LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AS STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT
Landscape Architecture as Storytelling realigns the typical relationship between designers and those for whom they design through a unique, easily replicated design process. The realignment process introduces the teaching and learning of design based upon how we learned to read, write, and tell stores. One outcome is a more people-centric design process than currently used. Bringing people to the forefront of design problem solving occurs naturally when we replace design jargon with storytelling and storyboarding. Initiating the design process with a first- or second-person narrative uses people’s anticipated experiences to a proposed design as the design’s starting point. This approach takes to heart John Simonds’ epiphany that we design “…not places, spaces, or things…but experiences. The places, spaces, and things take their form from the planned experience” (1961, 225).

Building on students’ taken-for-granted, understanding of language, the storytelling approach is introduced in three phases. First, the fact that we all daily read the landscape as a narrative. Second, learning design fundamentals through a three-tiered analogy that interrelates language, basic design, and landscape design and considers the designer-as-author, the landscape-as-text, and the end user-as-reader.

In the third phase, the designer writes a short experiential narrative of people experiencing the design, turns the narrative into a storyboard, and then interprets the storyboard into a final design. In this way the likely end users lead us through the design process. The final design emerges as the end-users’ experiences gain clarity through the narrative-storyboard-design process.

Keywords
Landscape Narrative, Designer-as-author, Landscape-as-text, Storyboarding
1 INTRODUCTION

*Landscape Architecture as Storytelling* didn't start out resting squarely on John Simonds' epiphany that as landscape architects, or architects, or interior designers, and to an extent land planners, we design “…not places, spaces, or things [but]… experiences (my italics).” And that “the places, spaces, and things take their form from the planned experience” (1961, 225). However, *Landscape Architecture as Storytelling* does finish with the realization that John Simonds’ tenet is just that, a cornerstone of our profession in that it brings people to the forefront of landscape architecture in terms of our responsibilities to them, to their sensual aesthetic appreciations of land and life, and to our ethical responsibilities as the designers of environments in which people are born, age, grow old, raise families, and run businesses and communities. In considering people as key to landscape architecture’s purpose, Eric Klinenberg (2018) would argue, the physical environments we design contribute to or take away from our "social infrastructure: the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact" (4) and on which our society, culture, and species gain their identities. *Landscape Architecture as Storytelling* brings people as feeling experiential beings to the front of the design process.

The following approach to learning and practicing design is presented here in three parts. First is the fundamental premise that we all read the environments in which we live and move about daily. Second, is an introduction of The Analogy as a learning tool, as an interactive tool that helps make conscious what we unconsciously take for granted in how we use language to share stories. The third part is a design process based upon what is learned through The Analogy. That design process has you write a short first- or second-person narrative, turn the narrative into a storyboard, and finally use the storyboard to develop a design.

Please note landscape narrative is used throughout *Landscape Architecture as Storytelling* in two of three possible ways. One way is as a short first- or second-person written narrative that tells a story of your design’s end-users’ experiences. Second, is the narrative built into your design as read by people approaching, arriving at, entering into, and moving about in it.

2 THE TWO-PART FUNDAMENTAL DESIGN PREMISE

Part One of the Fundamental Design Premise is that we are social beings and through our social behaviors we create the spaces in which we live. Simonds’ epiphany is supported by Lefebvre’s introduction of space as a social product (1994; 1979). Lefebvre’s idea is, in turn, furthered by Norberg-Schultz’s expression in *The Concept of Dwelling* that “space admits actions, and hence allows life to take place” (1985, 25). To these rather broad expressions of the contribution of social dynamics to the production of landscape, architectural, and interior spaces Simonds helps us recognize the experiential nature of people’s social interactions with the environment. In doing so we are brought closer to the medium we so blithely use to design the lifeworlds of others — storytelling — and, doing that cement our responsibilities to those we serve. I wish Simonds’ realization had been located in the Foreword or Prologue and not at the end of *Landscape Architecture* (1961) in the Epilogue. Had Simonds shared his epiphany at the beginning of *Landscape Architecture*, so much of what he shared throughout the book would have brought us a deeper sense of understanding of what the book introduces to our interplay as designers with “the forms, forces, and features of the natural and man-made landscape” (xi).

Part Two of the Fundamental Design Premise recognizes that we read the landscape, in all its forms. Given Simonds tenet, so much of the 1960s through 1980s’ literature on social environmental content (Gans, 1962; Goffman, 1963; Gottdiener, 1985; Hall 1981;1983; and Sommer, 1974) and environmental design (Ardalan et al., 1973; Bloomer and Moore, 1977; Jacob’s, 1961; Norbert-Schulz, 1980; 1985; and Smith, 1977), supports a people-centric approach to design. But, in our effort to bring storytelling into design, especially storytelling as a foundation of design, how most of us learned to exercise our design skills doesn’t work. If we introduce storytelling into our existing design process we would just continue to focus on objects and not people’s experiences. What does work is replacing the typical design pedagogy with a three-tiered, language-based analogy and its application to a narrative, storyboard, design process then followed with design, construction, and site engineering skills.

By using what we already know about language, about communicating with each other, as an approach to learning design, we greatly reduce the angst and ambiguities which make design seem a mysterious, unknown world. We are social creatures, and therein lies the means to develop a people-first approach to landscape architectural, architectural, and interior design. Using a three-tiered analogy, here after referred to as The Analogy (see Figure 1) to interrelate language, basic design and landscape design
gains clarity and depth of understanding with each use. With each use we make conscious so much of what we take for granted day in and day out: how we learned to interact with and read landscape narratives. A corollary helps us understand the potential of learning a design process based on how we communicate as we consider designer-as-author, landscape-as-narrative, and end user-as-reader.

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Figure 1. a three-tiered analogy

Simonds is not alone in recognizing the form-giving nature of people’s social energies. By accepting Simonds’ aha moment we are asked to think not in terms of nouns but verbs. Our acceptance of Simonds’ request to plan for people’s experiences before selecting and organizing the physical objects that contribute to the experiences is strengthened with Henri Lefebvre’s note that our social interactions give shape, form, and character to the spaces we inhabit. That thinking is expanded through a larger scale application that gives rise to a recognized regional scale’s sense of character such as New England vs. Southwestern, MidAtlantic Colonial, Creole, French Canadian, and more. People’s cultural behaviors, their personal and social behaviors, their verbs as it were, make up economics, religion, food production, recreation, and more that contribute to the character of their related nouns or landscape spaces.

Architect, Christian Norbert-Schulz (1980; 1985), takes our understanding of people’s social molding of space further back in history. He argues for an interrelationship between regional geographic character and folklore that existed and informed people for millennia. Norberg-Schulz gives us, based on landscape scale — the macro expansive topography of North Africa that gave existence to the larger-than-life Egyptian gods, the medium human scale landscapes of Greece, and Norway’s forested landscape “covered by minuscule hillocks and tufts…a kind of micro landscape…which seems to have been made for gnomes or dwarfs” (1980, 34). Norberg-Schultz’s examples awaken within us an understanding of how we are socialized into the ways in which we see the world and identify with the related spatial form, character, and content of those places.

3 THE ANALOGY – A LEARNING TOOL

The Analogy (Figure 1), grew out of a wish to develop a less anxiety-ridden approach to learning landscape architectural design than many of us experienced. I arrived at my first landscape design studio with a strong math-science background. The problem-solving vocabulary with which I was familiar didn’t allow me to recognize what I was being asked to accept as design. As a result, presented with my first landscape architecture design project I asked, “What’s the formula?” I got a response made up of words I never heard before, but not an answer.
Even then I felt that introduction to landscape architectural design was characterized by more anxiety than was necessary. As a student, and later a design instructor, I found one aspect of comfortable learning comes with the use of metaphors and analogies to introduce new insights and skills. My classmates and I, as ignorant -- meaning unknowing -- students had been presented with landscape architecture as something new and we accepted that premise. In actuality much of what we were being asked to learn – problem solving, design, planning – we already knew. Much of it we’d already experienced. But realizing that was a ways off. So the angst and anxiety continued. Eventually, once I was on the teaching-side of the classroom I realized there was an easier way to learn design, by relating aspects of design problem solving, and design process to things most, if not all, my students had already experienced. With that realization came an understanding that learning something new based on something already known, something that had already been experienced in different settings, was easier than considering the new thing as a stand-alone topic separate from all previous experiences. Put differently, by substituting design jargon with students’ everyday experiences much of their sense of anxiety was reduced.

The following is both an exploration and a journey. As a self-directed learning tool, The Analogy facilitates an exploration of what landscape architecture is. Unpacking what The Analogy has to offer is a journey of self-discovery and learning regarding landscape architecture design. It is also a map that most anyone could follow and find as exciting and fun as I did once I began to peel back the layers.

The three-tiered analogy interrelates language, basic design, and landscape design. Situating basic design between language and landscape architectural design makes connecting relationships between language and design easier than without it. Each tier is a form of expression, sufficiently different to beg questions asking how an item in one tier can be related to and inform the other two, yet sufficiently alike to enable finding something in one tier transferable to the others. Each tier basically starts with a blank or clear slate: a blank page waiting for that first word in an essay or story; a blank canvas waiting for the first dab of paint or charcoal or graphite; or a landscape waiting for a new design.

Bringing relationships with which one is already familiar into a new topic is easier than confronting a subject or experience as though it didn’t previously exist. A wonderful example of this approach to learning design is biomimicry (https://biomimicry.org/) or the interpretation of how nature solved problems can help you design solutions to your own problems. An outcome of this understanding helped me develop The Analogy. The Analogy provides a means of questioning one’s tacit, taken-for-granted, understanding of language to build an understanding of basic design and landscape design. For me it is a lot like the I-Ching (Wing, 1979) as a means of discovering relationships that bind or push apart personal, social, and ecological situations. It is a means to a clearer and deeper understanding of a situation.

Here is a simple example of how one might use The Analogy. Remember being asked to write an essay or report? Remember staring at the blank page or computer screen waiting for your thoughts to suddenly appear? Like a white-out in a blizzard your eyes meandered here and there, back and forth, and up and down across the blank page, and still the “right” word(s) didn’t appear. When that first word did appear, it was like a painter placing a point on a blank canvas or an object being set in a barren landscape. Suddenly there was a here and there, a sense of orientation, direction, relative distance. Then you might think that not all points in basic design are the same. How does that relate to letters of the alphabet? Fonts. What happens if we use Baskerville Old Face instead of Bradley Hand ITC? What is the initial impression? What happens if the first word is “The” instead of “A” as with Edgar Allen Poe’s story The Landscape Garden (1904b)? Why didn’t he title the piece A Landscape Garden? How do points appear in the landscape as vertical objects (Lynch, 1960, 78-83; 100-102) or horizontal spaces like a plaza, an urban open space, a clearing in a wooded park (Bacon, 1967; Arnold, 1991; Ashihara, 1970)? How do people read these objects and spaces as sequential moments in a journey and informative statements in a landscape narrative?

After exploring words as points, as individual objects and spaces in a landscape, consider what happens when we start to add words to make sentences. Words multiplying across a page are like a point moving through space, they both produce linear features. But, in selecting words that work together and move the reader’s thinking in a prescribed direction we need to consider grammar and syntax. In basic design, there are the rules or principles providing for comprehension, continuity, coherence, and cohesion. Then what might be the principles that make a landscape design a cohesive whole? What would they provide for in terms of organizing space, selecting materials, and fitting the design into the local ecology (Spirn, 1998)? And on goes the questioning and discovery processes. A line moves through space to inscribe a plane; what do paragraphs as two dimensional features bring to sentences that extend their functionality; what do ground, vertical, and overhead planes bring to landscape lines that give them shape
and character? Planes move through space to inscribe volumes, or volumetric spaces; multiple volumes connect to make a series of spaces or what you find when you start looking through Bacon’s *Design of Cities* (1967) which is all about paths and sequences or what Gordon Cullen calls “serial vision” (1961, 17-20). What might be fun, turn The Analogy (Figure 1) into a dart board. Throw a dart and start your questioning where the dart lands. Start realizing relationships between design features and their ability to express parts of a larger narrative.

What makes this self-directed learning process both exciting and gratifying is when you find what you discover on your own is written up and supported in the works of established, respected designers. Yes, you, we, have the ability to delve into something new, discover within our own knowledge a unique understanding AND THEN find our ideas reinforced in the published works of others such as Kandinsky (1979), Lynch (1960), Arnold (1991), Ching (1978), Halprin (1969), and Beaver (1994) to name a few.

The more I worked with The Analogy the more I learned about my new profession and the more excited I got. As an educator I was increasingly excited with The Analogy’s potential as a learning tool. I was also excited with what I was realizing The Analogy allowed me to bring to my students and to my clients. The days of anxiously questioning design language and principles were becoming more and more comfortable. I was understanding the interrelationships within and between language (the expressiveness of design), basic design (the coherency of the parts making up a design), and landscape design (people’s lifeworlds) and wanted to share my excitement. An opportunity to test my thinking came in the form of an invitation to speak to a landscape design studio at the University of Virginia (UVA).

The UVA presentation concluded with a simple question that gave The Analogy an unanticipated, yet critical, direction. After being introduced to The Analogy and contributing thoughts on how a topic in one tier generated understanding of a topic in another tier, the late Harry Porter asked, “What’s the moral of the story? What do I do with The Analogy?” I know I responded with something but, in all honesty, I didn’t have an answer. I was so excited about what I was learning that at that point The Analogy was the beginning and end of what I had to offer.

Fortunately, Harry’s question stuck with me. Without realizing it at the time, struggling to answer, “What do I do with The Analogy?” prepared me to meet John Conron, an English professor at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. John became my mentor, guide, and friend. At 37 years old I had returned to school to earn a PhD in Geography. John’s passion was for the Picturesque (2001), its origins, history, and applications to landscape, architecture, interior design, clothing, paintings, and literature. For John, everything held and expressed a story, more particularly a narrative. In his pushing me to closely read various literary works, poems, paintings, and actual landscapes he introduced me to an answer to Harry Porter’s question: as designers we author landscapes that are narratives read by those who use them. That answer came to serve as the foundation of a unique approach to landscape architectural design made up of writing a short first- or second-person experiential narrative, turning it into a storyboard, and then turning the storyboard into a final design.

While most of The Analogy dealt with nouns, with objects and spaces, realizing an extension of The Analogy’s language tier into narrative brought verbs and adjectives to the nouns. In doing so, when the idea of landscape as narrative was joined with Simonds’ call for designers to design experiences the learning tool could now extend one’s insights into space (geography) and time (history) as storytelling. In considering landscape as narrative, it was easy to consider the designer as an author, the landscape as a text, and the end users of a design as the readers of landscape narratives. There are various forms of landscape narrative in fiction (Cooper, 1980; Poe, 1904a & b; Conron, 1974), the work of naturalists (Watts, 1975), cultural and human geographers (Sauer 1974; Tuan, 1974), and landscape architects (Spinn, 1998; Potteiger, and Purinton, 1998; Swaffield, 1995; 1996; Aminzadeh et al. 2016). Even so, to my knowledge, no one has recognized the designer as an author, the landscape as a text, and the end-user as the reader of the landscape narrative. With Simonds’ call to design experiences not things it was easy to answer the question, What sort of narrative would a designer author? Answer: an experiential narrative.

### 3.1 A People-first Design Process: written narrative, storyboard, final design

Expanding The Analogy to include narrative was a no brainer. Once I started thinking of designing for people’s experiences, I began to realize the different ways I had been introducing students to narrative but never referred to it as such. Thinking of designs in terms of narratives pulled together a number of approaches I’d ask my students to use when they had difficulties developing their designs. My favorite was to sit with them and their design and tell them I was a visiting friend, we had just arrived at an entry point
into their design, and they were going to walk and talk me through their design. When they'd start talking I'd add "Oh, and by the way, I am blind." I would record their story and then play it back. Picking out gaps and vague areas in need of clarification along their storyline was easy, even for the student.

To a certain extent, working with the three-tiered analogy made it easy to extend the literature/design comparison. First, writing and design go hand in hand. If you can't write about something clearly you can’t see it clearly and vice versa. In that a landscape narrative is based on people’s experiences, anticipated experiences, it calls for a first- or second-person narrative. A third-person narrative is more descriptive of a landscape design, descriptive of the things that will make up your design and not the experiences for which you will be designing. Your narrative comes from inside those who will experience your design, the typical end-users' thoughts and emotions. But where will the end users’ likely experiences come from?

That question brings two thoughts to mind. Students often react to receiving a design project with statements like “Wow, the possibilities are endless.” And “How can I write a narrative for a design that doesn’t exist?” First, the potential content and character of the experiences that will come to make up your design are not limitless. They can't be. People come to or move through particular spaces for particular reasons. As such given your own life experiences, and maybe a bit of background research, you can identify the most likely experiences people will anticipate as they approach, arrive at, enter into, and move about a private residence, a government center, a marina, a sports complex or an inclusive play facility. Each project calls for its own collection of related experiences while excluding a lot of others. That is why the possibilities are not endless.

In realizing the natural limiting nature of a landscape user’s anticipated experiences, a wonderful dynamic is brought into play. Goodman calls it "probability" while Pouillon refers to "contingency" (Chatman, 1980, 46-47). Rubin calls it "constraint" (1995). Chatman refers to it as "reading out" (1980) and Rapoport labels it “cues” (1982). Contrary to many students’ reaction to design projects there isn’t an endless list of possibilities to choose from. You can’t do “just anything.” A design's narrative theme and related thread are actually quite focused. In empathizing with the likely end users’ anticipated experiences, the progression of their experiences, and their sought-after outcome(s), you bring into play a cohesive sequence of experiences. In doing so, as you begin to identify a bundle of possibilities that can be brought into your design you simultaneously identify a cadre of things that don’t belong with your planned for activity settings. I appreciate Goodman’s idea that parts of a poem arise from previous parts already mentioned and give rise to future parts yet to be discovered. About that he states, “the formal analysis of a poem is largely the design you simultaneously identify a cadre of things that don’t belong with your planned for activity settings.

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In asking how it is possible to write a narrative for a landscape that doesn’t yet exist, we are still thinking in terms of the typical approach to designing objects and spaces and not considering people’s anticipated experiences as a design process and its foundation. Simonds said the places, spaces, and things grow out of the experiences designed. The other matter being ignored is that poets, novelists, and film writers, as noted by Rae (1996), Lamott (1994), and Kooser (2005) and the Pace Gallery’s 1993 exhibition catalogue, Drawing into Film: Directors’ Drawings do not have their finished story, poem, graphic novel, film, cartoon, or exhibit in hand when they start writing, sketching, or storyboarding.

Most designers have probably thought “How do writers do what they do?” just as many writers have thought “How do designers do what they do?” What writers do is not magic. It is like doing design: perseverance, practice, and a little bit of Anne Lamott’s working through “Shitty First Drafts” (1994, 21-27). No writers write “elegant first drafts.” So relax. Write what you want. No one is going to see it. Lamott notes, “A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft – you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft -- you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it’s loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy” (Lamott, 1994, 21-26).

Once you have what you feel is a good draft, read it out loud. The gaps in your story’s flow, continuity, and coherence readily stand out. Then share it with others. Respond to their questions, tighten the narrative further. Then interpret your narrative in the development of a storyboard. You needn’t be a
professional illustrator. Given the stick-figure drawings produced by well recognized film directors (Pace, 1993) you can, as they did, save a tremendous amount of money by storyboarding your narrative. A storyboard is a collection of images, moments as it were along a path. Each moment is a separate sketch. Don’t hesitate to make notes on the sketches regarding long views, panoramas, nearby sounds, textures underfoot, lighting, aromas, and more. Once you feel good about the interplay between your narrative and your storyboard again call your cohorts together. Give them copies of the narrative to go through with you as you carry them frame by frame through your storyboard. Again, let them share their feelings about flow, continuity, and coherence. Edit your narrative accordingly and add quick sketches and sticky notes as needed throughout your storyboard. Reworked, you’re now ready to make a presentation to your client(s).

Be aware, what you are about to share is a powerful design tool. Absent of design jargon and characterized by emotions and sensual experiences, your narrative-storyboard presentation will do three things. One, without design jargon and the language of geometry you’ve greatly reduced people’s assumptions regarding spaces, places, and things. Given the ease with which your clients can empathize with your narrative’s character(s), there is a high degree of agreement, and even consensus, regarding the experiential content of the design. Two, your presentation will be devoid of statements like “I wanted,“ “I decided,” “I picked,” or “I put this here.” As a result, questions asked of you will deal with your narrative characters’ experiences in settings seen from eye-level. The narrative-storyboard approach greatly reduces a sense of you as the designer being held accountable for the decisions you made. Your clients readily identify with what they are hearing in the narrative and seeing in the storyboard. One result is they are well informed regarding the content and flow of your proposed design. The ability to readily identify with the narrative-storyboard design brings to the fore the approach’s real power and third quality. When sculptor, painter Ken Spiering and I made our first narrative-storyboard presentation of the healing garden to the Sacred Heart Hospital clientele, which included hospital administrators, members of the Center for Faith and Healing, and several Sisters of Providence nuns, something totally unexpected and frightening happened. People started crying. I had no idea what was happening but, fortunately, quickly realized the ease with which people were identifying with our character’s participation in and experiences derived from what they saw to be the healing garden. With people’s responses and a further refining of the storyboard we then moved to development of the final design and an interpretation and application of what makes up the art, science, and technology that is landscape architecture.

During the final phase, interpreting your storyboard and your clients’ reactions into your final design, you will begin to realize your physical design’s expression of two if not three levels of narrative that will be read by those who participate in your design. The most immediate and yet transient of the narratives read by people experiencing your built design is the practical narrative: “Can I get there from here?“ “Will I be safe?” “Is this the way to go?” and other concerns regarding one’s safety and comfort. The practical narrative is transient because once you are past a point of concern you are already searching out the next in the narrative sequence of messages.

The second level of narrative is more pervasive. It deals with the socio-cultural sense of place. You may park in downtown Plymouth, MA and be reading the practical messages regarding step here, careful there, oh, how do I get down the hill, I hope there is a ramp, and more as you walk to the site of Plymouth Rock. Along your walk the color palette, Colonial New England materials, spatial scale, connection to the harbor all contribute to the socio-cultural sense of place and time being expressed. The intrusion of a postmodern structure just wouldn’t fit, wouldn’t support the anticipated ambience of your Colonial New England walk. The third level of narrative is that of deep meanings and archetypes. These messages are the most subtle and yet enduring. They are almost inborn and inescapable.

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. readily expresses all three messages. The practical messages of the walkway along the wall. You see the beginning and the end. The ground plane is uniform. I can get there from here and do so safely. “Come, walk this way.” The memorial’s surroundings deepen the socio-cultural sense of place. Located in the nation’s capital and visually linked to the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument sets up the third level of narrative. The magnitude of meaning, a period of great sacrifice, and as you walk the wall your ability to do so freely is reflected in the 58,318 names of men and women who gave their lives in service to their country, to you.

4 Setting the Stage

There is no conclusion to Landscape Architecture as Storytelling. Using the three-tiered analogy to delve into your unconscious understanding of language as it contributes to landscape architectural design
opens doors that in turn open more doors. What there is to learn about designing for people’s experiences brings people to the fore. Design becomes people centered. People’s health, safety, and welfare are not so much an outcome of good design but a guide to good design. At least meeting, if not exceeding, people’s anticipated experiences awakens what I believe is the heart and soul of design and in doing so makes conscious not just the fun and excitement of being a landscape architect but also the responsibilities of being a landscape architect. John Simonds’ epiphany allows us to argue for a design’s goodness that rests in those for whom we design. Interpreted through The Analogy and a narrative-storyboard-design process, people’s anticipated experiences, their choreography across a landscape, guide the shaping of landscapes, the selection of objects, and the placement of things in ways that turn spaces into places.

I am continuing to explore what The Analogy has to offer my understanding of not just how to be a better landscape architect but also why I am a landscape architect. I realize that what I’ve presented here is not research in the strictest sense. Even so, it has produced numerous questions that beg a more detailed approach to answering those questions. My hope is that landscape architecture undergraduate and masters and doctoral students and faculty will accept the challenge to determine “What is the formula?” that makes for not just good but great design and in doing so add to my understanding of Landscape Architecture as Storytelling.

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