

# Edo/Tokyo's Genius Loci and the Cybernetic Agora

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It is often said that beneath the apparent chaos and paradoxical duplicity of Tokyo's genius loci lies a hidden order. In fact, this city, from its exuberant days of Edo to the anatomic phenomena of its modern day version, is made coherent by a connectivity of time/event over space - not by the continuity of physical/spatial "place".

To capture the enigmatic reality of Edo/Tokyo, this paper intends to offer some beguiling speculations in defining the city's urban condition. To do so, three demonstrative allegories will be cited here. They are:

- Vaporous Archipelago: the architecture of time/space intervals

- "There is No Rim of Mountains Where the Moon Can Enter"  
- from a popular Edo folk song
- Rivers Without Water - the "floating world" and "sakariba"

## VAPOROUS ARCHIPELAGO: THE ARCHITECTURE OF TIME/SPACE INTERVALS

Between the months of May through October, Tokyo exists in 80% humidity. With such high moisture content in the atmosphere the city is typically enveloped in a veil of hazy legibility.

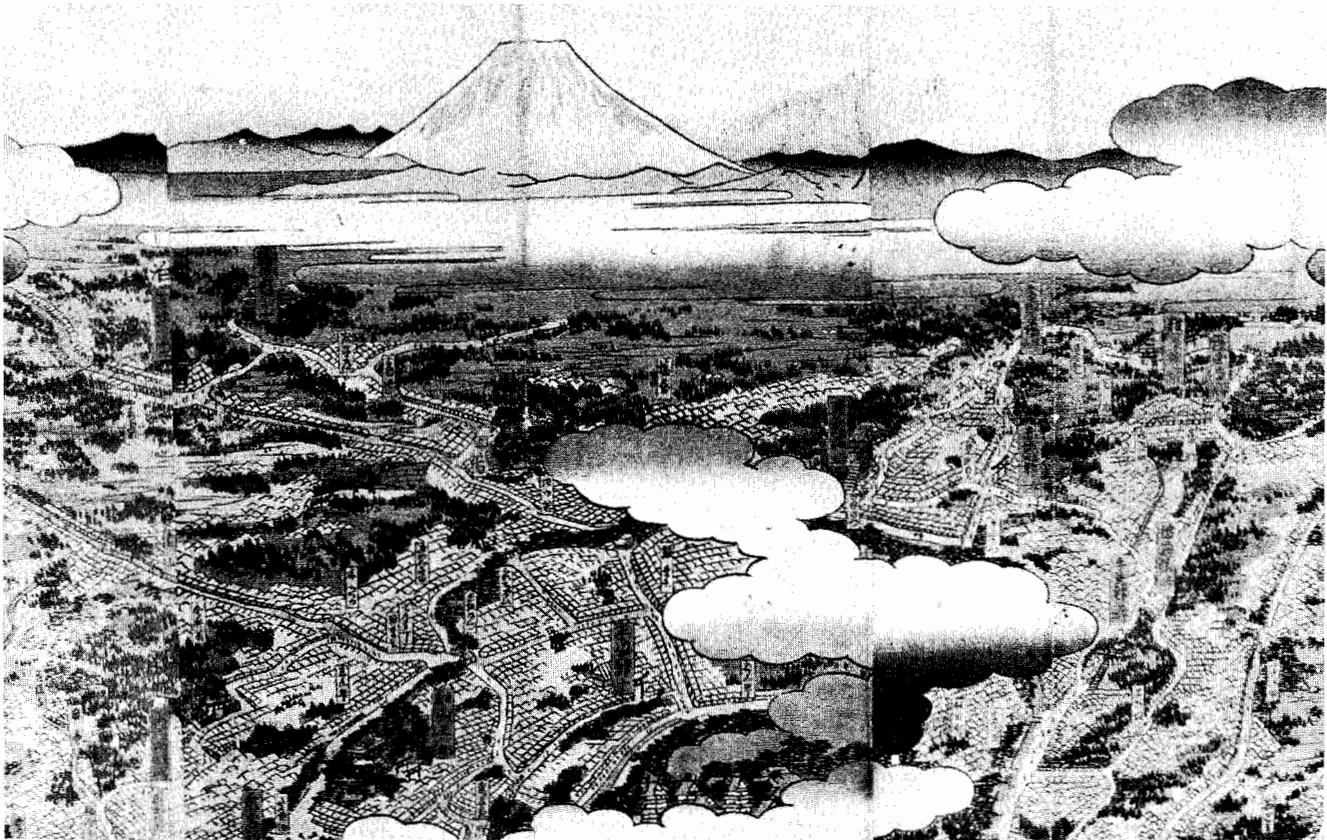


Fig. 1. Vaporous clouds over Edo; from *Hiroshige, Edo Meisho Ichiran*

The distinction between sky and ground is blurred. Unlike the sharp outline of the Parthenon against the clear Mediterranean skies, indigenous Japanese architecture is defined "in praise of shadows" and screened light. Hidden among the lush natural surrounds, the boundaries of built space appear imprecise and incomplete. The buildings harmonize with nature. They lack centrality and isolated prominence. The Greek temple of stone atop a treeless hill conveys a sense of permanence and presence in vivid contrast to its Japanese counterpart.

Cloud formations usually show up in the traditional scroll paintings of landscape scenes. Like Vermeer's painting of his View of Delft, the vaporous skies hover above an ominous portrayal of the life-world below. But unlike Vermeer, the narrative in the scroll painting is translucent, often piecemeal and fleeting.

The vaporous, blurred circumstance of Japan's humid climate has perhaps conditioned the acceptance of a recurrent transience and ephemerality in their milieu - of a "now you see, now you don't" frame of reference in their psyche. So it is that the spatial construct of the city may be a perceptual field of urban fragments unpredictably in flux. The very familiar occurrence in Tokyo of a building here today and gone tomorrow is pervasive and not a surprising reality.

Reinforced by such Buddhist thinking as expressed in the adage - "life in this world is but a temporary abode", the vaporous atmosphere surrounding our daily life has potentially influenced the Tokyoites' propensity for ambivalence in social and personal outlook at life in general.

Christian Norberg-Schulz in his seminal discussion of genius loci states that man "builds what he has seen" in nature and "visualizes his understanding of nature".<sup>1</sup> The

traditional rock gardens may represent such a topologic organization. At Ryoan-ji may exist the exemplar symbolization of Japan's indigenous physical construct - an archipelago called the Nihon Rettou (Japanese Isles).

But the seemingly random scattering of the rocks floating in the expanse of white gravel possess a qualitative dependency. Despite the ambiguous totality, there exists a "system of orientations", and again borrowing from Norberg-Schulz, an existential organization to "concretize the genius loci".

We need to be reminded of the vaporous archipelago, however. In the loosely structured garden composition, a personal and imagined orientation takes place. We pause to realize that the genius loci lies actually in the intervening space, not in the concrete properties of the rocks per se. The rocks appear to be positioned to stir up multiple interpretations, to in fact disturb any properties of patent meaning. If there exists a hidden order, it is relative, additive and transient. The setting as a whole is open to definition.

The renowned architect Ashihara Yoshinobu has observed that building and urban planning policy in Tokyo is considerably looser and more ambiguously framed than in the European cities.<sup>2</sup> The city's urban development unfolds in a context of vague commitment and dubious configuration. What is remarkable however, is that the parts of this city are akin to mutant regenerative cells. And as if one area of Tokyo has been sensing another through a periscope, urban development in one area stirs a reciprocating growth at another. These ambient urban fragments, each with their own genius loci, resemble metaphorically the reconstructed archipelago floating in the vast ephemeral totality called Tokyo.

Seen as a whole, these pockets of separate, unpredictable urban transformations produce a chaotic, disorganized im-

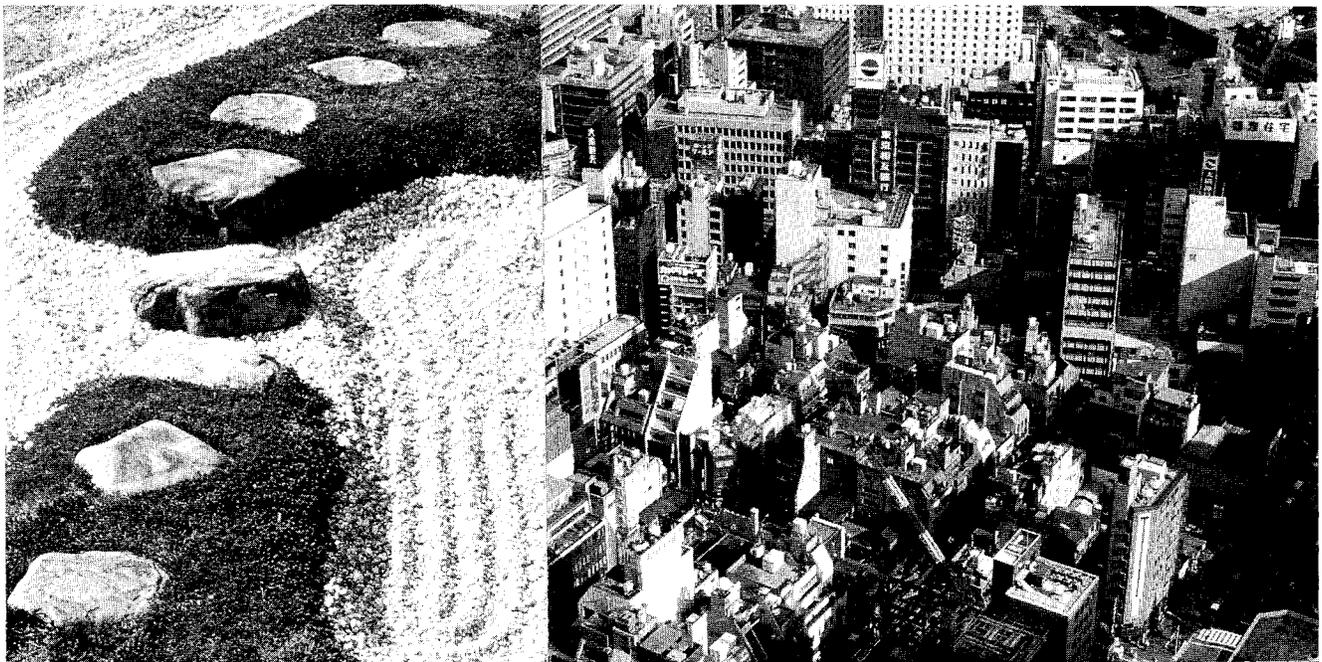


Fig. 2. Garden at Zuiho-in and built texture of Shinjuku.

age of the city. Yet many native planners believe that the fact that these metamorphoses can take place allude to a flexible, amoebae-like metabolism inherent in Edo/Tokyo's vaporous make-up.

### "THERE IS NO RIM OF MOUNTAINS WHERE THE MOON CAN ENTER"

Knowing one's way in Tokyo is best left in the hands of an expert minority of taxi-drivers and underground city rats. It is often said that one of the appeals of this city lies in the constant personal challenge of apprising the whereness of places. Maps abound everywhere - on streetcorners, on matchbooks, invitation cards, and fax messages guiding the businessman to his next appointment in the city.

Flat and featureless was the land when the Tokugawa shogun moved Japan's capital "down" to Edo in 1617. Whereas the ancient capitals of Nara and Kyoto are located in a topographical basin, surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges, Edo/Tokyo was founded on the coastal lowlands of the Kanto Plains. The low-lying landscapes of Tokyo Bay, the five hills of Yamanote, and the huddled rivers of Arakawa, Sumida and Edo depended on the distant features of Mt. Fuji and Mt. Tsukuba to remotely suggest a topological loci.

It is said that the center of Tokyo is a void, that there is no center. For a limited duration of 50 years, until the great Meireki Fire of 1657, there was in fact a visible center. The Edo Castle rising 100 meters above Edo Bay served as the symbolic epicenter of the ruling shogun and its people. After the fire however, the castle was never rebuilt.

The castle grounds have remained - now the Imperial Palace grounds of the Emperor, and in the minds of the people even to this day, there exists an invisible, inaccessible center - "a strange, dark forest in the midst of the city" as one of the contemporary historians of Tokyo, Professor Hidenobu Jinnai remarked to me several years ago.

It was not too long ago, that the expansive horizontality of Tokyo had its orientation in one other symbolic clue - that of the distant sight of Mt. Fuji. Situated 100 km. from Nihonbashi, it is said that during the Edo period, in one day



Fig. 3. Modern Tokyo with the Imperial Palace "forest" at the center.

out of three, Mt. Fuji was clearly visible. By the 1960's, it was one day out of ten. With the rise in recent building density, such apparent orientation particularly from eye-level is almost non-existent.

The people of Edo took pains to give the city an orientational bearing. All depictions of Edo showed the majestic Mt. Fuji at its apex. With the Edo Castle at the center, Mt. Fuji was rotated to align as north, at the top of the geomancy coordinates. Hence, despite its actual location to the west, a virtual geomancy had been established. A picture was rearranged to provide an illusionary definition of one's place in the larger world. The pragmatic and innovative Edo mind hesitated little in such endeavors to fulfill a pressing need.

Where the early form of European towns were enclosed and fortified, Edo emerged as a settlement without walls. Unbounded by spatial limitations, the burgeoning citizenry found communal place-making in a centrifugal spiral radiating from its center. A ring of scattered religious and secular precincts were established along this spiral.

The religious precincts consisted of two types: one at the macro scale made up of spiritual guardian outposts at varying locations circling the castle. Instead of defensive ramparts as in the West, Edo relied on the supernatural forces in the form of strategically placed temples to protect itself.

The second type, more at the micro scale consisted of local shrines at the edge of each residential neighborhood. In contrast to the centripetal neighborhood "campo" of Venice, the spiritual center of Edo neighborhood was found actually "outside". The long-held farming tradition of locating the shrine at the juncture of nature and manmade settlements found its way into Edo's community structure.

Frequently employing deliberate features from the natural landscape, these religious precincts reconstructed at miniature, the spatial depth and shadows of light residing in the mountains (abode of the gods). These scattered mini forests, to a great degree, provided an orientational construct

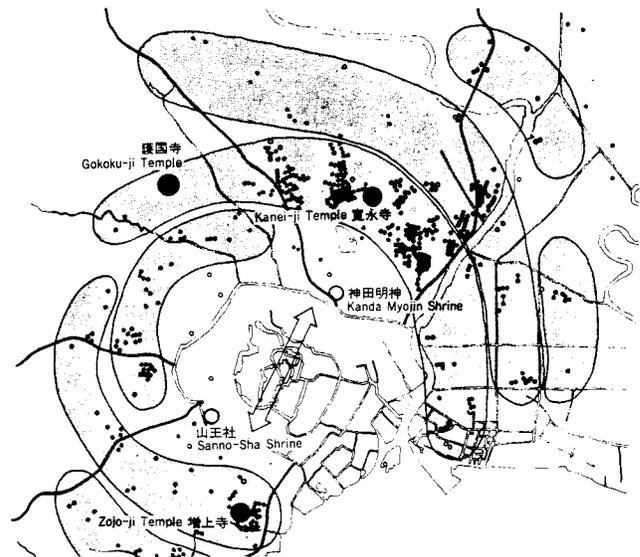


Fig. 4. Temples and shrines encircling Edo Castle as a spiral of supernatural protection; from H. Jinnai, *Ethnic Tokyo*.

and connected to a deeply ingrained folklore and *genius loci*.

Among the recurrent secular precincts dotting the spiral of Edo, the most notable were the *meisho*, or “famous places” of Edo. The loose collection of these “urban nodes” were located within a day’s round-trip by foot. The *meisho* were planned “picnic grounds” - for seasonal variety and festivities out of the pattern of the hectic pace of daily life. They were, socially and geographically, escapes from the center - into the realm of dispersed vantage points and spiritual renewal. Heavily advertised in the *sugoroku* games and in such woodblock prints as Hiroshige’s “100 Famous Views of Edo”, the *meisho* was forever carved into Edo/Tokyo’s topologic plan.

It may be that in this way, the Edo folks gained an approximate feel of the larger context of their community. I believe that such an appreciation of Edo/Tokyo persists today - the image of a city as piecemeal, multiform and tenuous but as living aggregation.

Tokyo today is yet unbound “by a rim of mountains”. The Meiji period (late 1800’s) pressed hard on a steady removal of these elaborate spatial layers of Edo with an attempt to transform it into a modern city. The contemporaneous Hausmann’s Paris Reform Plan was studied as exemplary. Yet, no fundamental changes actually transpired. With no existential foothold nor restraining border, an elusive soft urban structure exists in Edo/Tokyo where today, the “moon still knows not how to enter”.

### RIVERS WITHOUT WATER - THE “FLOATING WORLD” AND “SAKARIBA”

Most cities of the world are sited at the waterside, and Tokyo is no exception. From its beginnings on the wetlands bordering Edo Bay, its numerous canals and rivers recalled a “Venice of the East” - a reference echoed by mid-nineteenth century Western visitors to this prospering city.

The shogun government had envisioned a system of rigid, efficient canals for Edo. Yet it was the free flowing waterways, and in particular, the Sumida River, which energized a way of life and an informality to Edo’s morphology lasting to this present day.

There are two unique phenomena directly related to these waterways which I would now like to discuss and to conclude my paper of defining the urban condition in Edo/Tokyo: one pertains to a concept of *ukiyo* (floating world); the other, of *sakariba* (thriving places).

The first depended on the river, the latter on “rivers without water”, as the writer Takashi Hasegawa<sup>3</sup> laments on the city’s lost waterways. Both of these symptomatic entities of a life-world, I believe, characterize a latent urban construct and *genius loci* deeply rooted in Edo/Tokyo’s psyche and city form.

### THE UKIYO OR “FLOATING WORLD”

Edo population had swelled to one million by 1744. The core of this dense community was built primarily of wood

construction. Widespread disease and innumerable fires were rampant. It was about this time that a Buddhist concept *ukiyo* calling out the transitory nature of human life in the “world of suffering” emerged. The term “floating world” quickly found adroit application by its populace. As an antidote to the hardships and vicissitudes of daily life, the concept invoked escapades to a “floating world”. And the waterways of Edo soon assumed unprecedented significance lasting well into this century.

The rivers were already popular places of gathering and relaxation. But with the advent of a *ukiyo* society at the peak of Edo culture; the waterways took on an enhanced role far exceeding that of commerce. The rivers offered a liberating passage to the “floating world” - in this case, a world of fantasy and amorous escapades.

Edo, by this time, had found its social hub at Ryogoku Bridge. At this crossing of land and water, one entered the “floating world”. Alighting on a boat, you were transported upriver to Yoshiwara (“field of water reeds”) - a 350 meter square moated precinct in the wetlands. The legacy of Yoshiwara is synonymous with the exuberant lifestyles of Edo/Tokyo and the birth of art forms such as the *kabuki*, *ukiyo-e* and *haiku*. It was through the *ukiyo-e* (pictures of *ukiyo*) woodblock prints by such artists as Sharaku, Utamaro, Utagawa which popularized and perpetuated Edo’s lively, colorful way of life.

So it came to be that Edo culture blossomed not in the Castle at the center but in the “Nightless Castle of Yoshiwara”.

This story of Yoshiwara, or others similar which later evolved, is most significant for connecting our discussion back to the existence of ephemeral worlds in the Japanese archipelago. Places locationally blurred within worlds appearing and disappearing in-between the shadows of time displaced from the center of reality.

Leaving no footprints so to speak, the waterways also implied a hidden structure offering evanescent access to temporal inner worlds within the city. Curious as this

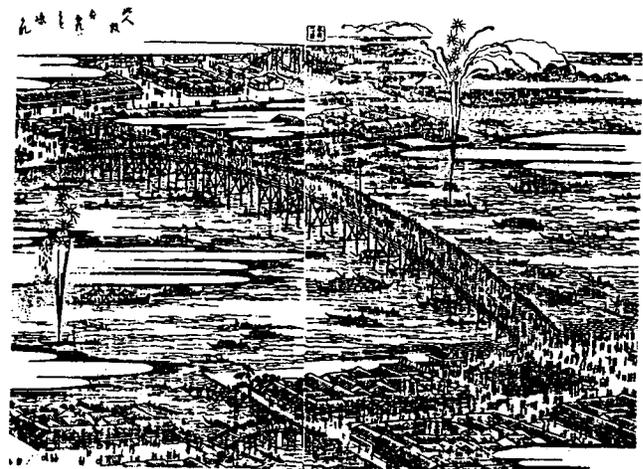


Fig. 5. Ryogoku Bridge in the Edo Period, a liberating place; from *Edo Meisho Zue*.

analogy may seem, such a phenomena of ukiyo is alive and well today, albeit in an altered state and form.

### THE SAKARIBA, OR THE URBAN “THRIVING PLACES”:

The second unique phenomena pertinent to the genius loci of Edo/Tokyo had its emergence in the more recent past when the rivers “moved onto dry land”.<sup>4</sup> The latent water passages leading to the floating worlds are today found in the labyrinthian streets and alleyways of this gargantuan metropolis. These rivers without water will transport you to the city’s myriad concentrations of “eel’s lairs” to be found in the sakariba. Some of you know them well - the Ginza, Shinjuku, Roppongi, Akasaka, etc.

The sakariba directly inherits the Edo spirit of an anti-structure - the unrestrained domain of disengagement from the work-a-day homogeneous environment to be discovered in the freedom of the amorphous city. Today, the “rivers without water” continues to exert the notion of a powerful hidden order, further obfuscating the conventional wisdom of a city’s genius loci.

### SUMMARY

In summary, the three aspects I have touched included:

- first, the overwhelming effect of a humid climate vaporizing both visible chaos and invisible order - in “vaporous archipelago: the architecture of time/space intervals”
- second, attempts of defining “place” conceptually given a topologic *tabla rasa* - in “there is no rim of mountains where the moon can enter”
- third, the capacity/performance of a city suffused with mobility and flexibility within a freer, sub-structure - in “rivers without water: the floating world and “sakariba”

What may be obvious from my discussion is the fact that the city of Edo/Tokyo evades conventional defining. It is not a “complexity” but a “subtlety/ambiguity” which befuddles analysis. For unlike other modern world cities of its size, it is relatively unencumbered by socio-economic stratification and conflicts. But in terms of city development and design, it is the “subtlety/ambiguity” quotient extant in the decision-making process as well as in the multi-layered life-space continuities persevering in the city’s midst and poses the ultimate challenge for the architect/planner.

It seems to me that the interest for us who have gathered at this conference here in Lisbon, lies in the questions posed by cities so deeply conditioned by a latent system of space-lifestyle relationships that we as ‘experts’ cannot all too quickly provide Cartesian solutions of modern urban design.

If we view Edo/Tokyo as a global mega-city but as well, as a stubborn aggregation of villages - quite native and traditional, the resultant outward chaos yet embodying actual, inner coherence may be understandable. Indeed, the

sakariba which I discussed, manifest characteristic village attributes. In modern Edo/Tokyo the sakariba may be the last preserve of a truly human scale environment.

It is the spatial, formal, then the related life-qualities of the village form which raise cogent reappraisals required of emerging urban design trends in Japan. The compelling and continuing transformation of contemporary urban design as dynamic aggregations of intact communities within this vaporous archipelago of Japan surely needs to be sustained.

Let me just insert one last tempting speculation for today, by making an analogy to the emerging field of Cyberspace:

- **“cyberspace is a controlled chaos”:** beneath Edo/Tokyo’s chaotic phenomena (the city’s labyrinthian streets and topologic disorientation), lies a highly ordered society ( rules of public behavior, strict schedules & mutual, unwritten interpersonal favors/obligations), networked to a dense, sophisticated matrix (rail & communication system) - the city as a structure of bits with a perfected navigational map and keys for basic operations
- **“environment having qualities of an agora”:** Edo/Tokyo is activity oriented (nodal arenas with thematic, participatory concentrations), time based (day/night, work/pleasure, transformational, replaceable, regenerative environments), with random access loci (constantly updated, floating data and scattered city paths/destinations within impulsive reach)
- **“enabling participants to achieve a sense of control over the virtual reality”:** available at thriving urban crossings (selective, temporal floating worlds of the sakariba - interior worlds connecting participants to personal freedom and expression)

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*. NY 1979, Rizzoli.
- <sup>2</sup> Yoshinobu Ashihara, *The Hidden Order*. Tokyo 1989, Kodansha International.
- <sup>3</sup> Takashi Hasegawa, *Toshino Kairo*. Tokyo 1975, Sagami Shobo.
- <sup>4</sup> Henry D. Smith II, “Sky and Water: The Deep Structures of Tokyo”, in *Tokyo: Form and Spirit*. Minneapolis 1986, Walker Art Center and Harry N. Abrams, NY.

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