

Caterina Lisini

The creation of happiness. About Lina Bo Bardi's drawing

Abstract

Drawing seems to have in Bo Bardi a dual soul, which results to range incessantly between expressive conciseness and inventive fury. Not only, or not so much, architectural drawings, technical drawings that are functional to the project, to its execution or to the worksite. But neither simply conceptual drawings, study sketches, theoretical or expressive research drawings, nor merely imaginative, perceptive or travel drawings. Her drawings, whose traits are often somewhat naïve, but at times meticulously precise and constructive, show a great variety of techniques and as a whole seem to be marked by the apparent, manifest oxymoron of the «fantasy of the real», borrowed, according Bo Bardi's words, from Majakowskij. A vision of architecture tenaciously adherent to reality, a spontaneous and impetuous creativity inseparable from the experience of the body and physicality of the real, which appears immediately contaminated, like personal expressive figure, with festive and ironic creation of happiness.

Keywords

Lina Bo Bardi — Drawing and reality — Autobiography — *Todos juntos*

«I am not interested in writing», Lina Bo Bardi told Francesco Tentori with sober frankness, «I am fully aware that I can write well. My masters are Stendhal and Majakovsky. The former taught me conciseness, when he declared that he had learned to write from the officers of the French building cadastre and the drafters of the articles of the Civil Code. The second taught me rhythm instead, the fantasy of the real» (Tentori 2004, p. 151).

Also drawing, seems to have in Bo Bardi a similar dual soul, which results in an extraordinarily multiformity of fertile significances. Not only, or not so much, architectural drawings, technical drawings that are functional to the project, to its execution or to the worksite. But neither simply conceptual drawings, study sketches, theoretical or expressive research drawings. Nor merely imaginative, perceptive or travel drawings. Her drawings, whose traits are often somewhat naïve, but at times meticulously precise and constructive, show a great variety of techniques, from pencil sketches, *gouache*, watercolour, ink drawing, and collage, and covering remarkably wide-ranging themes and scales, which include simple objects, furniture, jewellery, clothing, individual residential houses, housing estates, public buildings of great scale and complexity, as well as theatrical sets and museum and exhibition set-ups and mountings, as a whole seem to be marked by the apparent, manifest oxymoron: «the fantasy of the real».

In August of 1942, while the war was in full swing, the magazine «Domus», then under an emergency editorial staff which included Melchiorre Bega, Massimo Bontempelli and Giuseppe Pagano, asked «a group of architects to describe [...] with intimate confidence, the ideal design of the house of their dreams», an elusive theme, almost involving «drawing the impossible» (Redaz. Domus 1942, p. 312), to such an extent that it was

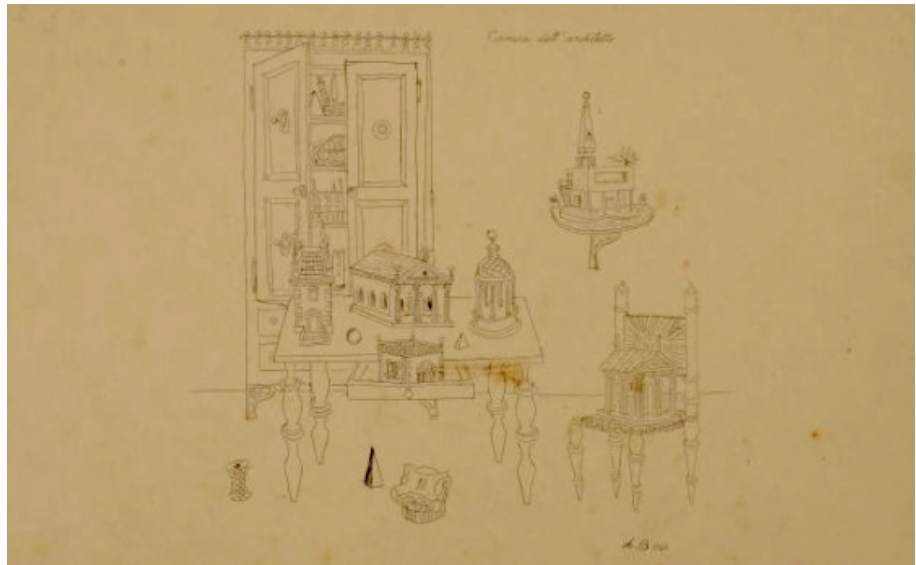


Fig. 1

Lina Bo Bardi, "Camera dell'architetto" lithograph.

interpreted, in the many 'confessions' that followed (Banfi, Belgiojoso, Zanuso, Cattaneo, Diotallevi and Marescotti, Cocchia, Bianchetti and Pea, Mollino, Pica, and others) as a symbolic rationalist house, as a spiritual abstract house, as a subject of pure escapism, or else as an autobiographical fantasy. Among the many drawings which exist from Lina Bo Bardi's years of education and training, first in Rome and then in Milan, a lithograph from 1943 entitled *Camera dell'architetto* seems like it could belong to this gallery of reflections, offering the ironic and meditative self-portrait of a period of her life which is about to conclude, and already revealing in a nutshell a constant of her work, that is the deep interweaving between drawing and autobiography. On an unremarkable wall, a stylish closet with half-open doors serves as a bourgeois backdrop to a small table with turned legs, next to which stands a traditional stuffed chair: the whole domestic space is crowded with a multitude of architectural models, mostly fictional, where a Classical temple and a Renaissance temple, a fragment of a Palladian villa and elements of historic dwellings meet in the foreground, while an Ionic capital lies on the ground next to abstract geometric shapes. Silhouettes of more distinctive architecture emerge from the closet: obelisks, a mediaeval tower, the leaning tower of Pisa, the Colosseum, and on one side, isolated above a small shelf, sits the model of a modern architecture, connoted by *pilotis* and a *fenêtre en longueur*, partially concealing a tall obelisk. Rather than an allegory, the continuous line of the drawing, as in an illustration which does not wish to show off any technical virtuosity, seems to represent a merry jumble which dissolves the multiple references from the architect's cultural baggage into a light image, placing them all together, without hierarchies, in a sort of silent dialogue. The mark of the cultural orientation derived from her collaboration, together with Carlo Pagani, in Gio Ponti's publishing enterprises during the years 1940-1943 is quite evident. She was a habitual presence in the last year of "Domus" before the war and collaborated with continuity on "Stile", where she wrote about furniture, interior architecture, and dealing as well with illustration and graphics, including the design of several covers of the magazine. She also collaborated occasionally on other magazines of Ponti's group, such as "Aria d'Italia", "Bellezza", and "Vetrina e negozio". However, by 1943 new concerns had taken hold Bo Bardi's life which seem to seep out of the sense of suspension of the drawing: as a result of the dramatic events of the war, the *impasse* of rationalism and the emerging debates within the

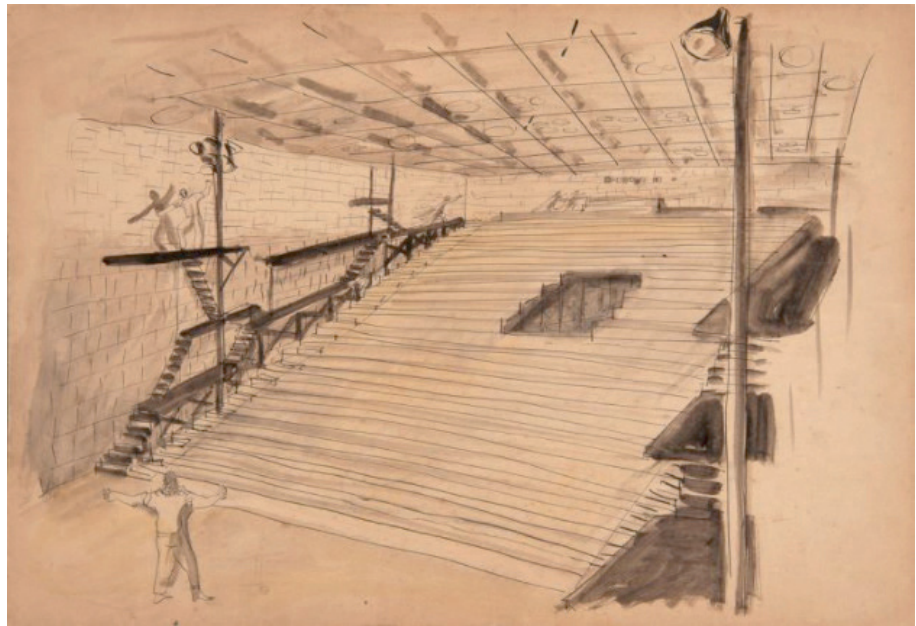


Fig. 2
Lina Bo Bardi, MAMB, Theater perspective.

groups of young architects, as well as the encounter with Pietro Maria Bardi, and the growing need to assert her personal convictions, the classical and idyllic limits of Gio Ponti's *milieu* became too narrow for her.

The urgency of reality and a new awareness burst in: «I saw the world around me, Bo Bardi wrote some years later, only as an immediate reality, and not as an abstract literary exercise» (Carvalho Ferraz 1994, p. 10).

In this way a vision of architecture and of human works took shape that was always tenaciously adherent to reality, a reality which became imbued with hope and vitality since Bo Bardi landed in 1946 in Rio de Janeiro, the city that represents the heart of the Brazilian spirit, and to which she responded with a spontaneous and impetuous creativity – «furious» according to Semerani (2012, p. 8) – that is inseparable from the experience of the body and physicality of the real, exercised in shaping rigorous designs which were immediately contaminated with festive and ironic evocations. «Architecture as inhabited, human space, wrote Bo Bardi in the early Fifties, is a powerful reality, accountable for the behaviour of man, accountable even for his happiness. And in this sense the Modern Movement continues» (Carvalho Ferraz 1994, p. 86).

Among the drawings made for the Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia (MAMB), which originated as part of her process of complex cultural re-founding matured during the years in Bahia and after her exploration of the Brazilian *Nordeste*¹, those that stand out most are the ones produced for the construction of the theatre «one of the most direct means of cultural propaganda, since it contains all the other arts» (Carvalho Ferraz 1994, p. 144). The perspective of the audience *cavea* is sketched on one page, with a few lines in pencil and ink, emphasised by the usual watercolour brush strokes, to be built with simple wooden plank decks and enclosed by a tangle of trellises and walkable stairs, which could also be used for stage action, shaped almost as plant ramifications. There is no formal adjectivation or superfluous scenography, as well as no functional division between the space for the audience and technical spaces, stage mechanisation is abolished and there is a continuity between the theatrical representation and the audience, resulting from the proximity of the improvised stage, with as backdrop the bareness of the great structure of the Teatro Castro Alves, still partially destroyed by the fire of 1958. A modern, simple, com-

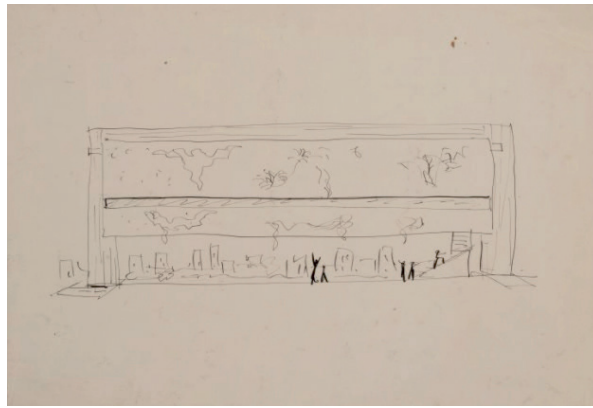


Fig. 3
Lina Bo Bardi, study sketch for the stage costume for Caligola.

munity theatre, «poor yet violently emotional» (Carvalho Ferraz 1994, p. 144). Bo Bardi's study sketches seem to appropriate the profound simplification lesson² derived from her experience in Bahia: in their traits there is no originality or gratuitous invention but rather the constant search for the essential and an inclination for 'poor' and bare architecture, as well as for raw and unfinished materials, which seems to spring directly from the translation of the close link between human needs and their fulfilment, between usefulness and beauty. In this case drawing for Bo Bardi is not only a stage in her approach to the project, but becomes a social and existential reflection, an expression, *tout court*, of her poetics, that can be summarised, using her own words, in the determined «anthropological research in the field of art against aesthetic research» (Carvalho Ferraz 1994, p. 216). And when her drawings become populated and enlivened with figures and shapes, it is the reality of the Brazilian human environment and the specific features of the target community that enter into action, 'dirtying' the sheet of paper with graftings and contaminations. Thus in her work memory, the relationship with cultural manifestations and popular traditions, is never nostalgic, a mere revisiting of the past for its own sake, it is not even a critical act, an inquiry into time in order to understand the art or the discipline in question, it is rather a motion of continuous wonder, undertaken almost through the eyes of a child, an amazement before a repository of forms, a tangle of expressions and experiences, all human, indispensable to nourish the imagery of her art.

There are numerous studies, distributed over a period of time ranging from 1957 to 1966, for the solution of the facade of the great gateway of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), iconically suspended at one end of Avenida Nove de Julho. The version dearest to Bo Bardi, which she tenaciously explored for a long time, envisaged the elevated body of the Museum as a single mighty concrete monolith, lit from above, materially dense and completely blind, except for a long horizontal slit at the level of the temporary exhibitions, and entirely embedded with plant inlays, drawing an irregular pattern of tropical vegetation emerging «among the interstices of the raw concrete, as if from the cracks in the stones of an old cathedral» (Lima 2021, p. 259). As part of that same series there is an unusual perspective of the Belvedere, traced precisely under the imposing frame of the museum and aligned with it, to the extent that it seems to stretch almost infinitely, which depicts, among the efflorescence of the vegetation, sketched in pencil, a collage of great tribal sculptures freely distributed throughout the vast space and surrounded by visitors, almost as if probing the vision of a new society capable of imagining a continuous overlapping of archaic artistic manifestations and contemporary creativity.

Bo Bardi draws what she is thinking about and designing, in fact she thinks by drawing and at the same time thinks by looking at the world. What guides her hand, as in any true artist, seems to be «the four-eyed head», imagined by the contemporary artist Tullio Pericoli, «with its double set of eyes, one on the forehead and one in the brain», the material eyesight and that of the intellect which cannot do without each other, in the same way that «it is not possible to see without involving the heart and the mind» (2021, pp. 43, 41). Even in her more specifically architectural drawings there is rarely anything conceptual about them, far from being polished, there is something immediate, spontaneous and vital in them, a kind of continuous flow between art and life, almost as if they had been made only for herself – Bo Bardi confessed: «I work during the night, when everyone

**Fig. 4**

Lina Bo Bardi, MASP, study sketch for the facade.

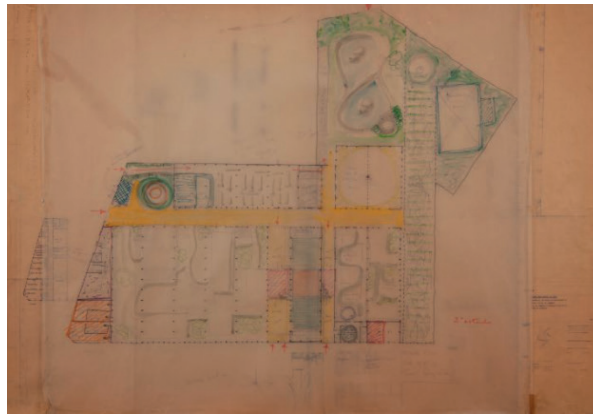
**Fig. 5**

Lina Bo Bardi, MASP, Belvedere perspective.

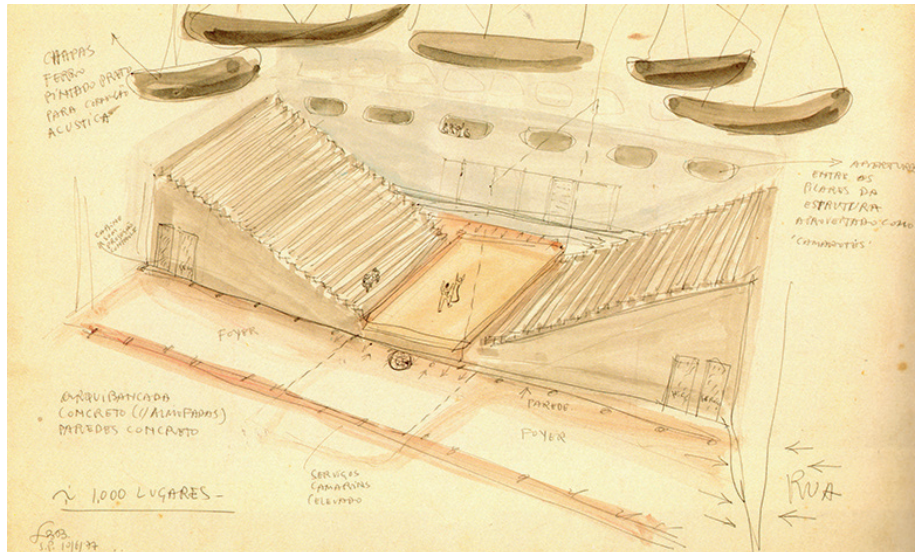
else is sleeping [...] and all around me there is silence» (Dos Santos 1993, p. 17) –, for the urgency of putting her thoughts on paper as they are being formed.

There is in Lina's drawings (this is how she is affectionately known, still today, almost everywhere throughout Latin America) a conflict, or rather the fruitful co-presence of a rational inclination, on the one hand, which is well suited to her Eurocentric education, and a surrealist tendency, on the other, which blends with her instinctive attachment to popular culture, to myth, to the ancestral rites of the local tradition: that «enchantment», which she said she felt immediately after arriving in Rio, «a real, not metaphysical hope found almost on a daily basis in the simplicity of the architectural solutions, in human salutations, things that were unheard of for a generation that arrived from far away» (Carvalho Ferraz 1994, p. 12).

Surrealism seems to completely take over the drawings of the Leisure Centre SESC Fábrica da Pompéia, carved out of the industrial suburbs of São Paulo by converting an old metal drum factory. They show, through the huge number of sketches and tests, Bo Bardi's extraordinary capacity to hold together the very different scales of the project, from the high cement 'towers' of the sports facilities, to the minute design of the furnishings, the staff uniforms and even of the advertising indications. «As in any Surrealist research, from Savinio to Picasso, Breton, Buñuel or Jarry, it is the images and materials which generate the composition through which the mechanic and the organic, the pure and the impure, desire and chance traverse the boundaries that separate them» (Semerani and Gallo 2012, p. 29). Yet in the case of Bo Bardi a hermeneutic capacity is added: it is an attitude which draws and stages «the imperceptible rustle of life», which in turn seems to relate her artistic path to that of a writer such as Natalia Ginzburg, another extraordinary 20th century female figure who was her contemporary. «It is the pleasure of using the mind as the bowels, of having the mind walk in darkness, the journey and the vicissitudes of intellectual knowl-

**Fig. 6**

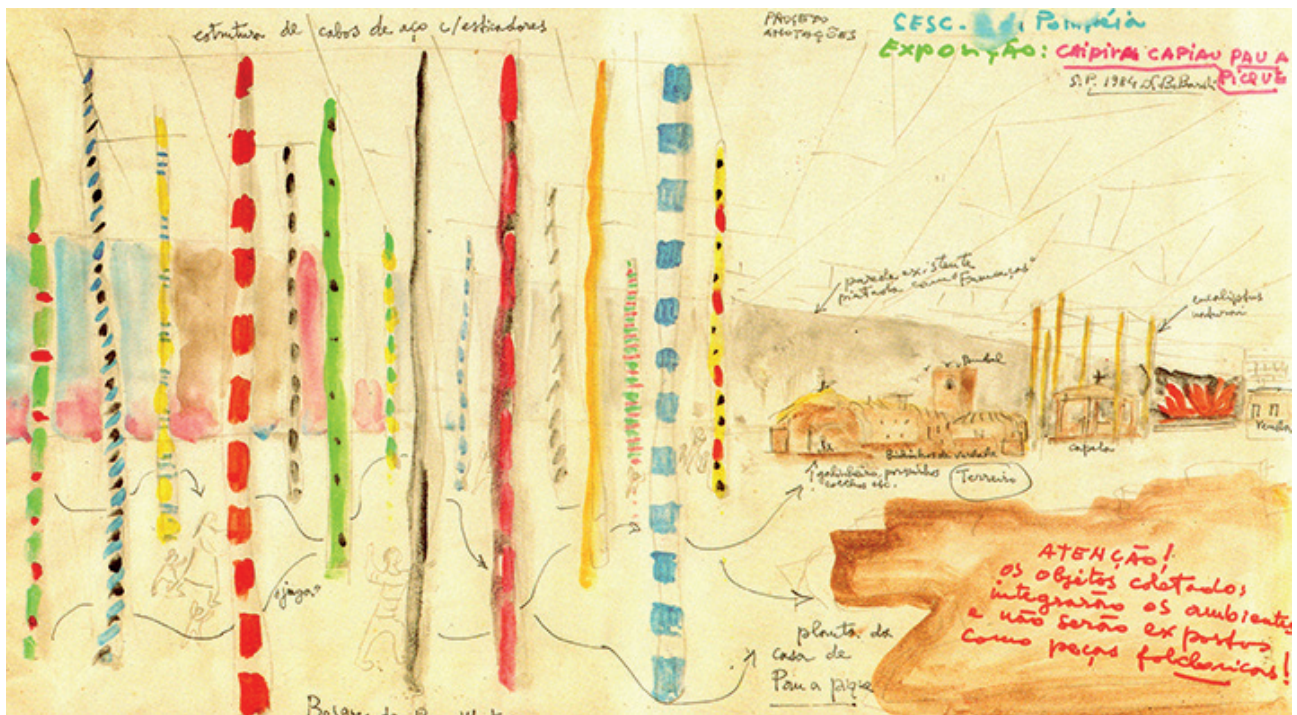
Lina Bo Bardi, SESC da Pompéia, plan study.

**Fig. 7**

Lina Bo Bardi, SESC da Pompéia, Theater perspective.

edge being nothing more than the slightly blackened mirror which reflects what in those depths [...] is dark yet still legible» (Garboli 1989, pp. 116, 106). For both probably an entirely feminine capacity for inclusion and appropriation of the world, that in the case of Bo Bardi seems to guide the steady hand with which sketches her creations.

From the first draft plans a theatre, symbol of life and participation, is placed at the cross-shaped intersection of the long open-air public paths that branch out from the Centre. A meaningful perspective sketch shows, in the elongated rectangle of the former warehouse, the completed layout for a modern theatre with a central stage made entirely in cement, with the monolithic block of the two cavea like terraced stands facing each other and surrounded by linear balconies overhead which offer additional space for the audience, with views from above and to the side of the stage, all of which animated by the sculptural presence of large steel plates, silver in colour, in the way of Calder's *Mobiles*, hanging from above and performing acoustic functions. All around, in the warehouses liberated from all interior partitions, the spaces for recreational and cultural activities are located, such as the library, workshops, reading and children's play spaces, as well as rest and exhibition areas and the vast lounge with the carvings recalling a watercourse and the *foguiera* – the great fireplace –: all places for social interaction interconnected and interwoven by way of a sought-after 'chancefulness' which reflects the unpredictable nature of life. All of Bo Bardi's drawings, full of voices and colours, seem to spread-out in thousands of rivulets of intense creativity that find expression even in the furnishings, such as the austere theatre seats, entirely in solid wood,

**Fig. 8**

Lina Bo Bardi, SESC da Pompéia, study sketch for the exhibition "Caipiras, capiaus: pau-a-pique".

not stuffed or upholstered in velvet as in 18th century court theatres or in accordance to contemporary comfort standards, but rather devised for «giving back to the theatre its capacity for both distancing and engaging». The drawings, even those more properly architectural, are never aimed at presenting a work or a creation, at presenting a professional proposal, but are rather intended as research and knowledge tools. A festive atmosphere, an ironic cheerfulness, continuously hovers above them, that is inseparable in Bo Bardi from a form of understanding or wisdom about life, and which seems to summarise her peculiar and unique creation of happiness. «*Todos juntos*», Lina wishes the recipients of her Sesc Pompéia to be, «young people, children, senior citizens, all united in the pleasure of getting together, of dancing and singing» (Bo Bardi 1992, p. 225).

Notes

¹ Lina Bo Bardi went to Salvador de Bahia for the first time in February 1958. She returned in 1959 and remained there until August 1964, a few months after the military coup d'état. On these experience she published an article in 1967 entitled *Cinco anos entre os brancos* ("Mirantes das artes etc", 6, November – December), later translated in *Cinque anni tra i bianchi* (Carvalho Ferraz, 1994, pp. 161-162).

² On the meaning of 'simplification' for Lina Bo Bardi see her words in the writings *Museu de Arte de São Paulo and Mostra Nordest* (Carvalho Ferraz 1994, pp. 100 and 158).

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