

Saltire Series No. 11

**Re Building
Scotland**

by

Neil Gillespie



Editorial note

In the Saltire Series we have invited individuals to spark fresh thinking, ignite debate and challenge our orthodoxies, through the publication of short commissioned essays. The Editorial note from a pamphlet produced in 1942 is still a strong expression of the proposition.

‘They will express the considered judgements of their own authors, to whom complete freedom has been given; and are not to be taken as representing the policy of the Saltire Society, whose objective is to promote that free and informed discussion without which no sound policy for Scotland’s future can be shaped.’

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About Neil Gillespie

Neil Gillespie is Design Director of Reiach and Hall Architects. Among the buildings he has designed are The Pier Arts Centre in Orkney, winner of the RIAS Doolan Award, nominated for a Mies van der Rohe Award and winner of a Europa Nostra Award along with an RIBA National Award and Maggie's Cancer Care Centre, Lanarkshire, winner of an RIAS Award and a National RIBA Award, shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize and the Doolan Award.

Neil was Honorary Geddes Professor at Edinburgh University 2009 - 2012 and is a Visiting Professor at the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture in Aberdeen and Sheffield University. Neil was curator of Scotland + Venice, Venice Biennale 2014. He was awarded an OBE in 2011.

An Abandoned Garden

"Without anyone to care for it, architecture always turns to decay, turns into an abandoned garden. And even with the utmost care, there is no escaping our living spaces - our own bodies - turning into abandoned gardens. There is no-one who can indefinitely maintain physical life, physical space."¹
Hu Fang, Chinese writer

The idea of a garden as a metaphor for culture is a well-tilled trope. Mark Francis and Randolph T Hester, for example, write: "Gardens are mirrors of ourselves, reflections of sensual and personal experience. By making gardens, using or admiring them, and dreaming of them, we create our own idealized order of nature and culture."²

A garden needs space, air and sun, it needs the right conditions for plants to take root and flourish. A garden needs shelter and protection from those who would consume it or indeed cause it to wither through their indifference. Culture like a garden is something that needs constant tending, nurturing, in short it needs cultivation.

There are individuals who quietly cultivate a northern culture, who attempt to hold decay and entropy in check. Three gardeners who have influenced me deeply are Alan Johnston, Peter Davison and Thomas A Clark. Artist Alan Johnston lies beyond the superficiality of the artist as celebrity. His work is held in high regard across the globe yet remains undervalued in Scotland. His is an art that

explores and reveals architectonic space through drawing and acute reflection. Then there are the writings of Peter Davison, an author and scholar whose lyrical prose, in books such as *The Idea of North, Distance and Proximity or The Last of the Light*, is rich with a melancholic sense of passing time and fading light. Thomas A Clark, a poet of significance who, like Johnston, conjures up stillness and longing, *a place apart*, through his modestly scaled texts and publications.

Quiet

*a place to which you can come
to find a quiet you might
take with you to other places*

Thomas A Clark, Cairn Gallery

An artist, a scholar and a poet but where is the architect gardener? The *abandoned* garden I am thinking of is the garden of modernist architecture, the great social project that called for democratic space filled with light and air. Spaces fit for all people of the modern age. There was a social agenda and concern for improving the built environment at its core. What of this project now in the first quarter of the 21st century?

Two Scottish architectural icons, of undoubted international stature, that serve to explicitly illustrate the fate of an abandoned modernism and a complete indifference to

architectural contemporaneity, are Gillespie, Kidd and Coia's St Peter's Seminary at Cardross and Peter Womersley's Bernat Klein Studio outside Selkirk. Two projects that were once revered, then were abandoned and now, having achieved an acceptable state of decay, are subject to renewed interest and acclaim. St Peter's will be conserved as a *ruin*. Our love of the romantic and the historic will now ensure that it becomes part of an acceptable cultural landscape, an inclination to the nostalgic that masks a fear and loathing of today. We are caught in the *ruin gaze*. Frances Stonor Saunders writes,

“After Rose Macaulay's London home is bombed during the second world war, leaving her "sans everything but my eyes to weep with", she goes on to write *The Pleasure of Ruins*, which confesses to her "intoxication" with "the stunning impact of world history on its amazed heirs.”

This hypertrophied response to decay and dilapidation is what drives the "ruin gaze", a kind of steroidal sublime that enables us to enlarge the past because we cannot enlarge the present. When ruin-meister Giovanni Piranesi introduced human figures into his "Views of Rome", they were always disproportionately small in relation to his colossal (and colossally inaccurate) wrecks of empire. It's not that Piranesi, an architect, couldn't do the maths: he wasn't trying to document the remains so much as translate them into a grand melancholic view.”³

Over 20 years before the completion of St Peters Seminary and the Bernat Klein Studio in the late 1960s early 1970s, the Saltire Society projected, through a small publication, a very different spirit and ambition for a Scottish architectural culture. I refer to the booklet *Building Scotland, Past and Future, A Cautionary Guide* by Alan Reiach and Robert Hurd, published by the Society in 1941.

Building Scotland was written by two highly respected architects: Alan Reiach, an architect whose work tended to the modern and Robert Hurd whose work tended to the traditional. In saying that however, such was their architectural intelligence, confidence in their abilities and their open attitude, that they saw no distance between new and old, the *gulf of the specialisms* was yet to open up. In their eyes there was good architecture or bad. Good architecture for them was an architecture that stemmed from a visually literate and intelligent culture, it should be concerned with improving conditions through embracing the new, tempered by respect for the past. For them bad architecture was one that looked in on itself, producing work that was bound up in aesthetics and formal expression or one that just didn't care. Reiach and Hurd understood that a living, meaningful culture is a meshing of innovation and tradition.

For them and their generation the task was the rebuilding of a nation not only physically but emotionally and culturally after the Second World War and to do it in an enlightened and contemporary manner. They saw the post-war void as an

opportunity to create living conditions that matched a new era. They called for courage and ambition while being mindful of the past.

There is a particular tone to their booklet. It is hopeful, fresh and at times they threw aside their Calvinist reserve to become almost passionate. It called for change, for the raising of standards while keeping an eye on a relevant past. They particularly abhorred the decline in Victorian times into architectural pomposity and willfulness, a term that Reiach used frequently. Fundamental to their thoughts was the underlying drive behind modernism ie a social imperative that sought to improve the environment, to make buildings safe and healthy through a concern for air, daylight and space.

Who were the authors' audience? I don't believe the booklet was aimed at architects. At that time architect numbers were small and they seemed collectively intent on using architecture to improve the situation. I recall tales of how in the 1960s Edinburgh architects would meet in a coffee house, designed in the Scandinavian manner by Basil Spence, on Queensferry Street. There they would discuss and exchange architectural ideas and ambitions.

Margaret Richards FRIAS recalls: 'There was a lot of Scandinavian influence. We went to Denmark in the early 1960s in a plane, all of the EAA. John and I rented the plane and we went to Copenhagen for the weekend, and just

lapped up everything. There seemed to me to be a sort of humane modernism.”⁴

Who could imagine that today? These same firms or those that survive them are more likely to be plotting a competitive fee tender than talking about architecture. Another anecdote: Whytock and Reid cabinetmakers, just down the hill from Spence’s Crawford Snack Bar of 1950, would prospectively put aside logs of rosewood or mahogany labelled Mr Spence or Mr Reiach for their next commission. Society had its eyes on today if not the future.

This essay however is not about nostalgia or a longing for the past. The 1950s and 1960s were a different time and offered a 1941’s version of the architectural profession that has long gone. No, the message contained within *Building Scotland* that still resonates is the breadth of the call. It attempted to speak to all citizens of Scotland to take part, to share the responsibility of creating a better place, naive maybe, hopeful certainly.

Architects and planners are blamed for the state of our cities, towns and neighbourhoods. We must bear much of the responsibility through our involvement in the headlong rush to demolish and replace more often than not with an inferior if braver version, tenements giving way to the high rise. Today we are involved in another rush, this time a rush for cash. We all are implicated in this decline into a bickering and self-centred society that places profit and self over quality and the collective.

The preface to the second edition of Building Scotland says “The point of this book is to introduce you to the pleasures and pains of ancient and modern forms of Scottish architecture: and in so doing to indicate that, to be a good citizen in an age of reconstruction, every man, woman and child should learn to use their eyes and be competent to know a good [or bad] building when they see it.”

Reiach and Hurd would have known the architect to be a central figure in the re-building. What they could have not have foreseen was the fall of the contemporary architect. Architects struggle to maintain or even achieve a position that affords them access to user clients and adequate time to design buildings that really explore contemporary needs and concerns. A procurement system that values economy and speed now stands between the architect and the client.

At one time an architect was approached and commissioned on their reputation, their past work and critically their ideas. We are now often merely seen as an offshoot of the contracting industry, a supplier to a managing contractor. Contractors themselves have delegated or rather shed the art of building to the sub-contractor and the supplier. The contractor organises and programmes systems and products into something that appears to be a building yet in reality is something that lacks any real connection to people, place and making.

Architects are working at fee levels that virtually preclude any thinking time. It is amusing if not painfully true that while there is often a call for a percent for art in public building commissions maybe there should also now be a percent for architecture. There is literally no time for design development. The buildings that we see being erected around Scotland are simply diagrams made real, they lack a level of refinement and iteration that would render them into an architecture.

Again Margaret Richards, who was working during the post-war years confirms: ‘I think also, latterly, architects lost their professional status, they became tradesmen who put the frilly bits on banal designs. And people like John Prescott saying, “what about the wow factor?” – It’s not real, it’s not answering somebody’s needs. You might get a wow factor if you were lucky. But... I think good buildings are as exciting as a very good meal. You come away thinking, that is really satisfying.’⁵

A short detour into the world of commercial tomatoes rings some architectural bells. Tomatoes are available in the UK all year, a fruit/vegetable that can only be harvested naturally from July to October in the UK. In order to fulfil the market requirement for an uninterrupted supply of a perfectly shaped, consistent crop, tomatoes are grown in heated glasshouses in the UK or imported in huge quantities from the south of Spain where they are harvested by cheap labour. The industrialised tomato is unsustainable both in terms of human and energy costs.

The tomato industry requires four things shape, uniformity, firmness and colour. In the USA tomatoes are harvested green in order to be robust enough for transport. They are then stored and fed ethylene gas to ripen them. When I say ripen I mean turn them red. You now have a product that is round, perfectly shaped and red. Producers, once called farmers, are not paid for the taste of a tomato they are paid for consistency of production, volume, shape, robustness and colour. Is it still a tomato if it tastes of nothing?

The public however have begun to rail against tastelessness and a lack of integrity in terms of production or in old-fashioned terms, farming. This dissatisfaction has happened in the brewing business ie CAMRA the Campaign for Real Ale, and also in the farming of meat, aka the horsemeat scandal. The public are now alert and interested, not only in the quality and taste of the food they eat but also in the quality of the husbandry that supplies it. The slow food movement was born out of these concerns. There is an understanding now of the critical link between time and quality.

The nature of professional architectural practice changes, as it always has done, in response to the shifting demands of society. As architects attempting to make a living we also have to change to survive. Architecture itself however is not dependent on a professional body or a procurement process. Architecture existed before professional bodies or codes and it will continue to be made regardless. The question is whether the profession and the organisations that represent

the profession can make a case for Architecture being a part of our cultural landscape and a strong voice within the construction industry? The jury is certainly out on that one.

Architecture is always concerned with looking ahead, it is about observing, listening, measuring and acting. Architecture is about making a proposition: what if we did this? Architects try to map an idea of the future on today's demands. The architect is literally a maker of plans, *arkhi*, and a manipulator of materials and construction, *tekton*. The complexity of building procurement today has effectively made the all-round architect extinct, replaced by the team of specialists, the marketer, the business executive, the technician, the performer and most worryingly the imagineer who layers the cynical commercial plan with a thin veil of iconicity that approximates to an image of a building. We are becoming the ethylene gas of the construction industry.

The skills of building ie making, are fading, replaced by a process that is concerned with assembling products and systems. Superficially some trades remain, the brickie and the stonemason, but purely to wallpaper an assemblage of standard components. The concerns are time and profit what is lost is pride, skill and an architecture that stems from making.

The German language, usefully, has three terms *Bauen*, *Baukunst* and *Architektur* to describe our discipline. *Bauen* describes the noble skills of the tradesman and their ability

to build well while Baukunst is the art of the architect who orchestrates these skills in order to create buildings that have integrity and value. Bauen and Baukunst are measurable, they can be taught, passed on, understood.

Architektur however is something that has no measure. It is something that is felt, experienced. The industry must concentrate on the first two, the third, architecture, will possibly emerge if we have applied intelligence and commitment to the task. The blackhouse, for example, is now an icon of Scottish architecture but originally was a simply and honestly conceived shelter that used a sustainable approach, local materials and an intimate understanding of site and people.

It is difficult to say what, if any, lasting influence *Building Scotland* has had, without speaking in depth to architects from the time. Certainly the short conversation I had with Margaret Richards as part of Scotland+Venice, Building Scotland Past and Future in 2014 indicated that architects at the time were aware of the Saltire Society publication and were certainly aware of what each other was doing and particularly what was happening in Scandinavia. The booklet vividly caught the spirit of those post war years.

Malcolm Cooper writing the preface to *Scotland: Building for the Future*⁶ says: “The decades after 1945 were heralded by Reich and Hurd’s *Building Scotland* from 1941 and just as they were looking forward, this book follows the first celebration, Peter Willis’s *New Architecture*

in Scotland 1977, in looking back.” He continues, “the purpose of this book is to continue the debate about the protection of Scotland’s significant post-war buildings. We believe they are an important part of our heritage.”

Already the work of those early Scottish modernists has been consigned to the history books and is now subject to arguments about what is worth saving from demolition, *ruin lust* has caught up with buildings that once looked to the future.

Picking up the analogy of a garden once more, however, growth has always worked hand in hand with its twin, decay. Life and death, spells of frantic flourishing and energy are inevitably followed by long periods of gradual decline and morbidity.

Where are the green shoots of ideas that might shape a way forward today? In the past architects have been part of that discussion. Housing is today's critical issue as it was after the war. Young people are unable to house themselves. Countries and councils are having to deal with displaced communities and displaced families. Civil tensions are there, real and potentially as explosive as before the Second World War. Europe is fracturing, nations are splintering and are concerned only with themselves. The bigger collective group picture is less clear.

There have been well thought through housing schemes, however they virtually all followed familiar patterns, be

they tenement or deck-access. Have there been explorations of how we might live that is more connected to contemporary concerns? Ideas about how we live, how we might want to live? What are our ideas for the old? What about the young? What about the poor? Those with special needs? How can we design for time? Circumstances change, needs change, once single, then a couple, then a young family, then children grow up and leave to have their own families, leaving elderly parents behind. Could there be an architecture that allows for change? Rather than the family moving frequently they remain and the house is reconfigured. Rooms let out to create income or for a displaced person, home office or small production facility. Could we make neighbourhoods that are centres of production, allotments, small light industry, bicycle repairs, design, chutney making?

Reiach and Hurd sought out the best ideas from outside Scotland, not to replace architects working here but to challenge them and inspire them. They knew the architects in Scotland had the skills and insight to do great work, given a culture that too had similar aspirations and ambitions. They were attempting to align ideas and clients, the public and the architect.

Today while many local architects are capable of good work they seldom win the high profile work in Scotland, maybe that is thought to be beyond their skills. We are often advised to collaborate, witness the V&A Dundee, the Parliament building, Glasgow School of Art's Reid

Building, the recent St Kilda visitor centre. Scottish architects are often referred to as the tartan fringe. Each major project that is advertised causes them to wonder whether they should enter alone or should they team up?

In the recent past, for example, the Scottish Government invited so-called New Urbanist architects from outside Scotland to deliberate and create master planning guidelines for new towns across Scotland. They are expert in the issues that are about place making and buildings that appeal to the housing market, to the wealthy, through the creation of a Brigadoon, a picturesque assembly of private houses in the *Scottish* style, slate pitched roofs, rendered walls and roses around the door. Just as it has always been.

Just as ruin lust would have its way, even with great modernisers such as Henry Ford. "I wouldn't give a nickel for all the history in the world," he declared, and promptly spent a fortune commissioning an estate on the outskirts of Detroit modelled on a Scottish baronial manor, complete with crenellations, turrets and a grotto. While his Model-Ts glided off the gleaming new production lines of Detroit (the "city of tomorrow"), he took to pacing his grounds like a restive laird.⁷

*'There once was a small boy who lived in a place
that seemed like a long way from everywhere.*

*Each morning he rose long before sunrise to begin
his chores. At sunset he crept wearily back into his*

bed.

At sunrise he would gaze across the valley. In the distance he could see a house with golden windows. He promised himself that someday he would go there and see that wonderful place.

One morning his stern father was away at market. The boy knowing this was his chance stole out of the house and headed towards the house with the golden windows.

As he neared the house he realised that there was something very wrong. He saw no golden windows. Instead there was a place in need of repair surrounded by a broken fence. He knocked on the door, a boy close to his own age opened it.

He asked the boy if he had seen the house with the golden windows. The boy nodded and pointed back to where he had just come from. The setting sun had turned the windows on his house to gold.’’

Anonymous

The apocryphal story of the *House with Golden Windows* warns that searching somewhere else for an answer to our issues is doomed to both superficiality and missing the value of our own voice. The development of an authentic and meaningful architecture can only come from within a

culture. Architecture gains its authenticity from the well it springs from, not from imported visions, regardless how exotic and seductive they may appear; the beauty and craft of Carlo Scarpa's work stems from the opulence of his Venetian heritage, Sigurd Lewerentz's dark intensity is born of a northern melancholy and Alvaro Siza's airy poetry belongs in the brightness of a southern Atlantic coast.

The threat and challenge to all things local and distinct is globalisation, globalisation of form and ambition. Much celebrated contemporary architecture is marked by an obsession with formal gymnastics and manipulation supported and marketed by an increasingly agile computer-aided industry. So-called *iconic* architecture is peddled by itinerant architectural celebrities – 'the starchitects' - who journey to foreign courts bearing sparkling wonders. The cult of the celebrity is endemic in our culture and spreading; their every move is documented and discussed at length. The fêted few are engaged in an exclusive and self-indulgent game where the startling image or extravagant visualisation wins.

Elsewhere, however, there are architects who have been successfully addressing bigger issues of how does a society house the ordinary citizen, the poor or the young or the old? I will cite only one example. Its French although in Belgium and London there is a vein of architectural thinkers and architects of stature who, it seems to me, to have a particular connection to Scotland and the country's democratic and social aspirations

The French practice that I think is particularly relevant is Lacaton & Vassal. They provocatively state: “Never demolish, never remove or replace, always add, transform and reuse!” or “Someone who demolishes a building just to re-erect it on the same site but in a contemporary look has, in principle, gained absolutely nothing.”⁸

Their seminal project, arguably *the* housing project of the early 21st century, was the Tour Bois Le Pretre of 2011. Conceptually brilliant, socially sensitive and progressive, culturally complex and economically disarming. For approximately the cost of demolition a 16-storey block of flats was extended and improved beyond what any new building would have produced. Remarkably the residents stayed in the block throughout the process, maintaining the community and their connection to this place. The result is intelligent, courageous, sensible and sustainable while producing beautiful new and much larger flats.

Is it time to regroup, to restate an underlying social agenda and a return to the architectural basics of space, light, materials, good construction, to get back to architecture founded on intelligent design and honest procurement? There are many areas that could and are being reviewed and developed, obvious amongst them is procurement.

Procurement must be reviewed to develop a process that recognises the need, within an architectural commission, for

dialogue with people, as opposed to a process, and one which allows for design development. Low fee levels that are cut close to the bone should be acknowledged for what they are, a devaluing of a professional service. There is no scope for a dialogue with a low fee, there is only an imperative to do things once and to do that with the most junior staff and at break-neck speed. Quality and ambition should be our aim.

Two areas close to my heart are publishing and education. Both are concerned with ideas and research. Ideas and research require an intelligent and adequately funded publishing initiative. Not a populist comic that is aimed at the public but one which causes the profession to pause, to think, to reflect, to contribute to, one that raises standards. There is no Scottish-based publication that discusses, promotes and celebrates architecture at the highest level and what it might aspire to. Just look at Quart Verlag, Switzerland a publishing house that is world beating in quality and consistency yet it is modest and achievable. Ae Foundation for Architecture and Education, a small independent organisation, has, since 2010, bravely, against all funding odds, orchestrated a series of ambitious lectures and interviews. There is an organization that has the vision and ambition to realise a potent publishing initiative.

We have five schools of architecture in Scotland, although desiccated and under continual threat of cuts to staff, studio space and tutorial time with students. To a university an

architecture department is an expensive thing. It requires lots of studio space, equipment, model-making and computers. Architectural research is also very difficult to define, measure and attract significant funding. Therefore architecture is not the moneyspinner that other departments are.

There is however a potentially huge role that the architecture school could play. Our architecture schools are located in urban situations, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee. They could play a central role in exploring the future form of these places.

My experience of over 30 years of teaching is that the students are as good if not better than in the past, they have fluent skills in computer design, drawing, writing and model-making. Many write superbly not to mention having the ability of the young to look at things freshly. If we are educating young people to merely serve a contracting machine then that is best done within that industry.

If, however, we as a society value enlightened education - and granted there is little evidence of that in today's Scotland - then architecture schools have an important role. As qualified architects we would all agree that the architecture school and its tutors gave us the compass in order to set out on our own, to explore and educate ourselves into the ways of architecture. While that is a lifetime's work architecture students could be asked to open up issues, to imagine, to be creative and to explore

compelling ways of approaching practical issues of contemporary society.

The schools of architecture should be recognised as centres of excellence and knowledge by making them the focus of research and study into Scotland's built environment. The profession can't do that as it is too splintered. The professional bodies can't either as they are there to serve their members and the public without promoting one above the other. The schools are independent of government and the profession. They can take a broad, even provocative view. They can operate boldly and ambitiously, they can explore and illustrate ideas that are too controversial or difficult for practicing architects, the industry, professional bodies or the government itself. We have talent, we have some teachers and practitioners of note who could be influential if they all faced the same direction.

George MacKay Brown writing in *Northern Lights, Shetland: A Search for Symbols* reveals how *extra* ordinary, ordinary life is.

“A blight on much modern art is an all pervading snobbery and elitism, and cult of personality – ‘the famous poet’; ‘the world-renowned sculptor’. We should think rather of art as being, in Thomas Mann’s words, ‘anonymous and communal’” a whole community contributes to the making of a poem...to see the symbol in the common objects of daily life is to know a depth and enrichment.⁹

If there is indeed a new and emerging Scotland, it needs to regain a relevant architectural culture. The profession needs to take a stance and create work that once more returns to placing people first through dignified and appropriate design. As a small nation on the edge of Europe I believe we are well placed to make a contribution to the current architectural debate.

At one point in *Building Scotland* the authors say “If the ability of the 20th century architect to tackle modern problems is still in doubt turn over and take...*courage!*” Some 70 years later the call remains the same, take ...*courage!*

Appendix

1. Hu Fang, Abandoned Garden, Towards Non-Intentional Space, Vol 1, Koenig Books 2016
2. Mark Francis and Randolph T Hester, The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place and Action, MIT Press 1990
3. Frances Stonor Saunders, review of the exhibition *Ruin Lust*, Tate Britain in the *Guardian*, Friday 7 March 2014
4. Margaret Richards interview with Neil Gillespie Vol 1, Scotland+Venice, *Building Scotland, Past and Future*, 2014
5. Ibid
6. *Scotland: Building for the Future, Essays on the Architecture of the Post War Era*, Historic Scotland, 2010.
7. Frances Stonor Saunders, review of the exhibition *Ruin Lust*, Tate Britain in the *Guardian*, Friday 7 March 2014
8. Druot, Lacaton & Vassal, Tour Bois Le Pretre, Ruby Press, 2013
9. Northern Lights, George Mackay Brown, Polygon, 2007.

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We believe we have an important and unique role to play, as an independent advocate and celebrant of all that is good and important about our cultural lives and achievements. The Society has played a crucial role over the last seventy five years, in recognising our cultural achievements. And while times have changed the need for that independent voice remains.

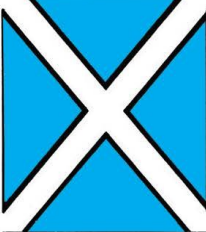
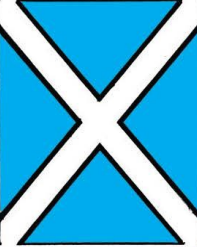
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