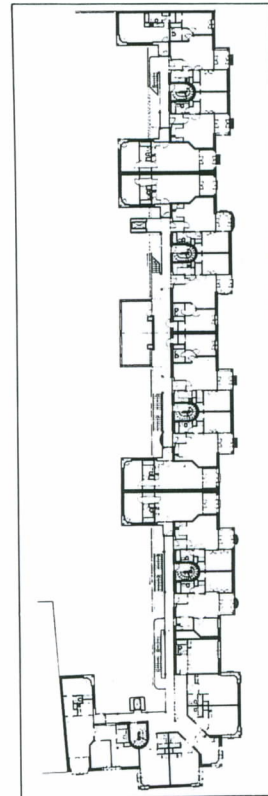
How has the design of housing evolved in Berlin between 1957 and 1986? Architects have been preoccupied with resurrecting qualities of the traditional city which were discarded 30 years ago. The IBA projects are worthy models for rebuilding the urban block and for designing more

articulate, variegated elevations; they conform to Berlin's indigenous qualities. But perhaps the architects have failed to resolve new challenges. They could have addressed changes in our ways of living and working, the problems of automotive and mass transportation, and the effects of new electronic information and communication systems.

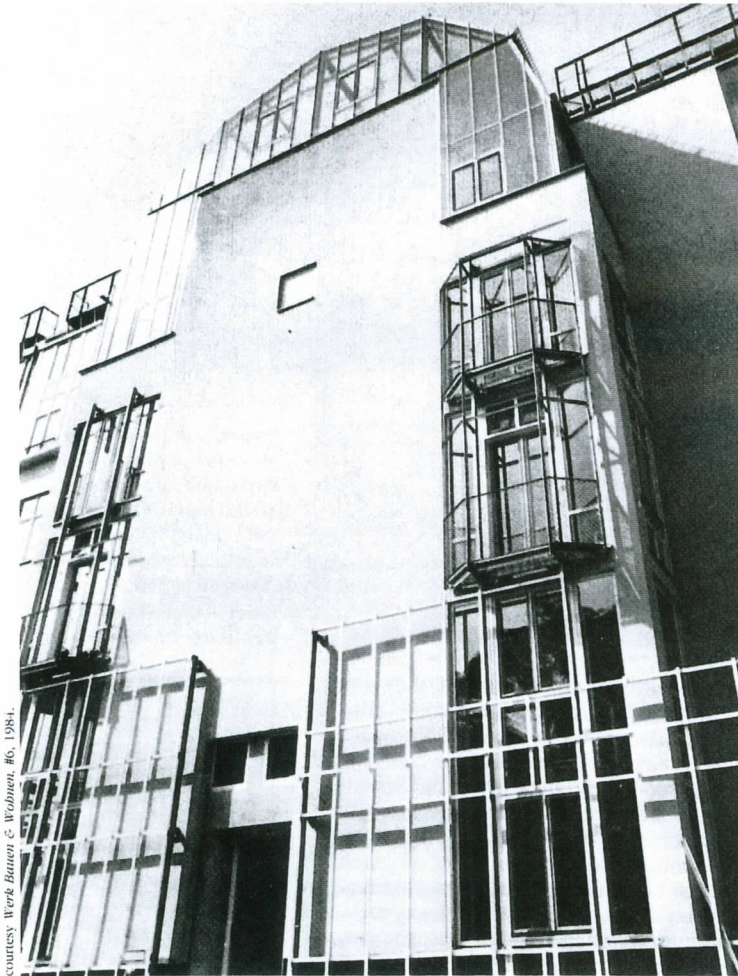
The benefits and hazards of modern industry are too great for architects to ignore: disasters in aerospace programs and nuclear power plants make us question our faith in technology. Nevertheless, we must resolve the problems we have created without escaping to a nostalgic reverie. Architects of the IBA have resurrected the qualities that make Berlin a humane city. The next step will be to reconcile architectural traditions with the formidable technology of the late 20th century.

Leaving the IBA projects behind, one always returns to the Berlin wall. While the architecture of the divided city fascinates us, the wall affects the spirit of Berlin today more than anything else. The psychological pressure created by its sense of enclosure is always present; it often helps generate the innovative cultural offerings of West Berlin, architecture included. Moving through Berlin, one inevitably encounters the wall, 15 feet high, grey, smudged.

Here the paradox that permeates this



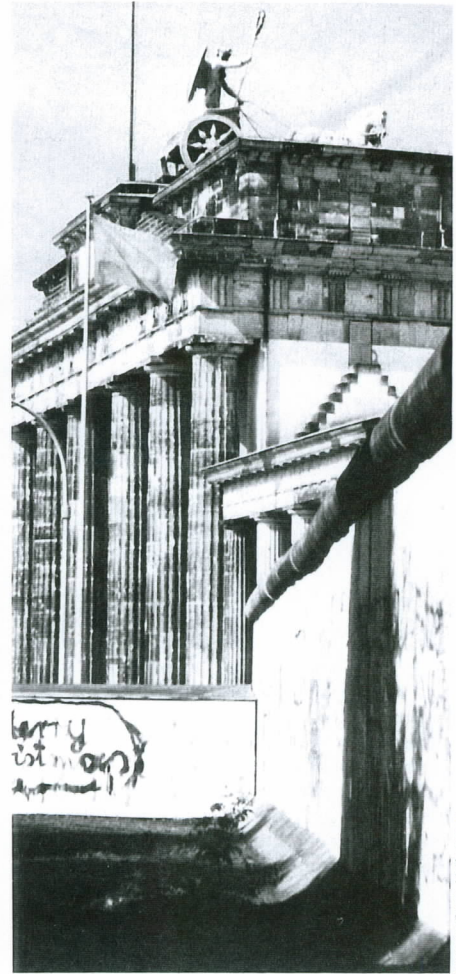
courtesy: Architecture D'Aiguard bau, September 1984.



courtesy Werk Bauern & Wobben, #6, 1984.

Left, typical bay, street elevation, International Meeting Center by Otto Steidle. Right, Berlin wall, as seen from the west.

city is most painfully expressed. The west side of the wall is a virtual billboard of slogans that are witty but usually mundane. It presents an extreme contrast to the no man's land on the other side. There, a rabbit darts, free, through a mine field. A nearby sentry in a stubby grey tower watches West Berliners through an old telescope. A bicycle rider on the western side dodges mud puddles. In East Berlin a motorcycle sentry putters by, and guard dogs bark. A bus full of tourists pulls up for a token view into the western "empire of evil," a sorry definition for a 20th century tragedy. A few tourists frequent the overstuffed souvenir stands; an elderly English-speaking woman remarks, "Why is all that painting on the wall?" The bus departs, throwing up dust; a passenger snaps a final shot through the



courtesy Casey Mathewson.

spotted window. The wall remains—15 feet, grey, smudged, a sword slashing through a city—separating cultures and lives. . . for how long? Probably until the tourists stop coming to see it.

*"Dear Wall,
Only you know your secret
and I ask that you keep it."*

(graffiti on the wall, 1986)

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