

Contemporary Art in Nairobi's Nightlife: Creating hyperreal worlds on Lang'ata road/ Arte Contemporânea na vida noturna de Nairobi: criando mundos hiperreais na Avenida Lang'ata

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ABSTRACT

Nairobi's nightlife comes loaded with an array of suggestions, through created spectacle, about how interaction should take place. This paper is interested in how elements of design in some of Nairobi's nightclubs define the kind of performance expected of a client within its premises. It focuses on clubs along Nairobi's Lang'ata road. These clubs, the paper claims, are aware of the kinds of clients whose tastes they hope to successfully provide. At the heart of everything, the ambiance created through the design adapted defines the kind of client. This means that clients are expected to take up roles and perform some kind of identity while within these spaces. On the one hand there are clubs that sell themselves as spaces for sports enthusiasts, others as providers of wild-game experiences with inviting catch phrases as "meet the big five" on their menu, still others will sell themselves as purveyors of urban identity and others as carving out a world of "authentic Africa." Of interest, in the location that is Lang'ata road, is how these clubs attempt to blend in with the history and landmarks. Along the road, there is a stadium, an airport, schools, a cemetery, two Universities, a military barrack, several malls, a game reserve, a women's prison, and several housing estates. Lang'ata road is also a place of contests, buildings have been demolished as some land has been said to have been acquired illegally. The nervousness associated with ownership of land, and therefore possible forceful eviction, has affected the way some clubs are built. This has presented interesting opportunities for designers to create interiors that, while appreciating the impermanence of the clubs' structures they provide illusions within these spaces where clients can "disappear" from threats of that outside world of contests. How design plays a role in creating new worlds that clients can disappear into and momentarily forget their woes is of interest in this paper.

Key words: Hyperreality, ambience, nightlife, performance, space

Introduction

In the various discussions about who "owns" Nairobi, or to whom Nairobi belongs, as headlined in the title of a popular rap song *Nai ni ya who* (whose is Nairobi?) by an

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artist whose stage name is “Muthoni the Drummer Queen”, segregation is a constant word in use. Whether we are discussing nightlife in the 1950s, as Ng’weno (2018) does, or live theatre spaces, as Mwangola (2012) does, or even the various interpretations of how nightlife in the 2015s is mapped out, as Nyairo (2015) has observed, segregation must rear its ugly head. This means that nightlife cannot be taken fore-granted, in terms of how one moves from one space to the other. In the popularized words of politicians, as uttered by Evans Kidero, a former governor of Nairobi, “Nairobi has its owners” (Otieno: 2015). In theory anyone can go anywhere they wish within Nairobi. They can dine and dance anywhere as long as they are paying, but in many establishments, management still “reserves the right to admission,” as suggested on notices at many of the club’s entrances. The sense of dressing marks one out as worthy of being allowed entry as suggested in Nyairo’s (2015) essay, “Clubs, Clothes, and Class.” These three Cs, as broached in the essay, are a necessary part of identity and do determine who goes to specific clubs. A national Identity card, as proof of age, can determine whether you will be let in by the security men or women at the club’s door or not. You could also be “thrown out” of a club if “management” imagines that you are chewing *miraa* (khat) within its premises, and thereby presumably lowering the standards of the nightclub. Waiters will tell on you to bouncers (nightclub security) if you seem sleepy, or if you are not buying any drinks at the venue. To a large extent your behavior will determine how you should be accepted, or treated, within these nightclub establishments. Behavior includes: whether you are buying drinks, how you dance, whether with a measure of violence like stepping on other dancers or pushing them away from dance floors. Behavior also includes whether you are starting a fight, or whether you are careless with the club’s utensils. If the bouncers see you as a regular client, they often do get friendly, but that is only if you frequently give tips. There is a clear and remarkable difference between how men who are unaccompanied should behave, and how lone women are viewed – usually, the lone woman will be treated as though she is out seeking a male client for prostitution. In some clubs, such a woman will be treated as a problematic person and will be at the mercy of the security men who will want, frequently, to take advantage of her in a process of negotiating a space for her at the club.

Lang'ata Road's as a Contested Space

In an introduction to the book *Nairobi Kenya: Migration Shaping the City*, by Shadi Rahbaran and Manuel Herz (2014) Nairobi is seen as a space which is constantly negotiating and renegotiating its look. From 1896, the year in which it was founded “by the British Colonial State as a railway camp and supply depot during the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway stretching from Mombasa to Lake Victoria,” Nairobi, it is said, has changed according to who settles in it. Indeed, culture in Nairobi is never a finished product, it is constantly shifting as has been shown, for example, in wa-Mungai’s (2005) argument about how *matatus* (mini-buses employed as public transport) both literally and metaphorically transport ways of seeing and thinking about the city. Kahora et al (2014) posit that Nairobi is a “vibrant, eccentric, extreme and elusive city.” This is because it hosts people from diverse cultural outlooks and settings who over the years have tended to not only retain but perform aspects of their identity. But perhaps in *Best of Whispers: Politics, Family and Society*, a satirical serving of the difficulty of finding one’s way through Nairobi is given especially through appreciating “survival” in a *Jua Kali* (literally “hot sun”) life, or where one encounters “national disaster in the city of thieves”, or where Nairobi mannerisms cause deportation so that, “Why the Danes sent me back to Nairobi.” Rahbaran and Herz (2014) have shown that land ownership is a key factor in the determination of how Nairobi people interact. This implies that the acquisition of land through government allocation, buying from owners, and even through “grabbing” has affected the way eventually Nairobi looks. Nowrojee (2014), Nyairo (2015), Rahbaran and Herz (2014), Omenya (2010), show that the pattern of Nairobi’s growth has followed the events of the colonial era, with the founding of Nairobi following the construction of the Lunatic Railway line, the declaration of Nairobi as a city in 1905, and events like the settlement of settlers from Europe in places like Karen, Ngong, and the outskirts of the city such as Kikuyu and Kiambu- parts of the so-called “White Highlands.” Nairobi also gets its character following demarcations by post-colonial governments as to where public amenities should be, and also in the segregation agenda set by the colonial government in deciding what race of a people shall settle in what part of the city. Further, the post-colonial era comes with a need for government to create a living environment, for its

workers in estates not far from their work stations especially within the current Nairobi Central Business District. Land becomes an essential component in this settling or resettling. In Omenya's (2010) and Rahbran and Herz's (2014) estimation, this settlement comes with the character of design of buildings and housing. Nairobi's Eastleigh area is a good example of this sort of dramatic change in its appearance, particularly with the coming of refugees into the neighborhood thereby affecting both the visual architecture of buildings but also "spatial acting." The refugees, being of Somali descent, come with a specific kind of architecture that could be identifiably Somali, yet because of limitations of space use, the architectural set up acquires a certain "difference" – negotiation between the Somali outlook with the fact of overpopulation.

If we can think of Eastleigh Estate of Nairobi in the fashion discussed by Omenya (2010), and Rahbran and Herz(2014), then how about the emergence of Lang'ata road with all the government intervention at play in terms of reserving land? First there is the idea that Nairobi has for long been run along lines of segregation, so that in many areas race determined who lived in specific places in the colonial times. In the post-colony what had been established in the colonial times was enforceable especially where the race concerned was privileged, in terms of wealth acquisition, to a point where there was capital to maintain particular neighborhoods with some element of "purity" of race. Class has become a distinct player in determining who lives where in these post-colonial times as prices have knocked out potential settlers.

Public land along Lang'ata road set for specific purposes such as the Nyayo National Stadium, Wilson Airport, Lang'ata Women's Prison, Lang'ata Army Barracks, and the Nairobi Safari Walk, among others have affected the way people interact with the space in terms of architecture. Around the area of the Wilson Airport, for instance, buildings can only go up to one floor above ground. Ng'ong River, which cuts through Lang'ata road, has provided interesting problems in the consideration of construction of buildings, as some of those structures have been condemned as being on "riparian land" which is covered under Kenyan laws on wetlands. These laws, as argued by Mwathane (2018), are confusing as they overlap, but nonetheless, they have like the laws on aviation, around Wilson Airport, limited the way buildings can be conceived. At the same time, Lang'ata road's public land has been vulnerable to "grabbing" as various articles in

the media have shown. Politicians, businessmen, Church organizations, have all been mentioned as having encroached on both public and private land. This, obviously, has made land ownership in the area a nery affair since what seem like valid title deeds from the main offices of the Ministry of Lands have been revoked. From the popular press stories such as “Two Primary School’s land grabbed by Private Developers” (The Star, 2015), “Demolitions to resume after a lull” (Nation, 2018), and “Residents renew fight for Nairobi West Land” (Nation, 2018), demonstrate problems of ownership, and therefore of a sense of impermanence.

On Lang’ata road, perhaps the most “confident” establishment, in terms of structures put up on its fenced premises, is “The Carnivore.” It sells itself as a space for the “carnivorous”, a space where meat will be served to one’s fill. Established in 1980, The Carnivore is arguably the oldest establishment off, or along, Lang’ata road. It’s setting suggests a “rural” feel. The Carnivore’s proximity to the Kenya Wild Life’s Uhuru Gardens adds to this “out of town” feel, that is essential in its advertisement as a place where one can get a “true” African bush experience not far from Nairobi’s Central Business District. Its architecture, which approximates old colonial houses with lavish spaces, and large windows that make it possible to constantly feel in touch with the environment – vegetation, air, soil – create an atmosphere of being in the wild. This is a major selling point that goes with the narrative of the “big five” animals in the African Safari. It bears echoes of the house imagined in Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa* and the kind of architecture that is a constant refrain in *White Mischief*, the novel by James Fox, and the film directed by Michael Radford. The Carnivore’s proximity to the Jomo Kenyatta airport, on Mombasa road for international travelers, and Wilson Airport on the same Lang’ata road, means that it can be easily accessed by the newly arrived foreigner hoping to sample some suggestion of the “African wild” – given that idea of the big five, including, Lion, Elephant, Rhinoceros, Buffalo and Leopard. The Carnivore’s brochures suggest that one can “feast” on “ostritch, crocodile, and camel meat.” Previously, on the menu there was a suggestion of zebra, and giraffe too, leading one to imagining a carefree world in the wild, with a taste of what it might mean to be a Kenyan cowboy – as alluded to in *White Mischief*.

With a rustic feel, and soft lights, the restaurant at The Carnivore, gives you a sensation of belonging to a set out there in a rural neighborhood. The rustic feel, with the

large colorful rugs on walls patterned in a print that is identifiably African, does suggest a certain communal “sharing” of space. The wooden feel, from wall to wall, gives the restaurant, a small dining hall appearance but with a familiarity, given the closeness, that makes one “belong” to a community of eaters – with the main choice being meat.

The Simba Salon, at The Carnivore, on the other hand plays host to a number of concerts, and music performances. The theme of the outdoor is explored by the presence of a tent under which performances take place. It might give a further idea of a camp site. Still, the lighting allows for revelers to enjoy with the possibility of walking to the bar, and restaurant, but within an identifiable perimeter.

Sites that promise to entertain night time revelers form hubs in close proximity to each other. This is mostly for reasons of sharing amenities such as security, parking, water, and also, in reality, this allows for the ease of movement of their customers from one establishment to another. Key areas around which these establishments congregate on Lang’ata road include petrol stations, car bazaars, car wash businesses, malls and shopping centers.

At the malls, for example, one will find that the restaurants serve a clientele that may be deemed high end. This is because clients tend to have access issues to these malls unless they drive their own cars, or can afford the high prices that taxis might charge. In any case, the night clubs or restaurants in malls, tend to cater mostly for an “international” clientele. This means that tastes might not suit the local Kenyan consumer – unless he has money to spend, and may have had travel experience that has exposed him to these “foreign” tastes. At The Hub mall, for instance, the restaurants include “The Mayura” (for Indian cuisine), La Cascina (an Italian eatery), Picazzo Restaurant Bar and Lounge (for Spanish foods). These are mostly indoor spaces, under the umbrella of the mall’s buildings. Others are internationally recognized brands like K.F.C (Kentucky Fried Chicken), Domino’s Pizza, and Burger King, the American Franchise. The experience at the mall’s nightlife comes with the set-up which mostly has to do with shopping, gaming, coffee drinking, and chitchatting in restaurants. At the mall, there are playing areas for children where the riding of toy cars and machines, and gazing at the fountain are popular.

A key feature of the night life on Lang’ata road is architecture that relies on semi-permanent structures. Here, night clubs rely on a small building which house the disc

jokey's paraphernalia and the bar's main stock, and a sitting area for a limited number of revelers. If one were to demolish the structures on which the night club stands, the losses accrued would not be in the high numbers that a bigger, permanent building would cost. Starting from the Nairobi West shopping center, which is off Lang'ata road, the most popular of these nightclubs include Lazinos bar and restaurant, and The Crave Lounge. At Lazino's one is welcomed at the entrance by the chitchat of revelers on tables facing the road. This space on the outside of the main structure is actually part of the road's pavement. The perimeter that separates the club from the road is a line of potted plants, which can be removed during the day, in case authorities question its existence. The boom of the music can be heard from the road and acts as a signature to the kind of place that Lazino's is. At night the green neon light announcing Lazino's can be seen flickering from the signage hailing us from the first floor. A significant element in the open air space is the roast meat on barbecue grill, so that the air as you enter the bar into the main building smells of roast meat. At the door into the main building, one sees wholesome pieces of goat and cow meat hung from the ceiling – in just the same fashion as in any neighborhood butchery in Nairobi. This combination of tables from which revelers are drinking, eating and chatting while dancing in close proximity to an ordinary butchery, provides a celebratory ambiance in the open air night. The lighting, mainly from the bulbs in the main building housing the bar effect a semi darkness hue in which revelers can see each other without the feeling of being gazed at. At the same time, the semi darkness allows for a sense of privacy which allows for certain inhibitions to be extinguished especially given that one might want to dance and might not be confident about it.

The semi darkness is helpful because it liberates the revelers so they can feel that they are not in the glare of any possible watchers. It kills probable inhibitions as revelers feel they can engage in the 'sin' of associating with whomsoever they like without being judged. This adds to the acceptability of the space where one is not under pressure to perform or appear to belong to a higher or lower class. There is hardly any visible security persons that stops to check those entering the premises. This is important because it allows hawkers with wares ranging from shoes, padlocks, items of clothing, light bulbs and anything easy to carry, to walk in and try and market their products to the revelers seated on the chairs at the pavement. This ease at the entrance plays along with the

'ease' of the music played at the space – which is predominantly the popular Congolese rhumba. Large comfortable sofa sets dominate the sitting areas throughout the bar in the main building. The sofa sets are all white in color and have no arm rests. They suggest an open space in their arrangement so that waiters can move with ease, but this also has the effect of making revelers feel invited to dance whenever they feel inspired to. The whiteness of the walls, seats and ceiling in the dim lights coming from bulbs and television screens, emulate some aspect of the modern sitting room in a family home. With the prices of beer at two hundred shillings per bottle, and the ease of access at the entry, without intrusive security checks, and the constancy of the rhumba music at play, Lazino's attracts middle-class family oriented men. Usually, these will be professionals in the field of law, University lecturers, engineers, businessmen, government employees, and doctors. The relaxed nature of the space allows the clientele to interact as regulars within a shopping center next to homes which they can walk back to. In local parlance the bar becomes an "extension of the living room." Women coming to the place would have to be accompanied lest they be confused with commercial sex workers who frequent the place. Television screens dominate the various walls of the main building housing the bar. They can be watched from outside the perimeter of the premises so that occasionally, hawkers standing outside the bar, on the pavements can watch football matches, which are a predominant source of entertainment at the night club – these are mostly European football leagues. When the screens are not showing football, they will be showing music videos and occasionally because of the setting of the place, some entertainers dance on the pavement adjacent to Lazino's so that those seated on the pavement can watch and as is the custom, pay for the performance. The interaction between those within the perimeter of Lazino's and those without is complex, but quite well defined; there are car washers sometimes washing revelers cars, there are hawkers with their wares, and there are the entertainers and those seeking to watch football from afar. These are constantly engaging in banter so that revelers have a feeling that they are in the real world, but still within the world of make-believe that the main bar's music and décor suggest.

On the same Nairobi West shopping center is The Crave Lounge which is designed in a similar manner to Lazino's. It's entrance, while surrounded in a similar manner to Lazino's with potted plants, profits from a tree on the pavement adjacent to the main

building. At night, the tree serves as part of the décor within the perimeter of the club. Clients sit under it, it is lit up with neon light tubes snaking up its branches, and it often serves as an ambiguous line separating “inside” from “outside” of The Crave Lounge. Because the branches move out further over the pavement, into the road but from a height which still allows motor vehicles to pass beneath it, the tree somewhat extends the boundaries of The Crave Lounge – at least in terms of how seats are arranged to accommodate revelers. The same homely atmosphere found at Lazino’s with hawkers mingling with the pavement revelers, a butchery announcing itself at the entrance, and television screens dominating the walls facing outside so that those without the perimeter can watch football or music videos, abounds.

The junction leading to The Carnivore on Lang’ata road is the busiest at night. It is well lit from not only the street lights but also from the businesses located there, whose neon lights keep the space looking bright and attract advertising. Carmax East Africa, Carbazaar, Kobil Petrol Station, Uchumi Hyper, Car Bazaar, and Chicken Inn, are some of the businesses whose lights affect that Junction which in addition has nightclubs including 1824 Bar and Lounge, Pitstop Grill, Rafikiz Bar and Restaurant. Off Lang’ata road, we come to Carnivore road which leads to The Carnivore.

While The Carnivore is on its own stand-alone fenced land, these other nightclubs on Lang’ata road seem to share space with car repair shops, and car sale companies for 1824 and Pitstops, as well as Petrol Stations (Kobil) for Rafikiz Lounge and Bar. Again, their strategies are constructed around reducing costs in terms of buildings so that they have a small building housing a bar, and from where the Disc Jockey’s box is located, the rest of the space is either under tents, or roofings that accentuate their differences. 1824 serves a young, mostly college going, fashion conscious clientele who are at the center of popular culture trends; football viewing, conspicuous consumption, new dancing trends, experimental drinking, gambling, internet trends- such as “selfie” taking, live recording and transmission via sites like whatsapp, facebook and instangram. Pitstop on the other hand seems to serve an older clientele mostly in its mid 30s and early to late 40s. It plays music that is recognizable by this group, which like at Lazino’s will mostly be Congolese Rumba or Luo Benga. This clientele is attracted to Pitstop because it can have their car washed as they indulge in the music or football viewing, and drinking. Unlike

The Carnivore, where one has to drive to via a road away from Lang'ata road, although a short drive, Pitstop and 1824 can be accessed directly from the main road. This makes 1824, in particular, attract the non-private-car-driving, public-car using youth out to seek fun as a distraction from University work.

The 1824 experience is crafted to delight the late teenager and young adult (in his early 20s). At the entrance, while it is clear that from the signs that one is entering 1824, the signage that screams loudest is the Roman numeralised MDCCCXXIV, which essentially helps invoke an idea of one entering a space in which some secret society where things must be deciphered are allowed. Here, the club harps onto popular culture idea of the "illuminati" as the secret society which speaks of good living, material wealth and power. Beyond the entrance where a security check is implemented on all who enter the club, one is open to an open space defined by a row of lights hanging from the roofing of transparent corrugated plastic sheets. The sitting area is populated with drum shaped wooden beer barrels around which seats are placed – often, finding a seat after nine o'clock from Friday night onto Sunday night, and even on Monday is difficult. Occasionally, as the case may be, giant screens are mounted on various ends of the club, from which live European league football matches are beamed, usually the English Premiere league. On one side of the club will be the main bar, which comprises of a two story structure. This is the main space from which alcohol is served. It has minimal furniture on its ground floor as if to suggest that it is not a seating area. Essentially, apart from the barman's counter, it resembles an art exhibition room, with artworks hanging on its walls. During sports seasons, such as the football or rugby world cup, this space is adorned with the colors of the various competitors – such as flags and portraits. The upper story of this small building, also houses a bar which is furnished with comfortable sofa seats, and easy chairs. Again there are beer barrels but this time set closer to the edge of the space which looks down on the revelers in the larger entertainment 'hall'. Currently, the bar is branded in the black and white colors of Johnny Walker Whiskey. This means that the walls, ceiling, bar counter and shelves are all branded in a black and white motif. This gives the room a specific feeling apart from the one down at the open space. This bar gives 1824 its other moniker: "1824 Whiskey Bar." Restricting this branding to this space only allows 1824 to be open to non whiskey beer brands such as Tusker, Pilsner

and so on. Occasionally, this space is a restricted area for VIPs (Very Important People) only. In that light, then it makes revelers feel “special” when they come up when there are no restrictions, although they might quickly retreat to the larger sitting area where the “real” action happens.

An important element of 1824 is the fact that its main seating area is an area for business during the day. There is a barber shop (Executive Cuts) and a car repair shop on its floor. The car repair shops large photos are visible at night when one walks into the club. They serve as part of the décor, so that this goes with more of the consumerism encouraged within. The logos enhance the idea of “good living” in which the big motor vehicle is part of that symbol of living large, or belonging to the successful illuminati – rumoured to secretly rule the world.

While Pitstop, directly across 1824 on the same Lang’ata road is built around the idea of a laid back nightclub where your car could be getting washed as you relax over a drink or taking a meal, its emphasis on the “stylish-beautiful-pricey-big car” is not as pronounced as 1824 which only allows the parking of cars that go with the theme of heavy consumption and materialism within its compound, if only for show. Pitstop’s emphasis on *rumba*, and *benga*, already attracts a clientele that is not within the youth bracket that 1824 aims at – and whose need to take selfies next to expensive machinery and tastefully furnished bars like The 1824 Whiskey bar, as described above, is not its main priority. Pistops also serves food to its clientele, which is not something one will find at 1824. The food goes with the music, in terms of taste. This means the menu is crafted around fish (tilapia), *ugali*, *adhola*, together with traditional greens such as *mrenda*, *terere*, and *kunde*. Roast meat in terms of beef and chicken is also served. Delicacies of the fast-foods nature are not served, mainly because the clientele have tastes that go with the idea that they have time to wait for their cars to be washed. In any case, because the club starts serving meals during the day, it already has a lunch time client base that sometimes might double up as consumers at night – the club hence wants to sell itself as a space that is open as a relaxing place for those needing to spend many hours there.

But a crucial aspect of this junction leading to The Carnivore, are the floodlights that serve as security lights running from the one end of the neon lights advertising CarMax East Africa, a car bazaar, to Rafikiz Lounge, and then Kobil Petrol Station, and

Uhuru Hyper across the road. These security floodlights are important as they not only suggest an aspect of safety for motorists and pedestrians going into the various clubs, but they also serve a critical group of revelers who never go into any of the clubs available. They simply park their cars in the created parking area that splits Lang'ata road. Here the revelers sit in their cars, occasionally with their windows wound down as they chew khat (*miraa*), *muguka*, *kuber*, or drink alcohol while playing loud music from their car music systems. They might also listen in on the loud music coming from the club they are closest to – often 1824.

Conclusion

This paper has tended to expose the nature of nightlife on Nairobi's Lang'ata road. The unique nature of establishments on Lang'ata road, it is claimed, affect the way in which the design inside these spaces is crafted. The problem of impermanence, in terms of land, means that many of the structures within which these night clubs will be housed may appear "make shift" or at least inexpensive. At the same time, the clubs will have to deal with the location in which they are found – for instance, the pattern around Nairobi West has been established over time to attract a clientele whose musical tastes is predominantly rumba and benga, and whose age is above 35 years. This means that the club's décor will respond in turn to the dreams that this clientele hopes to live through. Still, other clubs, such as The Carnivore, established on land that seemingly is not in dispute, can afford to create recreate strong structures that are within its compound. It works, at the same time, on taking advantage of its proximity to history (since 1982), and its established tradition of catering to the visitor to Kenya intent at interacting with the big five (particularly carnivorous), to present itself as a space where the "authentic" of African bush life can be consumed. This is reflected too, in its décor and furnishing. What is of interest in the paper is how, in as similar a fashion as Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality*, clubs have presented a "hyped" or heavenly space that allows clients to feel as though they are interacting with their dreams. In the Lazino case, for instance, the ordinariness of a butchery at the entrance, and the idea that you are one step into a club and a step outside, with people entertaining you from the streets, or cheering a soccer

team with you, is interesting. It creates a relaxed atmosphere so different to the 1824 experience where revelers are in the same space with motor vehicles which in their shiny or expensive looking nature can be associated with conspicuous consumption. Signs and symbols of popular culture are an integral part of this nightlife, but they have to be arranged to make meanings to specific groups of clients.

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