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The Houses' Eyes.
Le Corbusier in the photographs of Guido Guidi
and Takashi Homma

Abstract

In photography, the spatial and volumetric characteristics of buildings participate in an implicit abstraction process to realise a bidimensional vision, one which – in creating the image – accomplishes a new expressive form. If architecture is a privileged place for humankind to experience three-dimensional space, photography intervenes in our perception of space, transposing results from the act of looking onto a surface; sometimes this action cannot be understand as an act concluded within a single image but offers, instead, exploratory possibilities that engage the photographer as well as the image's viewers.

Keywords Architecture – Photography – Space

«No sane man can believe his point of view to be the only one, and even recognizes that every place and every point of view has its own value. It evokes one unique aspect of the world which, in turn, does not exclude but affirms other aspect» (Florenskij, 2020, p. 105).

The image of an eye recurs in Le Corbusier's sketches, often used to communicate the visual relationship between architecture and landscape. The eye also interprets the metaphor of looking – ready to attract, and, in a certain sense, "activate the observer".

"Look/observe/see/imagine/create" noted Le Corbusier in one of his notebooks, confirming the importance of perceptive aspects for the phenomenological interpretation of architecture and landscape and project development (Le Corbusier 1987, pp. 4-7). Photographers such as Guido Guidi and Takashi Homma - who explored the work of the Swiss architect through their photographs – referred to the image of the eye, each attributing to it a different iconic value. The depiction of an eye, for Guidi, and the photograph of an eye-shaped window, for Homma, seem to support the existence of a correspondence between the visual organ and the act of photography (Rössl 2019, p. 50), understood as a useful process for establishing a *new* relationship with the world. The eye represents the possibilities offered by photography as an essential medium for the comprehension of landscape and architecture. In an article dedicated to the memory of the photographer Werner Bischof, Ernesto Nathan Rogers expresses the difficulty of representing architecture through photography: «Photographing architecture is almost impossible. The underlying reasons for this difficulty lie in the very essence of the



architectural phenomenon. Though executed in a precise spatial position, it cannot be understood without sweeping through events, in the lively succession of temporal moments that continually alter our relationship to it and establish direct experience with its complex situation» (Rogers 1958, p. 156). In photography, the spatial and volumetric characteristics of buildings participate in an implicit abstraction process to realise a bidimensional vision, one which- in creating the image- accomplishes a new expressive form. If architecture is a privileged place for humankind to experience three-dimensional space, photography intervenes in our perception of space, transposing results from the act of looking onto a surface; sometimes this action cannot be understand as an act concluded within a single image but offers, instead, exploratory possibilities that engage the photographer as well as the image's viewers. In this sense, «the camera broadens perception in sectors not otherwise evident to our awareness» (Rogers 1958, p. 156).

Le Corbusier photographer

On occasion of his Journey to the East (1910-11), a strong interest in learning about locations and architecture drove young Charles Edouard Jeanneret to purchase a medium-format (9x12 cm) camera, the "Cupido 80". This camera, equipped with bellows and polished glass with a normal lens, allowed him to depict buildings while respecting the canons of architectural photography; the camera corrected vision through the decentring technique, keeping the vertical lines of buildings perfectly orthogonal to the ground and horizon line. Observing images produced during the trip, it is notable how Jeanneret's gaze clung to architectural detail, distancing itself from more traditional architectural representations that celebrate its monumental characteristics.² Travel allowed him to create a photography portfolio that could be considered – in the same way as drawing and writing – a collection of visual notes to deepen his understanding of the architecture he visited and interpret it in later projects. Photographic sections and sketches of the same place, often taken from different points of view, appear among the iconographic material (Figs 1, 2)³. Moved by the need to experiment and by a visual approach that did

Fig. 1 Le Corbusier, Santa Sofia, Istanbul 1911, in Giuliano Gresleri, *Viaggio in Oriente*, 1984, pp. 240-241





Fig. 2 Le Corbusier, views of cemeteries and cypresses, Üsküdar and Tombs in Asköy, Instanbul 1911, in Giuliano Gresleri, *Viaggio in Oriente*, 1984, pp. 248-249.



not stop at conventional framings, typical of architectural photography in the 19th and 20th centuries, Le Corbusier's images seem to instead represent mechanisms to test the available heritage and reveal a new way of imagining the world.⁴ His body of work at times demonstrates interest in an open vision, changeable depending upon the observer's position. Varying his point of view, he measures himself against architecture and produces multiple images of the same subject. The elements portrayed emphasize light and communicate a certain abstract character (Rabaca 2012, pp. 102-109).⁵ Emboldened by the camera's possibilities, Le Corbusier probes different aspects of vision and in some ways anticipates theories on the nature of imagination and perspective developed by Pavel Florenskij a few years later (1919): «Some points of view have richer contents and more characteristics, others fewer. In any case, this depends on one's position; there is no absolute point of view. The artist seeks to observe the object to be illustrated from different points of view. He enriches his own observation with new aspects of reality, recognising them as equally meaningful, more or less» (Florenskij 2020, p. 105). The different framings of Jeanneret's photographs become a means of representing architecture as well as an internal instrument of the compositional process, useful for identifying formal variants and verifying spatial determinants in architecture. 6 If we overcome the concept of a single, conclusive image to consider the combination of different photograms, photography's static vision acquires dynamic potential: set alongside each other according to the order they were shot or a different one, the a posteriori juxtaposition of different photograms allows us to construct sequences and reveal new spatial dynamics. «There exists no object more suprising, and at the same time simpler, in its naturalness and organic sequence than the photographic series. This is the logical culmination of photography. The series no longer represents a 'picture'. Nor can the canons of painting aesthetics be applied to it. Here the single photogram as such loses its identity and becomes a detail of the whole, an essential structural element of the totality, which is an object in itself» (Moholy-Nagy 1975, p. 131).

Referring to the journey to the East, Italo Zannier states that «the experience of space, now more than ever, is what photographic images



teach (and guarantee). These are essential tests of a cultural condition and thus prove the *projection* of a concept of reality that coincides with the architectural project in photography: a game of cross references difficult to avoid, without its captivating, insistent, yet definitive intermediation and comparison» (Zannier 1984, p. 69). Read a posteriori, the photographic image is witness to a process that at once compels the viewer to disappear into the figure of the photographer and share his experiences, and induces the viewer to engage with a *precious historical document* ready to come to life and suggest new meanings (Costantini and Zannier 1986). «Le Corbusier, like Wright, did not much appreciate photography as an expressive medium, despite his frequent and systematic use of it; both would have preferred photography 'servile and humble', as in the time of Baudelaire, and- who knows how- faithful and documentary» (Zannier 1984, p. 69).

Guido Guidi, space and time in photography

In his conception of humble photography, Guido Guidi approaches the work of Le Corbusier, searching for a bond with the Swiss master's architecture. As Olivier Lugon argues, «only by humbly accepting the documentary specificity of their medium, renouncing every artistic effect to approach the mechanical vision of the camera, can photographers hope to access art with a capital A. The idea of 'documentary art', which seemed a perfect oxymoron, takes on a positive connotation: fidelity to the mean's specificity, therefore purity and moral honesty» (Lugon 2008, p. 16).

Undertaking a photographic campaign of Le Corbusier's work, Guidi produced a *corpus* of photographs concentrated on five constructions: l'Usine Duval, La Cité de Refuge, la Maison La Roche, Maison Planeix e Villa Savoye. Facing these buildings, he confirmed his preference for "documentary" photography, free of preconceptions, as pioneered by Eugène Atget⁸.

Referring to his photographic campaign of Le Corbusier's architecture in conversation with Antonello Frongia, Guidi stated that he-like Daniel Arasse- wished to visit the scene «without all those critical writings holding me back», as the «best historical documents on a piece of art are not the writings on it but the art piece itself» (Guidi 2018, p. 109-113). This attitude of the flâneur photographer who prefers going to sites to see "what's there", without conditioning, certainly foresees acceptance of randomness and temporality as parameters intrinsic to photography, ready to reveal themselves in the very moment one "experiences photography", just as occurred with "experiencing architecture".

Complying with "what appears", Guidi's images pay close attention to detail, recognizing in this the transitoriness of the moment as well as the long arc of architecture. In his photographs, the interior walls of some of Le Corbusier's buildings become abstract surfaces, preordained to gather the sediment of time, while the elements' chromatic variations seem to seal the properties of different materials revealed by light. The photographer's point of view favours reading the material and underlines the independence of architecture's constituent parts. It makes explicit the different surfaces that intervene in the plane's decomposition, evoking a spatial unit.

A series of shots define the edges of the photography, hinting at spatial







Figg. 3, 4 Le Corbusier, Usine Duval, Saint-Dié-des Vosges, april, 20-25, 2003@Guido Guidi

continuity beyond the photogram and alluding to the fluidity of routes snaking through the environs. Two photographs shot inside the Usine Duval focus on a wall that combines different materials, confirming the interior space's abstract character and scale, which is mirrored in the engraved *Modulor* figure (Figs. 3, 4). While the oblique light captures the transitoriness of the photographic moment, its presence reveals the sediments brought by time and deposited on the surfaces of walls. The photographs of the same subject differ by minimal variations in point of view. Their combination suggests a poetry of vision founded in double pose and negation of the single image. Along with sharpening perceptions of space, the dichotomy produced by the paired images provokes reflection, beyond the appearance of things, on the existence of a temporal dimension inherent in architecture's construction.

The time of photography- consecrated to fixing the present- is overcome in this way by a combination of photograms organised in sequence and susceptible to new meanings and questions, in both architectural and photographical form. "Persistence of the gaze" is a prerogative of Guidi's photos. They express a certain way of observing the subject and seeking to visually capture its primal nature. "Yet while capable of such exactness and precision, while persistently focusing its investigatory, at times restless gaze, photography has the power to suggest other inexpressible realities hidden beneath a meticulous superficial description. The gaze is an intentional relationship with the lived horizon" (Costantini 1989, p. 11).

For Guidi, the gaze represents an act of obligation towards the natural and constructed landscape, but above all towards architecture understand as an artifact erected by man for man. «What seems to connect Le Corbusier to the world of photography the most (and also Guido Guidi to Le Corbusier), is an unending interest toward the cognitive possibilities of sight. [...] "Des yeux qui ne voient pas" are attributed to those unaware of changes in the architectural thinking» (Tamborrino 2018, p. 100). Attentively staring at a subject thus allows- when faced with Le Corbusier's architecture, as well- to experience space and overcome one's subjective condition, entrusting new opportunities for seeing to a mechanical instrument: in this case, a large-format camera (8x10").





Fig. 5 Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, may 22, 2003@Guido Guidi.

Lazlò Moholy-Nagy attributed to photography «the possibility of making visible, through a camera, things the human eye is unable to capture or perceive. In other words, the camera can perfect or integrate our optical instrument: the eye» (Moholy-Nagy 1975, p. 99). The photographer's eye finds space to wander inside the camera's rectangular surface of polished glass and examine the details of what lies before it: Le Corbusier tested a similar process with his "Cupido 80". Within that rectangle, light establishes the rules of photography, verifying and giving value to the volumetric, spatial and chromatic characteristics of the framed work (Fig. 5). «Eyes are made to see forms in light. The leading forms are beautiful ones because they can be clearly read" (Le Corbusier 2002, p. 11). Yet light is the factor that gives substance to photography. In Guidi's photographs, the interplay of light and shadows lays bare a new representation of architecture. The work he carried out for over a decade on Carlo Scarpa's Tomba Brion testifies to an inclination that solidified into method, a necessary act of observation that helped shaped his perception of architecture itself (Guidi 2011). The role of time- so central to Scarpa's thought-forcefully emerges in his photographs, in which shadows intervene once again in the deciphering of architecture. These photographs seem to establish continuity with Florenskij's view of a fourth dimension represented by time, without which "art is impossible". «The artist's creative spirit must synthesise, shaping the essential aspects of reality, of its instantaneous partition by the time coordinate. The artist does not represent a thing, but the life of a thing depending upon the impression he receives of it» (Florenskij 2020, p. 108).

The photographer investigates the spatial qualities of Corbusier's work through the passage of light and shadow, varying throughout the day. Time seems to etch itself on architecture: «space is nothing more that the thinnest light, writes Proclus: a statement in which the world- just as happened in art- is conceived for the first time as continuous and, at the same time, deprived of its density and rationality; space is transformed into a homogeneous fluid, homogenised, but not measurable. Indeed, it is dimensionless» (Panofsky 1988, p. 56).

The Villa Savoye ramp represents a central architectural emblem of this. It is the place in which the promenade architecturale – formally defined for the first time to describe Villa La Roche – is unmistakeably displayed. «You enter: the architectural spectacle at once offers itself to the eye. You follow an itinerary and the perspectives develop with great variety» (Le Corbusier and Jeanneret P. 1974, p. 60). Guidi's manifest interest in the ramp materialises in a composition of different photograms. Organised in sequence, these follow the ramp's path, uncovering new geometries within the framing (Figs. 6, 7, 8, 9). The triangle is a repeating dominant theme in the breakdown of space that includes the great ramp: a first triangle corresponds to an outward-facing window, a second identifies the empty space between ramp and parapet. The photographer's varying point of view allows him to progressively perceive two triangles pointing in opposite directions. The line uniting the triangles' vertices reveals a Z-shape uniting the points of two arrows pointed in opposite directions, a symbol that seems to communicate the construction's internal time as revealed by the choice of shot. The ramp identifies a key device in which the harmony of spatial and temporal dimensions is realised. Organised in sequence, the series of photograms directed towards the ramp establishes a diachronic vision of the structure. As George Kubler argues, the formal











Figg. 6, 7, 8, 9 Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, may 22, 2003@Guido Guidi

sequence is akin to «a historic network of gradually altered repetitions of the same traits. One could say the sequence has an armature. In cross section it shows a network, a mesh, or a cluster of subordinate traits; and in long section it has a fibre-like structure of temporal stages, all recognisably similar, yet the mesh is altered from beginning to end» (Kubler 1989, pp. 48-49).

The sequence amplifies perception through a succession of spatial composition frames. However, «cultivating repetition and movement is also a means of escaping the centred, timeless vision of a central point of view. Alberti himself was not so rigid about perspective. He said that point of view should be positioned at human height, but not necessarily centred; that point of view could be lateral or even outside the visual rectangle» (Guidi 2018, p. 111). Thus in the passage from one photogram to the next, the shape of a triangle bursts into the frame, pointing its vertex towards the pilotis located in front of the lens (Figs. 10, 11). The *pilotis* separates the frame in two parts, allowing a glimpse of a small window in the back wall revealing the panorama beyond the horizon.

Figg. 10, 11 Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, may 22, 2003@Guido Guidi.







The composition seems to allude, in formal structure, to the architectural construction in Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo's Annunciation. The pilotis in foreground, metaphor for the sacred column, draws the viewer's gaze along the margins of the photograph and outwards, beyond the large window. The ramp – protagonist of the composition – continues upwards, beyond the open space where the villa seeks to join with the sky and natural elements «in an attempt at an ideal reconciliation between Platonic absolutes» identified in nature and in man (Benton 2008, p. 230).

Takashi Homma, looking through

Interested on Le Corbusier's work, Japanese photographer Takashi Homma chose to investigate the theme of the window. He saw it as an apparatus that, varying in form and proportion, conditions both the character of architecture and- in a kind of bijective relationship- the place chosen to accommodate it. Homma had the opportunity to delve into Le Corbusier's architecture following a 2013 Canadian Centre for Architecture assignment to photograph Chandigarh. This first Indian experience inspired his work on the Swiss architect's creations, concentrating on their perceptive aspects and the dialogic reference they establish with the landscape¹⁰.

Windows foster interdependence between natural and constructed forms. In Ville Savoye, in particular, this interdependence is expressed through privileged landscape views made possible by the invention of the *fenêtre en longueur*.

The first step in truly looking at a landscape is to frame it, defining its edges with care, so that an observer may rest her gaze. Landscape occupies a central role in architecture, and- as Jean-Louis Cohen writes-«Le Corbusier confronted the question of landscape from different angles. The observer always came first, because it is through her vision that one usually encounters landscape; in his final book, *Mise au point* (1966), he defined himself as 'an ass, but with a sharp eye» (Cohen 2013, p. 25). The borders of openings in his constructions appear as paintings ready to mark the passage between interior and exterior. They are liminal spaces and physical places in which exchange occurs between the observing subject and observed object.

The *fenêtre en longueur* plays a central role in the Villa Savoye: as it governs the light shining into the living space, it opens new views on the first floor, offering a continuous series of framings that- organised in a succession of *photograms* – communicates scenery's diachronic dimension (Colomina 2007). Tim Benton asserts that «practical arguments for the panoramic window were, however, less important that psychological ones. Windows can be understood as the eyes of a house, and Le Corbusier always strove to provide a beautiful view for his houses». (Benton 2019, p. i)

Homma's series of photographs overturns point of view from the garden to the villa in an aim to amplify the role of nature as architecture's prominent backdrop. The shift in point of view enables the Japanese photographer to create a sequence of images accentuating the close relationship between construction and vegetation (Figs. 12, 13, 14, 15). Bushes intervene in the foreground, filtering the view of the building from below. Trunks jut between observer and villa, dividing the frame and architecture in a sequence of images. As the shrubbery grows thicker, vegetation prevails, underlining photographically scenery's











Figg. 12, 13, 14, 15 Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy-sur-Seine, 1928@Takashi Homma

central role. In Guidi's photographs, a glimpse of leafy fronds hinted at the surrounding landscape's depth. Homma's images- in contrast- exhibit nature's unbridled force as it accommodates architecture: implicitly clarifying the reason for this.

Describing the villa, Le Corbusier observed that «If it's standing in a meadow one can't see very far. The grass is largely insalubrious, wet, etc. Consequently, the house's true garden won't be at ground level, but raised 3.5 metres: this hanging garden will have dry, healthy soil, and from here one will see the entire landscape far better than if one were to remain on the ground» (Le Corbusier 1964, p. 140). In a game of reflections and projections, the first-floor garden expresses in photography the possibilities of a paradigmatic device seeking synthesis between interior and exterior (Fig. 16). The open-air space identifies the heart of the home, proposing an extension directed at nature and conceived to construct a privileged relationship with nature through an open spatial sequence. The transparency of glass surfaces promotes interconnection between architectural elements, importing an "ideal" landscape into the

Fig. 16Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye,
Poissy-sur-Seine, 1928@Takashi
Hommai.





home. The overlap of such elements- like the ramp ascending onto the roof- is reflected in glass surfaces, revealing an "apparent" presence. They take on a double spatial significance, concrete and imaginary. Photography intervenes to enhance the eye's perception, revealing spatial characteristics in equilibrium between reality and imagination within the same photograph.

Facing the Cabanon at Cap-Martin, Homma's lens was attracted by a window next to the front door, facing the sea. The pane's outside surface reflects the scenery, metaphorically incorporating it into the building (Figs. 17, 18). The lens draws progressively closer to reveal the window as it captures the outside landscape while allowing a glimpse of the domestic interior. Photographed from inside and transferred onto a black background, the window depicts a sea view; a mirror on the window opening's right side duplicates reality, amplifying features of the natural surroundings and creating an illusory dimension (Fig. 19). In this intentional positioning, the mirror seems to represent – as in classical painting tradition and later, photography – «exemplification of the fusion between the opposing forces of past and future – the world as a system of symbols, and the world as a set of visible facts [...] from the start of an indissoluble intertwining of art and science, directed towards exploration of nature (prior to its exact reproduction) and the consequent expansion of the artist's perceptive capabilities» (Costantini 1992, p. XXVIII). In response to a contraction in living spaces, the photographs celebrate Le Corbusier's attention to a placement of windows that, though small in size, foreshadow the overcoming of limits set by architecture itself to project – through the photographer's gaze – a new reality.

In the catalogue that accompanied the exhibit *Mirrors and Windows*, John Szarkowski observed a «fundamental dichotomy in contemporary photography between those who think of photography as a means of self-expression and those who think of it as a method of exploration» (Szarkowski 2006, p. 52). Guidi and Homma's series doubtlessly reflect the results of photographic research that continues to generate new questions about Le Corbusier's work. As Bertelli argues, «as determined by the frame, photography is the spontaneous ally of a trilithic architecture. Niépce's first photograph was shot from the window of his room. In the

Figg. 17, 18, 19
Cabanon de Le Corbusier, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, 1951@Takashi Homma









Fig. 20 Pierre Jeanneret House, Type 4-J, Chandigarh 1954@Takashi Homma



rectangular shape of the window, we cannot help but see the need for a steadfast link with known reality prior to the launch into a new, unproven space. And so the relationship between photography and architecture was established at the former's very origins» (Bertelli 1979, p. 6).

Guidi thus identifies in windows the "home's eyes", while Homma summarises Pierre Jeanneret's Chandigarh house in the image of a single window. The window opening's particular shape – the architectural interpretation of an eye – recalls the very act of seeing and the prerogative of framing, implicit in the act of *photographing* (Fig. 20). While windows have mobile fixtures to regulate the amount of light shining into domestic spaces, in rotating these different areas of the yard outside the home become visible: an anatomical analogy to "our optical instrument: the eye". Homma persistently returns to the window opening-eye and, in searching for the right distance, shoots a series of photographs that – placed one after the other in an approaching sequence – allow us to identify frame and window opening (Figs. 21. 22, 23). In this process of assimilation, the house's "gaze" seems to come to life and the window – considered a metaphor for observing – intervenes, activating once more the observer's gaze.

Notes

- ¹ «Knowledge of photography is just as important as knowing the alphabet. Tomorrow's illiterates will be as ignorant about the use of a camera as they are in the use of a pen today». In: Moholy-Nagy L. (1975, p. 131).
- ² In a letter to his father (7 October 1845), John Ruskin revealed the importance of detail as an element capable of gathering and fixing architecture's essence on daguerrotype. «Daguerreotypes taken by this vivid sunlight are glorious things. It is very nearly the same thing as carrying off the palace itself: every chip of stone and stain is there, and of course there is no mistake about *proportions*». In: Costantini P. and Zannier I. (1986, p. 12).
- ³ «Every image presents only that which is necessary and sufficient to describe the subject (and in that sense, Jeanneret is a great photographer), with no visual distractions. He excludes close-ups and bizarre points of view, which such a camera would in any case make difficult, with its obligatory orthogonality». In: Zannier I. (1984, p. 72).









Figg. 21, 22, 23
Pierre Jeanneret House, Type 4-J, Chandigarh 1954@Takashi Homma

- ⁴ «He broadened and often deepened factual, empirical experience with the input of a strong perceptive impulse. This impulse was at once cause and effect of his work». In: E. N. Rogers (1966, p. 11).
- ⁵ Recalling Cézanne: «the same object viewed from a different angle offers an extremely interesting study theme, so varied I believe I could address it without changing position, only turning now to the right, now left». In: Handke P. (1985, p. 26).
- ⁶ Guidi shot the photographs over the course of two trips in April and May 2003. In the same year, part of the photos was published in a volume edited by Rosa Tamborrino (2003). On occasion of the 2017 exhibit "Guidi Guidi: Le Corbusier- 5 Architetture", on display at Galleria 1/9 in Rome (6 May 24 June 2017) and at Kehrer Galerie in Berlin (27 April 7 July 2018), a selection of 87 of 137 exhibited photographs were published in the volume Guido Guidi (2018) *Le Corbusier. 5 Architectures*, Kehrer: Berlin.
- ⁷ As John Szarkowski has sustained «all of Atget's pictures are informed by a precise visual intelligence, by the clarté that is the highest virtue of the classic French tradition. This quality was achieved not by impeccable technique, but by discovering precisely what one meant to say, and saying neither more or less». In: Szarkowski J. (1981, p. 17).
- ⁸ The Z symbol recalls the Giorgione's paintings Old Woman (Castelfranco Veneto 1476-1477 Venezia 1510), Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venezia). The painting was a particular favorite of Guidi, an expert in Italian Renaissance painting, who often cited it as a metaphor for time. On the reference to the "time's arrow" Cf. Guidi G. (2012) "Appunti per una lezione".
- ⁹ «Drawn left by the passageway's convergent escape, by the double-arched window (the red column of which has Christological interpretations), and then by the loggia with the symbolic peacock, the viewer's gaze then winds through the landscape towards a view of Florence». Cf. D. Arasse (2009, p. 174).
- ¹⁰ Homma's research is part of the Tokyo Window Research Institute's Windowology program. He published it in the volume Takashi Homma (2019) *Looking Through Le Corbusier Windows*.

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