Public space and local diversity: the case of Northeast England

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ABSTRACT:

For much of the last quarter of the 20th Century debates on the state of public spaces in the UK concentrated on issues of neglect and abandonment. New public spaces, increasingly developed by private developers were of equal concern, seen simultaneously as creating privatised, socially exclusive enclaves and characterless' anywhere' regeneration schemes, filled with the same retail outlets, coffee shops and anonymous pieces of public art. This paper addresses this latter concern of homogenisation, examining the dynamics behind it and exploring whether local diversity can thrive in the face of such pressure. The paper further reports on a research project that was conducted on a series of prominent public spaces in Northeast England. The results of this study suggest that the spaces studied are far from passive recipients of global processes. That not only does the quality and quantity of public space often seem to have improved in the recent past, but that long standing locally significant traditions are thriving and new ones are being developed. So, while homogenisation in retailing may be significant and harmful to some traditional shopping streets, it is not necessarily damaging the social and cultural lives of the public spaces in our towns and cities to the degree that may be expected.

Key Words: Pubic space, homogeneity, diversity, distinctiveness.

Public spaces have become the subject of concern and debate for more than two decades and indeed one of the driving forces of urban design has been a campaign for the revival of public space (Barnett,1982; Vernez Moudon,1991; Carr et al, 1992). Much of this concern has been focused on neglect and privatization of urban public spaces. This body of work variously explores processes whereby at one extreme public spaces become privatised exclusionary

enclaves for the wealthy, or at the other, marginal, neglected, litter strewn and vandalised areas, largely abandoned by much of society. In the UK there are well-known case studies that illustrate the former (RICS, 2006) and studies that suggest many spaces make up the latter (CABE, 2003; ENCAMS, 2005). While these are major issues and need to be properly addressed, in this paper we focus on yet another concern about public spaces, the threat of homogenisation and whether spaces are becoming increasingly similar everywhere. We report on some of the results of a research project conducted on the public spaces of the Northeast of England, showing that local areas are far from passive recipients of global influences.

There is a sizeable literature on how public spaces have suffered from neglect and privatisation. As key assets of cities, the provision and maintenance of public spaces are primarily the responsibility of public authorities. However, partly due to the financial difficulties of these authorities in the 1970s and 80s, public spaces suffered from lack of attention and neglect, as signified by broken pavements, vandalised street furniture, defaced public monuments and generally being unkempt and unsafe places. In contrast when new public spaces were developed, it was increasingly done by private developers who, to safeguard their investment in a polarised social environment, would create privatised and exclusive enclaves (Punter, 1990; Sorkin, 1992; Tibbalds, 1992; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993; Zukin, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1998; Bentley, 1999; Urban Parks Forum, 2001).

This picture, however, has become more complicated after the economic growth of the 1990s, when government agencies in the UK have become more actively involved in the development and maintenance of public spaces. This new attention to public spaces has been part of an overall Urban Renaissance agenda, to promote cities as engines of economic development (Urban Task Force, 1999). With the help of new iconic buildings and public spaces, many authorities are trying to change the image of their towns and cities. While neglect, gentrification and privatisation remain as significant concerns, these new development activities pose a range of new questions. In this paper, we are primarily dealing

with the question of whether the new waves of attention to public space are creating a similar image everywhere, devoid of local identity, or if there is a possibility of diversity and local distinctiveness in the spaces being created, or regenerated.

Pressures for homogeneity

Tensions between globalisation and local identity are one of the key contemporary debates (Castells,1996). There seem to be increasing structural pressures on places to become similar everywhere, owing to ideas, practices, and circumstances that operate at national and international levels, while influencing and shaping localities. Powerful players helped by new technologies seem to be able to dominate local markets, with a negative impact on the diversity and variety of the local character.

One of the reasons for homogeneity is the change in the nature and number of development agencies (Whitehand, 1987;1992). Designers, developers, and public and private sector clients are no longer rooted in a particular locality. Throughout the twentieth century, development agencies grew in size and technical capacity. Their detachment from local areas allowed them to function at national and international levels and restricted competition allowed larger companies to dominate the market. For years, there have been complaints about how British high streets tend to look the same, with similar chainstores, complying to corporate images, making them almost identical everywhere; and how suburbs too have become increasing similar, with identical building forms and estate layouts (Tibbalds,1992; Bentley,1999). These concerns have been extended to the urban regeneration schemes, in which a similar set of ideas seems to be implemented in different places, giving the new additions to cities the same functions, feel and appearance, from the corporate architecture to the type of coffee shops and paving materials.

Urban centres have become dominated by retail development, pricing out other activities. As shopping becomes the primary function of town centres, the diversity and range of other activities are reduced, and the rent mechanisms of the market ensure that the space is occupied by the highest bidders. While the ambience may be more colourful than ever before, the range of commercial organizations and activities in town centres has become substantially less varied, hence the campaign to promote mixed-use design and development. Pressures for homogeneity are not only at work in town centres, however, they are also shaping the urban periphery, owing to the prominence of powerful market players.

In retail, for example, a single supermarket (Tesco) controls one-third of the UK's market, dominating in two-thirds of the UK postal districts. This has caused a backlash campaign orchestrated by convenience store operators, but supported by groups ranging from environmentalists, to suppliers and organisations such as the Women's Institute, who claim that the big supermarkets are driving independent stores and small suppliers out of business. In effect turning UK high streets into so-called "clone towns", dominated by the same retailers (Finch, 2007; Competition Commission, 2007).

Large companies also dominate the housing sector, where the number of companies has been considerably reduced in recent years, consolidating the share of larger players. Just three private companies (Barratt, Persimmon and George Wimpey) accounted for 21 percent of the market in 2005, while the share of regional companies dropped (AMA Research, 2006). Similar to the retail sector, complaints have been raised about the housing sector on how this market structure has had negative impacts on the quality and diversity of their products, and ultimately on the quality and distinctiveness of the urban environment.

Pressure for homogeneity can also be found in the scale of urban development. In the past decade, the United Kingdom has experienced one of its longest periods of economic growth, and subsequently one of its biggest public sector building booms since the Second World War

(CABE, 2006). Financed through taxation, private finance, or funding from the national lottery, there has been a significant increase in public buildings, such as schools and hospitals, urban regeneration schemes and public space improvements in city centres.

One of the consequences of such a massive building boom in a short period of time has been pressure for homogeneity. This pressure is not necessarily applied knowingly or explicitly; it is the result of a prevailing national atmosphere. Each period of construction boom tends to have its own character and its products can be identified from the products of other periods. For example, we can easily distinguish post-war buildings and spaces, which were built during a period of public building in the 1960s. Similarly, we can identify the urban environments of Georgian, Victorian and other historic periods due to the prevalence of a particular character and taste at that time. When each development cycle comes to an end, its particular tastes and approaches are questioned and revised by the next generation. The post-war boom in public building was later criticised for its attention to quantity, rather than quality, for its attention to buildings and cars, rather than pedestrians and public spaces. Many of its housing schemes have now been pulled down and its use of brutalist architecture seen to have degraded the quality of urban environment. One of the key criticisms against it was its homogeneity, attempting to create urban environments in an international style that could be anywhere in the world.

Globalisation has speeded up the circulation of ideas around the world. Expertise is not a locally-based phenomenon, it can be learnt and practised elsewhere, which is why educational institutions, consultants and construction companies can operate at national and international levels, taking their ideas everywhere around the world, creating possibilities of similarity across the globe. The building boom in Britain has generated a shortage of skills in the construction industry at every level. In these circumstances, it is inevitable that a small number of consultants will get a large number of commissions. The result would tend to reflect this limited number of designers, in patterns of similarity across the country. As local

authorities and regeneration agencies compete to recruit star designers, the range of consultancies become even more limited.

The change in the nature of development agencies and the impacts of large scale construction activities on the availability of skills have been paralleled by the impact of regulatory frameworks. To maintain the quality of development, and to promote good design, there has been a continuous growth of guidelines, rules and regulations by UK government agencies. To enable this massive programme of development activity, the Commission for Architecture and Built Environment was established in 1999, with the aim of promoting good design and high quality. As a result, the UK government has recently become increasingly aware of the importance of public space and has commissioned a series of practice based publications in the field (CABE, 2002, 2004; CABE & ODPM, 2002). Meanwhile, exemplars of good practice have been identified (Billingham and Cole, 2002).

In urban design, a culture of checklists, guidelines and codes has developed. In their attempts to articulate what urban design means, academics and practitioners have produced lists of principles to follow (e.g., Bentley et al, 1985; Alexander et al,1987; Jacobs and Appleyard,1987; Tibbalds, 1992; Urban Task Force, 1999). In other branches of design, such pressure to codify and regulate has been less pronounced. While in architecture innovation and imagination are the keywords, in urban design good practice guidelines proliferate. While these are meant to provide a framework to help practitioners, they can also contribute to homogeneity when applied unthinkingly.

Dynamic of Diversity

Pressures for homogeneity, however, are not the only forces at work. There are a number of factors that contribute to local specificities, which keep places different, despite pressures for homogeneity. As a place is developed and changed through decades, and even centuries, it

acquires a number of historic features and associated uses and traditions; in short a particular character that makes it different from any other place. While places in different cities, or even in the same city, may be subject to similar forces, their particular histories make them unique. Each will have its own stories, associations, uses and configurations. It is this historic continuity that mixes with the forces of change and creates a particular new context, unless the place is fully wiped out and rebuilt, which was the case with much of the post-war urban renewal schemes. In such cases, local memories were dispersed and physical traces of the former places dismantled. It is only at this level of intervention that the historic context can be largely removed; otherwise, it remains an influential factor in the shape of the outcome (Mumford, 1975; Hall,1998).

Even if the place is fully redeveloped, it will start to change over time. As local circumstances change, small and large adjustments to the place will make it different from what it was at the time of development. Places go in an out of fashion, people adapt spaces to their own needs, surrounding land uses and buildings will change. This is the future history of the place, which makes it a different place from today. Moreover, as society's values change over time, new generations never experience places in the same way as previous generations, so the experience of place will inevitably be different. Through this constant change, the possibility of remaining the same is reduced, and the dynamics of diversity strengthened.

The patterns of ideas and practices may be increasingly more universal: from the styles of design and management to the technology of construction and the rules that frame them. However, these ideas, rules and practices need to be applied in a locality, and each locality will have a different combination of these patterns. In a globalised world, it is this particular local combination that may help establish a local identity, using the same ingredients, but in a distinct and unique ways. Importantly too, when local populations are part of the process of design, development and management of a place, the place will become different by virtue of their involvement. If successful, this intervention will make it suitable to local needs and

conditions, rather than a bland imitation of a universal pattern with no connection to the context.

Public Space Vitality in North East England

In late 2004 the regional development agency One North East and the regional cultural consortium Culture North East, commissioned the Global Urban Research Unit, Newcastle University to carry out an empirically based research project into the cultural and economic life of public spaces in the North East of England. The aim of the research was to broaden the debate around the factors that contribute to vibrant public spaces and feed into long term strategy making for the creation and development of locally distinctive public spaces in the region.

The first stage of the project involved a scoping exercise of all prominent public places in the North East, including existing policies and outline strategies in place for these spaces. All settlements of populations over 10,000 people were considered for inclusion. Spaces were classified in terms of function(s); size; character; investment strategy (where appropriate); and location in the region. Consideration of the contemporary or historic nature and success or latent potential of spaces was also included. From this exercise five case studies were chosen for detailed examination, giving a geographical spread and typological diversity of prominent spaces. These were:

- Market Place, Alnwick. The historic core of this Northumberland market town surrounded by a range of attractive 18th and 19th Century buildings; it underwent major resurfacing and partial pedestrianisation in 1999.
- Millennium Square, Durham. Space contained within new cultural buildings of a theatre, cinema and library. It is just outside Durham's historic core.

- Old Eldon Square/Monument, Newcastle. In effect two separate, though geographically close public spaces. Old Eldon square was designed as a private garden for a set piece residential square in the 1830s; subsequently 3 sides of the square were demolished to make way for Newcastle's covered shopping centre (confusingly called Eldon Square) in 1975. The area around Greys Monument (designed 1838) is the climax of Grey Street in the heart of Newcastle's Grainger Town. As part of recent improvements this area has been re-laid with Caithness stone and includes new bespoke street furniture.

- Esplanade, Redcar. Traditional seaside esplanade, the area underwent an improvement in the 1990s to encourage access to the extensive beach area and incorporate a number of artistic installations.

- High Street, Stockton. The widest street in England, enclosed by buildings of a range of styles and quality. The central section of the street was pedestrianised in 1995/96 except for a busy two way bus route along one boundary.

Concurrent with identification of possible case studies a desk/web-based scoping exercise of public spaces that had been identified (for example though professional body awards) as exemplar of successful public space strategies in the UK and elsewhere was carried out. The aim of this was to provide a broad picture of the types of issues that were being tackled and the range of approaches used. The information gathered through the exemplars study was combined with design principles from contemporary literature to provide a framework for semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders with interviewees drawn from local authority officers, local amenity groups and local business groups. Further observation analysis combined with informal interviews of members of the public was carried out in each space. All the interview material was anonymised as a condition of the research; quotation marks and italics in the subsequent sections denote direct use of interview material.

Overall perceptions of case study spaces.

The key finding from the study was that the spaces examined are well-used and valued by both users and providers. The quantity and quality of spaces had also changed positively over recent decades. Newcastle's Monument, is a good example. Up until the 1970s this area was a major road junction, the monument itself isolated on traffic island as one interviewee described it *"effectively a signal controlled roundabout"* whereas today, it was in their view *"a high quality pedestrian space and good quality public realm"* (fig 1). Similarly Durham Millennium Square, (fig 2) was created from a derelict area used for car parking and Alnwick was described as previously *"a car park, part of that a bus station... it wasn't a very pleasant space"*; today both these places were praised by users and providers as providing high quality public spaces.

Figure 1. Grey's Monument high quality pedestrian space.
Figure 2. Millennium Square, from car park to cultural space.

For users, however, it was often the function of the space which was more commented on rather than aspects of the physical design. People talked about day to day life of these spaces, so that Monument Newcastle *"works well as a social area"* and *"it's nice to sit down and see everyone passing around you"* and at Durham *"the Square brings people to this part of the city and it initiates culture"* . Users were particularly enthusiastic about the various special events that took place in the spaces and the fact that they were open, accessible and 'free' counted in their favour . Unfortunately, however the animation of spaces during these types of special events can actually highlight the ordinariness and emptiness of spaces when no events are taking place. This seemed evident in Alnwick when on an event free day people made comments like *"it's alright"* and *"I'm used to it"*; though observation analysis suggested overall the space was generally popular and well used (fig. 3).

Figure 3) Alnwick Market Place appeared popular and well used

In Stockton, users expressed concerns over maintenance, with factors such as broken and loose paving being specifically mentioned along with chewing gum remnants and litter, however even so most people were satisfied with the amenities the space provided. There were no complaints of lack of maintenance, litter or unaddressed vandalism from the other case studies.

Homogeneity and Retail Uses.

There was no evidence that homogeneity through the dominance of major retailers was a key concern of members of the public in the four commercial spaces studied. This was perhaps not surprising in the cases of Alnwick and Redcar where local independent traders are still relatively prominent within the retail units adjacent to the spaces studied. It might be more expected as a complaint in Newcastle and Stockton. Newcastle, however, also had a number of local retailers within the cases studies. Old Eldon Square, for example, had a row of 'alternative' second hand boutique and record shops mostly serving groups of teenagers who had adopted the surrounding public space, and Monument has the local football team's main supporter's outlet facing the pedestrian space. In this sense only Stockton is most representative of the type of traditional shopping street where chain store domination has been most acute. Here, interestingly however, members of the public were more concerned by the quality of the shops, with numerous examples of 'pound' shops and charity shops which while recognised as serving a demand had rather *"cheap and chatty"* frontages; rather than the fact that the outlets represented might be found nearly anywhere.

Among provider interviewees the anyplace retailing of Stockton High Street was a major concern, however, as one interviewee stated, *"it has pretty much the same shops you would get anywhere else, so why come to Stockton?"*. The key issue here was that Stockton was

struggling to compete with nearby larger centres, in particular Middlesbrough where the range and quality of stores was higher. Interviewees stated that even when new shops were attracted to Stockton because they were branches of stores already present elsewhere in the region it did not help the town's competitive edge. The solution was seen as encouraging small independent retailers, who could generate a distinctive atmosphere, *"let's create a design element; let's offer... a really interesting quirky type reason to come into town"* as an interviewee expressed it. To this end the town had be working hard to develop successful music and street theatre festivals and it was hoped that these might provide a basis for more diverse business opportunities.

Other forms of homogenisation, for example through the use of ubiquitous forms of street furniture, materials, artworks, or general ambience, were not picked up as a particular issue in any of the spaces studied. Further, while generally interviewees seemed relatively unconcerned with the issues of homogeneity, they were far more engaged by themes of distinctiveness in relation to their areas with a number of key themes being explored; with words like 'unique' and 'special' combined with 'identity' being used frequently in discussions.

Dynamics of distinctiveness

Historic settings, buildings and structures were seen as a key provider of local distinctiveness and identity, as in the case of Alnwick, where *"the urban form is pretty much unchanged for centuries, it gives a very powerful sense of place"* or as another interviewee put it *" the market cross, which is an ancient monument, stands within the square and gives it an identity which is immediately Alnwick"* . Historic structures were not always necessary, however, association with long standing traditions and uses could be equally powerful, as at Redcar where an interviewee noted *"there is a distinctiveness that is to do with the seaside tradition... the fishing boats, sell their catch on the beach... and that's been a long standing*

tradition in Redcar, I don't know of any other place that actually does that…it's part of its quality" (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Traditional fishing and catch selling is very much part of Redcar's seaside identity

Long term use by local people was therefore a key way of developing distinctive places. However, the changing dynamics of use, or the adoption of spaces by certain groups can be controversial. Old Eldon Square provides an interesting example. Here the central area has become a popular meeting place for adolescents interested in alternative culture, generally referred to in the City as 'Goths'. However the square also has the City's main war memorial as its central feature and is, therefore, valued by war veterans, their families and associated organisations. The demands of the different groups were seen as particularly incompatible, with those interested in the war memorial seeing the youngsters' behaviour of congregating in large groups as disrespectful and inappropriate. To what extent the teenager presence puts off other people from using the space on a day to day basis is a matter for debate, though some users did comment on the "*kids and hippies"; *however, the teenagers themselves made comments like it's a *"greenspace for us kids to hang around, a good social area!"*. Providers recognised the dilemma and the contribution the youngsters made to a distinctive sense of place, for example commenting, *"personally, I think it would be a poorer place if they* (the teenagers) *didn't feel they could gather there"*. The Square is however undergoing redevelopment which will encourage more through movement of shoppers; this distinct aspect of the Square's social life may, therefore, fade away or move to another location.

Involving the community with redesign schemes was highlighted as a key way of reinforcing ownership and identity in public spaces as in Alnwick where it was suggested that "*everybody has gotten to feel it is theirs"*. Success, it was claimed, was achieved by involvement at many different levels, for example the input of local expertise and knowledge through involvement of individuals like the local civic society in the regeneration of the space to more generally

"ideas (for the design) came up from the public consultation exercise" . Local children, for example, had developed design for new benches based on local history; these had then been crafted by a local blacksmith.

More generally across the study areas and particularly Redcar and Newcastle, working with artists was seen as way in which the identity of these places could be strengthened; however art was not an end in itself and works had to be meaningful and contextualised. The street furniture used in the Grainger Town regeneration area of Newcastle, which includes Grey's Monument, designed as a collaboration between poet Julia Darling and glass artist Cate Watkins, both artists having long associations with the Northeast, were cited as successful, by interviewees in Newcastle and several of the other case studies (fig 5).

Fig 5) Grainger Town street furniture at Grey's Monument, cited as contextualised and meaningful public art.

In Durham's Millennium Square, while devoid of historic buildings, or traditional uses, there was still a sense that the space had captured a local 'identity' and that this was tied up in the design process. This had been a design competition in which four (projects) were short-listed, though one interviewee commented, *" two were quite horrendous and had no idea of the ambience of the city"* whereas the winning entry was felt to *be "although modern its simplicity and use of materials echo the traditional Durham"*. Further, animation of the space through a calendar of festivals and events was helping to create local ownership of the space as indicated through the positive user comments.

Investment, Distinctiveness and Vibrant Places

The recent investments in the public spaces studied, were seen by providers as essential to maintaining and increasing distinctiveness and this was seen as linked to improving overall

cultural and economic vibrancy. In terms of economic benefits, for example, these included increased confidence and private investment particularly in adjacent businesses. In Stockton, Newcastle and Alnwick there were claims of substantial private sector leverage, for example in Newcastle of *"at least"* 1 to 4; and at Alnwick 1 to 3. Further, in Alnwick there was a sense that public investment had in particular created an atmosphere in which small independent businesses could thrive, *"there were individuals who had the drive and enthusiasm to make something happen on the back of the new conditions"*. However, it was also recognised, that the economic benefits of public realm works could not always be calculated because these improvements did not happen in isolation, as one respondent summed up, *"it is quite a difficult one to actually measure because other things have been developing over the same period"* . In Alnwick , for example, this related to the 'Market Towns Initiative' and works on Alnwick Garden (associated with Alnwick Castle a major tourist attraction) from 2000 onwards, which had led to a *"clouded picture"*. In Stockton too investments elsewhere in the town had contributed to making the town more economically active, so that the effect of the High Street public realm works was felt extremely difficult to quantify.

The key cultural benefits of quality public space were clearly seen as increasing public engagement and the popularity of places and the events they hold. So in Alnwick, for example, *"there has been a strengthening in the role of the market place as a focal point for people"* and in Stockton, the improvements were seen to improve the social life of the town *"because it's provided a space which can now be used"*. In Newcastle *"I think what we've done has massively improved the quality of life and the experience of (the City)"*. Cultural benefits were not necessarily place-based, however, so that in Alnwick for example though the Market Place was the focus of the annual music festival, events 'spilled over' in to local schools and other venues. Public space regeneration, however, had provided a focus for this to happen.

There was also a perception that quality public realm could set the scene for greater engagement with the region, or at least the sub-regions that surrounded the places studied. The use of Alnwick's Market place for farmers markets was an example of this: *"it supports local farmers and the farmers' market supports local traders and local produce, it's a very positive thing"*. Again in Durham this was certainly seen as an aspiration; *"we can create shorter links, shorter supply chains between the customer and the local area..."*. In particular there was a sense that craft and creative industries could also be encouraged through the use of the Millennium Square for trading their products.

Discussion and conclusions.

The aim of the Northeast research was broaden the debate in the region around the factors that contribute to the creation and maintenance of vibrant public spaces. In so doing it became apparent that the project was of significance in current debates around homogenisation versus local diversity and distinctiveness in public spaces.

Homogenisation may be a key concern at the national level, but at the grassroots level of users and providers it seemed less of a pressing issue and a concern, really only expressed in one of the case studies.

Admittedly, however, this may be in part a function of the case studies chosen. Newcastle is the Northeast regional capital; Durham is a unique historic city; Alnwick is a relatively isolated market town; and Redcar has its distinct seaside character. Stockton on the other hand has somewhat lost its identity by being amalgamated into the conurbation of its larger neighbouring settlement, Middlesbrough. It maybe the case, therefore, that if all the studies were drawn from towns which were equally disadvantaged in some way, then the issue of homogenisation may have been a far more dominant theme to the research.

Homogenisation, due to 'anywhere' retailing, is also likely to be most strongly associated with areas considered as primarily retail orientated by users and providers. Again in the cases examined this is not necessarily the case: Redcar promenade has a duel function of beach use and recreation; the two spaces in Newcastle are slightly outwith the prime shopping locations and were clearly seen by users and providers more as social spaces than retail ones; Durham is a non-retail associated space; and Market Place Alnwick, by virtue of the size of the settlement, is necessarily perceived as multi-functional. Thus again, if the study had set out to look at areas only associated by users and providers as retail spaces, then homogenisation may have been more significant.

Even if, however, the choice of case studies has been somewhat biased against spaces that would be most effected by homogenisation pressure, from the studies we would suggest there is plenty of evidence that users and providers believe that local distinctiveness and diversity of places are thriving; even if certain aspects of our towns and cities seem to be becoming more similar. The key dynamic of this is that people still value public places as spaces of social encounter as much as any aspect. This use by people over time creates a distinct identity which can not necessarily be predicted, or controlled. People are not automata; passive recipients of global forces and by the same token the spaces they create are not either. To this end while forces of globalisation are undeniable, they do not necessarily in themselves destroy the uniqueness of place.

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