

Encoding and Transferring Transience in Housing

Linking the Architectural Heritages of Migrant Hostels and Public Housing in Victoria in the 1960s

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Abstract

During the 1960s, Commonwealth Hostels Limited, a Commonwealth owned company, undertook a nationwide program to improve migrant resettlement accommodation. This was undertaken in order to bolster Australia's migrant intake and to appease protests by hostel occupants about inadequate facilities. The addition of purpose-built apartments at the Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel in Western Melbourne between 1966 and 1970 is an example of the in-transit design that was produced through these redevelopments. In this paper, Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel is considered in the broader context of public housing in Melbourne. The paper investigates how migrants and refugees moved through Federal and Victorian State housing systems and whether significant comparisons can be made between the material and social histories of the two. It proposes that built in processes of continual displacement, as linked to the economically and ethnically marginalised, emerge through both policy and arguably government endorsed material cultures. Migrant and refugee experiences of housing instability stresses the precariousness of home myths as connected to the discriminatory processes of articulating nationhood. Indicative of other migrant hostels throughout Australia, Maribyrnong promoted assimilation programs for non-British inhabitants. The redevelopment of the site in the 1960s draws on broad appropriations of British culture and architectural quotations of imaginings of Australian ways of life. Using Maribyrnong as a beginning point, this paper interrogates select public housing sites in relation to assimilatory policies.

In-Transit Housing Cultures

Current processes of refugee settlement in Australia are often continuing journeys through transitory accommodation— a shuffling through locations marked by both displacement and emplacement along with sometimes resulting in physical homelessness. *The Housing and Homelessness Journeys of Refugees in Australia*, produced for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute in 2015, emphasizes refugee movement through multifaceted housing pathways along with the scarcity of literature investigating these experiences. This survey based report concludes by contending that “discrimination appears to be a major impediment to successful movement through the housing market”.¹ This paper looks at migrant and refugee resettlement sites in Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s. It focuses on a critical intersection between on arrival accommodation in the form of the Commonwealth directed Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel and Victorian State public housing. By looking at the types and forms of housing migrants and refugees passed through, the research aims to test whether the current structural processes emerged in comparable incarnations historically. Although, as historian Klaus Neumann points out, it is highly problematic to view current refugee resettlement policies as a “seamless continuation” of policies introduced in the late 1940s which were part of broader migration policies where non-British refugees were designated as alien immigrants.² The aim is not to superficially juxtapose time periods but to provide a thorough context of the purpose-built housing for incoming populations during 1965 to 1992, before the introduction of mandatory detention that signified an already burgeoning shift in Australia’s settlement of refugees. This period is often overlooked in the scholarship on refugee resettlement as it nestled between the nation building push of the 1950s and the distinct violence of immediate histories. The paper focuses on the redevelopment of Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel in the 1960s and how the architecture in tandem with housing policy encoded transience. Applying this as a platform, it explores whether connections can be identified between migrant hostels and other government directed housing experiments for the economically marginalised.

Migrant hostels provided transitory accommodation for the Commonwealth nominated migrants and special Commonwealth groups who arrived under assisted passage arrangements from 1948 to the mid-1970s.³ When Commonwealth Hostels, a company owned by the Department of Labour and National Service, overtook management from the Department of Immigration in 1952, there were forty-four hostels spread throughout Australia. The sites accommodated migrants and refugees from countries such as Britain, Poland, Latvia, Malta, Greece and Italy. Historian Sara Wills suggests that hostels can be viewed as the “frontiers of assimilation, of the policies, procedures and practices that directed the cultural and national re-education of non-British migrants, and helped to delimit what it meant to become a ‘new Australian’”.⁴ Migrant hostel architecture is examined through the lens of government assimilation agendas in relation to how national communities were imagined and enacted. Appropriations and quotations of British design and wider cultural trends filtered through the Australia locale were part of Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel’s redevelopment. This attempt to spatialise and code Australian life is used to briefly consider select forms of public housing that migrants encountered on leaving hostels. The paper interrogates these architectural and daily-life quotations that linked Australian national identities to their colonial heritage, with the aim to recognise how assimilation and transience emerged in tandem in on-arrival accommodation.

This is a preliminary investigation based around a selection of key secondary sources and scoping studies to test the feasibility of a comparative discussion of government sponsored housing. There is an emerging field of academic commentary, along with statistical based research on migrant hostels through government publications.⁵ However there is minimal scholarship on the architecture of migrant hostels and the framing of Maribyrnong draws on the scholarship of Sara Wills and Pamie Ching Tsz Fung to consider the hostel’s social histories as a methodology to study the architecture.⁶ Public housing architecture in Victoria is framed through Renate Howe’s seminal edited compilation, *New Houses for Old: Fifty Years of Public Housing in Victoria 1938* to track policy and building innovations.⁷ Both sets of buildings are examined through site visits, heritage assessment reports and

archival material produced by the federal Department of Immigration, the Department of Labour and National Service, Commonwealth Hostels Limited and the Victorian Housing Commission.

From the scoping studies undertaken, it is foreseeable that direct linkages between federal and state departments associated with housing might prove to be obscure. From these studies minimal tangible evidence has surfaced indicating any direct communication between various branches of state and federal bureaucracy in regards to hostel design and other forms of public housing. However this paper addresses the wider themes associated with these select housing sites, focusing on the manifestation of assimilation policies and consequential spatial discrimination. Through further archival research, I aim to explore whether the architecture and the policy informing the briefs significantly contributes to coding transience in these forms of housing. For example, to what degrees does this impact both continual processes of displacement or temporary emplacement experienced by refugees? In particular, how were the complex needs of the economic and ethnically marginalized addressed or annulled through the functional, relational and symbolic performance of the architecture? The scholarship tracking the movement of migrants from on-arrival hostels to other forms of accommodation both public and private is piecemeal in the 1960s becoming increasingly more substantial through the 1980s and 1990s.⁸ This lack of cohesive records prior to the late 1960s is partly due to the absence of united departmental strategies to collect information on migrants housing patterns. Anne-Mari Jordens argues it wasn't until the late 1960s that the Department of Immigration improved its abilities to collect and process information on migrant communities and not until 1971 that policy makers became explicitly responsive to cultural diversity and migrants housing needs.⁹ A clear image on population movements in the 1960s and 1970s will become robust through the archival research. Arising simultaneously to this acknowledgment of diverse housing needs is a national shift in policy from assimilation to integration. This contributes to the significance of research, as it is positioned at a time where cultural debates are amplified. The discussion is limited to overviews of built form and site context but it is important to acknowledge that housing is activated by daily practice and the personal histories of migrants and refugees passing through these types of sites were varied and complex.¹⁰

Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel

The site of the former Maribyrnong hostel is located in Western Melbourne and when it closed down in 1989 was sold to Victoria University. Situated adjacent to the former hostel, is the purpose built Immigration Detention Centre that is proposed to close in 2017.¹¹ The suburbs surrounding the site have recently undergone piecemeal redevelopment with waterfront apartment complexes as Melbourne's inner west is marketed as a more cordial, gentrified extension of metropolitan planning celebrated for its multicultural roots. When the hostel underwent redevelopment in several stages during 1966-70, it initiated the area's transformation from industrial to residential. Maribyrnong officially opened on the 21 July 1949 and was the first migrant hostel in Victoria set up for family units and like most hostels throughout Australia prefabricated Nissen huts were used for dwellings.¹² Progressively improving transitory accommodation was given increasing importance by the Department of Immigration due to needs to promote resettlement in Australia as a beneficial and desirous encounter. This was due to intensified competitiveness with other countries in recruiting migrants for Australia's long-term growth.¹³ The nationwide program led by Commonwealth Hostels Limited to inject hostel sites with medium density, more permanent housing took place between the years of 1967 to 1973.¹⁴

The hostel redevelopment produced two new housing block complexes that were renamed Midway Hostel and The Philip Centre which opened slightly later. The new additions were designed by the Melbourne based firm of Montgomery, King and Trengrove who formed a partnership in 1953 and initially specialised in private residential architecture. Neil Clerehan in Montgomery's obituary states the firm "quickly gained a reputation for excellence in the emerging contemporary style: white, hard-edge cubistic forms, elevated with Mondrian-inspired fenestration and a multiplicity of materials".¹⁵

Maribyrnong was the firm's first large-scale housing project, marking a shift in direction from residential to educational and institutional projects it would undertake in the 1970s.¹⁶ Montgomery worked in England in the early 1950s but it is unclear if he had any contact with state sponsored housing or alternatively the emerging practitioners and cultural attitudes associated with New Brutalism.¹⁷

An expressive use of materials can be seen in both complexes with the use of concrete blocks with polished concrete spandrels and low pitched tiled-roofs.¹⁸ The Philip Centre, which predominately housed single migrants, was a series of apartment blocks unusually planned in a donut around a small courtyard and was the only migrant hostel to be arranged in this atypical residential formation for Australia.¹⁹ Although configured differently, with a scattered grid plan, the adjacent Midway Hostel included thirteen detached blocks that contained family units with improved living conditions by the inclusion of central heating and new laundry facilities.²⁰ The blocks were connected by a maze of covered, unadorned steel walkways. In an interview conducted with Simon Reeves, David Morgan, who worked for the firm and documented the project states:

Brutalism was like a whisper from the northern hemisphere-the UK, some of the stuff that was happening in America. But it had the effect eventually of making it ok to do what had been crass detailing and crass materials. Hence the grey concrete block-what had been considered as milking shed details.²¹

The clear articulation of covered walkways between blocks, semi-exposed stairwells and laundry taps on the exterior walls demonstrate an interpretation of the brutalist style. This quote also curiously draws connections to material sensibilities seen in rural life, which was frequently miss-quoted or distilled into clichés in national mythmaking. Simon Reeves argues "that the complex at Maribyrnong can be considered as a representative and intact example of a building from the late 1960s that exhibits the emerging influence of Brutalism, but they can hardly be considered as an outstanding manifestation of the mature style".²² It is difficult to draw a direct connection between Maribyrnong to the British articulation of New Brutalism ideology in the relatively late and minimal built projects for the Welfare state by architect's like Alison and Peter Smithson. However, there are planning and form crossovers between medium density council houses throughout Britain from the 1950s and migrant hostels in Australia, including, the use of exposed materials and expression of function that became synonymous with the brutalist style. However, this stylistic appropriation in Australia could easily be linked to a wider range of housing projects, including the larger tower blocks, that emerged both throughout Britain and in Europe after the Second World War to satisfy housing shortages.

The design for Maribyrnong aimed to foster a distinction between temporary hostel living and housing that simultaneously aimed to avoid an institutional appearance.²³ One strategy used was to invoke impressions associated with Australian suburbs. At the Midway complex, the maze of covered walkways framed small shaded courtyards and the blocks were surrounded with vast lawns and garden beds. The entire grounds were gated with a waist high fence. The landscaping between the scattered arrangement of blocks emphasized the colonial Australian setting, namely seen in rose gardens lined by eucalyptus. The landscaping did provide better grounds for children with more designated play areas. However simultaneously it emphasized regional and suburban ideals of the time with overtly British and Australian cultural, landscape tropes. This attempt to define a distinctly regional character in the context of hostels sites produces a layering of complex and contradictory meanings. The meaning of these additions is heighten by the institutional and instructional framework hotels engendered, where the housing becomes separated from the local context due to unfiltered federal government direction. This coding of everyday Australian life provided a backdrop to migrants receiving welcoming pamphlets such as "Fact's About Australia" and "Getting to Know Australians". These pamphlets provided both useful on arrival information but also contained descriptive cultural practices distilled in generalisations of Anglo-Celtic traditions, focusing particularly on family life in the

suburbs.²⁴ The pamphlets were used as an introduction to wider re-education programs for migrants that were predominately about learning English but also contributed to delineating expectations about living in Australia. Through the archival work I will be able to investigate whether these attempts to cultivate imaginings of Australian suburbs were deliberate strategies or just indicative of attitudes of the time.

Beyond the Hostel: Migrants and the Victoria Housing Commission

Before the Second World War, the site had been the Maribyrnong Explosives and Ordnance Factory that opened in 1924 and in 1942 expanded its facilities with a New Pyrotechnic Section, consisting of 150 buildings partially located on the site of the migrant hostel.²⁵ When the war ended, this section closed and the buildings were used to house migrant workers who initially worked in other sections of the ordnance factory before it also closed. The initial migrant hostels in Victoria had been established for individuals, frequently housing only male workers for usually industrial or agriculture labour. Although there had been migrant workers from nationalities outside Britain prior to the Second World War, again predominately men who moved for construction work on Victorian roads and railways, it was not until the post-Second World War nation building immigration scheme that providing decent on-arrival accommodation became a priority and orientated towards families.²⁶ Opportunities for employment determined hostel occupation periods and analyzing the coding of transience in the architecture must be situated in this broader social and economic context. Migrant occupation in hostels varied from weeks to years and although Commonwealth Hostels Limited set no fixed limits, they encouraged migrants to move into privately rented or owned accommodated as soon as economically feasible. A welfare survey conducted in the 1950s by the department found that over 60 percent of families had been in hostels for two years or more and by 1964 the average stay for British migrants was nine months and for all other migrants grouped as aliens six months.²⁷

By the time the Midway and Philip hostels were built, migrants were arriving from Britain, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Poland, Malta, Italy, Greece and Turkey.²⁸ Richard Broome asserts that in the late 1940s “Victoria took a third of all postwar immigrants and about forty percent of southern European newcomers but only twenty-five percent of British and Irish immigrants to Australia” and “by 1981 the British-born component had dropped to thirty percent of the total of overseas-born in Victoria whereas it was thirty-eight per cent in the rest of Australia”.²⁹ In the minutes of evidence for the proposal of a new hostel at Springvale, which was part of the same program of the Maribyrnong reconstruction, the concept behind the proposed Springvale Hostel is outlined: “The prime objective is to provide reasonably comfortable surroundings which, however, must not be seen as a substitute for long-term accommodation”. It outlines the driving concepts that should determine migrant hostel form which includes “adaptability of families of varying sizes”, and “to allow for the vagaries of the economic climate” in relation to employment opportunities. Many points presented outline the need to accentuate temporariness, for example “not to discourage families from moving into the general community as their circumstances and resources permit”, and “to provide opportunities for persons of a wide range of financial sources to develop the ability to make a move”.³⁰ The aim is to investigate how the conceptual guides outlined in these proposals were interpreted and directed in the brief and then by the architects: What were the design characteristics deliberately employed to encourage these points? Beginning in the late 1960s Maribyrnong accommodated refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Through oral histories the differing impressions of these dwellings by displaced people arriving from across Europe and Mainland South East Asia will help to understand ways in which transitory accommodation in Australia was spatially defined by the various scales of government against the free-standing suburban house.

The Victorian state government had little governance over the construction and management of migrant hostels but was involved in providing land for various hostels and the land provided was frequently in heavy industrial areas and uncontended real estate, for example in Altona, Nunawading and Springvale. Including Maribyrnong these four hostels were to remain open to the 1980s. At the

same time as hostel redevelopments were being instigated in the Commonwealth, the Victorian Housing Commission by 1958 began the high-rise program as part of its wider slum reclamation in inner Melbourne.³¹ During the late 1960s about one third of assisted passages were entitled to hostel accommodation and it roughly amounted for about one fifth of the total migrant intake. The remaining people stayed in accommodation arranged by relatives, friends or sponsors such as church groups and employers. Settlement options also depended on different cultural practices for many Mediterranean cultures boarding house accommodation for single women was seen as inappropriate.³² Once leaving migrant hostels, the only purpose-designed migrant accommodation, the options were varied depending on family and community connections and employment.

Immediately after the Second World War, non-British migrants were subject to systemic discrimination in applying for publicly funded housing that was exacerbated by housing shortages. Non-British migrants had to reside in Australia for at least three years before competing with British migrants who also were at a disadvantage in comparison to Australia born. In the proceeding decades, incremental policy adjustments improved the application process for non-British migrants.³³ By 1954, migrants in rural areas received automatic consideration but those located in Melbourne had to wait 12 months or show evidence of becoming a naturalised citizen to be considered alongside British born migrants.³⁴ A report prepared for heritage Victoria about post 1940s migration states that the “High-rise commission housing retained a large concentration of migrants throughout the post war period”.³⁵ However the specific statistics of people moving directly from hostels into public housing, particularly the new high-rise flats, have yet to be located to support this observation. By 1967 all overseas born in Victoria had the same access to public housing as Australian born but the post-war discrimination advanced wider social stigmas surrounding public housing and many migrants chose to privately rent or purchase homes. Jordens argues “no legislative protection was available to aliens against exploitation by unscrupulous landlords” and “those who sought to avoid these problems by acquiring their own homes face legal and administrative obstacles”.³⁶ This brief overview of housing pathways beyond the hostel and encounters of discrimination, indicates that there is case to be made for comparing the architecture of hostels with other forms of multistorey and communal public housing that were occupied. The discussion is a prelude to focusing on the architecture and asking questions such as can the British derivation of Australian home ideals be linked both to colonial heritages but also to the British welfare state’s housing agendas for the economic marginalised? How were these ideals in conjunction with assimilation programs navigated by refugees from various cultural backgrounds passing through public housing in all its incarnations from inner town houses to the estate tower blocks?

Reception Sites for Domestic Life

Initially migrant hostels were named and stratified according to function, for example: ‘migrant reception and training centres’, ‘dependents holding centres’, and ‘migrant workers’ hostels’. These descriptive titles identified the two-tiered purpose of providing housing for both labor and assimilatory practices. Fung suggests that the slippages between names such as ‘migrant hostel’ to ‘migrant camp’ and ‘workers camp’ highlights that hostel sites such as Maribyrnong initially were not perceived as fixed structures.³⁷ She argues that the sites were viewed as emergency accommodation for incoming populations: “Maribyrnong was in many ways a typical hostel of the immediate post war period, developing in a somewhat ad hoc fashion in response to local conditions and the demands of the boarder program”.³⁸ It was not until the introduction of designed apartment blocks that the site’s purpose becomes physically defined, even if its wider cultural aims relating to assimilation were under constant negotiation both from within the bureaucracy but also more significantly with the people moving through the site. Maribyrnong’s name change to the Midway Hostel and Philip Centre attempted to reaffirm the department’s objective of a new era of improved housing options and domestic facilities for assisted migrants and refugees. Other new titles included Westbridge Hostel in Villawood in Western Sydney and The Enterprise in Springvale.³⁹ Such naming strategies by providing intense extracts of information signaled wider themes or contexts –functioning to a degree

like improvised quotations of places, people and events related to Australia's past. The bureaucratic ambiguity surrounding their nomenclature and description points to the uncertainty around how these sites were formed physically and spatially to receive migrants and what their continuing purpose would be. This hesitation around naming indicates the overlapping of conflicting codes in the site's redesign and public packaging. The architecture awash with new amenities was billeted to entice migrants to choose Australia while simultaneously the government produced publicity with the aim to placate public fears about the collusion between housing competition and non-white assimilation that was ingrained in the political discourse. The architecture fits into this confusion over coding, seen in the conflicts in departmental objectives to provide better accommodation that mimicked suburban standards to reinforcing temporariness to avoid long-term stayers.

Although refugees share economic circumstances with other types of public housing users, including the elderly and single parent families, often their religious and cultural practices were visibly different. The inhabitants of migrant hostels and state public housing were classified by the state as aliens, migrants, refugees or displaced persons. In the decades following the Second World War the inconsistencies and experiments surrounding how to filter, classify and house large numbers of people incoming to Australia demonstrates the national ambivalence and hostility to embracing new modes of nationhood from affiliations with Britain to modes based on migrancy.⁴⁰ Examining histories of public housing in Australia through refugee experiences of housing instability stresses the precariousness of home myths as connected to the selective processes of articulating nationhood. The questions this preliminary research has brought forward emphasize the need to establish more nuanced public housing histories in Australia, where the architecture delivered by different levels of government is discussed in tandem with the social histories that move through it.

Endnotes

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- ³ Parliament of Australia, Standing Committee on Public Works, *Minutes of Evidence relating to the proposed erection of a Migrant Hostel at Springvale Victoria*, (Canberra: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1966), 1-4.
- ⁴ Sara Wills, "Between the hostel and the detention centre: possible trajectories of migrant pain and shame in Australia", in *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with Difficult Heritage*, eds. William Logan and Keir Reeves (New York: Routledge, 2009), 268.
- ⁵ Examples: Reginald Thomas Appleyard, Committee for Economic Development, *Low-cost housing and the migrant population*, (Canberra: Committee for Economic Development, 1963); Glenda Sluga, "Bonegilla and Migrant Dreaming", in *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia* eds. Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994).
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- ⁸ Examples: John Sommerlad, "Housing Programs and services: access and equity for people of NESB", in *Housing policy for a multicultural Australia*, (Canberra, ACT: Office of Multicultural Affairs, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1988), 26-43; Ian Castles, 'Housing' in *Overseas-born Australians, 1988: A statistical profile*, (Canberra, ACT: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1989), 41-44.
- ⁹ Ann-Mari Jordens, *On Accommodating Migrants, Administration, Compliance and Governability Program, Working Paper No. 19*, (Canberra: Australian National University, Research School of Social Sciences, 1994), 45-46.
- ¹⁰ Examples of oral histories of migrant hostel experiences: Graham Brooks and Associates, Interviews with former residents of Villawood Migrant Hostel, 2001, State Library of NSW: CY MLOH 467/1-18; June Hill interviewed by Joanna Penglase in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project, 5 December 2011, NLA: ORAL TRC 6200/112.
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- ¹² "New Australian Families Settled in Hostel Homes", *Age*, 30 December 1949.
- ¹³ Ann-Mari Jordens, *On Accommodating Migrants, Administration, Compliance and Governability Program*, 21-23.
- ¹⁴ Ann-Mari Jordens, *On Accommodating Migrants, Administration, Compliance and Governability Program*, 22; "Migrant blocks will house 500", *The Sun*, 9 February 1968.
- ¹⁵ Neil Clerehan, "Obituary: Neil Thomas Edward Montgomery", *Architect (Vic)*, November-December (1995): 16.
- ¹⁶ Simon Reeves and David Wixted, (Heritage Alliance), *Former Midway and Philip (Maribyrnong Migrant Hostels): Supplementary Assessment of Heritage Significance*, (Prepared for the City of Maribyrnong, February 2008), 12.
- ¹⁷ Simon Reeves, *Former Midway and Philip Migrant Hostels*, 7.
- ¹⁸ Commonwealth Hostels Ltd, Montgomery, King and Associates Architects "Maribyrnong Migrant Hostel, Type A block plans, elevations, sections, New hostel accommodation Maribyrnong", Melbourne: NAA, B6726, 7 [508/5], 1967.
- ¹⁹ Simon Reeves, *Former Midway and Philip Migrant Hostels*, 17.
- ²⁰ "A new-look hostel", *Age*, Feb 9, 1968.
- ²¹ Simon Reeves, *Former Midway and Philip Migrant Hostels*, 20.
- ²² Simon Reeves, *Former Midway and Philip Migrant Hostels*, 20.
- ²³ Parliament of Australia, Standing Committee on Public Works, *Report relating to the proposed erection of a Migrant Hostel at Randwick, New South Wales*, (Canberra: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1966), 7.
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³³ Warwick Eather, "We Only Build Houses: The commission 1945-1960", in Renate Howe, ed. *New Houses for Old*, 80.

³⁴ Warwick Eather, "We Only Build Houses", 80.

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³⁶ Ann-Mari Jordens, *On Accommodating Migrants*, 52.

³⁷ Pamie Ching Tsz Fung, "A place 'Midway'", 49-50.

³⁸ Pamie Ching Tsz Fung, "A place 'Midway'", 49.

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