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**EDITED BY
LUCIA PATRIZIO GUNNING
AND PAOLA RIZZI**

**INVISIBLE
RECONSTRUCTION**

**CROSS-DISCIPLINARY RESPONSES
TO NATURAL, BIOLOGICAL AND
MAN-MADE DISASTERS**

UCLPRESS

Invisible Reconstruction

FRINGE

Series Editors

Alena Ledeneva and Peter Zusi, School of Slavonic
and East European Studies, UCL

The FRINGE series explores the roles that complexity, ambivalence and immeasurability play in social and cultural phenomena. A cross-disciplinary initiative bringing together researchers from the humanities, social sciences and area studies, the series examines how seemingly opposed notions such as centrality and marginality, clarity and ambiguity, can shift and converge when embedded in everyday practices.

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*Cross-disciplinary responses to natural,
biological and man-made disasters*

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Lucia Patrizio Gunning and Paola Rizzi

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Part II

Public space, a human right

(Re-) constructing the contemporary city in Latin America

María Andrea Tapia

This work has been conceived as a space for reflection on, and analysis of the (re-) construction of the contemporary city. Needless to say, no views on this issue can escape the state of current affairs worldwide and the emergence of COVID-19 – a challenging factor that questions the very principles that once structured the concept of ‘city’.

Considering studies on urban recovery of favelas, such as Paraisópolis, or the cases of some cities in Brazil, Venezuela or Argentina, with a number of building construction projects carried out over the last 15 years, it can be stated that some of these have resulted in innovative developments. This has been possible thanks to the in-depth examination of existing social networks in informal neighbourhoods, and the need to make them visible and to organise them hierarchically through the materialisation of the public space, which serves as the cornerstone that ensures the development of civic values and the citizens’ sense of belonging to the city they are part of. However, building construction projects led by the private sector – especially after the military coups in Latin America and during the early years of globalisation – were focused on housing as a whole, neglecting the process of creation of the city as a complex space that favours the formation of citizenship through its public spaces and public buildings. This approach can be identified not only in the construction projects of informal neighbourhoods, but also in their counter-proposals: private neighbourhoods or gated communities. In both of these models, the concept of public space, understood as a construction, is rejected and denied on the basis of the predominance of individual development and values in private neighbourhoods or due to unsatisfied basic needs in favelas or precarious neighbourhoods. Housing, then, affects public space,

which becomes a type of 'residual space' for the construction of social networks and shared values. In other words, public space, which serves as the basic framework for the construction of citizenship, occurs in the urban interstices or the 'in-between' spaces of the cities.

With new policies of voluntary and mandatory isolation, social distancing and avoidance of close contact implemented in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the debate around physical and material space has been highlighted, together with the subject of housing. It has revealed a number of issues which had not been considered essential until now, including the prolonged silencing and deprecation of discussions around public space. Such debate is now more than 30 years overdue. In order to reflect on concrete cases, three informal urban situations have been chosen in three different Latin American countries that have all suffered a structural housing problem since the middle of the twentieth century. Although the scales of the examples are different, Paraisópolis with 60,000 inhabitants and the neighbourhood 'Las 250 casas' with around 1000 inhabitants, they show the same deficiencies or absences and the same strengths: the public space as waste, the network of social links as support and engine for the improvement of the urban condition and policy as an instrument to build both the city and citizenship.

Invisible reconstructions

Today it is possible to provide a critical reading of Latin America's most vulnerable habitats and constructions, which have been explicitly exposed due to the impact of COVID-19. Both housing policies and policies for vulnerable urban sectors, which are usually informal, tend to respond to a single emergency with a sense of urgency: housing. By providing a quick solution, policies ignore the fact that, more often than not, households are sustained by an underlying invisible network of social links, mainly between women, who support one another to make their lives more enjoyable and tolerable as they try to manage the formal work and reproductive labour that take place in the domestic sphere and in the community.

In Latin America, the real catastrophe is that of the informal settlements, as they represent a serious emergency which requires urgent action, and calls for reconstruction. Originating in the twentieth century, they have been considered and treated as a contextual problem, initially triggered by the economic crisis of the 1930s. The considerable number of economic and political crises that followed were the main impediment to

the proper management of these informal settlements, creating a tragedy in the making. It is hard to conceive that a catastrophe could last almost a century, yet it is true. Nowadays, 110 million Latin American people live in informal neighbourhoods, equivalent to 17 per cent of the population,¹ which means that almost a quarter of our cities have an informal origin.

This chapter presents stories, investigations and experiences from three different contexts: Caracas in Venezuela, Sao Paulo in Brazil and General Roca in Argentina, to provide the basis for the portrayal of the silent process of reconstruction of informal settlements.

Caracas, Venezuela

El Barrio Julián Blanco, Petare

Understanding the invisible reconstructions in our cities requires an understanding of the people and ideas that give birth to such reconstructions. For this purpose, we shall embark on an imaginary trip through the tales of some of the actors who have been silenced and made invisible. This trip begins with the initial premise in mind that:

city life is a delicate and complex interwoven network of encounters and disagreements, and as such, it demands both sensitivity and sensibility so that its fragility is understood. We are talking about a balance sustained by the day-to-day and the subjective; a balance that should not be omitted in the processes of urban planning.²

In order to understand this complex network, one needs to pay attention to the women who live, or have lived, in vulnerable neighbourhoods which have been built autonomously, or self-built. These neighbourhoods provide the central spaces for urban reconstruction and are reminders that 'there are no disconnected or foreign worlds, and a mutual and attentive look, and a sympathetic listening, are necessary'³ to promote understanding among individuals. This understanding paves the way for the construction of a common shared vision, a city-building, a network of neighbourhoods with public spaces where 'streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs. Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull.'⁴

With these beliefs as a starting point, we begin with the reconstruction of the Venezuelan chabolas through the history of their

families. From a poetic perspective, ‘the house was magical: it stretched and shrank according to need. Perched halfway up a hill, it offered a panoramic view of the bay; there were four rooms on the first floor, and an apartment below...’²⁵ This description is not entirely inaccurate, as the Venezuelan *chobolas* in the area of Caracas seem to hang, like pendants, from the surrounding hills. This vernacular architecture, which responds to the definition of opportunity, economy, availability of particular materials and local building techniques, is realised through land being occupied in an informal manner, with self-built houses distributed according to the topographic conditions and land availability. Such occupation is neither accidental nor casual. In fact, it is the result of the materialisation of invisible bonds built by families, through women, in pursuit of self-protection and mutual collaboration.



Figure 8.1 Exteriors of precarious homes, El Barrio Julián Blanco, Petare, Caracas, Venezuela, 2009.



Figure 8.2 Informal neighbourhoods, El Barrio Julián Blanco, Petare, Caracas, Venezuela, 2021. Source: Google maps.

If we describe these settlements by considering their public structure, we can say that the main public ways in the neighbourhoods are those which allow them to communicate with the formal city. They are generally plain, asphalted surfaces, where vehicles and people circulate freely. The main arterial road of the settlement is more lively, displaying the typical hustle and bustle of a city, so it could be seen as ‘the neighbourhood’s centre’.

The secondary public ways are commonly known as pavements and are generally built by the people who live in the neighbourhoods. These walkways are usually made of concrete and have a terraced or stepped design built on a steep slope. They hardly ever meet the minimum standards of usability, for instance, considerations of width are determined by the residual space available, and the tread and riser of a stair can vary depending on the slope of the land and available materials. Generally speaking, along these walkways you will not find a landing or a resting spot for long distances.

Privatised ways, better known as condominium staircases, are those which, according to the people in the neighbourhood, once offered public access but due to their location and insecurity issues were then locked with steel security doors. This permitted the emergence of a type of community space with shared household rules, agreed upon by the families living in the condominium. The size of the street and its centrality determine the activities that take place there. Similarly, each remaining interstitial space – the space resulting from the subdivision of a parcel of land – becomes a space full of life thanks to the people who live there. By means of recreational activities, such as basketball or football, or decision-making in community meetings or neighbourhood assemblies, the space is appropriated. In the case of secondary or less central streets or public ways, women do the laundry while little girls play with their dolls, and others gather in small groups for conversation. Doorways also provide a place for socialisation among female neighbours and a control centre for the neighbourhood’s watch and protection.

The reading of the streets we have made, of the appropriation of space outside the scope of urban planning or projects in the city of Caracas, reveals that these so-called ‘streets’ are also the spaces that give people the possibility to access their housing. These houses become the central element of a new configuration. It is vital to understand this for action to be taken to reconstruct them and, in doing so, to restore a sense of dignity and visibility to their otherwise invisible support and containment networks. These groups are essential, especially in moments like the COVID-19 pandemic, since they are the pillars of the community and provide assistance to those in need – women, children and the elderly.

Through analysis of the houses, we will be able to grasp how much these housing units rely on one another: one single house may contain several houses or units and the groups that live in each unit may be correlated in different ways. Family bonds, business relations, landlord – tenant relations, friendship or cooperative relations, and even relations of ‘invasion’, in which individuals occupy a piece of land by force, all coexist here. Social and family relations, in particular those with blood bonds, are key to understanding these houses, since the social or family hierarchy, both within the group and within the neighbourhood, is closely connected with the hierarchical organisation of space. The society of this city presents such an extreme situation that, in order for people to survive, they need to forge close interpersonal links that allow mutual recognition and acceptance, cooperation and help.

In this neighbourhood, the reconstruction process was carried out on the basis of microcredits being granted, especially to women as heads of households, so that they could improve the living conditions of their households. The existing relationships and bonds were kept, but there was no clear attempt to make them visible, or to strengthen them. Thus, we observe that the responsibility for improvement lies solely with individuals (private), with no intervention or action on behalf of the state.

Sao Paulo, Brazil

Paraisópolis



Figure 8.3 Aerial image of the Paraisópolis favela, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2009.

The second case we are concerned with is the reconstruction of one of the biggest favelas in Sao Paulo, Brazil. This project was implemented by the SEHAB (Secretaria de Habitação, or Housing Secretariat) whose director, architect Elisabete França, began the urbanisation and transformation process of Sao Paulo's favelas into new neighbourhoods. It was understood that public space had to be reconstructed and materialised into new configurations, which acknowledged that its underlying cooperative networks sustain, support and collaborate with it.

The favela can be read as a 'strange' configuration located in the city – partly due to its peculiar morphological traits, but also because of the lack of clear connecting elements between the favela and its surroundings, which result from the self-centredness of the favela's dwellers, and a marked feeling of rejection towards the favela by neighbours in the surrounding formal neighbourhoods.

The reurbanisation of Paraisópolis represents one of the most ambitious programmes of Sao Paulo's prefecture, which seeks to improve informal settlements in the city. Just as in the Venezuelan case, houses here are arranged in a disorderly and dense layout, occupying all the land available. Once more, public space is the remainder of private use of the space. Some of the houses are located in areas with dangerously steep slopes, prone to landslides and floods. Others are made with scavenged materials or waste, often built within the blocks themselves, putting the state of sanitation and safety at stake. Then, if one or more houses prove to be life-threatening to individuals or a group, they are removed or torn down.

Through observation of this and other favelas it became evident that the football field is the only public place respected by most, especially young and adult males. It is not occupied, whereas all the other spaces that could be considered public are residual spaces that surrender to the power and dominion of the strongest. This is why women occupy residual spaces within the private realm and the household, as these effectively represent an extension of their own houses. Identifying and making such residual spaces and the domestic realm visible can lead us to chart new maps that reveal the underlying invisible 'nets' necessary for the process of reconstruction of the public space, in order to make the favela a real neighbourhood where its residents' culture and idiosyncrasies are respected. Not only do these spaces alter our conception of the neighbourhood, they also help us to rethink housing standards. The focus here is not the material quality of houses in the favela, but the activities carried out by women, elderly people and children, as well as the roles they play in these spaces, which, although precariously built, provide support and life to the neighbourhood.

The reconstruction of Paraisópolis marked a turning point in urban reconstruction. Social workers played a key role in unveiling the existence of the complex social networks that enable women's self-support and personal development. Women can be seen as more than reproducers; they are active producers, working outside their households. It was then understood that a requalification and the reconstruction of these urban areas did not merely mean deciding whose house was to be torn down for being considered dangerous or in a deplorable state. It meant a complex process of relocating families, where each family's place within the long-established social network in the different sectors of the favela had to be carefully considered. One might say that a task resembling microsurgery was carried out, since it involved removing dangerous house units, relocating families to new houses, or exchanging their home for another unit located in the same original urban nucleus. Other improvements were the removal of houses which prevented other households from having proper lighting or ventilation. In turn, public spaces were built providing shared services to the nuclear unit of houses, since this could not be done within each house. This process of public space reconstruction has favoured the consolidation and strengthening of the social networks people are already part of.

Regenerating urban voids is a contemporary necessity in an area which lacks open spaces. When conditions permit it, removals are carried out in blocks' centres to create small squares or parks. New constructions are then built around their perimeter to resettle the local population. New buildings with three or four floors provide housing for families who have lost theirs, or have given it to others to sustain the existing social network. This type of operation is innovative, since it contemplates the intricate and delicate social networks – or the invisible strings – mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, thus foregrounding vulnerable groups and their social structure, and fostering their identity generation and sense of belonging.

General Roca, Argentina

Toma Las 250 casas

'Anthropology, as a discipline, has put great emphasis on the fact that social relations among individuals and/or groups are based on social obligations, which link and associate people within a community'.⁶

In 2007, the illegal taking and occupation of lands known as the '250 viviendas' (250 households) took place. The city council imposed



Figures 8.4 and 8.5 Public space in Paraisópolis, Sao Paulo, Brazil – before reconstruction (2009) and afterwards (2011).

measures including the withdrawal of lands owned by the Federal Penitentiary System (FPS) and their transfer to the new occupants in September 2011. The procedure involved the incorporation of these lands into the city council's land bank as social lots, so that the neighbours of the settlement could purchase and acquire them. Around 175 lots were distributed, with almost half the number to be granted once the occupants had been able to put their financial situation in order. This was the state proposal for legalising the tenancy of the lands, however there was no real reconstruction project. Nevertheless, there were cases in which social networks were created on the basis of a sense of belonging and an already existing collective identity. One example was Barrio las 250 viviendas,⁷ a housing project from the Provincial Institute of Housing and Urban Planning (PIHUP).⁸

General Roca's case becomes emblematic as it is a project aimed at the materialisation of public space through the replication of social networks and the consolidation of the space. The Toma 250 casas⁹ (take 250 houses) can be seen as an example of constructing a settlement based on recognition of and association with pre-existing social relations. This settlement originated with the second generation of residents of Barrio las 250 viviendas del IIPV – a neighbourhood that belongs to a formal social housing programme in the city. Located in the north of General Roca, this neighbourhood consists of small apartment units, built by the state to a standard design that does not permit horizontal expansion. For this reason, as families saw their numbers increase with the next generation, they occupied a piece of land right across the street, thus giving birth to informal settlements. As the sons and daughters of the neighbourhood started their own families, they also settled on the land opposite the neighbourhood. They received the help of relatives and neighbours in building their homes, focusing mainly on areas to rest and relax, since their basic needs of food and hygiene were still being provided by their parents in their own flats. In this way, the Toma 250 casas has a symbiotic relationship with the neighbourhood from which it stemmed, as it depends on the service infrastructure of the houses from that neighbourhood. The families settled in this 'occupied land' call themselves the 'sons and daughters of 250': their parents are part of the group of families able to access a housing programme from PIHUP. Currently, there are 240 such families – a second generation that decided to occupy a piece of land since their parents could not expand their own housing units to accommodate their children and grandchildren. The occupied land has been divided into lots with an area of 10 x 25 m, a configuration that bears a slight resemblance to formal land distribution.



Figure 8.6 Interdependent relationships between the formal neighbourhood and the Toma Las 250 casas. General Roca, Argentina. Image: Luciano Idda (2014).

This settlement has a special peculiarity in that the spaces which families lack in the formal house unit (the parents' house) are reconstructed in the Toma, with spaces for social events such as dining incorporated into the precarious house, which, even with few or no facilities, becomes a meaningful central space for family relations and other existing social networks.

These settlements are not part of state housing proposals or development programmes, yet they provide the space for social gatherings among neighbours, for social collaboration among women – who benefit from having a space for sharing and spending time together – for the potential creation of shared values, and in some ways, for the construction of citizenship. However, this is not enough, since the state should strive for a suitable construction of public space that guarantees the incorporation of these precarious, informal settlements into the urban structure and configuration of the city. These settlements constitute neighbourhoods in their own right, since they contribute to the creation of a new citizenship in a collaborative and horizontal way.

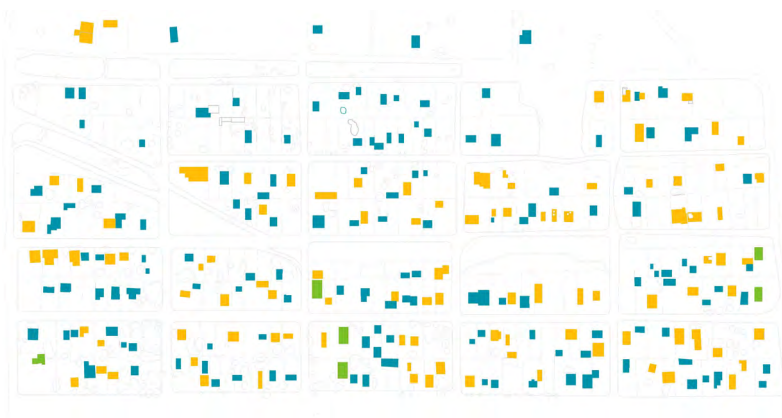


Figure 8.7 Toma Las 250 casas house distribution and classification. Images: Luciano Idda (2014).

Conclusions

These three cases have enabled us to reflect upon the issue of reconstruction of the city in the light of a catastrophe, whether of a natural or anthropic nature. The factors of emergency and urgency, for this particular study, have profound implications for rethinking and changing the paradigms of action in the context of traumatic events, such as losing one's home and social group of support and containment.

We are social beings and, as such, our development relies heavily on the collective aspect of belonging to social groups that share the same interests, values and desires – a right to which we are entitled as individuals. In spite of how banal this may sound, it is essential to resignify 'reconstructions', because simply providing a roof over someone's head is not enough. The experiences we have seen reveal that providing housing does not necessarily guarantee the construction of citizenship, neither does it facilitate social integration within communities, or a sense of belonging.

The current pandemic presents a new challenge: the construction of a social understanding with 'risk' as a predominant value. This in turn emphasises and strengthens individual rights and values over collective rights: the private realm over the public one. In the prologue of *The Death and Life of Great Cities*¹⁰ is a quotation, which, although written some years ago, is relatable in the contemporary context of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Jane Jacobs is an advocate of a kind of urban lifestyle, which guarantees people certain faculties or choices. Among the elements Jacobs considers essential for life in the city, there are two we would like to stress; two aspects that seem both contradictory and mutually exclusive: security and privacy. The sense of freedom, granted by anonymity in big cities, is no longer a felt commodity in our cities, as now it is common to find surveillance cameras in public spaces and a strong police presence in neighbourhoods with a higher crime rate.¹¹

The issue of security is a recurrent theme in discussions of reconstruction, especially for the most vulnerable social groups, including women, children and the elderly. When there is no vision for public space, house planning and material quality submit to the private sector and individual decision-making. This leads to residual spaces becoming part of the public sphere, since they generate and allow circulation of those who need to access the housing. Such residual space, now considered to be ‘nobody’s land’, is an area that can potentially be transformed and materialised through the sociocultural development of its people.

Within the context of a pandemic, this challenge seems to be even greater. In Latin America, the lack of sanitation norms and preventive measures, as well as supplies to tackle COVID-19, has become clearly visible, especially in vulnerable settlements and neighbourhoods. This situation does nothing but add to the stigmatisation of this type of neighbourhood, since they have become the incubators and focus of infection. Moreover, the absence of civic regulations becomes evident as we fail to observe shared beliefs and the recognition of the other as one we can trust for our wellbeing. The other, understood as the neighbours who live in formal neighbourhoods, who meet the standards of a citizen: in those spaces, the state’s presence and actions provide services that cater for basic needs, offer public spaces, institutions of representation and participation. Conversely, state regulation is nonexistent in informal neighbourhoods, since they are left out of the formal urban configuration.

Another consideration drawn from the analysis of the three Latin American examples is the meaning attributed to housing in each society. In Venezuelan *chabolas*, access to housing means ensuring a source of income. In the informal system, housing means being able to make a living, or renting a place. So, housing does not only mean having a place to live, but also, a place where survival is possible thanks to self-employment and jobs that provide an income.

In the case of Paraisópolis, housing and location represent possible access to formal work, as Paraisópolis originated with the construction of

Morumbi – one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Sao Paulo. Therefore, the men and women of Paraisópolis constitute a potential workforce for the different trades and domestic spheres of the residential Morumbi quarter. Living in this settlement allows people to reach their jobs in a short period of time and promotes the creation of flexible spaces where women work collaboratively with one another – for instance, to look after children or the elderly. In their masterplan, *Ciro Pirondi, Analía Amorin and Rubén Otero* materialise these small spaces which come in close contact with housing, and try to provide a new configuration of the space – one which takes into consideration the complex social networks of cooperation and dependency that are interwoven by the families living in the favela.

As for the *Toma Las 250 casas*, housing becomes an extension of the formal house, and family relations are central, with children choosing to live close to their parents. This situation can also be seen in the Venezuelan *chabolas*, where a single house may accommodate three or four generations within its walls. In *General Roca*, as the state's formal housing programme would not permit expansion, the younger generations occupied the lands nearby, opening up a symbiotic interaction between the two parts: formal houses and their informal growth and expansion no further than a hundred metres away.

In the three examples, public space, whatever its characteristics, is the resulting product of house occupation. These informal neighbourhoods have been constructed individually, with families building whatever house they can in the available land, with no collective project or vision behind the settlements. However, this has not prevented the emergence of social networks of help, support and collaboration – sustained and reinforced mainly by women. Still, it must be noted that the lack of planned and thought-out public space reveals the notable absence of the state: the entity that allows the development of citizenship and the creation of a sense of belonging and attachment to a bigger and complex system – the city.

Yet, when the state does take action and intervenes, whether it is with the granting of microcredits in Venezuela, or with reurbanisation projects elsewhere, the focus is primarily on solving housing issues without the generation of spaces that favour the development of social networks. Constructing public space should not only benefit the neighbourhood, but should also generate ways of connecting the neighbourhood with other surrounding areas, to construct the city. This aspect was only understood in Paraisópolis' ambitious masterplan, aided by a number of different professionals who worked to generate a more encompassing, inclusive and complex reconstruction project.

We are well aware that a serious and in-depth discussion about the construction of public spaces, understood as the aesthetic materialisation of socio-political ethics, has long been needed, and that for more than 60 years this discussion has been postponed in order to respond to the housing emergency. Needless to say, housing access needs to be guaranteed, yet it is of the utmost importance that the right to access the city should also be guaranteed, since the city is the epitome of public space – the space where our civic beings develop, and this can only be achieved when we become true members of society – individuals with full rights.

Notes

- 1 ONU-HABITAT. 'Estado de las Ciudades de America Latina y el Caribe', 12.
- 2 Colmenarejo, 'Más reflexiones sobre La Ciudad según Jean Jacobs' (translated quotation).
- 3 Colmenarejo, 'Más reflexiones sobre La Ciudad según Jean Jacobs'.
- 4 Jacobs, *Muerte y Vida de las Grandes Ciudades*, 55.
- 5 Allende, *La suma de los días*, 99.
- 6 Lekerman, 'Formas de habitar', 66–71.
- 7 'The 250 houses' neighbourhood.
- 8 In Spanish: Instituto Provincial de Planificación de la Vivienda (IIPV).
- 9 The word 'toma' refers to the illegal act of taking and occupying a piece of land. 'The TAKING of the land'.
- 10 *Muerte y Vida de las Grandes Ciudades*. Original name in English: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, first published in 1961. The Spanish reedition was released in 2011. The prologue corresponds to the Spanish edition.
- 11 Jacobs, *Muerte y Vida de las Grandes Ciudades*, 8 (translated quotation).

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