Special Session 'Transition Histories'

Back to the Past?

Tram City, Motopia and Light Rail Commercialism in Canberra

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Abstract: One of the long-term trajectories in urban development since the late 19th century has been determined by changing modes of movement. Following the city of the pedestrian plus bicycle and horse & carriage and that of trams and railway suburbs, the rise of the automobile city saw the decline and often total disappearance of streetcar systems. Then, the 1980s experienced a wide-spread renaissance of rail transport. Futuristic projections have accompanied these visions right through to current developments around driverless cars and trackless trams. Based on the case study of Canberra, this paper analyses these projections and their legacy in terms of success, failure and portent. The original plans of the Griffins (1911-1918) had proposed a model streetcar city financially supported through income from the leasehold system. These ideas were supplanted by a Motopia vision, which morphed into plans for a linear city shaped by land-use-transportation studies – an automobile-dependent suburbia, yet with the potential for a rapid transit public transport spine. Light rail was eventually introduced in 2019. Financed through the sale of public housing and creating high-rise development along the route, this is resulting in a profound transformation of Canberra's urban form with real-estate values as the central shaping factor.

Keywords: Streetcar cities; Motopia; urban form; Canberra

Introduction

In urban development (as in other fields, too) phases characterised by rapid transitions, by new visions and vigorous new developments tend to alternate with protracted periods of stagnation and periods in which base innovations take effect step by step and in which plans are carried out and gradually modified, before the next wave of innovations breaks its new path, again accompanied by fresh visions and a corollary of individual innovations.

What is the role of planning history in this context, particularly in the phases of rapid transition? When can insight provided by planning history be appropriately harnessed for innovation? And, by contrast, what are the consequences of disregarding planning history or of exploiting history in a manner that is at best selective? A well-known case in point is that of radically modernist urban renewal, which often painted the legacy of the preceding period in dark colours to justify the demolition of valuable historic structures.

In the field on which this paper is focusing, it appears that today we are at a point in time at which innovations in transportation technology associated with advances in fields such as electronics, digital technology and Artificial Intelligence have gained momentum and

are leading to significant changes in urban form and structure. Self-driving vehicles, trackless trams and high-speed trains have already transformed urban regions in parts of the world and are foreshadowing patterns soon to be followed globally. These developments are closely linked with transitions in the fields of the economy, energy and a plethora of related changes in the planning context.

Canberra

In our local case study of Canberra, plans for a tramway system were an essential element of the original design of 1911, but evaporated in 1920 to be replaced by motopia visions in the 1950s. Efforts for the introduction of a tram system following the European models emerged in the 1990s but remained without success for several decades. It took until 2009 before a new dynamic was introduced through a Labor-Greens political alliance leading to the inauguration of light rail in 2019. Although a success of sorts, the result is nevertheless not broadly seen as the desired triumph of the persistent struggle for sustainability. The reasons lie in a combination of issues in the narrow field of transportation planning and the wider, more complex economic and urban development context.

At the heart of this problematic lies the strategy of financing the light rail infrastructure largely through the sale of public housing and land and through value capture from new high-rise development on up-zoned properties along the light rail route. This is resulting in a profound transformation of Canberra's urban form. In order to 'sell' the associated change in character to the public and real estate investors, remarkably aggressive strategies of re-branding the city have been applied over the last decade. They are designed to transform the image of Canberra from what is depicted as a boring garden city and 'bush capital' into an exciting metropolis of luxury high-rise apartments. The Canberra Metro, as the light rail is called, is an integral part of this concept.

In tune with modern information technology and current themes such as fake news and media wars, the Planning Minister (today Chief Minister) and big developers are involved in campaigns via Twitter and You-tube that are based on a selective (re-)writing of planning history in order to advance their joint agenda. In this perspective, today's Canberra is depicted as the product of an old-fashioned plan that has escaped from a Simpsons' Family cartoon, unfit for adaptation to today's challenges and defended only by NIMBYs and senile locals. This sarcastic narrative runs parallel with an interesting mix of thoroughly researched work on the Griffin Plan, real estate spin and selective readings of later phases of planning. In order to sort out fact, fiction and critique, aspects of Canberra's planning with relevance for our theme are laid out on the following pages before analysing the most recent developments.

The Tram City of the Griffin Plan 1911-1920

Conceived very much as a complex "Gesamtkunstwerk", the original plan for Canberra is impressive at many levels – whether as an achievement integrating urban design, landscape planning and sustainability principles (Fischer and Weirick 2014), as a manifestation of "democratic symbolism" (Weirick 1998) or as the artwork drawn by Marion Mahony that was listed as UNESCO world cultural heritage in 2003. Walter Burley Griffin's reports go well beyond explaining the features of the design by embedding the whole in a planning theory context (Griffin 1912, 1913).

In his treatise on land use/transportation, density and building height, Griffin elaborated in which way "the transit system affects the density and character of the city, allowing for a horizontal distribution of building mass that maintains the city in scale with its landscape and increases access to open space. With a liberality of public space… and

directness and speed in communication between all points, the necessity of making these large units stand on end as in the congested American cities, can be avoided" (Griffin 1912:83).

Designed to overcome such disadvantages of the "congested American cities" Griffin's low-rise medium-density city was constructed around a skeleton of avenues with a suburban railway and "a streetcar system that was so simple, logical and comprehensive" (Weirick 2012) that "some 90% of the population would live within a five-minute walk (500 metres) of the service" (NCA 2004:74). This feature was explored in a careful analysis of long-lost plans by officers of the National Capital Authority in 2004. More revolutionary than this was Griffin's idea of free tram travel "perhaps supported financially in the same way out of rents as the lift or elevator" (Griffin 1913:32).

The progressive character of these planning principles was, however, not appreciated. They were alien to the Australian culture of the first half of the 20th century. Already in 1909, architect John Sulman had warned in his explanations for the international competition for the capital: "the European boulevard with its street cafés would be unappreciated in Australia" (Sulman 1909:606), but as we know, the Griffins did not heed Sulman's advice and produced one of the world's most beautiful plans for a city of avenues and tramways.

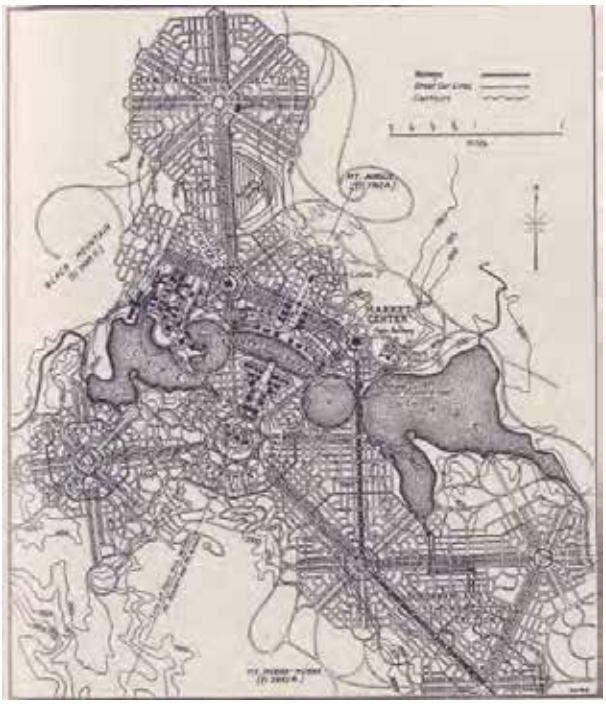

Figure 1

A closer look also reveals that the plan for Canberra is really that of a multi-modal city, even though the most conspicuous elements of the 1912 version (Figure 1) are the *Railways* and *Street Car Lines.*[1] However, as Griffin pointed out in his 1912 report, the plan

[1] It is only in the 1912 plan, which was drawn while the Griffins were in America that the term streetcar instead of tram is used.

is shaped by *two* new modes of transportation, "tramway and fast vehicle traffic, which mean a very different distribution of trade than where walking range [had] been the determining factor" (Griffin 1912:101). The Griffins were of course well acquainted with the developments in the automobile field through their experience in Chicago and their connections with Henry Ford, for whom Marion had designed the Fairlane estate (Van Zanten 2011:106).

These perspectives vanished from common knowledge after Griffin's demise in 1920, and from the 1950s to this day, re-assessments of the Griffin Plan have frequently been marred by assumptions that the plan dated back to the pre-automobile horse-and-buggy days (Senate 1955:78) and could not be anything than quirky and old-fashioned (Barr 2010). On the other hand, such positions were counterbalanced by people who really dealt with the original materials, beginning with Canberra's Chief Town Planner Peter Harrison in the 1950s and James Birrell, one of Griffin's biographers, who drew attention to the surprising fact that "no major concept in town planning has been put forward in the (then) 40 years since the city as designed that is not incorporated in the original scheme" (Birrell 1963:92). In addition to the plan's urban design qualities praised internationally by Edmond Bacon, John Reps and Peter Hall, the sustainability principles of the plan impress to this day (Fischer and Weirick 2014). Had they been applied in the development of the city, many of the problems of climate change would have been mitigated. However, the rich semantic content of the plan was watered down and impoverished in the following years.

From the doldrum decades to "Fast Forward" in the Fifties

Following Griffin's demise in 1920, the basic change in the conception of Canberra was that from a capital city of clearly urban character to a suburban "garden town with with simple, pleasing, but unpretentious buildings, mostly single storey" (FCAC, 1924, p.8). In terms of the perspective of this paper, this meant that traffic was not much of a theme and public transport did not exactly have an easy task in the "seven suburbs in search of a city". The most memorable feature of the traffic scene during the stagnation of the inter-war years may have been the long row of cars making their way on Sundays to the pubs of the neighbouring town of Queanbeyan leaving the "dry territory" during the years of prohibition.

The dramatic change in Canberra's planning history came in the 1950s with Prime Minister Menzies' program of transferring the majority of Commonwealth Government departments hitherto headquartered in Sydney and Melbourne to the national capital.
In this situation, a new set of ideal concepts in planning emerged from the late 1950s on. It was triggered by the initiatives taken by Prime Minister Menzies; it was shaped by the war-time experience and by the break-through of the automobile culture; and it was orchestrated by engaging international networks and by founding an all-powerful organization for planning and development.

A first key person in the international context was the British architect and town planner Sir William (later Lord) Holford. Well known for his work on the reconstruction planning of London, as chairman of the adjudicators on the designs for Brasilia and with connections to Canberra dating back to his appearance at the 1951 *Federal Congress on Regional and Town Planning* there, Holford was personally briefed by Menzies during an overseas visit in London. His *Observations on the Future Development of Canberra* published in 1957 were a clever 'tour de force' presenting ideal concepts with an immediate appeal to his target group of Australian planners and politicians.

Canberra, Holford said, faced two alternatives – to retain the provincial character of the city, with grazing and gravel digging (!) around Parliament House, or "to become a unified

city" (the lake had not yet been created) ... "a cultural and administrative centre and a national capital" (Holford 1957:6). He acknowledged that this would call for "an all-out combined operation of the kind which is so much more difficult to achieve in peacetime than during war." This is why Holford emphasized the necessity of creating a bold, unified design "on a scale sufficient to make an impact on people's imagination" (Holford 1957:7) beginning with the creation of the lake.

In addition to a range of planning proposals including the location of the new permanent parliament building, Holford identified three important objectives for the whole city:
- The development of Canberra into a cultural centre - "the sort of city which people would want to retire *to* rather than *from"*
- the "maintenance of a garden city character in the residential parts of the city, [which] is more important than raising the density"
- and the development of "a modern system of traffic circulation" (Holford 1958:9).
This began with the construction of a freeway link across the length of the northern lakefront. Named "Parkes Way" after federalist Sir Henry Parkes, this six-to eight-lane freeway link is characteristic of the U.S.-American "parkway" concept designed for automobile drivers to experience the world through the windscreen of the moving automobile. Hailed as the epitome of modernity, speedways of this kind were rapidly cutting off urban areas from waterfronts all over the world. Everywhere, the struggle to reduce the negative effects on urban life took decades, and Canberra is still looking for solutions.

In Canberra, the parkway approach has been serving as a model for the urban development plans until today. The organization that conducted the planning and development until the late 1980s came into existence on 1st March 1958. Named *National Capital Development Commission* (N.C.D.C.), its task was "to carry out the planning, development and construction of the City of Canberra as the National Capital of the Commonwealth." Endowed with a large, single-line budget and a high degree of planning control based on continuation of the leasehold system, the Commission's professional planners enjoyed planning conditions that their colleagues elsewhere could only dream of. Over a period of three decades, the planning organization acted as benevolent dictator in a city that was managed like a company town without self-government until late in 1988.

Motopia – triggers, transformations and trajectories
The plans produced in this situation were extreme in their concessions to the 'bungalow-automobile syndrome'. If the post-war decades marked the break-through of automobile culture, then Canberra was an ideal location for translating this into urban development plans, or so it seemed at the time.

The NCDC was convinced: "We are unique - we are in a better position to meet the challenge of this 'growth pressure' than any other capital city. We have the opportunity to benefit from the mistakes made in other capitals and the methods that they use in endeavours to find a solution." Taking advantage of "an opportunity untrammeled by any of the normal inhibitions of planning, and aided by modern science and technology" (N.C.D.C. 1964:2) the planners in Canberra could aim for something that had proved impossible in other "auto-reliant communities of similar size" – to develop a road system that could always stay ahead of traffic demands.

Little wonder that the NCDC's first official long-term metropolitan development plan (NCDC 1965) projected a utopian or rather a "motopian" vision (Figure 2)

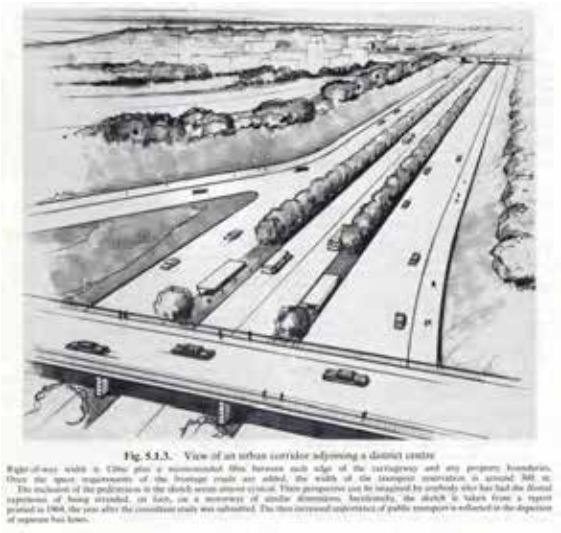

Fig. 5.3.3. View of an urban corridor adjoining a district centre

Figure 2

that soon revealed its true nature as dystopian (Figure 3). Designing a freeway system that would remain congestion-free even at peak hour for the corona of dormitory satellite districts converging on a CBD expanded close to North Canberra's green belt of Haig Park would have drowned the city centre in a vast sea of asphalt (Fischer, 1989, p.178; Reid, 2001, p. 259). For North Canberra, the plan would have implied the atomisation of the existing residential areas into small islands, some containing no more than eight to ten houses surrounded by expressways and speed ramps.

Figure 3

This insight led to last-minute redesigning which indeed managed to save the central area from being devoured by the asphalt desert of early 1960s' urban expressway planning; and it led to a radical transformation of urban form from radial-concentric to linear.

From Motopia to the Perfectionist Garden City Metropolis

The next plan was no less extravagant in terms of the consumption of space (Figure 4). The congestion that would have choked Inner Canberra was now to be avoided by stretching the urban area into a linear corridor of considerable length.

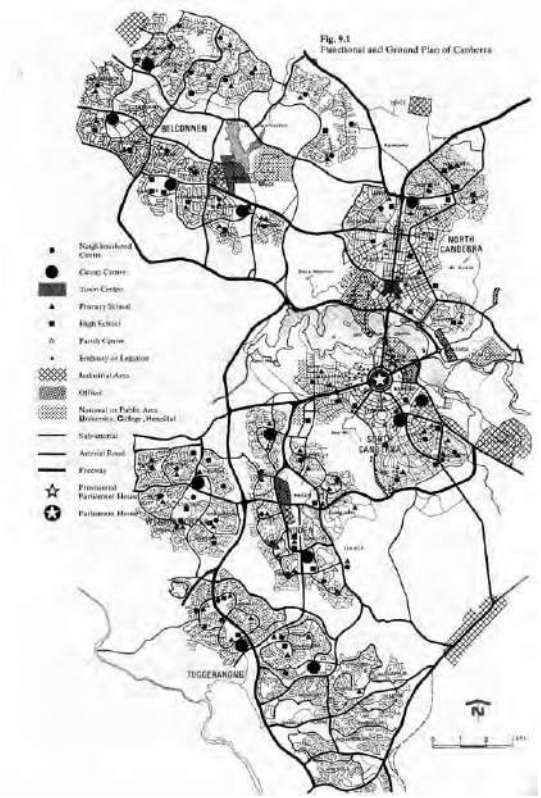

Figure 4

Two important conclusions were drawn on the basis of a Land-Use-Transportation Study (Voorhees, 1967): First, instead of developing a conventional CBD, a significant share of the retail functions and offices would have to be decentralized into the satellite 'New Towns'. This term was chosen in order to indicate that a high level of self-containment was intended. Second, the new districts had to be stretched into the form of a linear city with 'old Canberra' in the middle, and the expressways passing through the whole length of the districts would be connected by peripheral freeways and a central public transport spine. This would allow for the introduction of rapid transit once the 500,000 population level was reached. Dividing the city at its northern end into two branches was intended to make public transport on this spine more effective. The frame of this 'Y Plan' was fitted out with housing and shopping centres, community facilities and streets organized into perfect hierarchies.

Utopia realized?

The product of this approach might be called 'the perfectionist garden city metropolis' (Fischer, 2013, p. ix). One of its amazing features is the degree to which the planning concepts of that period have been implemented. This can be impressively demonstrated

by comparing a visionary artistic rendering of Canberra drawn in the late 1960s, with an actual aerial photograph from 2000. The drawing depicts the city in the manner of an aerial photograph as it was expected to look like in the early twenty-first century. The two images are surprisingly similar, if we exclude the conspicuous new Parliament House (1988), which shows up in the aerial photograph, but which the artist could not have foreseen in 1969.
In a similar way, the city's functional and ground plan drawn up for the book *Canberra – Myths and Models* in 1984 looks very much like a diagram from a planning textbook (Fischer, 1989, 184). In fact, however, it displays the built reality of the then existing city, demonstrating that the hierarchical planning principles were applied with utmost perfectionism: Canberra was a perfectionist manifestation of planners' ideal concepts in the Fordist age – albeit in a non-industrial city. A critical key to this concept lay in the government's power to achieve a balanced disposition of employment centres through its control of the land and the location of its own offices. This, however, began to unravel as early as the 1970s.

Transition into Neoliberal Times
Following the dismissal of the Federal Whitlam Labor Government (1975) the succeeding conservative Fraser Government ended the 'company town' practice of building and owning its own office complexes, creating instead a market for private commercial development underpinned by long-term leases from government departments. The privatisation of office accommodation led in due course to the creation of powerful development interests, which successfully lobbied to concentrate office development in the central city at the expense of the New Towns.

The underlying shift in planning culture (Fischer 2004, Fischer and Weirick 2016) was part of a broader shift to the Australian version of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005) under the heading of 'economic rationalism' (Pusey 1991, Yeatman 2017). In fact, fundamental changes towards a neoliberal agenda had already begun as early as 1970 when, in the fever of a Canberra by-election, the leasehold system was emasculated by replacing land rent with municipal rates, thereby transforming property in the ACT from leasehold to virtual freehold tenure (Brennan, 1971).

While the high level of planning control was not immediately affected, the economic consequences were significant. A result at the short-term level was a windfall benefit to the property sector. In the long term, the ethos of Canberra's development was shifted from the 'common wealth' to conventional property speculation. What the fathers of the leasehold system had once been conceived as a sustainable method of supplying building land at equitable cost for the homes of average citizens was turned into its opposite with land policy now focusing on the maximisation of land values.

The new arrangements also laid the foundations for a new way of financing the capital; and this became important when the Commonwealth Government decided to divest itself of financial responsibility for the city beyond core national capital functions. In the administrative sphere this underpinned the decision to force self-government on the reluctant population of the city, who were only too aware of the privileges they would lose in the process. In 1989, Canberra was finally granted self-government– a step that appeared long overdue in a democratic society.

The system devised in this situation, however, entailed serious defects at different levels (Powell, 2012) and it marked the beginning of a long phase of turbulent political reforms continuing to this day (Fischer and Weirick 2018). At the economic level, a 'city-state' (ACTPS 2011) without a productive hinterland could not operate in the same way as the Australian states raising revenue from mining, manufacturing and industry. Therefore,

the ACT still depends on Federal subsidies, but in a system set up with the intention of minimizing Commonwealth expenses, federal grants proved to be a continuing bone of contention.

Self-Government and Land Sales as a Source of Municipal Revenue

As a consequence, the ACT government has to finance a significant part of its revenue through the sale of its principal asset, greenfield lands (Corbell, 2005; ACT Government, 2005; Sansom, 2009). Unfortunately, this approach is unsustainable given the limited extent of developable land in the ACT. Over time therefore, the strategy of drawing income from up-zoning land for high-density redevelopment gained importance. And by 2012, it turned out also to be an important basis for financing light rail infrastructure.

Right from the start, the exigency of raising revenue for the day-to-day requirements of the territory budget increased the pressure to achieve rapid returns from greenfield development and weakened the ACT Government's negotiating power with the development industry. The low-density, car-based city, which the local government had inherited from the national government thus continued to expand with long-term costs overlooked in favour of short-term gains. To maximise these gains, the process of suburban development was privatised and in the push for low infrastructure costs and maximum yield, 60 years of exemplary neighbourhood planning in the National Capital was overturned, creating some of the worst suburbs in Australia in terms of environmental impact and environmental amenity (Fischer 2004). In this process, the latest district developed at Canberra's northern edge, Gungahlin, emerged as "Canberra's unhappiest new town with… a jungle of-badly designed houses and townhouses, unsatisfactory community facilities and a poor quality of social life… a nightmare of planning" and bad transport connections (Clack 1995). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it seemed as though the neoliberal turn at national and local level had reduced Canberra planning to a travesty of its former self.

Triggering New Visions of Strategic Planning

A turnaround, however, occurred – and from a most surprising source. In 2001, the OECD – that paragon of market economy orthodoxy – was invited to report on Canberra as part of its 'urban renaissance' studies of sustainable urban development in selected cities worldwide. The major findings of the OECD investigation included the lack of a strategic plan for Canberra, and the lack of effective community engagement in the planning of the city (OECD 2002).

Facilitated by the election of a local Labor-Greens coalition in 2001, the Territory government was able to move decisively to address both issues. It prepared a metropolitan strategy with a social plan, an economic plan, and a spatial plan projecting, urban consolidation, a more compact urban form and the introduction of a light-rail system. In recognition of community ideas for a creative, compact city freed from car-dependency, which date back to a path-breaking study of 1991 ('Towards a More Sustainable Canberra' by the pioneers of public transport planning, Peter Newman & Jeff Kenworthy) the Territory government began to draw up plans for the first stage of a light-rail system to connect that northernmost 'New Town' Gungahlin with the City Centre. It took another decade before another deal struck between the Labor Party and the Greens following the 2012 ACT election, at which Labor required support to form government, lead to the implementation of that 12km stretch of light rail.

The announcements by Commonwealth Government for financial contributions have varied significantly in the daily ups and downs of politics. This reinforced the policy of financing the infrastructure to a significant extent through the sale of public housing and through up-zoning land along the light rail corridor for high-density development. The

changes in the character of the "Garden City and Bush Capital" have led to controversial discussions in which the Planning Minister, the Property Council and the biggest local developer Geocon have pursued remarkably aggressive strategies to fight their fears, a low-density vision might constrain future development along the corridor. In 2010, the Planning Minister started this campaign by ridiculing the Griffin Plan by comparing it to the Simpsons Family small town of Springfield (Figure 5). In his role as Chief Minister, he has been continuing this strategy until recently.

Figure 5

In his role as Chief Minister, he has been continuing this strategy until recently, even though he has been praising the element of the tram or light rail that was essential to the plan. In recent years, campaigns by developer Geocon have attacked the garden city and bush capital image. One of their you-tube video films features a young lady smashing a 'bush capital' sign with utter disgust (Figure 6), as all around her, a brave new world of beautiful high-rise apartment blocks with beautiful people drinking champagne and jumping into the pool emerges.

Figure 6

These visions are linked to utopian statements by Geocon claiming that the extension of the light rail line to their new developments south of the lake is going to take the new residents into the city within ten minutes (Jervice Bardy 2019) – a remarkable propaganda war on the perspectives of real estate and light rail.

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