

"Memory, Place, and the Humanities"

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Thank you, Mrs. Adler, and good afternoon. The widely admired American author Eudora Welty in her collection of essays entitled *The Eye of the Story* wrote, "it is our describable outside that defines us, willy-nilly, to others, that may save us, or destroy us, in the world; it may be our shield against chaos, our mask against exposure; but whatever it is, the move we make in the place we live has to signify our intent and meaning."

I don't know how many of you have spent much time in Savannah before, but it is one of the truly great American cities. Two hundred and thirty years before Welty wrote those words, James Oglethorpe understood that. This entire city was laid out to signify its intent and meaning. But the expression of the intent and meaning of Savannah did not stop with Oglethorpe. For nearly fifty years Emma Adler and her husband Lee have committed themselves to the place they live to signify their intent and meaning. There is no question whatsoever that the Savannah that welcomes you today would not be here were it not for the Adlers. They are heroes in Savannah, they are heroes in the historic preservation movement, and they are heroes among Americans who love our cities and our history. And if you want read one of the great tales about the rebirth of a city, you should read Emma and Lee's book, *Savannah Renaissance*.

I began with the Welty quotation because her last line ought to be our guidepost for how we act toward our own communities – "...the move we make in the place we live has to signify our intent and meaning." So I want to spend just a moment on that word "meaning" and two related words: "significance" and "value". The word "value" comes from the Latin *valere*, which means, "to be strong, vigorous, in good health; to mean, to signify." Our communities – the places we live – ought to be strong, vigorous, in good health. The places we live ought to be valuable places, places with significance, places with meaning.

Take a moment and think of something significant to you personally. Anything. You may think of your children, or your spouse, or your church, or god, or a favorite piece of art hanging in your living room, or your childhood home, or a personal accomplishment of some type. Now take away your memory. Which of those things are now significant to you? None of them. There can be no significance without memory. Now those same things may still be significant to someone else. But without memory they are not significant to you. And if memory is necessary for significance, it is also necessary for both meaning and value. Without memory nothing has significance, nothing has meaning, nothing has value.

That, I think, is the lesson of that old Zen koan, "If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears, did it make a sound?" Well of course it made a sound; sound comes from the vibration of molecules and a falling tree vibrates molecules. But that sound might as well not have been made, because there is no

memory of it.

We acquire memories from a sound or a picture, or from a conversation, or from words in a book, or from the stories our grandmother told us. But how is the memory of a city conveyed? Here's what Italo Calvino writes, "The city ... does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls."

The city tells its own past, transfers its own memory, largely through the fabric of the built environment. Historic buildings are the physical expression of memory – and it is memory that makes places significant.

In a great Tom Robbins book, *Skinny Legs and All*, one of the characters is an extremely erudite can of pork and beans. At one point Can o' Beans remarks, "imprecise speech is one of the major causes of mental illness in human beings. The inability to correctly perceive reality is often responsible for humans' insane behavior. And every time they substitute a...sloppy slang word for the words that would accurately describe a...situation, it lowers their reality orientations, pushes them farther from shore, out onto the foggy waters of alienation and confusion."

Well, I don't want to add to the foggy waters of alienation and confusion so I'd like to spend a moment on some definitions.

If we are to have valuable, meaningful, cities, they must be places, not mere locations. Welty didn't say "...the location we live" she said, "the place we live..." What is the distinction between a place and a mere location? I've struggled with that over the past few years. I have settled on landscape artist Allan Gussow's definition of place as "a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings." So place is not a synonym for "location." A location is a point on the globe; an intersection of longitude and latitude. Certainly every "place" has to have a location but I do not believe every location meets the test of being a "place."

My second definitional distinction is the vastly overused word "community." Community is not, in my judgment, a synonym for "municipality". I've searched for an appropriate definition of "community" and here is the one I think is most useful. "A community is a place in which people know and care for one another – the kind of place in which people do not merely ask 'How are you?' as a formality but care about the answer."

There are today, throughout America hundreds of groups advocating for "community" and hundreds more advocating for "place." What virtually none of them has recognized is that the two concepts - community and place - are inseparable." Place" is the vessel within which the "spirit" of community is stored; "Community" is the catalyst that imbues a location with a "sense" of place. The two are not divisible. You cannot have community without place; and a place without community is only a location.

I would further argue that the built environment in general, and historic preservation in particular is

the nexus at which the concept of community and the concept of place intersect.

So there are hundreds of place advocacy groups, hundreds of community advocacy groups, but also hundreds of “rights” movements: animal rights, abortion rights, right to life, right to die, states rights, gun rights, gay rights, property rights, women’s’ rights, and on and on and on. And I’m for all of those things – rights are good. But I would suggest to you that any claim for rights that is not balanced with responsibilities removes the civility from civilization, and gives us an entitlement mentality as a nation of mere consumers of public services rather than a nation of citizens. A consumer has rights; a citizen has responsibilities that accompany those rights. Historic preservation is a responsibility movement rather than a rights movement. It is a movement that urges us toward the responsibility of stewardship, not merely the right of ownership. Stewardship of our historic built environment, certainly; but stewardship of the meaning and memory manifested in those buildings as well.

Does it matter if we live in a place rather than just a location? If we live in a community, not just a municipality? I think it does. Location and municipality are quantitative measurements – we have an incorporated body of local government that includes x square miles, and y population. But place and community are qualitative measurements. And as human beings the quantifiable ought not be enough. I would suggest to you that if only the quantifiable were important, there would be no such thing as humanities councils, which, at their core, are about qualitative contributions to our lives.

But, you know what? I have no expertise in the humanities. Nor in the arts. I’m a consultant in economic development – the world of job creation and loan demand; of encouraged investment and enhanced tax base. And in the past economic competitiveness was largely measured by a set of quantitative standards: How low are the taxes? How cheap is the labor? How much electricity available? What’s the sewer capacity? How close is the port?

But in the economically competitive city in the 21st century, qualitative will be more important than quantitative. And the single most important element will be that cliché, “Quality of Life”. But ultimately quality of life will be determined by five senses: the sense of place, the sense of evolution, the sense of ownership, the sense of identity and the sense of community itself.

The Greeks had a phrase – horror vacui – the intolerability of no-place-at-all. Many places in America have approached that horror vacui . On a trip to California I picked up a copy of the Sacramento Bee one morning and read a local columnist – Steve Weigand – and here’s what he wrote. “And from the Brave New World of the Internet comes the following new term. “Generica: fast food joints, strip malls and subdivisions, as in ‘we were so lost in Generica, I didn’t know what city it was.’”

Generica isn’t just a California phenomenon or just a city or suburban phenomena. Generica is happening everywhere and I would suggest it is at the heart of the challenge of economic development. Generica undermines all five senses – the sense of place, of evolution, of ownership, of identity and of community.

A city will need a sense of place for it’s quality of life – something other than Generica – but it will also need a sense of evolution. Let me tell you about the small town of Rushville, Illinois. There is a school

there built in 1919 with an addition built in 1925. The addition was the gymnasium on the lower level and an auditorium space on the upper level. The school board decided the structure no longer worked and so built new schools, added to others, and finally the junior high kids who were the most recent users of the school were moved out. But the school board decided that not only didn't the building work as a school – it was unusable for anything and intended to demolish it. When I toured the building I went into one of those little dressing rooms that are usually found behind the stage in high school auditoriums. There written in graffiti on the wall – clearly by a 14 or 15 year old was this: "Those who want to tear this building down have never seen this place as Wonderland." That kid clearly understood what the school superintendent did not – that the evolution of the community was represented in that building and it was a far too precious commodity to be lost. The School Board didn't understand that and the building was torn down.

But if the Rushville, Illinois School Board didn't understand that, others do. In his book *The Good Society* sociologist Robert Bellah observes, "Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history--in an important sense they are constituted by their past--and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a 'community of memory', one that does not forget its past." Generic diminishes each of the five senses; preservation of the historic built environment enhances each of the five senses, and constitutes the physical manifestation of a "community of memory". Historic preservation builds both community and place; generic destroys both community and place. The third sense necessary for quality of life is the sense of ownership. People within the city need to feel the city is theirs. This sense of ownership has nothing to do with who the deed holders happen to be. People need to truly believe "This is my community." A sense of ownership stems from a sense of opportunity – economic opportunity, political opportunity, social opportunity, and the opportunity to participate. Over the past twenty years historic preservation has proven to be the singular form of economic development that is simultaneously community development.

The sense of identity is vital to quality of life. A major component of real community identity is community differentiation. In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* Marco Polo is describing to Kublai Khan the various cities of the Khan's vast empire. In depicting the city of Trude, here is what he tells the Khan.

If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off. The suburbs they drove me through were no different from the others, with the same little greenish and yellowish houses. Following the same signs we swung around the same flower beds in the same squares. The downtown streets displayed goods, packages, signs that had not changed at all. This was the first time I had come to Trude, but I already knew the hotel where I happened to be lodged; I had already heard and spoken my dialogues with the buyers and sellers of hardware; I had ended other days identically, looking through the same goblets at the same swaying navels.

Why come to Trude? I asked myself. And I already wanted to leave. "You can resume your flight whenever you like," they said to me, "but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end. Only the name

of the airport changes."

It seems to me that the most powerful argument for historic preservation is to avoid having the "world covered by a sole Trude which does not begin and does not end." In economics it is the differentiated product that commands a monetary premium. If in the long run we want to attract capital, to attract investment to our communities, we must differentiate them from anywhere else. It is our built environment that expresses, perhaps better than anything else, our diversity, our identity, our individuality, or differentiation.

There is a principal in physics that says if a thing cannot be distinguished from any other thing it does not exist. If your town cannot be distinguished from any other town, sooner or later it will cease to exist. Some of you will remember Robert Pirsig as the author some twenty years ago of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Well Pirsig reemerged a couple of years ago with a book entitled *Lila* in which he hypothesizes a concept called the *Metaphysics of Quality*. He adds a second principal of physics and states: "if a thing has no value it isn't distinguished from anything else." My only modification to that premise would be to turn it around and say: if a thing isn't distinguished from anything else it has no value. For our communities to have value they must be distinguished. And their physical distinction – particularly the historic built environment – is a crucial element in that search for value.

The fifth sense necessary for quality of life is the sense of community itself. And lest you misinterpret what I mean, "community" does not imply everybody holding hands and singing Cumbaya. In fact as art critic Lucy Lippard writes in her book, *The Lure of the Local*, "Community doesn't mean understanding everything about everybody and resolving all the differences; it means knowing how to work within differences as they change and evolve...A healthy community in a mixed society can take these risks because it is permeable; it includes all ages, races, preferences, like and unlike, and derives its richness from explicit disagreement as much from implicit agreement."

Quality of life is the amalgam of those things that make a place out of a location and a community out of a bunch of houses. Maintaining that quality of life is not easy nor will it get easier. But the five senses of place, of evolution, ownership, of identity and of community will lead us there. And historic preservation is at the core of each of those senses.

Now for some "historic preservation" is still the local group of retired librarians writing letters to the editor and struggling to raise funds to save the mansion of the local rich, dead white guy. Well thank god for those activists, those letters to the editor, those fund raising events, and even for those rich, dead, white guys, because the properties that have been saved are an important component of understanding ourselves as a people and constitute an irreplaceable collection of the art of architecture and landscape architecture that has been created in our country's relatively short history.

But that part of historic preservation – saving old mansions – represents an insignificant percentage of preservation activities today. In the last two decades, historic preservation has moved from an activity whose goal was an end in itself – save old buildings in order to save old buildings – to a broad based, multifaceted group of activities that uses our built heritage not as an end in itself but as a means to

broader and, frankly, more important ends. Around the country that has meant historic preservation as a means for downtown revitalization, neighborhood stabilization, attraction for tourism, job creation, small town revitalization, affordable housing, luxury housing, education, transportation, and others.

And historic preservation is the irreplaceable variable in any effective Smart Growth strategy.

In the last two decades preservationists have “pushed the envelope” of the roles historic preservation plays in our communities, and no one has pushed that envelope more than Emma and Lee Adler here in Savannah. So since I’m here in Savannah today, at the invitation of Emma Adler, I’d like to push the envelope once again.

A few months ago the National Endowment for the Humanities pushed their own envelope and invited proposals for projects to preserve and document cultural resources in Iraq. Well, I’d like to build on that initiative and suggest a significantly expanded role for historic preservation as part of the international policies of the United States.

I am going to give you a personal view. It is a view in part molded by events in the United States over the past three years, and in part molded by my good fortune of having worked in a dozen countries on five continents in the last few years. I believe that events of the last few years have set back American influence around the world by a generation. My purpose is not to convince any of you of anything. Many of you will vehemently disagree with my conclusions. My only goal is to plant the consideration of a concept in your heads.

Over the last 26 months we have seen far too many headlines and heard far too many commentators ask, “Why does everybody hate us?” Not only is that not true, it is the kind of whimpering, whiney comment one might expect to hear from an 11 year old on the school playground, not from the world’s strongest nation. That sniveling is embarrassing. Of course there are some people in the world that hate America, and I’m not sure it is particularly useful to spend a lot of time worrying about denunciation from one’s enemies. But there is a difference between criticism from one’s foes and critique from one’s friends, and as a country we need the maturity to know the difference. And I’m not even talking about the war in Iraq. I don’t think anyone’s perspective on that subject can be objective at the moment.

Remember as a child when your mom said, “I’m disappointed in you.” That was far more devastating than a spanking. Well, America’s friends are disappointed, and are questioning our own commitment to the very values that they have admired.

What had been admiration for the United States is today tempered by eight specific critiques from America’s friends.

The first critique goes like this: “We’re for economic globalization. We want foreign investment and we want an opportunity to sell our goods and services around the world. The United States has been the champion of globalization and we admire that, but it seems to us American corporations don’t want free trade or competition, they merely want to dictate and dominate world markets.”

Now why would they think that? This might give you a clue. This is a New York Times photograph of the president of General Motors standing in front of the Renaissance Center in Detroit. You see him there with his foot on the globe. Whether or not that is General Motor's version of globalization, it is consistent with the image and the practice of many American corporations in much of the world.

Critique number two: "We understand the importance of economic globalization, but the American version carries with it a cultural globalization, a westernization, a McDonaldization, a Disneyfication, that is diminishing our local character."

Now why would they think that? The Golden Arches are frequently the target of cultural globalization protestors. McDonald's CEO Jack Greenberg vehemently denies his company is trying to McDonaldize the world. But when asked why only one of his Board of Directors is a non-American (the exception being a Canadian) his response is, "I'd love to add somebody from outside the United States, but getting them to meetings six times a year is very complicated." Wait a minute! McDonalds can figure out how to get special sauce and sesame seed buns to 28,000 restaurants in 120 countries and can't figure out how to schedule six plane trips a year? No wonder Greenberg is not believed.

Critique number three: "The United States says they won't invest here, and that we aren't a reliable market economy until we have transparent banking systems, strong securities and property laws, get rid of corporate nepotism, and begin building a strong middle class. We believe those are goals to strive for, but in many cases it seems the U.S. is rather hypocritical in that regard."

Why would they think that? Well in the last three years we have not isolated examples, but Enron, Anderson, World Com, Merrill Lynch, Solomon Smith-Barney, Martha Stewart, Tyco, ImClone, Qwest and dozens of others who not only steal billions of dollars but represent a level of cronyism unimagined by the most egregious third world dictator. I don't think, by the way, those people ought to be charged with mail fraud or insider trading or securities violations. I think they should be charged with treason for the damage they've done to the United States around the world.

Critique number four: "The United States has pushed us toward a capitalist market economy saying that was the way to build a strong middle class and we want that to happen. But the middle class no longer seems to be the chief concern of capitalism today in America."

Why would they think that? In 1980 CEO's were paid 80 times as much as hourly wage earners; today their pay is nearly 500 times as much. CEOs of America's largest companies are paid every three weeks what the president of the United States is paid for his entire four year term. We have corporate CEOs with retirement packages and stock bonuses that would embarrass King Midas, and then they move the mailing address of corporate headquarters to the Cayman Islands so as not to have to pay American corporate taxes. We've sold market economies saying, "You can prosper if you are successful" But that doesn't seem to be a criteria any more. "The executives at the 25 largest American companies to go bankrupt in the past few years walked away with \$3.3 Billion."

Critique number five: "The United States so often pursues its goals based on short term strategies that

they don't consider the long term implications."

Why would they think that? Well, maybe it's because they remember it was the United States that funded Osama Bin Laden when he was fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. Maybe it is because they remember it was the United States that first provided the ingredients to make biological weapons to Iraq when they were fighting Iran. Or maybe it is a pattern of championing democracy and free elections but rather quickly abandoning that position when the dictator de jour serves a tactical purpose.

Critique number six: "The United States rarely shows either knowledge of or respect for local culture, oversimplifies issues and has no recognition of the importance of the time necessary for transition."

Why would they think that? Well, maybe they look at Russia, where the U.S. declared, "Just hold elections and have a market economy and everything will quickly fix itself." Instead we've seen the emergence of gangsters in the guise of capitalists and a standard of living that has significantly declined for the overwhelming percentage of the population. It isn't that free elections and a market economy aren't important. Rather the absurd assumption that those two institutional changes can be made overnight and be expected to work. After all, English-speaking people had 550 years of beginning to practice democracy between the Magna Carta and the American Revolution. Russians had no such opportunity for 80 years under Communism nor for centuries under the czars.

Critique number seven: "We've admired the pluralism of America, the acceptance of diversity, and the rule of law, but the commitment those values seem in question today."

Why would they think that? Well we have a white, protestant, male clergyman – Pat Robertson – who says of the State Department, "If I could just get a nuclear device inside Foggy Bottom, I think that's the answer." with no rebuke from the President. Rest assured if a Muslim cleric used that language of terrorism, even as metaphor as Robertson did, he would be hauled off to Guantanamo and questioned without benefit of legal council and held as an "enemy combatant" indefinitely.

Critique number eight: "We'd like to believe President Bush that U.S. troops aren't in the middle east for oil as a religious Crusade against Islam, but we are increasingly skeptical".

Why would they think that? Well we have a three star general who serves as the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense who says of his Muslim opponent, "I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol." The rebuke from President Bush or Secretary Rumsfeld? Oh, sorry, there wasn't one.

And please note that this list of critiques does not include any of those items of American policy on which there are serious disagreements in this country: failure to sign the Kyoto treaty, opposition to the international criminal court, urging free trade for American goods abroad but protecting the steel industry because of the electoral importance of West Virginia and Pennsylvania, a unilateral pre-emptive strike policy, abandonment of arms control agreements and others.

I excluded those issues because in the post-9/11 environment I understand that a case might be made for a different set of standards. There is legitimate debate about those items here in the United States.

But I have to tell you, on most of those issues there is not much debate in the rest of the world. On those issues in most of the rest of the world America is seen by America's friends as both wrong and hypocritical.

Well please don't imagine that I don't know what most of you are thinking at this moment – "First, I don't necessarily agree with this guy's conclusions, but more importantly, why in hell is he talking about those issues at a humanities conference?" My reasons are twofold: 1) I am absolutely convinced that it will take America a generation to recover the respect, admiration, and moral authority that we have lost in the last few years, and 2) encouraging and assisting historic preservation around the world needs to be a central strategy of the United States in regaining what we have lost.

Why should historic preservation be part of the foreign policy of the United States? Here are some reasons:

1. The adaptive reuse of historic buildings is fully compatible with participation in economic globalization, which is critical for stability and prosperity in most of the world.
2. Using historic buildings in and of itself mitigates cultural globalization, of which there are no demonstrable benefits.
3. Our having a policy encouraging and assisting historic preservation shows our respect for the local culture of each country.
4. There are aspects of other cultures that do not deserve our respect, rather warrant our reproach – the role of women in Saudi Arabia, the rule of law in Pakistan, freedom of worship in China, tolerance of diversity in India. But those cultural changes will not take place under the point of a gun, nor will they – however meritorious change may be – take place overnight. A strategy of our valuing local heritage resources, however, shows our respect for those cultures without condoning every aspect of them.
5. We have learned in preservation that positive change is an incremental process. An historic preservation based component of foreign policy will inherently be an incremental one, thus both providing the time to regain our rightful position in the world and to dissuade the idea that there is an instant answer to difficult economic, political and social problems.
6. As a parallel to incrementalism, a historic preservation based strategy is inherently long-term. And we need to demonstrate more long-term thinking.
7. One of the great economic arguments for historic preservation in this country is the local impact on jobs and household incomes that rehabilitation makes relative both to new construction and to most other economic activities. This aspect is surely true in the rest of the world as well. There are few countries in the world where creating local jobs isn't a high priority.
8. There is certainly great expertise in some aspects of historic preservation in other parts of the

world, especially in Europe, that surpasses ours here in the United States. What we have exceeded in, however, are market based strategies for the adaptive reuse of historic buildings. That could constitute a meaningful contribution to countries around the globe.

9. A historic preservation based policy is applicable anywhere and works equally well in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. 97% of the net population growth in the next 20 years, by the way, will be on those three continents.
10. Developing historic preservation as a key component of our foreign policy provides a useful vehicle for our learning about other cultures on an indepth basis. The most vociferous cheerleader for American policies today would hardly claim we're the most culturally aware nation on earth.
11. America is obviously the only military superpower left on earth, and I for one think its important that we remain so. However if there is one vital lesson from September 11th it is this: having far and away the strongest military is not sufficient to protect us. Historic preservation could serve as a non-military component of a comprehensive strategy that recognizes that.
12. While both the private and public sectors play an important role in historic preservation in the U.S., it has always been the non-profit sector that has been the strongest advocate and the most innovative problem solver in preservation here. Change in the developing world will be led by the non-profit sector as well, which are known in the rest of the world as NGOs – non-government organizations. Using historic preservation as a strategy abroad helps us assist in the establishment and effectiveness of NGOs elsewhere.
13. A legitimate concern, particularly in world heritage cities, is that a heritage tourism strategy can often overwhelm the fragile historic resources. While heritage tourism will still be important, we have been developing the knowledge here as to how to protect those resources from overuse. More importantly, however, more than anywhere else on the globe, we have found economic uses for historic buildings far beyond tourism. My best guess is that 95% of all of the historic buildings in economically productive use in this country have nothing to do with tourism. That knowledge is also transferable.
14. An historic preservation based foreign policy component would be vastly less expensive for American taxpayers than buying tanks for foreign armies or building dams of questionable economic utility and negative environmental impact.
15. As we assist other countries in identifying, protecting, and enhancing their historic resources we are at the same time aiding them in building sustainable and marketable local skills.
16. We have seen in this country some of the downsides of economic growth and prosperity – suburban sprawl, declining city centers, loss of agricultural lands, environmental degradation, and others. Encouraging and assisting developing countries to adopt preservation-based

strategies could be central in their preempting those problems before they occur.

17. Finally, in much of the world the major problem is the outmigration from the countryside to the already overcrowded urban areas. A combination of technological advances, and protection and enhancement of local historic resources could be a useful tool in helping to stem that tide.

I want to conclude with these observations. Let me be clear that I'm not so silly as to think the entire structure of American policy be jettisoned and replaced with historic preservation. Of course we still need our army, still need to supply military assistance to our allies, still need the CIA, still need ambassadors and foreign aid and the Peace Corps. What I am suggesting is a role for historic preservation in foreign policy akin to the role that historic preservation plays in downtown revitalization or in smart growth or in neighborhood stabilization – that is as a central and critical component of a comprehensive strategy.

Why do I think this might be remotely possible? When was the last time that virtually every country in the world was on the same side of the same issue – India and Pakistan, Israel and the PLO, Africa and Europe, North America and South America? It was in the condemnation of the wanton destruction of the Buddhist stupa in Afghanistan by the Taliban – a historic preservation issue.

I think if there is one adjective that describes the impact of historic preservation in America it is this one – healing. Healing our cities, healing our neighborhoods, healing our downtowns, healing our small towns, healing our economies – all by healing our historic resources.

If historic preservation has proven to be such a healing tool in America, why can't it be a healing tool around the world over the next generation? God knows we're going to need one.

Thank you very much.

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