The Future for Heritage Practice

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Abstract

In exploring the future for heritage practice, this paper reviews the recent history of heritage in Australia and debates around the relationship, or lack of relationship, between heritage theory and practice. The Future for Heritage Practice themed volume captures the spirit of the 2013 Australia ICOMOS Conference program and the wide-ranging discussion and debate generated by its insistent questioning of all that we do now, and might do in the future. Themes emerging from this discussion include the generative potential of practice, and the need to reconnect heritage theory and practice within a broader cultural frame, with a stronger focus on imagination, innovation and creativity.

Introduction

As the study of heritage expands rapidly in universities around the world, debates about the tension between theory and practice in heritage are well represented in recent literature. This does not make heritage studies exceptional, but rather echoes similar debates in archaeology and other fields where the pragmatic ‘doing’ of (field)work is highly valued and contributes significantly to disciplinary identity. However, some discussions in heritage have certainly bifurcated into distinctive parallel paths, one more interested in the ‘why’ of heritage, and the other more concerned with the ‘what’ and the ‘how’. As Winter has recently put it, ‘there is an uneasy ambiguity and a frequent unspoken slippage, between critical interpretivist approaches to heritage and a concern for the actual conservation of culture’ (Winter 2013: 396).

This fragmentation is particularly problematic at a time when government support and funding for heritage conservation has contracted. The strong partnerships between heritage NGOs and government, which generated significant research and were such an important feature of successful heritage management in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, no longer seem to be possible in the context of an ever-more risk-averse and politicised public service (and see Sullivan, this volume).

This themed volume of Historic Environment explores a broad range of questions around what the future might be for heritage practice in Australia and more broadly in a globalising world. The papers emerged from the 2013 Australia ICOMOS Conference, Imagined Pasts, Imagined Futures, which was infused by an urgent sense of the need to respond to heritage’s contemporary challenges, but also by a sense of optimism about the positive role that heritage, as a community and future building practice, can play in society. This volume captures something of this ethos in its combination of reflective scholarly papers and historical accounts of moments of dialogue and convergence, which are all too often lost to the published record.
A victim of its own success?

While the Australian heritage ‘industry’ has been well known for its innovative heritage practice, based on an imperfect, but comparatively robust framework of legislation, policy and regulation, governments have been gradually retreating from their past acceptance of the need to invest in these areas. Driven not only by ideological commitment to smaller government, streamlined regulation and the removal of impediments to investment and development, these moves reflect a more fundamental change in philosophies about what constitutes the common good and what role governments have in protecting these goods, as opposed to the role of market-driven service-providers. While few would now argue against the power of heritage to move, mobilise and validate communities, or against the perceived social and environmental benefits of conservation, politicians in Australia are now less likely to see the care and management of heritage as a proper investment for government. But these changes in heritage also reflect a broader, more concerted trend away from seeing public investment in culture and the humanities as the responsibility of government, with a growing emphasis on philanthropy and on seeing the ‘community’ as holding the responsibility to care for its heritage (for example see A Draft Strategy for Australia’s Heritage, Australian Government, Department of Environment, 2014:15, 24-26). Further evidence of this is seen in the memorable debate that played out in the Australian media in late 2013 about the value of humanities and social science research, following the recently elected Abbott government’s decision to ‘redirect’ $103 million away from ‘wasteful’ humanities research into health related research initiatives (eg Trounson 2013). This in turn echoed very similar debates seen in the United States and the United Kingdom about the social and economic value of the humanities and social sciences, and a range of academic responses concerned with how these values might be better measured and more successfully articulated to government and communities (eg Bennett 2013).

Looking further back in time, the 1970s and 1980s in Australia saw ‘people power’ and grass roots activism bring about enormous and rapid change in heritage and environmental protection, while the following decades saw a focus on embedding the language of heritage expertise - a language that would stand up in court and build public trust in the authenticity of the outcomes of the heritage process (see for example Davison & McConville 1991: 28-37). However, the canonisation of heritage management into a solid framework for a research discipline, a specialized body of expert knowledge and a heavily regulated aspect of land management and urban planning, has perhaps also had unintended negative consequences, a point which is also made by Sharon Veale in her contribution to Sullivan’s paper in this volume.

This situation may have caused some communities and groups to either feel excluded from heritage care, or simply to accept that heritage care is more rightfully the responsibility of the experts. In a similar vein, the positive impacts of the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, The Burra Charter, 2013 (Burra Charter) management process have been widely documented, however the Charter’s aloofness from economic matters has perhaps exacerbated the current paucity of both data and concepts for measuring and expressing the broader economic, social and cultural benefits of heritage conservation to the wider community, as has also been suggested for the conservation field more broadly by Mason (2008). For instance, Clark and Maeer concluded in their 2008 analysis of the impact of the Heritage Lottery Fund in the UK that the clearest beneficiary of that program was ‘heritage itself’ (2008: 26). While they went on to outline important methods for demonstrating impacts, and to critically assess the available data and its inherent issues, there remains an uneasy tension here, perhaps an example of Winter’s ambiguity, or slippage, between notions of the intrinsic benefits of stewardship versus critical interpretivist approaches to how and why heritage is made and which individuals and social groups this in fact benefits.

In Australia again, the 2006 Productivity Commission was a further strident reminder of how, with the flick of a government auditor’s red pen, investment in heritage care could be transformed from a contribution to the common good to a market failure. Ironically the Productivity Commission had been welcomed by Australia ICOMOS and other advocates as a crucial opportunity for much needed public sector research on the economic impact of heritage conservation in Australia (Australian Government, 2006). However the results were a stunning
disappointment to the sector. Focusing overwhelmingly on the impact of the heritage listing of dwellings on the property rights of individuals, the Commission’s report failed to grapple with evidence for the benefits of heritage conservation at a broader societal scale, but as Clark has pointed out, this disappointment has at least stimulated a research response from heritage advocates, and highlighted, as had several iterations of the State of the Environment reporting process before it, that the lack of meaningful data on the impact of heritage activities is perhaps one of the most significant issues for the future of heritage conservation in Australia (Clark nd: 9).

Also during the early 2000s, the longstanding approach of the Australian Heritage Commission and the Register of the National Estate (1974-2004), with its ideals of community and government partnerships funded through mechanisms like the National Estates Grants Program, was dismantled by government and replaced with the narrowed focus of the National Heritage List, the ‘jewels in the crown’ metaphor usurping the ‘places in the heart’ (Australian Heritage Commission, 1998). The current draft National Heritage Strategy (Australian Government, Department of Environment, 2014) continues to reinforce this national, and nationalistic, focus on icons. The majority of listings on the current National Heritage List were added between 2005 and 2008, while after this period a ‘priority list’ for assessment was created in response to the limited resources available to assess nominations. The 2011 State of the Environment Report (SOE) suggested that this situation caused community enthusiasm for seeking national heritage recognition to wane, as advocates saw their nominations languish for years, tangled up in incomprehensibly slow forms of bureaucracy (2011 SOE: 707). The SOE also argued for more flexible heritage management approaches and the need to simplify the over complex systems of heritage related approvals and regulations that have characterised Australia’s compliance-driven heritage management industry, particularly as in many jurisdictions the large, specialist bureaucracies that were built up in the 1980s and 1990s, have been slimmed down and made more generic and managerial over the last decade.

As Richard Mackay revealed in an analysis of findings from his research for the heritage aspects of 2011 SOE, 40 years of Indigenous heritage management had resulted in a highly regulated and expensive process designed less to conserve than to regulate the destruction of Aboriginal heritage (Mackay 2014). He also suggested that Indigenous heritage management in Australia was so fragmented between states and jurisdictions that it is not possible to understand what has been lost, what is currently under threat, and more broadly, what this actually means for Indigenous communities and their cultural and economic aspirations (Mackay 2014). It is notable that, in the last five years or so, some of the most successful Indigenous heritage outcomes have been achieved under broadly-based environmental programs, such as Caring for Country and Working on Country, rather than cultural heritage projects per se. These programs have provided jobs for Aboriginal rangers, as well as strengthening the links between traditional knowledge and scientific and cultural research, identified by Jackie Huggins, Indigenous representative on the Australian Heritage Council, as a crucial part of any future collaborative projects between Indigenous people and professional heritage practitioners (see Sullivan, this volume; Altman and Kerins, 2012: 5-6). As many of the papers in this volume spell out, because of this complex history there is currently a sense of the need for change in heritage practice, and also that, in some ways, the Australian heritage sector’s major achievements over the past 40 years in lobbying for strong heritage protection legislation and regulation have in a sense caused it to become the victim of its own success.

The Relationship between Practice and Theory

The discussion thus far has explored a range of converging and divergent external factors that are driving change in heritage practice in Australia and indeed in other locations subject to similar social and economic conditions. However, the need to bridge a perceived gulf between heritage theory and heritage practice has long been a major concern from within. In reviewing this situation in 2001 Denis Byrne and colleagues suggested that there was a danger that the ‘ship of practice will have sailed so far from the ship of knowledge that there will be almost no way back and they will each have gone beyond the range of communication’ (Byrne et al
2001: 44). However, in recent discussions on the subject of the future for heritage studies, several authors have questioned the assumption that heritage conservation practitioners simply require a ‘corrective’ injection of heritage studies theory. Janelle Warren-Findlay quipped that many heritage studies academics tend to treat heritage practitioners like ‘graduate students’ (2013: 380). While others have suggested that this thinking not only underestimates the nature of the disjuncture between practitioners focused on the deployment of positivist, science-based conservation knowledge and researchers working within humanities or social science approaches to heritage, but also fails to see the opportunities presented by a more iterative, reflective engagement with practice as a domain of situated knowledge (eg Winter 2013, 2014, Witcomb and Buckley 2013). These commentators suggest that seeing richer theorisations as guiding the future development of heritage practice is a limited way to understand this relationship and they ask for a richer engagement with domains of practice as providing a distinctive agenda for future heritage studies and heritage practice. Witcomb and Buckley have further stressed the need for the teaching of vocational courses, with their necessary emphasis on ‘toolkits’ and methods, within a critical context, suggesting that heritage studies can ‘perhaps be at its most vibrant and engaged when it is located in heritage studies departments that also teach vocational courses’ (2013: 574). They go on to suggest that if heritage studies/practice could produce a more coherent articulation of how it is relevant to, and might contribute to solving, the pressing social and environmental issues of our time, then it would be better able as a field to argue for the kind of government support and investment that it feels it is losing (2013: 576).

Rodney Harrison’s work is another distinctive intervention in this debate, drawing on the ‘ontological turn’ to move away from discursive and deconstructive approaches to focus on heritage practices themselves as an important means ‘by which people globally attribute value and express a sense of care for special objects, places and practices’ (Harrison 2015: 39 and see Harrison 2013). Harrison turns an ethnographic gaze onto both professional and non-professional forms of heritage practice as the subject of his research, however, in his recasting of heritage practice as a set of ‘emergent modes of caring for, valuing, and assuming an ethical stance toward the future’, he clearly also sees this domain as holding great potential for generating positive social and environmental outcomes for global societies. He nonetheless maintains the need for criticality, or suspicion as he puts it, suggesting ‘heritage is rarely deployed innocently’ (Harrison 2015: 38). He argues that the flipside of this focus on heritage as a future building practice must always be ‘an ontological politics of heritage’ that is cautious, critical and skeptical of how heritage can be used by governmental structures, and groups or individuals who hold embedded or inherited forms of privilege. His position is one of critical reserve, whilst also approaching heritage practice as a rich field of real-world creative engagement that might in itself be generative of new theories for how ‘the future is cared for and curated across varied contexts’ (2015: 38). This approach we suggest offers real creative potential and aligns with many of the approaches to the politics and ‘social worlds’ of heritage practice found in the papers in this themed volume.

**Futures for Heritage Practice**

The generative potential of heritage practice to contribute to future theory building and to social justice agendas is a recurrent theme in papers in this volume. Wallace and Buckley are primarily concerned with how heritage practice has contributed to building concepts around cultural landscapes, although they express frustration that this powerful idea has failed to lead to the kinds of transformations of practice that had been looked forward to at the time of the origins of the idea in the 1990s. They wonder if the clarity of Carl Sauer’s 1920s expression of the cultural landscape, which was so easily overlaid upon a scientific, positivist heritage conservation frame-without challenging its fundamental premise-has in fact limited the development of innovative practice in heritage and, perhaps more importantly, failed to transform rigid heritage management systems that continue to embody the tension between positivist and critical interpretivist approaches. However, Wallace and Buckley also show convincingly how the communities in their case studies strategically deploy the language and
governance of heritage to achieve local outcomes, that then leak out beyond the boundaries of what might be officially recognized as ‘heritage’. Their case studies show that creative solutions are being developed at the grass roots level, exemplifying the importance of management approaches that are built on understanding the specificity of nature/culture/human/non-human/thing entanglements.

In a related vein, Owen’s paper in this volume also uses the concept of entanglement and explores how materiality and visibility have shaped notions of what heritage is, how it is defined through practice, and how it can be managed, suggesting that, as an archaeologist, he needs to pay just as much attention to absences, and places of ‘nothing’, in order to build understanding of Aboriginal landscape use in the past and contemporary Indigenous heritage in the present. ‘The locations of ‘absence’’, Owens argues, can also provide a space for Indigenous people to situate and revive their ‘personal connection to Country’, through language, and through experience, that goes beyond archaeology and the confines of heritage governance. He describes how being in the field, spending time in the landscape with Aboriginal owners, spending time together doing excavation, allowed him time to learn and the Aboriginal community time to reconnect with the place and ‘develop a sense of why the landscape had been important to their ancestors’. The outcomes of the project meant that the hilltops surrounding the site of excavation were identified as ‘intangible heritage’ and were then conserved within an environmental planning zone for the benefit of future generations.

Brown’s paper, focused partly on Flugelman’s buried sculpture Tetrahedra, is another that gives us a strong sense of what and how Brown has learnt through the doing of heritage work. Once again drawing upon entanglement theory, and with strongly articulated social justice objectives, his richly theorised approach to place-attachment is built upon insights gained from working with and talking to people in place and about place. In particular, Brown argues that heritage practices which are blind to the emotional content of attachment (or ‘association’ in Burra Charter terms), which separate emotions and feelings from material things and thus construct people as external to, and separate from, places and things, not only fail to come to grips with the nature of heritage, but also have negative consequences for people: ‘It is the operational consequence of this conceptual position, one that I have observed to have negative consequences for people’s wellbeing, that concerns me’.

Turning sharply away from our inward focus on the heritage profession in Australia, Winter’s paper looks outwards to explore how cultural globalisation is opening up new spaces for engagement, and for the development of new, non-western modes of heritage practice and governance (Winter this volume). He suggests that Australia’s old models of engaging with Asia, including around heritage, retain that musty odour of colonialism. Australia requires, he argues, new strategies that not only recognise the significant investment that countries like Japan, India and China have made in the domain of heritage – but also understand the need to build long term peer-relationships, based on the ‘value of cultural engagement’, rather than on ‘capacity building’ or other aid-type discourses or understandings of cultural diplomacy. Whereas Winter highlights the need to develop ‘new cultural and institutional capacities and literacies’ to engage effectively with the region, in her panel discussion, Sullivan suggests we must question the nexus between our national practice and the growth of sophisticated global heritage leadership in the region, and where we might fit in the future (see Sullivan, this volume). Winter also shows that the tendency to revert to a kind of ‘theoretical universalism’ in heritage studies also promulgates another veiled form of eurocentrism that requires significant further work, a point also made by Andrea Witcomb in her comment that we need to be ‘open to non-Western understandings of heritage, whether these be Asian, Indigenous or just simply those of diverse cultural groups that do not necessarily understand things in the same way we do as western-trained, heritage professionals’ (in Sullivan, this volume).

Christina Cameron, a uniquely positioned observer and historian of World Heritage governance, draws from her own experience and her broader oral history project, based on interviews with leading personalities of the early years of the World Heritage Convention, to suggest possible futures for the convention and its idealistic concept of universal values. In her book, Many Voices, One Vision: The Early Years of the World Heritage Convention, launched at
the 2013 Australia ICOMOS Conference, Cameron charts the broadening of the Convention with the evolving understanding of ‘heritage in all its human and social dimensions’, which she believes has contributed to its global acceptance by diverse cultures and most countries (Cameron & Rossler 2013: 75-102; see also Cameron, this volume). However, she identifies worrying trends that threaten to undermine its relevance and credibility: first, and despite the early promise of the idea of cultural landscapes as a unifying and integrating concept, the institutionalised, conceptual and structural dichotomy between nature and culture; second, the growing politicisation of World Heritage, with the drift away from international solidarity to national self-interest, evident in the ever-widening gap between Committee decisions and the recommendations of technical advisors. This is especially true for nominations, such that in 2012, the then Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, commented that they risked becoming ‘mere accountants of the World Heritage label’ (as cited by Cameron, this volume). Finally, the recent shift in emphasis and discourse from conservation to development, such that despite its mission for stewardship, the World Heritage Committee is increasingly supporting development projects at the expense of conservation, raising ethical questions about who in fact speaks for the conservation of World Heritage sites? In Cameron’s view, a significant challenge for the future is the recalibration required to renew the leadership role of World Heritage in the conservation field.

Some of the most engaging and spirited discussion and imagining of heritage futures came out of the two panel discussions on the last day of the 2013 Australia ICOMOS Conference: firstly, a plenary keynote session about Indigenous Futures, chaired by Carmen Lawrence, chair of the Australian Heritage Council, which explored the potential for songlines to be recognised as National Heritage; and secondly, a panel session chaired by Sharon Sullivan, former director of the now defunct Australian Heritage Commission, on the question of fundamental interest to practitioners and members of Australia ICOMOS, ‘Does the practice of heritage as we know it have a future? There was consensus among panel members that we need to, in Helen Lardner’s words, ‘uncover an entangled and more complex past’, embracing ‘the spaces between, the complexities and the entanglement around fabric’. A particular challenge is to recognise ‘ancient Indigenous songlines, woven across the land but still held in oral traditions and intangible heritage’. Panel member, Sharon Veale, felt that as heritage practitioners, ‘we are ensnared in the system of heritage, rather than in understanding and unraveling the social processes of its making’. In her view, we need a critically reflexive practice that is more centered on deeper cultural engagement, a common theme throughout the conference proceedings.

Digital disruption

Perhaps one of the most prominent and widely discussed issues for the future of heritage and the cultural collections sector, is new digital technologies, including digital products and objects, the provision of digital modes of access and public participation, and their potential to facilitate a move away from culture and heritage as the preserve of experts and to democratise history and heritage making (Cameron & Kenderdine 2007). Heritage management, particularly archaeological practice, was to some extent an early adopter of computational tools and new technologies, from geographic information systems and remote sensing, to 3D scanning and computer aided modeling and visualization. Concepts such as digital disruption and disintermediation are currently the site of intense scholarly activity and while these issues are not a key focus for this volume, their centrality is acknowledged by Denis Byrne in his contribution to Sullivan’s paper (this volume).

Byrne comments on debates about the virtual experience of heritage and the impact this might have on existing understandings of stewardship and conservation, on understandings of the fake and the real, the experiential and the informational. In heritage place management and conservation the ready availability of digital preservation tools (eg 3D scanning and digital archiving) appears to be creating a new kind of ‘archive fever’– a massive accumulation of digital archives – and their importance is being daily reaffirmed by destructive activities such as those of ISIS in Syria. However, as Byrne suggests, the question of how the digital will transform current heritage practices remains an open one. Perhaps the relationship between fake and real
will itself be transformed reflecting the ‘mundane reality that genuinely old objects and places are not readily accessible in the landscape of most people’s everyday lives and also the reality that the genuinely old is often not as dramatic and ‘consumable’ as a reproduction can be made to be’ (Byrne, in Sullivan, this volume).

The idea that the genuinely old is a rapidly reducing and fragile resource is often seen as the key driver for the field of digital heritage, for instance in a recent paper the Burra Charter is cited as evidence for the ‘fact’ that UNESCO and other conservation groups are increasingly opting for reduced public access’ to fragile heritage sites (Flynn 2007: 362). While from another perspective, Winter claims that the rapid uptake of digital tools has only intensified the long standing bias towards techno-scientific knowledge practices in heritage and conservation, ‘creating a whole new scopic regime of heritage governance’ (Winter 2013: 397). Ross Gibson, on the other hand, focuses on the unexpected affordances and creative potential that the digital can surprise us with, an affordance that he suggests feeds the ‘narrative hunger’ of our contemporary, networked society (Gibson 2014). It is clear that digital tools, like Google Earth and the National Library’s Trove, have not only transformed how heritage work is done, but also shape what heritage work produces, similarly contributing to feeding ‘narrative hunger’; allowing anyone, anywhere, to rapidly assemble images and historic sources, without the need for experts or expertise, in order to build new stories around people and places.

**Histories of Heritage Practice**

Finally, there is, we suggest, a need for more detailed archival, empirical and ethnographic work that describes and charts the relationship between critique, theory and practice in heritage, to develop richer accounts that explore how practices and forms of expertise are established, how they gain authority, how practitioners and non-practitioners feel about them, and how they are impacted by prevailing intellectual concepts and critiques. In Australia the requirements and needs of legislation have clearly been a key determinant of some forms of practice. How the implementation of legislation is nuanced by different political regimes, how it is re-drafted in response to ideological, environmental and economic trends, are all questions that deserve ongoing analysis. However the opposite situation is also undoubtedly true: that practice has also led to change in legislation. Although it seems almost axiomatic that legislation lags well behind even sustained critiques, such as the continued distinction between historic, indigenous and natural heritage in the Australian federal system.

It is significant therefore that this volume includes three papers that use oral histories, interviews and survey data to assemble granular accounts of heritage practice and the views of practitioners, exploring the issues and priorities that drive particular actors at different times and in different contexts.

Cameron and Rossler’s book *Many Voices, One Vision: The Early Years of the World Heritage Convention*, referred to earlier, is a welcome history of the World Heritage system, undertaken at a time when the generation who pioneered the World Heritage Convention was aging, or had already passed away. The in-depth recorded interviews, now held at the University of Montreal World Heritage Oral Archives, provide an essential complement to the rich documentary record already available. The images, memories and stories contained in this repository are also of nostalgic and personal interest to many involved in the World Heritage processes over the 40 plus years of the Convention. In a similar vein, Bronwyn Hanna’s oral history project on the writing of the Burra Charter captures the voices and memories of the early Australia ICOMOS members involved in this major initiative which has had considerable, and somewhat controversial, influence on heritage practice in Australia and globally (see Hanna, this volume; see also Smith, 2006 for a critical assessment of the use of the Burra Charter). Sadly, we note that the documentary archives of heritage history in Australia have recently been decommissioned by the Federal government’s environment department and disbursed to various libraries, archives and NGOs, or simply destroyed.
Chris Johnston’s paper is a further important contribution to research into heritage practice in Australia—a rare attempt to capture and publish the ‘zeitgeist’ of a conference, and the propelling momentum that occurs as issues, questions and concerns are found to be shared and to converge across the themes of the conference, across disciplines and across both professional and community-based groups. Her paper draws out six key themes emerging from interviews and a post-conference survey, each of which is linked to an imperative need for change:

- To reconceptualise the ‘heritage frame’, understandings of what is or is not heritage, for reasons of inclusiveness;
- To develop critical and reflective forms of heritage practice that are flexible, ‘slow’ and creative, not formulaic box ticking;
- For heritage to become part of a global discourse around sustainability and to question the limitations of national frameworks;
- To continue to build engagement with diverse communities, but centrally around better engagement with Indigenous communities;
- For more strategic and generous government engagement with heritage;
- And last but not least, how openness to change can become part of a dynamic, responsive heritage practice.

Creating Futures

The papers in this volume on the Future for Heritage Practice capture the spirit of the 2013 Australia ICOMOS Conference program and the wide-ranging discussion and debate generated by its insistent questioning of all that we do now, and might do in the future. The challenging and varied views represented in this volume will make, we believe, a constructive contribution to a renewed debate around the relationship between theory and practice, the generative potential of practice, and to a stronger and more reflexive approach to research and practice in all aspects of heritage. They also demonstrate how such reflection is shifting, even de-materialising, the ‘heritage frame’ that perhaps has seemed so sturdily stable and well constructed in previous decades (and see Schofield 2015). In doing so, these discussions are helping to reconnect heritage theory and practice with a broader cultural frame. We see this penetration of disciplinary borders and other forms of barriers around and between the different components of heritage, such as tangible and intangible, natural and cultural, as necessary and desirable in building more methodologically coherent (anthropologically and ethnographically informed) forms of heritage practice, in reconnecting with culture, and building a stronger focus on imagination, innovation and creativity in the future that we make together.

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