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Title: The City-Place as a Work of Art. Introduction

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Citation style: Popczyk Maria. (2016). The City-Place as a Work of Art. Introduction. "Folia Philosophica" (T. 35 (2016), s. 101-113).



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The City-Place as a Work of Art.

Introduction

Abstract: In this paper I will attempt to look at the city-place as a work of art. Such an approach will allow us to take into consideration its aesthetic, sensual and reflective qualities and, at the same time, contemplate those aspects which go beyond the philosophy of art, such as practical needs of everyday life. I analyze the opinions expressed by Olsen, Christie Boyer and the architects, Le Corbusier and Kevin Lynch. The positive view of the place emphasizes the role played by its shape and layout, by the sense of security and beauty, by harmony, sensuality and emotions, and by the sense of belonging and identity. The city, however, also means ruins, abandoned places invisible to its inhabitants. I examine an approach adopted by Urban Explorer and underline the aesthetic and artistic way of depicting the city. In the final part I discuss the spatial-temporal dimensions/indicators of the city as a work of art

Keywords: City, aesthetics, work of art, visual sensibility, Le Corbusier, K. Lynch

The city, being a place itself, comprises a variety of different places: public, private, abandoned, unremarkable — non-places, as Marc Augé calls them. All these places, albeit to a different extent, are saturated with human activity, both individual and communal. Among a multitude of different ways of defining what the city is, I am particularly interested in the one which sees it as a work of art, since it takes into consideration its aesthetic, sensual and reflective attributes without leaving out those aspects which go beyond the issues related to the philosophy of art, such as the practical needs of everyday life. Georg Simmel's assertion that “[the] image we have of external things has a dual significance: in nature everything can be

seen as connected, but it can all be seen as divided as well”¹ seems relevant here. While looking at a bridge, we see — in its most practical features — a specific set of qualities, including aesthetic ones, as the bridge makes the connection between two distant river banks perceptible, tangible. The experience of distance, separation and connection is accessible only to a human being and, therefore, a bridge, apart from physically connecting two river banks, makes manifest the invisible attribute of contact and distance: the structure of a bridge, its shape transforming these attributes into a real entity. Thus, the city-artwork is an embodiment, a manifestation of what is separate and seemingly impossible to connect, it makes metaphors and human dreams material, and rather than ossifying them in the matter, it uses them to convey them to the origins of the visual — emotions, memory, reflection.

There has been a long tradition of identifying the city with a work of art, which far from being a mechanical transfer of the definition of a visual arts artwork onto an artefact-city, creatively develops the potential of a work of art which has become the city as well as that of the city regarded as a work of art. St Augustine’s conception of the city included in *De Civitate Dei* as well as Renaissance ideal cities must certainly be mentioned here; however, it was not until the nineteenth century, the times when the formula of a modern city as known to us today began to crystallize, that the cities — London, Paris and Vienna — were explicitly referred to as works of art. Donald J. Olsen singled out these three cities to demonstrate how their successful modernization resulted in their transformation into places which could be considered artworks. What they owe to it was a unique concentration of energy and economic prosperity, flourishing intellectual thought and artistic activity working in harmony to successfully oppose the forces of anti-urbanization, stagnation and inertia. These cities have retained their status as capitals not only in a technical sense, but above all, symbolically, with their vitality following from the flexibility with which they assumed a new shape emerging from the modernization of urban and public space. These essential conditions work to promote other undertakings, since it goes without saying that the initiation of the transformation of the city fabric, its layout and architecture, bring about new urban practices and phenomena and, as a consequence, new experiences and activities found nowhere else, and they all cooperate “to promote the

¹ G. Simmel: *Bridge and Door*. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/217039509/Georg-Simmel-Bridge-and-Door#scribd> (20-06-2015).

happiness and exalt the dignity of mankind.”² The impressive ground floors of public buildings foster moral virtues, architectural ornaments serve to express the beauty through the truth of the material, while the form rather than merely reflecting the function, transcends it. Olsen sees the demolition of entire neighbourhoods of Paris directed by Baron Haussmann not as a political and edifying act but as an effort to transform the streets of the city into boulevards.³ The well-thought-out ideological projects were carried out on a grand scale (Ringstraße in Vienna can serve as an example),⁴ producing visual effects accessible to the human eye, like the ornamentation of façades, whereas the lavish manifestations of public life illustrated the conviction that life could be expressed more fully in play than in work. Olsen’s analyses allow us to conclude that the city-artwork exists permanently in a specific time and space, with its vitality and the manifestations of communal life constituting a measure of its lasting existence, since they are deciding factors in determining the beauty of the city; they establish the place in the fullest sense of the word. Olsen also mentions the cities which, according to him, confound us: anachronistic like Liverpool or cities-museums such as Venice.

The demonstration of the positive qualities of the nineteenth century cities, as well as the typically urban characteristics emerging in the city of a new kind, seems to be an attempt to preserve a particular moment in the history of European cities, when their openness to changes brought on by industry and technological developments was combined smoothly with the cultivation of fine arts and manifested through a lavish lifestyle, the moment which later was given the name of the *belle époque*. The balance between technology and tradition, which made it possible to take full advantage of both without belittling or favouring either of them, is what *avant-garde* artists were to criticize so fiercely. In Olsen’s view, the city is a work of art when grand-scale renovations promote urban practices and rituals

² D.J. Olsen: *The City as a Work of Art. London, Paris, Vienna*. New Haven&London, Yale University Press, 1986, p. 5. This statement can be considered a definition of the city as a work of art.

³ On negative aspects of Haussmannism see among others: L. Benvolo: *Miasto w dziejach Europy* (The History of the City). Translated by H. Cieśla. Warszawa, “Krag.” “Volumen” 1995, pp. 181–199.

⁴ W. Koch: *Style w architekturze: arcydzieła budownictwa europejskiego od antyku po czasy współczesne* (European Architectural Styles: the Masterpieces of European Architecture from Antiquity to Modern Times). [Translated from German by W. Baraniewski et al.], Warszawa, Świat Książki, 1996, p. 416.

involving the residents. Therefore, Venice is more of a museum than a work of art, due to the fact that although immensely popular as a place to visit, it is not the best place to live, since it has long lost the vitality it possessed in the times of doges. Mere artefactuality is insufficient to make a city a work of art and, indeed, few cities deserve such a name. Ruins hardly qualify either, as for the city to constitute a work of art, the cultural activity of its residents is an essential component. Moreover, it is only from a historical perspective that a city can be labelled a work of art, since the qualities and attributes that make it such are only noticeable afterwards, when it is an artwork no longer, when we can see the disintegration of this unity. We can identify many cities as easily satisfying Olsen's requirements; they enjoyed the period of economic and cultural prosperity and realized a specific ideal of communal life: Athens of the classical times, the Renaissance Florence or Rome under the rule of Pope Julius II, to mention but a few examples. Furthermore, from this perspective it becomes evident why participating in the transformations of a city prevents its residents from seeing it in terms of a work of art, one obstacle being a lack of temporal distance, another the impossibility to see it in its entirety.

The nineteenth century witnessed the tumultuous changes of European cities: old centers were collapsing, an open urban landscape was emerging and, in consequence, the experience of space, the way people perceived places and the sensations they produced, had undergone a dramatic transformation, the evidence of which is provided by the paintings created at the time by painters-observers, by the evolving urban landscape, by novels and diary notes commenting, not always favourably, on the urban life at its beginnings. There is a hint of nostalgia in Olsen's reflection: he considers the order of places of a bygone era from the perspective of the modernist vision of the city, or rather the failure to make it real. Decrying ornamentation and decoration as a crime failed to result in satisfactory architecture or welcoming city space. The standard arrangement of the previous era, characterized by a densely built-in area around the central place, with radial streets and tight rows of residential buildings as well as squares with imposing edifices, had been called into question and gradually replaced by widely-spaced detached buildings with the dispersed, shifted centre. Historic buildings no longer offer a history lesson: isolated from others, they become solitary monuments, tourist attractions. Demolitions caused by warfare or Haussmannism can produce such an effect, but there are also new cities, especially industrial ones, built on a linear layout.

A city can be considered a work of art also from a different point of view. Christie Boyer adopts an aesthetical perspective as a point of departure for her classification of cities. She indicates three aesthetic factors that could be attributed to a city in the order of its historical development. According to her, a traditional city constitutes a work of art, a panorama is an attribute of a modernist one, while a spectacle characterizes a contemporary city.⁵ The classification is based on a type of visibility, the manner in which an observer experiences spatial and temporal setting as well as his or her own attitude, and first and foremost, the art of constructing urban space. Therefore, the aesthetical value, as proposed by Böyer, permeates all the components of a city-place, from its visual aspects to everyday activities. Böyer asserts that the purpose of the 19th century renovations was to design the urban space with a well-defined frame. The observer was to see the city as an arrangement of highly conventionalized picturesque views forming a framework for architectural narratives, which is perhaps best illustrated by the Place de la Concorde in Paris. According to Boyer, those carefully-planned and well-executed features of European capital cities show aesthetical and moral aspirations of the contemporary elites, whereas their studied, theatrical appearance commands static perception.⁶

Indeed, it was in the 19th century that the visual qualities of the view *via* a painting were discovered, which resulted in greater significance attached to the location of buildings open to urban as well as natural scenery. The painting exhibitions of this period, with museum walls densely packed with pictures, demanded a similar taxonomic kind of viewing, which directly affected urban views. The exceptional advancements of optical devices had undoubtedly contributed to the development of the perception of this kind, which, despite certain similarities, was different from the baroque, when a well-composed view was also highly appreciated but with the focus on the metaphysics of infinite spaces. It must be noted, however, that although Boyer has in mind a specific conception of a work of art, traditional, representational and viewed in isolation, the developments in photography and poster art taking place at the time led to artists gradually dispensing with the frame and employing the perspective drawing the eye inside the picture. Without a frame, the

⁵ M. Christie-Boyer: *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*. Massachusetts, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994, pp. 33 id.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

edges of the picture open to the previously invisible background, the surroundings, which at the same time attracts the viewer's attention to the qualities of the surface and, as a result, broadens his or her perceptual capabilities. Looking at the urban scenes recorded by the painters of that time, we can see a moment held in time, characterized by liquid contours. Nevertheless, alongside the visual viewing of the city, another alternative way of experiencing places emerged: multisensory, participatory, nomadic, typical of the flâneur, who attaches far more importance to wandering and the immersion in the city. The flâneur is "completely devoted to viewing, hearing and smelling in order to grasp the atmosphere of the place, the architectural scene and the doing of the crowds on the streets and squares."⁷

The city of the modernist type has to be evaluated from two independent perspectives: utopian theory and the practice of building. We owe the former to Le Corbusier's passionate words and his ideas, inspired by the architecture of Manhattan, which had a great impact on the character of many cities as well as establishing an open floor plan of the city, the very essence of modernism. Even though the architect failed to put any of his ideas into practice (except for the part of the development of Chandigarh), his plans together with the principles ruling everyday life offer an entirely novel conception of the place. Boyer refers to Le Corbusier's urban planning views of the cities as a city-panorama, which is determined by the perspective of the city seen from the viewpoint of a mobile eye. Thus, the new visual sensibility emerges, combining multidimensional views of interpenetrating spaces in the eye of the viewer, which, according to the author, corresponds to cubists' paintings.⁸ The observer looks at the city experiencing the speed, from the car or plane window — Le Corbusier included silhouettes of airplanes in his designs. The description of the city in Villa Contemporaria allows us to draw a conclusion that it is also a static panorama. Le Corbusier intended a resident to look from a skyscraper down at a surrounding park. The building materials for the city designed for the pleasure of the eye, the eye presiding over the space, are four pillars of the space: the sky, the space, trees and steel, which Corbusier believed to be best suited to satisfy a modern person's visual and metaphysical⁹ as

⁷ H. Paetzold: *Experiencing Urban Architecture. The Politics of Strolling in the Vein of Walter Benjamin*. In: *What is Architecture?*. Ed. A. Budak. Kraków, Manggha 2008, p. 121.

⁸ B. Boyer: *The City of Collective Memory...*, p. 41.

⁹ Metaphysical is used here in the sense of the access to reason and eternal unchanging laws, similarly to Kandinsky's understanding of the term.

well as everyday needs. The architect wanted the sky to be reflected on the glass walls of skyscrapers and the space to be arranged in accordance with geometrical principles so that the eye could roam freely over the buildings. Trees and greenery were meant to be the lungs of the city, whereas steel was to embody human intellect manifested in high-rise buildings, whose visual power Le Corbusier compared to flames.¹⁰ The components of the city make us think of Empedocles' four primary elements, with steel alone relating to the subdued form of fire held in check by means of a trick originating from the Promethean act. Boyer, interested in various manifestations of memory in the city, regards the city-panorama as a place devoid of tradition, designed for people who have forgotten their roots and turned their backs on the past. It is worth noting that the author wishes to highlight the screen-like aspect of the views, but her assessments of the character of the place are based on the description of the idea of the place richly illustrated by Le Corbusier. Nevertheless, the term panorama is predominantly associated with static frontal views of the city, encompassing more objects than the observer's eye is capable of taking in and constituting a graphic or pictorial representation of the city. The city, reduced to the flat surface, becomes an autonomous whole. This approach to the question of the city as a work of art is governed by its own rules and deserves to be examined in its own right.¹¹

The shape of the city created in the past can often prove unbearable for next generations of residents, whose desire to adapt places to new ways of life results in reconstructions. Le Corbusier finds the contemporary cities chaotic and considers the corridors of streets lined with rows of residential buildings to be unhygienic, immoral and unaesthetic. He declares that it is time to reject the current layout of the cities and suggests that instead of noisy streets and cafes, which cover the pavements like mould, we should move our lives to the fourteenth floor, where we can have peace and clean air.¹² New

¹⁰ Le Corbusier: *The City of To-morrow*. Trans. F. Etchells. London The Architectural Press, 1947, p. 190.

¹¹ Here I would just like to mention that if the view of the city follows the rules of the art of painting, it is possible to extract the essence not only of the city but of human existence as well. Cf. the interpretation of Edward Hopper's urban scenes: M. Brötje: *Obraz-spotkanie* (Image-Encounter). Trans. M. Haake. „Quarto” 2008, nr. 3(9), pp. 65–80.

¹² Le Corbusier: *W stronę architektury*. Trans. T. Swoboda. Warszawa 2012, pp. 107 and 108. http://monoskop.org/images/b/bf/Corbusier_Le_Towards_a_New_Architecture_no_OCR.pdf

architectural forms were meant to correspond to the relationships between people and their hurried hectic lifestyle, as well as take into consideration the position of a woman, since according to Le Corbusier, home would no longer be an archaic unit held in such an esteem as a family or a nation.¹³ Nonetheless, the adoption of the international style in urban architecture, the establishment of zones, the construction of aggressive high-rises competing for dominance, and the uncontrolled growth of the suburbs all contributed to the emergence of monotonous, featureless spaces with a confounding network of too many transport routes. The ideal of building a new harmonious place failed dismally, with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe complex in 1972 serving as ultimate proof of the disaster it was. Forty two years after the publication of Le Corbusier's book, David Lynch uses the word "horror" to describe the feeling the metropolis arouses in him, and claims that the antidote to this horror of the city-metropolis is to make it legible.¹⁴ According to Lynch, the most important task facing urban planning is to manage time and space in such a way as to adapt the environment to people's perceptual capabilities as well as their emotional and symbolic needs, and, in consequence, to satisfy a basic human need, that is, to give people a sense of security. Residents relate to a city-place when they can form its clear picture in their minds, when they have no difficulty finding their way, "where objects are not only able to be seen, but are presented sharply and intensely to the senses."¹⁵ Lynch likens the city to the writing on the sheet of paper: in order to read it we need to know the code, the template organizing the content. Each resident accumulates many images of the city, which make up a kind of mental map. Landmarks, dominant features, recognizable and clear routes, all that Lynch calls the imageability, legibility of the city, enable a resident to create the image-based map of the city and keep it up to date by filling in the blanks as the need arises. The character of such a map is entirely personal: it is comprised of emotions, memories, personal experiences, and as such it allows an individual to establish their personal identity and to feel at home in a particular place and identify with it. What urban planners are concerned with, however, is a social image. Lynch claims that in certain aspects all those individual personal images are similar, that they

¹³ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁴ K. Lynch: *Obraz miasta*. Trans. T. Jeleński. Kraków. Archiwolta, 2011, p. 140.

¹⁵ K. Lynch: *The Image of the City*. Cambridge The Technology Press&Harvard University Press 1960, pp. 9—10.

have a common denominator, the core which, covered with layers of symbols acquired with time, has the power to bring together all the residents, uniting them through their shared memory. It is this community-shared image that allows us to assess the imageability of the cities, to determine whether they form an irresistible, logically strong and distinctive view revealing the shape of the city, as illustrated by Florence seen from the south side, or whether they are characterized by low imageability, which results in residents' dissatisfaction, their inability to find their way around or distinguish the components of the view. Lynch bases his theory on the analysis of the perception and orientation of Boston residents, and his idea of a city characterized by imageability as well as a strong distinctive form constitutes the foundation for further qualities, such as a sense of security or an emotional identification with a place. Such a city imparts a meaning and a sense, it is a source of pleasure derived from physical sensations, it affords a non-visual sense of the rhythm of forms.¹⁶ Lynch establishes the criteria which make a city a work of art as the following: "As an artificial world, the city should be so in the best sense: made by art, shaped for human purposes."¹⁷ If the imageability of the city is achieved, it draws together all the attributes of a good place based firmly on a sense of location and orientation.

The three above-mentioned approaches to shaping a city as a particular whole accumulating a multitude of various meanings in an experience can be supplemented by others, the most valuable of which are those whose construction was actually completed, often in various forms, like Ebenezer Howard's garden city or Léon Krier's city within the city. No good recipe for a place seems to exist and although for centuries people have been building cities, settling in them and transforming them, something prevents us from establishing clear rules. In one of his books, Léon Krier maintains that, paradoxically, the art of building roads, vehicles and transportation systems is much better developed than the art of creating places.¹⁸ Nevertheless, both designers and architects make a great deal of effort to improve the city, to make it a place allowing its residents to feel at home and relate to it, to give it a form and shape, to meet the conditions of a beautiful city and to make it safe. The city, however,

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁸ L. Krier: *Architektura wspólnoty* (The Architecture of Community). Trans. P. Choynowski. Gdańsk, słowo/obraz terytoria, 2011, p. XIX.

also includes the ruin within, situated on its outskirts or fenced off from the world of life. The ruin which creates empty enclaves, subjected to the forces of nature, vandals and urban explorers' cameras. The cultural forms attempting to get the ruin under control in the figure of melancholy are as ancient as reflection on the passing of time, and currently highly aestheticized, ironic forms predominate, as illustrated by deconstructivists' architecture, where the infection of a building, its wobbliness suggestive of an imminent collapse are designed with utmost precision and taking place in the eye of the observer. An alternative perspective on the city as the ruin is the one offered by urban explorers, the hackers of places, whose activity, documented on websites and in social networking groups and communities, is both diverse and divided into specialized categories.¹⁹ They set out to expose deserted, dangerous and closed places to Internet users and collect them like ethnographers or sociologists; they are involved in the modern form of flâneurism. They share their theories on the Internet, commenting on the culture of consumption and aesthetization. Sometimes they refer to themselves as postmodern archaeologists and rather than learning about the places which they visit, they want to interpret them for themselves, since they are more concerned with aesthetics than history.²⁰ They could be said to be working with the place: they enter underground passages, explore post-industrial areas and, in doing so, they reveal the city from the standpoint of the ruin within it. Their extensive and multilayered activities contain the holistic view of the city, which lends a contemporary tone to old metaphors. One of urban explorers likens the city to the body which has the outer appearance and the entrails. Like a surgical probe inserted into hidden underground arteries, urban explorers examine the areas affected by disease, penetrate disintegrating interiors of houses and factories. Fascinated by abandoned objects, no longer useful or needed, they document the traces of presence by photographing the details: a collection of books falling apart, a grand piano covered with plaster, a doll in a pram. Films and

¹⁹ They are classified with regard to the type of the place (underground passages of a city, abandoned houses, hospitals, palaces, post-industrial areas, roofs of the highest buildings), to the type of narration (films with historical or reporter's commentary, films with background music, films-interviews), to editing techniques and to the techniques of auto-creation.

²⁰ B.L. Garrett: *Urban Exploration as Heritage Placemaking*. In: *Reanimating Industrial Spaces: Conducting Memory Work in Post-Industrial Societies*. Ed. H. Orange. Left Coast Press, 2015, p. 75.

photo-essays employing emotive images²¹ and spinning a tale of an irretrievable loss typically evoke the sublime, and the sublime in the Kantian sense of the term. And even though the image shows the sublime without causing fear, it still moves the mind deeply, leads to self-knowledge and raises the awareness of something bigger than the explorer him- or herself. What we can also see here is the beauty of the ugliness, which frequently constitutes the background for the portrait of an explorer him- or herself or a model. As a result, the meanings multiply and intensify: the movement of the inside and the outside, the juxtaposition of the visually attractive body and the body being eaten away by the incurable cancer of decay. Thus what they offer is a holistic approach to the city, while at the same time they question²² the aestheticization and consumption of a seducing image, as illustrated by Mitchell's passionate words. The urban explorer is also interested in the panorama of the city viewed from the perspective of the ruin, as exemplified by the photographs taken from the roofs of the Battersea Power Station with the view of London brightly lit by fireworks.²³ The silhouette of the explorer with his back to the camera and the city ablaze with night illumination in the background brings to mind Caspar Friedrich's paintings. However, whereas Friedrich's melancholics turned their backs to the world to stare at the Transcendence from mountain peaks, urban explorers watch the spectacle of the city lights in the silence of an abandoned place.

Therefore, to look at the city as a work of art, we can adopt Olsen's criterion, the accumulation of culture-forming energy, and follow its various manifestations in both urban planning projects and public life, comparing their different historical and cultural aspects. On the other hand, if we choose Boyer's evolutionary approach, according to which a new type of the city manifests a specific aesthetic quality, we have to assume that it permeates all the components of the city at a given period, it makes the city an artwork, a panorama and, presently, a media spectacle. However, although both proposals allow us to bring to light the positive attributes of the city, the perspectives they offer seem rather one-sided, while the city is a total work in the space-time continuum, it is a product of ideas and the

²¹ The technique known as HDR (High Dynamic Range) is often used by photographers to add dramatic quality to the scene.

²² I. Douglas-Jones: *Urban Exploration & the Search for the Sublime*. "Architecture" 2008, p. 25.

²³ http://www.wired.com/images_blogs/dangerroom/2013/03/placehacking-660x440.jpg (20-06-2015).

ways in which they were actually carried out, of well-thought-out plans and spontaneous processes. It can hardly be expressed or experienced in one single way, so it has to be assumed that an immediate experience of a place, as well as art engendered by the city, merge and interpenetrate. Furthermore, one field of art is insufficient to articulate and convey all this content. As far as spatial arts are concerned — material and immaterial images, urban planning layouts, buildings, spatial installations, designs and architecture without architects — they are never autonomous, since they always unite a certain specific community around the place. In addition, we must remember that the credit for making a city a work of art needs to be given to its residents and migrants, who add particular colour and flavour to the stone face of the city: “All world cities, all capital cities — I am even tempted to say *all* cities — have a special character, a slang or dialect, a form of humor.”²⁴ The city is an open project which can be seen as finite, complete only in the dimension of one generation, and it is never given to a person in its entirety. The only creature capable of seeing the city as a whole — in its past, in its present and in its future, in its demolished and newly-erected buildings, events and street-level practices as well as through the eyes of its residents, their thoughts, emotions and experiences — would have to be a supernatural being, like Benjamin’s Angel of History.

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²⁴ J. Rykwert: *The Seduction of Place: The History and Future of Cities (Pokusa miejsca: przeszłość i przyszłość miast*. Przeł. T. Bieroń. Kraków 2013), p. 214. http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0375700447?keywords=Joseph%20Rykwert%20seduction%20of%20place&qid=1445258199&ref_=sr_1_1&sr=8-1#reader_0375700447 (20-06-2015).

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