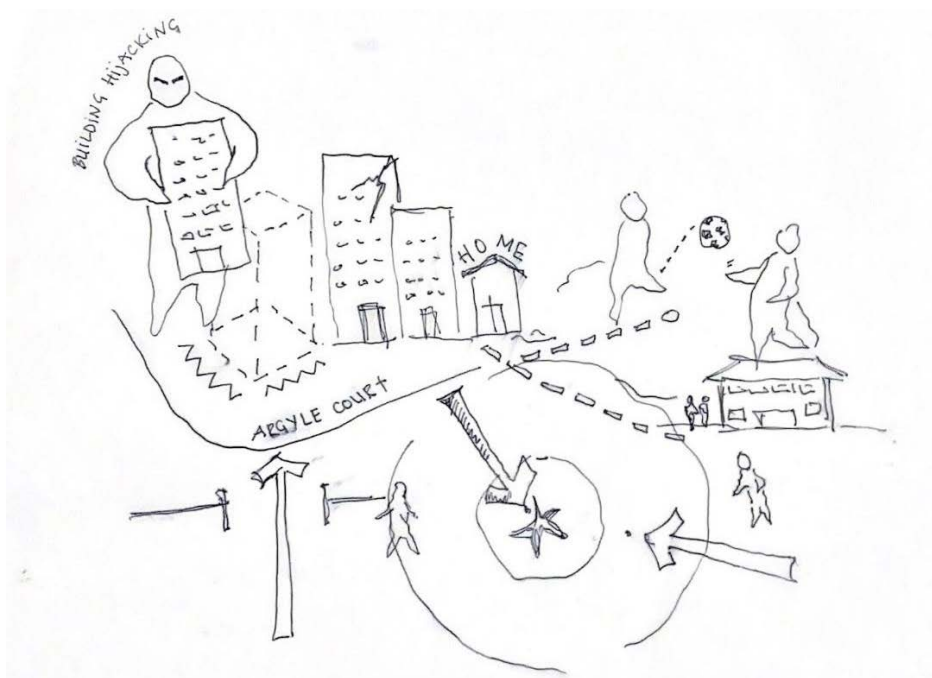


DESIGNING BETWEEN LANGUAGES: STORYTELLING AS PLURILINGUAL PRAXIS IN PARTICIPATORY URBANISM

By Marika Searle Krokidas



Bringing a Story to Life: Live visual documentation of Resident Narration in Change by Design Workshop, Johannesburg

1. INTRODUCTION

With more than two-thirds of the global population projected to live in cities and urban agglomerations by 2050, urbanisation has emerged as the defining ‘megatrend’ of the 21st century (UN-Habitat, 2022), making the urban the dominant spatial form of contemporary societies (Zieleniec, 2018). The cities that host these societies, our urban cultures and ideologies, reflect the diversity of their inhabitants. They are complex, gritty, reactive systems, constantly mutating in response to social trends, demographic shifts, environmental pressures and crises, and political dynamics (UN-Habitat, 2022). While urbanisation and the ideal of The City offer opportunities for the ‘urban dream’ - innovation, wealth, density, and connectivity - it also intensifies social inequality, ecological strain, allocation of resource decisions and governance challenges. Urban resilience, the capacity of a city to “survive, adapt, and grow” in the face of such stresses and shocks (Meerow et al, 2016), is a paramount urban

design and planning concept for sustaining the longevity of cities with optimistic futures (UN-Habitat, 2022). However, urban resilience should not be measured solely by the city’s infrastructure, new-age technologies and economic performance. This paper proposes a more holistic understanding of climate resilience, with urban design and planning acting as a deeply cultural and communicative method of meeting the needs and complex interrelationships of such diverse societies (Seo, 2024). Urban practitioners, then, must forge urban support systems that promote a city’s ability to nurture inclusion, cultural plurality, and linguistic diversity as a two-way non-hierarchical process between urban practitioners and urban dwellers. And, according to the United Nations Sustainable Development goals 11.7 and 16.7, civic engagement and participatory design are key to achieving this urban cohesion cum resilience in the global and localised scope of sustainable development and creation of inclusive public open spaces (Target 11.7: “By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and 4children, older persons and persons with disabilities” (SDG, 2025a), and Target 16.7: “Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels” (SDG, 2025b)).

This exploratory paper positions storytelling as a critical yet under-recognised tool in participatory urbanism as a means to achieve urban resilience and positive urban futures. Participatory urbanism, or participatory design in this context, refers to the active involvement of all members of a user group or ‘community’ in shaping the development of their physical and social spaces, where collaboration with said groups in the urban design and planning process gives rise to systems-level benefits (Gattupalli, 2023). To achieve this, this paper advocates for a “plurilingual praxis” in participatory urbanism, where linguistic, cultural, and intergenerational translation are central to achieving resilience and inclusion. Plurilingualism, in this context, stresses the dynamic and developing linguistic and cultural repertoire of an individual, allowing them to draw on all their resources to engage with diverse social situations (CoE, 2025). Praxis refers to the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted, embodied, or realised (Merriam Webster, 2025). Combined, plurilingual praxis in this paper pertains to the intentional and dynamic application of diverse modes of communication - through embodied, linguistic and cultural resources - in the practice of participatory urbanism, fostering communication and co-creation across various forms of knowing and being. Clarity in communication between everyone involved is crucial for fostering resilience and inclusion. Storytelling, with its natural and accessible forms, inherently possesses this pluralistic quality, making it understandable without specialised study.

Drawing from example models of participatory urbanism, such as co-design and community engagement experiences with the Cities 4 Women project in Nepal, and Architecture Sans Frontier UK’s supporting work with 1-1 Agency of Engagement with residents of informally occupied buildings in inner city Johannesburg, this paper investigates how storytelling tools can serve as a plurilingual bridge to translating across linguistic,

3. STORYTELLING AS TOOL AND PRACTICE IN PARTICIPATORY URBANISM

Storytelling is a critical component of our evolution (Niles, 1999), helping to articulate our deepest values and provide fables on which we rely as we confront moral dilemmas since time immemorial (Cronon, 2002, p88). The material practices of urbanism - urban design and planning - are, too, intimately linked with forms of storytelling. New urban fabrics are woven from the threads of a diverse collection of experiential narratives to address the aforementioned social and infrastructural issues within the city, strengthening those existing stories of place through new material creations, or nurturing the emergence of new narratives to take root in established urban spaces. Storytelling, therefore, can also function both as a mode of communication and as a design methodology. As Bauregard asserts in *Democracy, Storytelling, and the Sustainable City* (2003), stories have the capacity to make planning more inclusive by bringing to the surface hidden histories, pluralising truths, and engaging the emotions otherwise lost in more traditional, quantitative forms of data collection, which, according to Escobar (2018), fail to capture the richness of peoples' lived experiences, reducing complex realities to simplistic models and data. Put differently, current, conventional, urban design and planning methodologies risk undemocratic outcomes due to their technocratic, monolingual and exclusionary tendencies. When embedded in participatory urban processes, storytelling can shift power dynamics, enabling marginalised voices to reshape dominant urban narratives. This in turn aids urban resilience and mitigates the impact of external stressors that affect each member of society differently, as the details of their unique urban experiences have already been taken into consideration.

A central argument to this paper is that storytelling serves as a multifaceted method, medium, and bridge in participatory urbanism - the application of which could result in more inclusive, resilient and democratic urban projects (Ameel et al., 2023). As a method, it encompasses various approaches (participatory tools) such as storytelling workshops, drawing, timelines, semi structured interviews, and zine-making, to name a few. As a medium, it refers to the tangible output of the methods, documented modes of experiential information, which become artefacts within themselves. Most importantly, storytelling acts as a bridge, connecting community members across ages, cultures, professions, and stakeholders due to its colloquial, embedded, and engaging nature. Afterall, people relate more to stories than data (Sarkissian et al. (2008).

4. ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY 1: CITIES 4 WOMEN PROJECT, NEPAL

The Cities 4 Women: Inclusive and Climate Resilient Urbanization in Nepal project (C4W) is an initiative implemented by UNOPS, UN-Habitat, and Cities Alliance in eight municipalities across the country. It seeks to address gender-responsive and climate-resilient public open space development



Figure 02 Co-Design Workshop and Listening Practices, Cities 4 Women Project, Nepal (left)

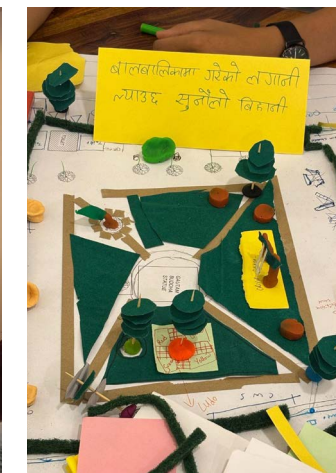


Fig 03 Co-Design Workshop, Cities 4 Women Project, Nepal (right)

by piloting participatory planning processes with communities, local governments, and academia (Cities Alliance, 2025). Central to the author's involvement in the project is the co-design of public open spaces through a multi-phase participatory framework: community mapping, site-specific co-design workshops, and community validation.

In the first phase, community mapping workshops invite local residents to identify, reflect on, and prioritise public open spaces in their neighbourhood using large printed maps and visual tools. Participants share personal and collective memories, walk through spatial histories, and debate the relative significance of the different public open spaces to decide which ones should be put forward for improvement. These dialogues are captured, simultaneously through visual markers on maps, sticky notes, drawings, and written annotations in Nepali - all in real-time. Importantly, this process of pluralistic ways of documentation makes space for accessibility across language and literacy levels: with over 120 local languages and dialects in Nepal, even Nepali may not be a participant's mother tongue. Therefore, the visual cues and real-time collaborative annotation create transparency, trust, and a shared sense of authorship.

In the second phase, co-design workshops bring local participants to the chosen sites to re-engage with the space through storytelling, dialogue, and memory. Practical design sessions involve site plans, sketching, annotations, and hands-on model-making. In one workshop, one participant, a jewellery maker, used her craft skills to create miniature play structures and urban elements in playdough, turning her tacit design ideas into spatial contributions. For her, she has a trained fluency in translating creative concepts into material outputs or representations. Others use drawing or verbal narration. The idea is that the multiplicity of formats allows participants to engage on their own terms.

However, despite this plurality, it has been observed that some participants still struggle to express needs beyond conventional items like benches, lights, or trees. This highlights the limits of familiar representation and the need to include imaginative, narrative-based prompts, for example asking participants to describe dream future scenarios, reflect on past joys, or walk through speculative spatial stories. Through storytelling, a richer, more layered understanding of spatial desires can emerge.

These workshops thus do not merely extract ideas and feedback but facilitate, co-created multimedia articulations of urban futures at a localised level. The C4W project process is structured in a way that ideas from the workshops are then translated into technical drawings, concept notes, and finally returned to the community for validation and review prior to construction, ensuring iterative authorship throughout the design process. The C4W project has supported engaged municipalities in the development of over twenty public open spaces across Nepal, with each one identified and prioritised through these community mapping sessions and ideas conceptualised for the space in co-design workshops with local people. Some sites were further engaged with by academia or external urban practitioners through the project's own Urban Design Studio workshops and International Urban Design Competitions. However, each brief is rigorously compiled with each communities genuine needs and wants, following consultations, and in the case of the Studio, students participated in further community co-design sessions as part of the curricula - not only to ensure agency and transparency for the community of users of the site, but to also equip students with the experience and skills of participatory design that is likely not included in their mainstream education. At the time of writing, construction is already underway for a handful of these special sites, and municipalities, communities, and those involved in the project eagerly await to see dreams and grand ideas translate into tangible reality.

5. ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY 2: CHANGE BY DESIGN WORKSHOP, SOUTH AFRICA

In April 2024, the author participated in the Architecture Sans Frontières UK (ASF-UK) Change by Design workshop in Johannesburg, part of a collaboration with long-term project by local NGO 1-to-1 Agency of Engagement in addressing housing justice through participatory urbanism. Engaging with residents of informally occupied inner-city buildings, the workshop employed ASF-UK's collaborative methodology, working at dwelling, community, and city scales, guided by the theme: 'Acts of care: Stories of Collective Maintenance and Repair in Inner-city Joburg (ASF-UK, 2025a).

A key tool of participation employed was the 'timeline tool': a long roll of paper laid out in front of residents and facilitators to visually and chronologically document their stories along the themes of maintenance, repair, and everyday survival. The semi structured interviews, conducted



Figure 04 Plural Modes of Listening and Documentation During Timeline Tool, Change by Design Workshop, Johannesburg (left)



Figure 05 Co-Design Workshop, Cities 4 Women Project, Nepal (right)

primarily in English but further patchwork-translated where necessary through other languages, gesture and dialogue, were transcribed simultaneously by multiple facilitators: two written transcripts, two visual timelines. Each facilitator picked up different nuances of the story, producing parallel interpretations that, when layered, created a more complete and democratised narrative.

These visual records allowed residents, many of whom did not read or write English, to engage in real time with their own documented histories. Residents corrected, elaborated, or validated what was being drawn in front of them onto the timelines. This process reoriented the engagement from extractive to co-creative, enabling residents to become authors of their urban histories. In one timeline, a resident corrected a misinterpreted event, going on to explain the significance of a turning point in the building's collective organisation. This moment highlights the importance of accessible means of communication, in situ and in later documentation, so that everyone concerned has the opportunity to engage in an equitable way.

The plural documentation formats (visual, textual, oral) were later compiled into illustrated zine-like publications that included timelines, collages, diagrams, and maps. These artefacts, distributed in both English and local languages, became tools for advocacy, reflection, and resistance. They allowed residents to articulate tenure claims, spatial practices, and informal governance structures through multi-sensory and narrative-rich forms.

Building on the investigative phase of the workshop, the Making Home report later consolidated findings across seven inner-city sites - including those visited during the workshop, being Argyle Court, Bertrams Priority Block, Fraser House, and Jean Lane Court - highlighting that residents of so-called "bad buildings" are not passive victims but active agents of preservation and repair. Despite precarious tenure and systemic neglect,

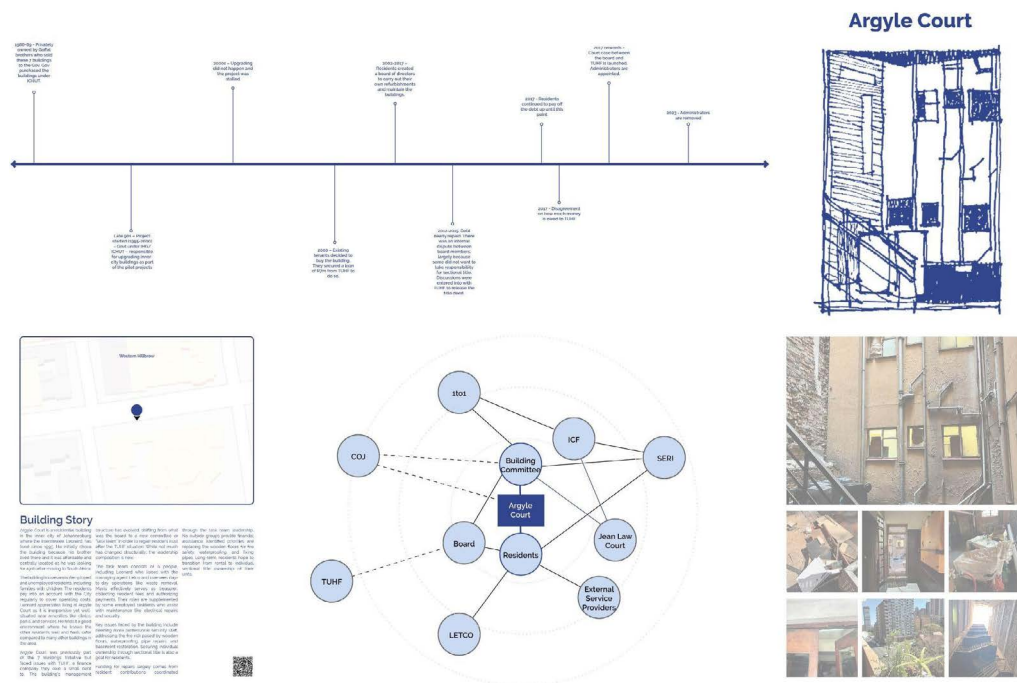


Figure 06 Timeline Tool Translated: Plural Documentation and Ultimate Output from Change by Design Workshop for each Residence

communities self-organised to manage plumbing, security, waste, and shared spaces, often through informal committees or mutual aid networks. The report underscores that these practices of maintenance and collective care represent acts of urban citizenship, sustaining dignified living conditions within hostile policy environments (ASF-UK, 2025b).

Crucially, the Making Home report reframes these residents not as obstacles to urban renewal but as legitimate co-producers of the city. The report calls for state and municipal recognition of such self-managed buildings as viable sites for in-situ upgrading - adapting lessons from South Africa's Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP) to the inner-city context. Rather than demolition and displacement, it advocates collaborative repair, tenure security, and policy reform to enable these communities to scale their efforts and create safer, more stable homes (ASF-UK, 2025b).

This case study illustrates how storytelling, anchored in real-time, multimodal practices, can not only make hidden urban knowledge visible, but also reshape power relations by validating multiple voices and epistemologies. It reinforced that co-design is not always about future-oriented planning; sometimes it is about making visible what already exists, and valuing it as urban expertise. In this sense, the workshop's participatory storytelling methods formed part of a broader continuum of research and action that positions care, maintenance, and repair as foundations for a just urban future in Johannesburg's inner city.

6. NARRATIVE COMPETENCY IN URBAN CURRICULA

Participatory design represents an essential skill set that should be embedded within the core curriculum of architectural, planning, and urban studies education. From experience, most architectural studios abide by a formalised two-part design process: 1) study and 2) design. In traditional studio models, there is limited to no collaborative dialogue with external stakeholders, or role-play scenarios (as most design studios are framed by a non-live brief), which marginalises the opportunity for deeper participatory learning. Having followed the role of narratives and storytelling in urban design and planning, the role it plays in achieving urban resilience and inclusivity, and looking at real life case studies as such, this paper posits the need for pedagogies that also cultivate relational, communicative and empathetic design skills to breed a new generation of urbanists who have the skills and capacity to drive inclusive urban futuring practices.

Sanders and Stappers (2008) reflect on this proclamation by posing a fundamental question: is it better for students to learn traditional design first and then move to co-design, or should co-design be the foundation? They argue that beginning with co-design nurtures the mindset that "all people are creative" (Sanders and Stappers, 2008, p. 10), therefore embedding it within the pedagogy of design. This mindset is essential to participatory urbanism, where the goal is not merely to design for, but with, communities. The challenge, they note, is not technical but cultural - "Embracing participatory thinking flies in the face of the 'expert' mindset (...) It is very difficult for those who have been successful while being in control to give it up" (p. 14). Design education, therefore, must actively work to shift these ingrained power structures by normalising distributed authorship, shared control, and multi-voiced co-creation, to construct spaces and new realities made from plural voices, via pluralised and accessible modes of communication.

Whether students go on to work in commercial firms or grassroots organisations, the ability to communicate effectively with diverse publics - residents, stakeholders, clients, and government actors alike - is a vital professional competency and civic service. Participatory methods are not merely relevant to socially oriented individuals and practices, they are central to every domain where built environments intersect with lived realities.

To refocus on this paper's key points, in this context, storytelling should not be treated as a peripheral or soft skill, but as a foundational method of engagement within participatory design. Storytelling enhances planners' and designers' ability to interpret place-based knowledge, navigate complex social dynamics, and create accessible dialogue between technical professionals and everyday urban residents (Beauregard, 2003). It cultivates empathy, sharpens observation, and can support ethical documentation and representation.

Integrating storytelling into architectural and socio-design curricula also aligns with calls for decolonising design education (Chattopadhyay, 2012). The notion that design should begin with people (Papanek, 1983) and address deeper social and ecological concerns is a long-standing tradition in design aiming for democratic ideals. For designers to answer this social calling, their training needs to equip them to act beyond a traditional design brief, developing skills in relating to vulnerable or marginalized populations rather than to a brief from a manufacturer (Margolin & Margolin, 2002). These methods would not replace technical skills, but complement them, forming a more holistic, situated planning praxis and allowing students to develop fluency in, and better grasp the syntax of, pluralistic design-communication. Furthermore, these methods provide accessible and culturally sensitive platforms for the sharing of diverse lived experiences, especially in multicultural groups or those with limited English (or dominant language) proficiency.

Storytelling is not merely about telling stories; it is equally about listening. If no one is listening, it is a monologue, or simply unheard thoughts. Practitioners need to cultivate masterful listening skills, learn how to ask open and unbiased questions, show genuine interest, and effectively record, dissect, and understand the nuances of shared narratives. Facilitating this narrative-based participation also helps students, and practitioners, develop a deeper understanding of relational dynamics - learning to not only speak, but to listen, interpret, and negotiate across boundaries of identity, language, and experience. As Jenny Hou (2025) maintains, this infrastructural approach to listening and the act of storytelling is not merely a means of data collection but a co-inquiry - an ethical, interpretive process that can decolonise knowledge production by amplifying historically excluded voices. Furthermore, if participatory design projects surface tacit knowledge but do not effectively collect or document it, then any efforts toward shared decision-making or co-design fail (Moore and Elliot, 2016). Embedding storytelling in design education fosters not only better processes, but more just and inclusive urban outcomes.

However, it should be noted that implementing storytelling as a methodology poses practical and ethical challenges. It demands significant time and resources for sustained engagement, and researchers often face difficulties building trust and retaining (multicultural) participants, particularly when communities experience 'consultation fatigue' from repeated demands by different researchers or agencies (Hou, 2025). Power dynamics are also more nuanced than in traditional methods where researchers typically control the process. In storytelling, complex interplay arises between researchers, participants (especially with multicultural backgrounds), and intermediaries (Brekke et al., 2021). Ethical considerations such as informed and meaningful consent and preventing re-traumatisation are paramount, necessitating culturally safe environments and appropriate support mechanisms (Hou, 2025). As demonstrated in both the Cities 4 Women and ASF-UK Johannesburg case studies, shared ownership of stories, allowing participants to control, edit, and distribute their narratives, is crucial for self-advocacy and agency

(Gruson-Wood et al., 2024) with agency and care for space being a paramount pillar of social urban resilience.

Beyond methodological considerations, reflecting on one's own positionality within such projects is essential. As both participant and observer, an urban designer trained in Western academic contexts but working within deeply localised, multilingual, and community-driven environments, occupies an intermediary position between facilitator and learner. This dual role generates ethical dilemmas around authorship, representation, and voice: whose story is being told, and by whom? In both Nepal and Johannesburg, the author remained conscious that their presence, however well-intentioned, carried embedded assumptions about communication, value, and participation. The act of translating lived experiences into visual or written formats risks privileging certain narratives over others, particularly when mediated through institutional frameworks or donor expectations. Recognising this tension invites humility. Storytelling in participatory urbanism must be approached as an ongoing negotiation of trust, reciprocity, and power. True co-creation demands continual reflexivity, not just about methods, but about our own roles within them.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how resilience in cities could be redefined, not solely as a material or technological feat, but as a culturally grounded and communicatively inclusive process. It contributes a critical proposition to the themes of planning for resilience and quality of life: that storytelling is not an anecdotal embellishment to design, but a plurilingual methodology central to building resilient, just, and inclusive urban futures.

The authors' conceptual framework of method as mother tongue highlighted how participatory design methods rooted in local communicative practices, be they visual, oral, gestural, or speculative, offer more authentic and accessible modes of engagement. When storytelling is used not just to communicate but to co-create, it becomes a bridge across linguistic, generational, and epistemological divides. It is in this bridging that communities (and, not being homogenous entities, the individuals within them), begin to imagine, express, and materialise futures otherwise excluded from dominant planning paradigms.

The two illustrative case studies - Cities 4 Women in Nepal and ASF-UK's work in Johannesburg - demonstrate how storytelling can surface lived spatial knowledge, challenge technocratic hierarchies, and foster collaborative authorship over urban narratives. They show storytelling's capacity as a form of infrastructural care, capable of archiving memory, sustaining relationships, and catalysing agency in relation to tangible and intangible urban space.

To meaningfully embed such approaches in practice, this paper calls for

a pedagogical shift in architectural and planning education. Participatory design, when taught from the outset as both a civic responsibility and an imaginative act, can seed new cultures of listening, co-design, and distributed authorship. Storytelling, when recognised as a design tool within this, offers practitioners a means to interpret place-based knowledge with humility and respect, thus moving us toward design cultures that do not just speak louder, but listen better, with storytelling as our common ground.

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