

## **Vernacular Evolutions at the Center of Landscape Change**

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### **Abstract**

*The article looks at the transformation of traditional landscapes in Europe and Romania in particular, as a result of the spread of current patterns of urban development and at the some of the main pressures on traditional and/or cultural landscapes. Their transformation, deemed inevitable, is not just visual but more profound, as it obviously implies an entire spectrum of changes which include societal, lifestyle and technology related ones, as well as changes of perception, value systems and user behavior. These precise changes of perception are some of the most unequal between scholars, specialist, officials and the public alike, which contribute to a state of hostility and confusion and eventually a recoil in managing the transformation.*

### **Rezumat**

*Articolul urmărește transformarea peisajelor tradiționale din Europa și România în special, ca urmare a răspândirii modelelor actuale de dezvoltare urbană și în același timp unele dintre principalele presiuni actuale asupra peisajelor tradiționale și/sau culturale. Transformarea lor, considerată inevitabilă, nu este doar vizuală, ci mai profundă, implicând în mod evident un întreg spectru de modificări care includ anumite evoluții societale, de stil de viață și tehnologice, precum și schimbări de percepție, sisteme de valori și de comportament al utilizatorilor. Tocmai aceste modificări de percepție sunt unele dintre cele mai inegale între diverse categorii de public, specialiști, cercetători și factori de decizie, ceea ce contribuie la o stare de ostilitate și de confuzie și care produc, în cele din urmă, un recul în gestionarea acestor transformări.*

**Keywords:** landscape transformation, vernacular, dwelling, building culture, locality, Romania

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## 1. Introduction

The more modified a landscape, the more cultural it is [1]. Landscapes transform because they are expressions of the interaction between cultural and environment forces. Cultural landscapes are therefore the result of consecutive reorganizations of the territory as a result of changing needs of a society. Along the history many such changes took place, some of which were devastating, but not all have left traces which are still visible today. Still, most of these phases, and not necessarily the most recent, were accompanied by initiatives of landscape conservation and regulatory measures to this effect.

History and archeology show us that important changes have occurred in what were in fact short periods of time within larger time intervals, alternated with periods of stability and inactivity, when the new elements were adopted and harmonized with the existing, thus creating much of the regional landscapes, with their specific differences. The frequency and magnitude of these changes depended largely on the technology available and so unsurprisingly the biggest transformations which were considered destructive to the environment coincided with the beginning of industrialization [2,3]. Around the same time, or soon after, the Romantic period brought about the first legislation in regard to the natural environment and to landscape protection, under the influence of new currents of thought in natural sciences [2]. A little later, Evolutionism would forever change the vision upon nature and the responsibility of man towards it. At first, once again under the influence of Romanticism, which rediscovered the nature in its posture of a cultural, aesthetic good, the focus would be on protective measures regarding mostly visual aspects, including landscape protection and protection of the natural monument as a "natural sight". These would add up to older, functional regulating measures, which saw nature firstly as an economic good, regulations which have always accompanied economic development, whether in agreement or in opposition to it. Only after the mid-twentieth century, a new environmental vision, which assumed integrated development and regulatory concepts, would pave the way for a whole series of enthusiastic holistic inquiries, which came about after the 1980s. The vast potential of such an approach would eventually open new strands of research, both theoretical and applied, which would conclude in numerous implementation policies [2]. To all of these a revived interest in the concept of cultural landscape would finally add beginning with the 2000s, which came along an increased concern towards the threats of globalization on local identity and regional diversity [2].

The disappearance of traditional cultural landscapes and their replacement with new ones emerging in recent decades is a constant concern in the literature of the last decade. The transformation of landscapes is seen as a threat, as a negative development, the more that it is not only impending the uniqueness but also the diversity. Distinctive landscapes of the past are becoming increasingly similar today. This uniformity is in fact the main concern, because it could wipe out the identity of territories [2]. Qualities such as identity or consistency, though they can be described relatively easily from a holistic perspective, are however difficult to quantify, making their processing difficult [3]. A traditional landscape should not be mistaken for a cultural one, in contrast to which it was formed over a long history, of usually more than several hundred years, during which it configured a recognizable structure that integrates particular biotic, abiotic and cultural elements [3]. Many of them have disappeared over time, being replaced by others, only to be replaced once again, at an even more rapid pace as we approach the present [3]. Similarly, and even easier to follow, the same changes happen in the case of vernacular architecture: throughout history a certain place almost always knew several very different forms of housing [4].

## 2. An Inevitable Change

Marc Antorp [2] is talking about the creation of completely new landscapes, whether cultural or natural, which overlay on the former ones instead on integrating them, leading to a rapid decline of the existent. The result is an obvious breach of continuity, which creates further losses of coherence and identity. Other authors emphasize the threats which today's development pressures pose to the visual quality of landscapes, including those admitted as valuable by society as a whole [5], especially where special regulations did not specifically prevent them [6], or the fact that landscapes become a progressively rare resource, which is less and less capable of offering the same level of quality which once made it valuable for tourism, once again because of human pressures [7].

The wear and changes are affecting even areas where regulations and growth policies are genuinely advanced. The Barcelona metropolitan region, ie, is facing progressive transformations in the direction of low density urban development, which leads to a weakening of its traditional compact character and to the loss of some of the most important legacies of Mediterranean culture - its landscape and urbanity.[8,9]. In Flanders, on the other hand, this process is more advanced because there most of the traditional rural landscapes have already suffered a "severe structural disruption and loss of identity as a result of the processes of urbanization, agricultural rationalization and development of a dense communication infrastructure" [3] This was a result of the region's reconstruction after World War 2, when a very permissive planning and construction system was introduced. What can be seen today in Flanders are traces of the former traditional landscape, within a post-modern landscape which formed relatively quickly, traces which not infrequently require training to be identified.

Undoubtedly, ongoing processes of urbanization and the continued expansion of cities into the territory make it increasingly difficult to evaluate the identity content or the historical substance of places and landscapes, and indeed what the eye can see everywhere is increasingly similar and increasingly more generic. The dynamics of these changes at landscape level, both in terms of speed and scale, are accompanied by changes of values, behavior and perception. And they are altogether so numerous and rapid that their tracking and analysis is very difficult in the present pace of research [2].

According to N. John Habraken there are several important phenomena that influence the change of territorial structure today: 1) the increase of numbers and diversification of forms of supply, which are becoming more in reach of the domestic environment and a greater complexity of environment systems; 2) the increase in numbers and variety of foreign elements, as evidence of the expansion of trade and institutional global networks, which in turn limit the field of action of the local; 3) an increase of the overall size of buildings [10]. Most of the changes, although visibly breaking with the past, are made in order to improve the living conditions of an ever more urban population, whose mobility has also increased the footprint of urbanity far beyond the cities and their traditional hinterlands [2]. The optimization of some functions has resulted in the case of some complex systems in such a radical reorganization that in the process they became something completely different [3]. The accelerated technological innovation as indicator could give the extent of these changes [2].

And if on a short-term sustainability at the local level would be sufficient as goal in itself, "on a long term common structural changes should be considered" [7] believe Noronha et al., an opinion largely shared by European authorities. In the EU, the efforts to support marginal and less developed rural regions are facing with a paradoxical situation. The official policy sees that strengthening their regional identity is the key to their affirmation on the market and their increased

competitiveness. In reality, the economic development of these regions meant too often the exact opposite of this vision, namely environmental degradation and a marked loss of the specificity of their culture, economy and environment, to a much greater extent than it managed their consolidation [11]. This is the consequence, as in many other cases, of unequal power relations between stakeholders at local and global level [11] and of a growth strategy by means of stabilization, which is relatively empirical and not necessarily very honest.

Such situations brought to the attention of scientists, managers in planning and policy-makers that decisions on urban development require more attention and a coordinated approach at a range of levels within and between member states, and the need to develop common agendas and tools as part of the responsibility of the European Union [12]. The European Landscape Convention is the first legally binding instrument designated exclusively for the protection, management and planning of landscapes in Europe, which emerged in response to this growing concern towards the nature and extent of landscape transformation and the loss of local specificity as a result of this transformation [13]. The main pressures on landscapes are housing and artificialization on new territories, the increase in area of productive lands, the expanding of networks and infrastructure and not least the demand for leisure and recreational spaces [14]. Just as in the past, the main driving forces of these changes today are availability of lands/goods/services, urbanization and globalization, to which adds a fourth and more unpredictable one - calamity [2]. But today's changes are also of perception, value systems and user behavior [2], the shift occurring along with the infuse of the post-modern landscape [7].

### **3. The Vernacular Building Culture Evolution as a Measure for Change**

Because of landscape inertia, certain decisions materialize long after they are approved. If we understand the landscape less as a framework and more as a process, admitting this fact makes it possible to know the future [15]. Writing down the history of making the vernacular landscape requires an ability to identify the vague or scattered traces left into the land by older planning directions [15]. Traces of past planning can be found throughout the vernacular landscape in the Western world, but we have to strive some more to better understand their importance as features of the modern vernacular landscapes [15]. The established status of the vernacular, that of being anti-modern, makes that any modern transformation of either single objects or the landscape as a whole to be seen as a decline and a loss of authenticity. Because it is the consequence of a social reality, the vernacular is subject to the same developments as those of society out of which it grows. In the logic of this relationship, vernacular dwelling forms today are probably not in a deep crisis, but in a new phase of development. The reaction in the face of such realities cannot easily surpass the regret of the loss of "authentic", unique practices, and the consequence is the tendency to preserve or prescribe them, even if their relevance is outdated. For the average consciousness, the vernacular and the modern, it seems, just do not go together, observes Marcel Vellinga.

Andrei Șerbescu opposes such an attitude, as he warns that architectural expressions and in relation to these particular traditions and especially authenticity must be seen as part of the same social developments, as dynamic and creative processes and traits. The Romanian rural and its architecture after 1989 are blamed, without being studied. Most often one speaks of the loss of specificity and sensitivity or authenticity. The benchmarks are clear, the same every time, established as authentic and unrepeatable products of a specific area and its people. But too little is observed that spatial transformations and architecture are (natural?) effects of the social transformation, rather than any drifts off the course of tradition [16]. At the same time the question rises whether there is a critical amount of transformation which will annihilate/alienate a landscape

[2] In its support the Identerra model [17] defines territorial identity as a set of constants and spatial streams which marks a geographical unit - a place or a region. All heritage elements, be they natural, cultural and economic are called spatial constants, as is the population of a territory, whether permanent or temporary. In greater detail natural heritage includes all elements and objects that constitute the natural environment (atmosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere) of a territory. Population designates the spatial distribution model and structural features (biological, social, economic, cultural) of people who are permanently or temporarily present in a territory. Economic heritage is the sum of objects that create the artificial environment (modified nature and the built environment) created with the production, distribution and consumption of material goods and services (those related to the satisfaction of physical needs) of a territory. And cultural heritage represents all the objects that create the artificial environment (modified nature and the built environment) created with the production, distribution and consumption of goods and intangible services (those related to the satisfaction of spiritual needs) in a territory. Spatial constants are therefore natural landscapes (whether intact or modified, conserved or degraded etc.) and cultural ones (agricultural, industrial, rural, urban, mixed, etc.) in a territory. Finally, spatial flows are defined as activities, relationships and meanings in a horizontal (territorial) and vertical (functional) network, which shape nature, society, economy and culture. Sets of spatial flows influence certain lifestyles, regarded here as patterns of use and management of spatial constants [11]. What reinforces this definition is the evolution and not the abandonment of the traditional Romanian living environment in its physical form and in everyday habits, thus one of several successive developments in the last hundred years.

Vernacular architecture should not be seen as a category requiring protection and preservation, but as a dynamic concept that includes certain specificities, which remain peculiar to a place along their development [18]. In this regard Andrei Șerbescu observes that although migration and tourism transfigured radically the rural from a formal, spatial and technological point of view, they cannot completely break all its ties with tradition. In anthropology, the cultural dependency theory states that in the case of traditional cultures, their coming into contact with Western civilization will lead to a loss or a decline of their indigenous social structures, culture and tradition, and, as a corollary of evolutionary theory, that they will have to also become modern in order to survive. There is of course the opposite scenario, where a group adopts largely technological means, which ultimately allows it to consolidate its own culture and to "indigenize" modernity [19]. The influence of urbanity and its advance in regard to the rural always influenced the notion of beautiful for rural residents in Romania, for whom the relationship is often directly engaging: urban, therefore beautiful. Throughout the entire socialist period, for example, when the introduction of "modern" types of rural housing was preparing a new image and a different ordering to Romanian villages, their widespread adoption eventually created a vernacular landscape by means of countless interpretations and adaptations of typologies created by the official realm. Housing models introduced by the socialist state and adopted into the social and cultural structures of the villages, largely discontinued today, are therefore utmost expressions of the vernacular, and what's more, a historical vernacular.

Like elsewhere, we can speak of a tradition overlap and a mix of influences in the case of Romania. Very briefly, there's one part European tradition, namely Eastern Europe, where Oriental influences are significant, one part a harsh totalitarian regime, and a burst of energy in recent years, all seasoned with measures meant to align the country to the systems in use in the European Union and then a de facto implementation of its rules. This makes the development model found in Romania, says Constantin Goagea, one neither completely Western and none entirely specific to urban areas in developing countries [20]. Conversely, Andreea Matache observes that in Romania historical alignments to European urban ways of living have always been subject to a local modus

vivendi, wherein certain rural specificities have survived in both lifestyles and built morphologies. According to her, the same transfer of urban into rural or viceversa exists today as well, the difference being the way of understanding things and their putting into practice. What characterizes the current synthesis is, in her opinion, the substitution of the rural with the rustical, a more cartoonish and ridicule form [21]. For Șerbescu the "hesitant" and sometimes "grotesque" landscape, today after a long and mutating socialist experience, is the result of a process of transformation which is only now beginning [16]. Although he agrees that changes to the traditional way of living and to a greater extent, changes of housing forms are often radical, contrasting strongly with the older local specificities - "today's vernacular architecture looks completely different than what we knew it looked like" (my translation) [16] - he believes in the persistence inside present forms of a certain sense of place, other than a formal continuity, but rather as a fundamental relationship of dependence on social, economic and cultural issues that influence the way people live. This in itself has changed significantly in the post-socialist transition, as part of the comprehensive but so hesitating search for modernity.

If traditionally the meaning of vernacular when talking about buildings implies some sort of contact with a place, if not exclusivity to it, independence of means and building procedures and even selfbuilding maybe, in the 21st century, in which culture is delocalized and is increasingly informatized, these features should especially be reconsidered. And all considering that the transformation of vernacular culture is seldom limited by conservative practices, but rather by the informational and material maximum which is accessible given the economic, social and geographical conditions [16]. Technology transfer brings about changes in society and the cultural implications it has are more than semnificative [22]. In a contemporary building culture, selfbuilding is supported by well represented industry and media, and a large offer of building materials and techniques, whose employment, in spite of the combinations possible will in fact generate rather predictable and repetitive results. And this despite the fact that today the number of materials used in building a house is much larger and their origin more remote than in any other historical periods, just like in all other forms of production [23]. In present-day societies, which are network dependent and reliant on a large scale operation of technical systems, the origin and distribution of information and materials, as well as their distribution, depend on the functioning of these networks. This explains why there is a dominance of materials and techniques of non-indigenous origin in the built environment today.

*"The irrefutable innovation of the modern era lies in systems of all kinds being sustained permanently by network - as opposed to local societies. Of this phenomenon, building systems and architectural styles represent only a part. It seems to encompass all ways of producing and signals a more fundamental shift than mere increase of scale and frequency in manufacturing and commerce."* [10]

If in other countries prefabrication of whole houses is not unusual, in Romania it is limited to the supply of subsystems, or to free compositions inspired by prefab designs or ready-made developer houses. Drawings are not strictly necessary, and therefore, changes and improvisations occur naturally and economically. The domestic construction site is open-end and easily operable. In this part of the construction sector, the building subculture is the least formal, and some projects - usually very small ones - are made almost exclusively to the legal limit or beyond it. Informality is not just about legal compliance, but the entire process of identifying and contracting builders and suppliers, choosing materials or amending constructive solutions is almost exclusively done orally, based on recommendations and site suggestions. In all these cases, an industry well intertwined in the territory stands ready to respond to any project with its offer of materials and techniques, among which the cheapest are the ones employed by most users [23]. The logical result are stocks of goods whose importance in the tender and spread of constructive solutions is all but negligible. Although

today the increase in building materials supplies is indeed remarkable and perhaps unprecedented, it is somewhat tempered by those materials actually available and accessible, whose variation is obviously limited by their turnover, their merchantability, by distributors and market exclusivity. As always, there are few buildings today whose design is not ultimately dependant on financial considerations, and starting in the 19th century, behind many of the building activities there are increasingly more parties interested in capital investment, many of whom are in turn dependent on the construction sector to remain profitable themselves [23].

Eventually, however, new forms inside a building culture, initially conflicting local traditions end up becoming traditional themselves [22]. New hybrid buildings are certainly different from those before them, but they are still distinct cultural artifacts, whose authentic expression (such as it is) is linked to a specific cultural context and environment. In this sense, they are all vernacular, or at least resulted from "vernaculizing" modernity [19]. Understanding such a typology depends on one's participation in the group or society which produces it, and in this respect its spread is essential. Important is also the technological affinity of the "vernacular" built forms and those whose production is fully "formal". Although there is much more to it, the concept of fashion or more precisely how fashions change can help explain the current state of conflict. According to Wytold Rybiczki, fashion is a new language to discredit an older one and a way each generation differentiates itself (by means of rejection) from the one before it. Therefore changes in fashion involve not as much as creating something new, as destroying something old, which explains why new fashions always produce discomfort at some level. In the case of homebuilding what we witness is more of an upgrade or an update, a precipitous and difficult one of course, whose uneven processes alter the consistency of the environment in which they take place. Modernization, we find out [24], produces not other than residual space in the first place, therefore by spreading into territory - residual landscape.

*"Our desire for harmony has allowed the plan and the project to grow, spread, expand, superimpose themselves on the entire surrounding world as though they were the only ways of establishing a comprehensible order. This order refers to a specific idea of rationality: the rationality of what is modern."* [25]

Instead of harmony, the picturesque becomes the defining quality of today's cities, but not a beautiful or colorful picturesque, pleasantly irregular and intermixed, but one resulted from a mixture of qualities that until now were regard as negative: heterogeneity, irregularity, the extraordinariness, complication, excess of variation, clutter, dispersion and the lack of determination [25]. Unlike historical vernacular cultures, where constraints and choices were rather naturally occurring, in today's culture, the difficulty of choosing between the many options and the fewer constraints are responsible for the apparent lack of sense of domestic form and of the built-space as a whole [4].

#### **4. A Matter of Reference**

Quite often, in many European cultures, the domestic space occupies more than one module, whether we talk of the packed together dwellings typical to the Mediterranean region, of traditional urban houses and their outbuildings, of farms with their annexes of all sorts, summer kitchens, separate living spaces for the elderly etc. [10]. In Romania, up to moving into blocks of flats, mass living, whether it was in cities or in the countryside, was for the most part taking place between a number of separate spaces, and even after moving into these blocks, annexes were still becoming possible, in the form of garages, garden huts or closed balconies. Therefore, the next step - that of

the single family suburban type of house, was somehow raising a challenge in managing to pack up all these spaces into a single unit. That is maybe why many of them look so unsettled. Referring to the domestic architecture of Romanians in comparison to that of Transylvanian Saxons, Lucian Blaga talks o a identify "a cornucopia of futilites typical to Romanian houses" confessing beyond any artistic sense, which meanwhile becomes questionable, a "native blood who wants at any price to be set in a world of picturesque" (my translation) [26]. This view of the Romanian interwar village corresponds to that of the Romanian urban environment of the same period:

*"The richness and charm of these houses came from the delicate ornamentation, which was freely and inventively adopting stylistic echoes of many origins ... A minor poetic genre of sonnet or elegy, often ill-paced, but making up the charm of the city, giving a character to many residential areas. Not even luxurious residences would deviate from the rule, just as new avenues wouldn't, be they eclectic and modernist, where the more solid continuity of high street fronts would in fact dissolve at skyline level in a a rich array of unexpected silhouettes and overlapped plans."* [27] (my translation) - Ana Maria Zahariade talking about the builtscap of early 20th century Bucharest.

In the mid 2000's, commenting the preference of Romanians for complicated forms of roofing, Celia Ghyka notes an adversity to the ordinary and the traditional, both on the side of home-owners and architects [28]. References to a mix of influences and these "irrational" [29, 30, 31] complications are constant in the literature characterizations of new housing forms, and here they are, talking about the older forms as well. What we are dealing with, apparently, is a cultural trait, whose explanations I am not eager to offer myself, but I may note that they are often linked with cultural specificities and a vision of space peculiar to Orthodox Eastern Europe, as opposed to the one typical of a more pragmatic West [26, 32]. At the same time we might consider Rapoport's observation which, far from being deterministic, he says, notices that poor societies seem to be more attracted to symbolic values, as opposed to more utilitarian ones, unlike wealthier societies [4]. Their translation into built form raises the most comments:

*"Reporting on the grand houses being built in different areas of the country, the press in Romania is set to discuss them in the samy lazy terms of irrational housing options, when it is not preoccupied with the Kitsch aesthetic."* (my translation) [33]

The qualites of Kitsch are loughed at, meanwhile its role in shaping the built environment is as real as can be [24]. Popular aesthetics and tastes in architecture reflect standards and abilities to connect to them, thus having a greater role than they are usually granted [34]. Venturi and Scott Brown claimed that architects, concerned to obtain expression of the inner order of buildings, ignored the "ready-made" expressions that would have allowed architecture to communicate with a larger audience [35]. An architecture that recognizes fashion and styles, unlike one which is self-referential and introspective as the one architects appreciate, is an architecture for the world - and there is not necessarily anything wrong with it [36]. What we are dealing with here is a continuation of the postmodern reaction to the modernist formula, which calls, as once proposed by the Krier brothers, Bofill or Venturi, for a return to premodern cultural and aesthetic models, which are more meaningful and less aesthetically, socially or ideologically biased [37].

"Populist and supremely ugly", the new architecture becomes somehow pleasant if looked at outside a narrow architectural spectrum, and instead a larger, cultural one [31], in which its means, processes and objectives contain consitent meanings, which produce every time a personalized image, even if one which is always recognizable [31] and ultimately very much alike every time. Its rhetoric which is "pseudo-conservative, pseudo-progressive or a combination of both", includes "a radical sense of national identity and an ironic perception of global trends." Associated to questionable political regimes and to a often subversive economic prosperity, it is easily

recognizable in one form or another in all developing regions of the world [31]:

*"Although in cities there may be a persistence of long-standing cultural patterns as expressed in room arrangements or settlement patterns, ... the most ubiquitous modern vernacular looks much the same in different parts of the world. Many new areas of cities in the "developing" world, consist of buildings of some kind of mixed concrete and unit masonry construction, with pre-manufactured windows and doors, covered with plaster, stucco or thin tiles. Other places, particularly in the west, are characterized by suburbs based on an American model, with repetitive items built by developers. Each of these contemporary manifestations has a reality which, quite realistically, is not about to disappear." [22]*

If, as Paul Oliver says, the importance of a vernacular type will be recognized once it is out of use [23], it is not certain if this time we can afford to wait that long.

## 5. Conclusions

The landscape of today doesn't resemble very much the one before it and in fact it doesn't look like what we learned to cherish and to understand. We are witnessing a deconstruction of the landscapes all over the world, made under the auspices of the global models of urban growth, based on low density developments, a model seen as a serious threat to the local, historical character and diversity of the European landscapes, among others. At the same time the decline of urbanity is taking place, the overuse of exceptional landscapes eroded their aesthetic value, which used to ensure their function as a complement of urban life. The diffusion of the low density model into the territory alters the "authentic" landscape, but one which is disconnected from the contemporary way of living, depriving it of its value as an aesthetic consumer good, but creating, instead, an ubiquitous familiarity. The fervency of autonomous spatial or building processes surpasses by a large margin the possibilities of urban planning and even of the reactive spatial design, which cannot keep pace with the economical and cultural cycles, with their distribution and with the intensity of capital flows inside a global world. Inside a building culture [23] like the we have today in most places, volume industries are supplying much of the building solutions and techniques as well as building schemes employed by large segments of the public, for whom specialized planning is becoming an increasingly expensive and expandable formality. Opting for these solutions, the local building culture develops a system of hybrids - in perfect agreement with the inherent evolutions of the vernacular - which become easily recognizable, in spite of personal differences. Its role in the formal production of urbanity, landscape or locality for that matter is not to be anymore overlooked.

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