

From Colonial Port to Post-Revolution: Urban Planning for 21st Century Havana

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Abstract

Coffee table books are filled with them: the clichés of Havana as "frozen in time", scented with "nostalgia for a bygone era". At first sight, the city's unique combination of urban design and architectural styles suggest a tension between the island's various historical and political periods. At second glance, the tension lessens into what is a mostly complimentary relationship between patterns, designs, and vision. That is, a city made rich by its combination of continuous innovation and historic preservation.

The result is an avant-garde, mostly European (compact, pedestrian, grid-based), urban planning agenda with many assets and challenges to its name. This photo essay aims to: examine how Havana's colonial history created the city's basic modern grid street pattern, compact block structure; identify what elements make Havana's urban character different from that of other major Latin American cities; observe current projects as outlined by the New Master Plan; and, finally identify challenges ahead. By covering these points, the essay sets out to challenge the "frozen in time" perception of Havana by replacing it with one of a unique and historically rich city on the brink of major changes.

Author's Note

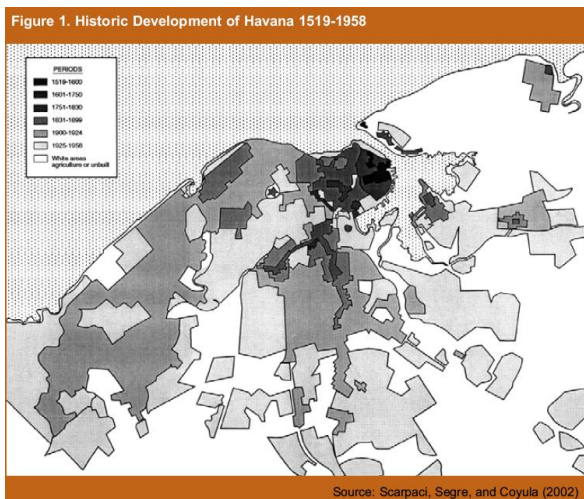
Laura Peñaranda Currie was born in Bogotá, Colombia and attended high schools in Washington D.C., South America, southern Africa, and Jordan. She is currently on a gap year working on women's rights in New York City while completing online classes through the Harvard Extension School on Journalism, International Law and Human Rights. Her passions include women's rights, the Palestinian cause, and Latin American revolutionary movements. In August 2011, her most recent visit to Cuba, Laura hitch-hiked across the Cuba with her sister Isabel.

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1. Laying the Foundation (1519-1799)

1.1 The Creation of Grid Street Patterns

Founded in 1519, Havana's strategic importance as a port propelled it to become one of Latin America's most important cities by the 1700s, rivaled only by Buenos Aires (Coyula, 2002). Its thriving export-economy, based on the slave and sugar trade, funded the extravagant architectural foundation in estates and public buildings. Its modern urban layout, traced to the 18th and 19th centuries, was founded on the Spanish urban tradition of multiple churches and squares, leading to the city's polycentric format, complimented with narrow grid street patterns.¹



Figures 1: Growth Patterns of Havana 1519-1958 (Coyula, 2002). Figure 2: Old Havana's abundant displays of Classic Architecture act as living history of the city's rich colonial heritage.

1.2 Calzadas: Havana's Arteries

The poor and freed-slave classes, in settling outside the fortress walls, literally paved the way to future development: the network of roads built to supply the growing populations became today's famous "calzadas" (wide streets, referred to as Havana's arteries). The expansion of these *calzadas* explains the city's initial southern finger-like expansion (pictured).²

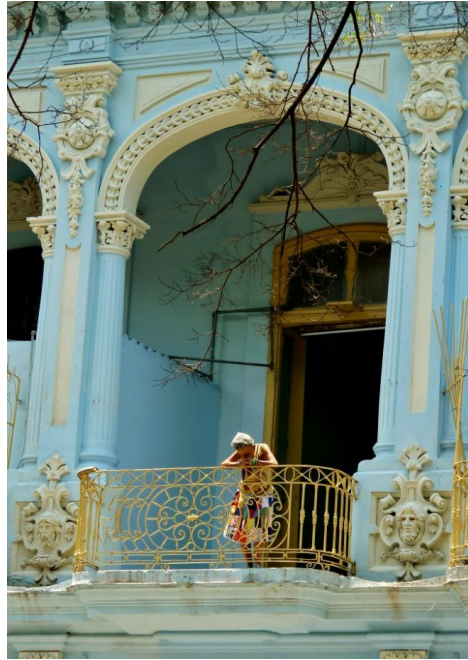


Figure 3: Havana's historically valuable buildings actually cover a large area – more than 2,000 hectares – that exhibit almost all the Western architectural styles seen in the New World.

2. Independence and Neocolonialism (1800s)

Up until the 1700s, the inner city aristocracy had preferred their mansions styled in the baroque tradition. Nineteenth century Creole patrician families on the other hand favored detached villas in the neoclassical tradition, a style very prevalent in today's Havana- most notably in the neighborhood of El Vedado, known for its historically upscale atmosphere and its landmark inclusion of trees into its regular street pattern, a first for Havana. The neighborhood boomed after independence and today acts as the seat of government. After the revolution, many of the original landowners fled their villas, which were then transformed into schools and government offices.³

3. Transformation in the 20th Century

3.1 Miramar

By 1902, the year of independence, Havana was a largely European city, in both its style and urban structure. The 20th century would see an increasing influence from the United States in political and economic affairs, as well as the 1959 Revolution led by Fidel Castro.

Perhaps better than any other neighborhood, Miramar neighborhood encapsulates the two drastically different 19th century periods. It was originally developed in the 1920s for the new money of Havana. The neighborhood followed the grid pattern, but differed in its even greener arrangement and in its absence of store properties (an initiative taken to discourage lower income populations from moving in).⁴



Figures 4-5: (Left) Construction for the National Institute of Arts (ISA) began in 1960 where the exclusive Country Club Park had previously stood. The internationally-renowned structure resembles organic revolutionary architecture and was constructed with locally produced brick and terracotta tile. (Right) During the early Revolutionary years, many of Miramar's mansions were abandoned and confiscated by the government for alternative uses.

3.2 The Revolution

After the Revolution, many of the upscale houses were abandoned- as in Vedado- by their fleeing owners. The vast majority of land coming into government hands was the result of a 1961 law mandating confiscation of property of emigrants who permanently left Cuba⁵. Although Miramar continues to be an upscale neighborhood, housing many of the city's embassies, it has also reinvented itself as a tourist destination and as the stage for the city's most varied display of Modern architecture, a style that boomed after WWII and extended into the late 1960s.

4. Post-Revolution Years



Figures 5-6: (Left) National “Balanced Development” policies led to slowed population and economic growth in the capital. (Right) Soviet-style housing units in the city outskirts.

4.1 Balanced Development and the Neglect Years

When rebel troops marched into Havana on January 1, 1959, the city housed one fifth of the island's total population, and urban structures were virtually unscathed, a rare occurrence in countries undergoing revolution. The years that followed were marked by Castro's initiative to create a more balanced national distribution of population and wealth. These policies led to prioritization of rural villages and other cities and resulted in a period of neglect for the city's capital.

The city's percentage of economic activity dropped drastically; Havana's national share of non-sugar industry dropped from 70 to 34 percent between 1959 and 1988. ⁶ As for population changes, Havana experienced a slow growth for various reasons: (1) high emigration rates coupled with low domestic migration rates, (2) a low birth rate, and (3) the restrictions implied by the city's housing shortage. The 'balanced development policies' in turn helped become Cuba one of the few developing states with contained growth in its largest city.⁷

4.2 Soviet Style Architecture and the “Special Period”

In order to address the housing shortage, the government built large shapeless housing units on the city's outskirts. Described as 'soviet-style' modern architecture, these buildings provided a sharp contrast to the previous exuberance of baroque and neoclassical structures. An interesting and important side effect of these massive housing units was the preservation of the inner city's colonial architectural history. ⁸

Despite advances made in social equality during the early years, the 1990s marked the “Special Period”; following the fall of the Soviet Union, this period was characterized by severe scarcity of resources which in turn led to a radical restructuring of the economy.

4. Spotlight: Havana Differentiated

There are five unique characteristics of Havana's urban development that distinguishes it from its Latin American counterparts.⁹

1. Colonial exposure. Cuba's colonial experience outlasted that of the continental colonies by nearly eight decades. This, coupled with Havana's proximity to the United States, made for a stronger-than-usual dosage of European, and later American, influence.

2. An expansion pattern of addition, rather than replacement. This allowed for a rich coexistence of architectural patterns from a wide range of architectural styles from different periods. Havana's unique skyline is therefore a combination of a grid street pattern, outstanding urban heritage preservation, and mostly low-rise buildings.

3. Havana's characteristic low density. The result is a unique quality of life made evident when juxtaposed with other cities which have been over-developed.

4. The comparatively large number of wealthy families and their seemingly never-ending quest for more upscale outskirts. Throughout the years the aristocracies left a powerful trail of grandiose villas, which were later refurbished to fit the needs of several families. This quest spared Havana of gentrification cycles seen in other cities.

5. A sizeable lower middle class with decent housing. The relative absence of shanty-town growth provides a steady foundation on which future development and housing improvement projects can thrive.¹⁰



Figures 7-10 (clockwise from top left): Dancers in Havana's Carnival; grandiose windows in Centro Habana neighborhood; Centro Habana's cozy *barrio* atmosphere after a summer rain; terraces provide a multi-layered feel to the city's residential areas.

5. Planning Havana

5.1 Why Pérez's "Master Plan for 21st Century Havana"?

As an evidently unique city, Havana both enjoys exclusive advantages and faces exceptional challenges. To tackle the latter, teams of urban planners from across the world have proposed their own Master Plans for Havana's future development. Julio Cesar Pérez Hernandez, one of Cuba's leading city planners, and his team are taking lead with their "Master Plan for 21st Century Havana". The team is a work of cooperation between Cuban architects and urban planners with the Council for European Urbanism. In Pérez's own words:

*"We propose a holistic and integrated vision. The previous plans did not consider Havana for what it is: a whole, a territory with a particular ecosystem that arises from its geographical condition, its idiosyncrasies, and its culture. For the first time in history, and this is perhaps its greatest merit, this Master Plan conceives and develops ideas to transform the capital city in the short, medium, and long term, and to turn it into a modern city that honors its long history and expresses its continual process of change."*¹¹

The plan is also unique in that it is non-government affiliated while recognizing the need to work in partnership with the government. The following is a closer look at three of some of the Master Plan's main elements: waterfront revitalization, environmental sustainability and housing maintenance and renovation.



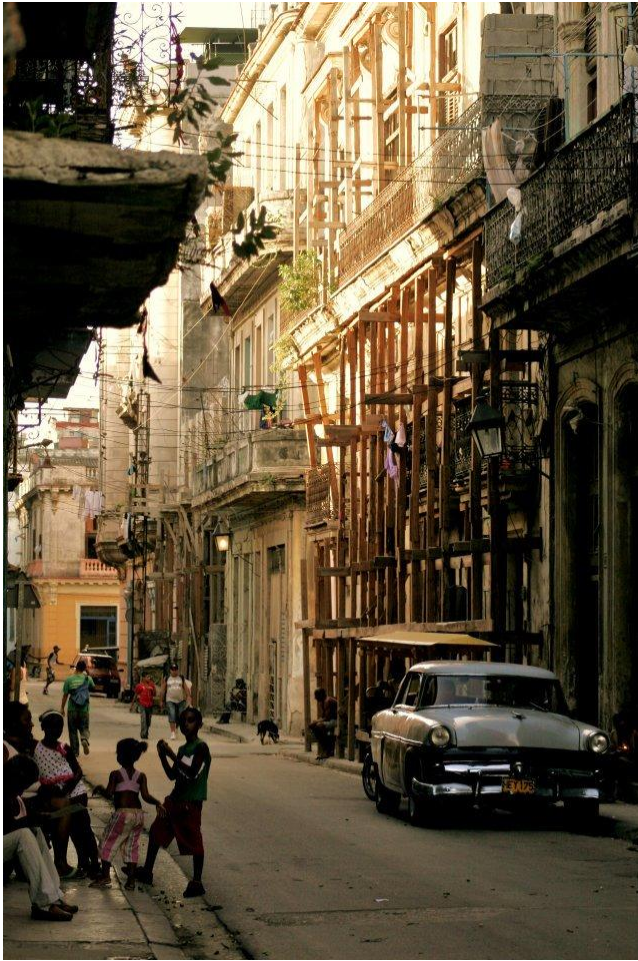
Figures 11-12: (Left) Malecón Drive and El Vedado in the backdrop. Sporadic flooding of Malecón Drive during the rainy season puts pressure on nearby traffic routes. (Right) Sunset watching from Malecón Drive -whether on a date or with grandparents- forms part of many Havanans' daily routine.

5.2 The Waterfront: Malecón Drive

The waterfront is particularly important in that it greatly defines Havana's historical character and its contemporary culture. The overarching goal and long-term vision would involve allowing Havana a new façade by having it relate directly to the sea. The Master Plan focuses on the famous Malecón Drive (pictured) by arming it with a protective buffer against the eroding saltwater mist and the possibility of rising sea levels due to climate change.¹² Additionally, the Plan suggests a highly ambitious two-level tunnel underneath the Drive to reduce vehicular pollution above, and allow for several uninterrupted kilometers of clean pedestrian space.¹³

5.3 Environmental Sustainability: Ventilation

The Island has an outstanding international reputation for environmental sustainability. According to the World Wildlife Fund, Cuba is the only country that successfully combines a satisfactory high quality of life (as measured by the UN Human Development Index) and a per capita environmentally sustainable footprint.¹⁴ Domestically however, Cuba's capital faces several sustainability challenges. The Master Plan pays particular attention to reinforcement of the polycentric layout, greening, and ventilation projects. The latter of these is most urgent in Centro Habana, where the average temperature is two centigrade warmer than that of the rest of the city. This 'heat island' phenomenon, present in other neighborhoods as well, is the result of high density, lack of green space, and poor wind circulation. In addition to the introduction of cool roofs (with high solar reflectance) and green zones, the proposal aims to modify the compact grid system so as to orient road grids, particularly those on the waterfront, to the sea to create a natural ventilation system for the larger neighborhood.¹⁵



Figures 13-15 (clockwise from left): Street-level interactions are one of Havanans' most common ways of socializing; young and elderly Cubans alike often organize dances or "roller-chair" races with neighborhood friends; bikers in Vedado.

5.4 Environmental Sustainability: Public Spaces

The greening component of the Master Plan focuses on increasing the current per capita ratio of open space (currently at ten square meters) through the creation of new public parks, the up-keeping of existing ones, green landscaping of the city's *calzadas* and- as was previously mentioned- the prioritization of pedestrian traffic alongside Malecón Drive.

Planners hope that by providing ample spans of green public space, Havanans will gradually feel inspired and empowered to develop a common consciousness against the littering and contamination of these areas, in turn creating a cleaner city. The planting and celebration of native species through gardening coops is another common way of encouraging sentiments of community, pride, and belonging.

Public parks, Mario Coyula argues, are in many senses the gift that keeps giving. As a prominent Cuban urban designer, he studies the optimization of urban land use and believes parks, in addition to their economic, health, and community benefits, have the power to act as social-levers. Rather than converting privileged land into a building for exclusive use, the space becomes visitor's land, and every Havanans responsibility. Simultaneously, the value of near-by properties shoots up significantly "*just like it happens in Manhattan's Central Park,*" Coyula points out. "*Maybe that would have solved the contradiction in the popular North American saying that you cannot keep the cake and eat it.*"¹⁶



Figures 16-17: (Left) Open plazas such as the one directly in front of the National Academy of Science ("*El Capitolio*") encourage pedestrian traffic. (Right) Malecón Drive swamped with festive pedestrians during *Carnaval*.

5.5 Environmental Sustainability: Reinforcing Polycentrism

The last of Pérez's main greening proposals, namely preservation and reinforcement of the city's polycentric layout, aims to create and preserve large open spaces (the original churches and squares mentioned previously embedded within city pockets. Pérez refers to the historic layout as an "ecological alternative to suburbanization". The plan explains the importance of reversing previous urban amalgamation processes begun in 1975. According to Pérez, doing so would restore the individual character of each neighborhood, decrease bureaucracy, and increase civic engagement in local neighborhood proposals. Maintaining individual character is facilitated by the outlawing of land speculation in Cuba.¹⁷

Such reinforcement would pay homage to the city's European tradition of mixed-use zoning, by encouraging each neighborhood to have its own cultural, commercial and residential culture. Providing a variety of resources and services that address different social groups additionally provides- as in the case with public spaces- social-equalizer properties. The rationale, all the meanwhile, is to promote an ecological alternative to suburbanization.¹⁸

6. Housing as a Leading Challenge

6.1 Shortage and Living Conditions

Housing and transportation as largely considered Havana's two greatest challenges by urban planners, including Pérez. Succeeding the balanced growth policies, only one-third of Havana housing was state-built, while the remainder was self-built. Additionally, the Special Period caused building deterioration due to lack of construction resources, further aggravating the situation.

In 2001, Cuba's National Institute for Housing categorized conditions into three categories: good, fair, and poor, based on their need for rehabilitation and level of deterioration. The official figures were: 64% in "good" condition (up from 50% in 1990); 20% in "fair" condition and 16% in "poor" condition.^{19 20}

6.2: Reforms and Finances

The current Castro administration has responded to the state of housing through political reforms. On November 10th 2011 a new property law was passed allowing Cubans to buy and sell their homes for the first time in 50 years, a practice that had existed only through the constraints of the black market. In addition to trading property, reforms include legalizing ownership of a second home beyond the city's borders, legalizing private contractors, stocking construction stores, reducing housing paperwork, and, in true Cuban style, offering subsidies to homeowners.

Despite these reforms, tackling shortage and deterioration will require a significant financial commitment for all players involved. The cost of investing in rehabilitation of a deteriorating house presents high figures for a low-income country under a USA-imposed embargo. The creation of construction and housing cooperatives is among the low-cost alternatives being proposed.²¹ The government hopes these cooperatives would allow groups to invest in small apartment blocks, thereby reducing building costs and relieving some of the financial burden on individuals and small family units.



Figures 18-19: Deteriorating multi-family buildings in Centro Habana pose a security threat to the families inhabiting them. The government is currently pursuing housing reform through various policy changes including new housing laws. As Pérez explained, “changes are needed. My guess is that the government is doing this right now; they are aware of the need for changes, but they cannot do all the changes at the same time, they are doing things gradually.”



Figures 20-23: (Top Row) Two versions of the popular and inexpensive bicitaxis. (Bottom Left) A new city bus pulls up to its station in Centro Habana. (Bottom Right) A main street in Bogotá closed off for Sunday ciclovía (photo credit: Radio Santa Fe).

7. Transportation as a Leading Challenge

7.1: The Special Period and Alternative Transportation Methods

Methods of transportation are remarkably diverse in Havana. Coco-taxis (small, round motorized scooters) and state-run taxis are available for dollar-carriers; locals meanwhile rely on city buses, private trucks, almendrones (1950's cars), bicitaxis (pictured bottom left), and hitchhiking, depending on their location and destination. Despite the variety of options, transportation remains, alongside housing, one of the city's leading concerns.

Like many other industries, transportation suffered significant setbacks during the Special Period. As fuel imports and availability of vehicle parts dropped, Cubans were forced to look for alternative methods of transport, including the introduction of the 'home-made' *camellos* (double-humped buses) and what soon thereafter became the biking craze. Between 1992 and 1995, the Havana bicycle population exploded from 70,000 to 1 million.²²

7.2: The Recuperation Process

Naturally, recuperating from the Special Period will take more than improvisation methods. The process will include three main elements: maintenance, replacement, and innovation.

Maintenance: While Havana's main streets are well kept, maintenance is urgently needed in the inner-city shantytowns, where strong signs of negligence are evident. Dim lighting, potholes, lack of pedestrian crossings, and degradation of gravel are just some of the problems.

Replacement: Currently, Havana only has a quarter of the number of buses that operated in the late 1980s. Creating a reliable bus system involves increasing the bus populations as well as replacing the worst of the pre-1990's buses with new, more fuel-efficient ones. The Government began this initiative in the early 2000s.²³

Innovation: While Havana has valuable lessons to offer other Latin American cities, it can also learn from them, perhaps most notably in the transportation sector. With a large per capita biking population, for example, Havana could benefit from assimilating Bogota's *ciclovía* and *cicloruta* (the closing off of streets for non-vehicular traffic on weekends and the creation of extensive bike-lane networks). Similarly, it can look to the Colombia's internationally recognized "Trans-Milenio" bus system, which has already been imitated in several Latin American cities.

8. Government Involvement

8.1: Grassroots and Political Cooperation

The Master Plan makes a point to work independently of the government orders but simultaneously recognizes the crucial role of government cooperation, involvement, and support in the Plan's success. Getting the government on board can and should, according to Pérez and his team, begin at the grassroots level. The goal, they explain, is to promote local government participation by encouraging neighborhood-based organizations including the "Committees for the Defense of the Revolution" and the "Federation of Cuban Women", in addition to the very locally active trade unions.

The Master Plan's mixed-use component is particularly reliant on government support due to its inclusion of small private business. Here too the government has reacted favorably: last year the state granted an unprecedented number of licenses to individuals looking to launch small-scale businesses, such as home-based restaurants and flower stands. The government and the Master Plan therefore share the common vision of balancing "individual initiatives without unleashing unbridled market forces, speculation, corruption and exploitation".²⁴



Figure 24-25: “El Capitolio” was constructed in 1929 and remained the tallest building in Havana until the 1950s. It acted as the seat of government until after the Revolution, later becoming the National Institute of Sciences. Figure 25: A Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) logo displayed on ally wall in Centro Habana.

8.2: Government in Support of Cuban Academia

Addressing shortfalls in the country’s educational institutions may be another avenue for government involvement in urban planning. Recent constructions have lacked the design quality characteristic in Havana’s architectural heritage. Perez points to the “uncritical assimilation” of foreign projects as the reason current Architecture and Urban Planning professors lack the needed authority, esteem and professional experience their position demands.²⁵ Therefore, giving greater consideration and opportunity to Cuban professionals in construction projects insofar as government decisions are involved may prove a worthwhile investment in the incoming generation of planners and in the city’s future as a whole.



Figure 26: The quality of today's Urban Studies programs have long term consequences for tomorrow's urban planning.

9. Questions by Mario Coyula

Mario Coyula is one of Cuba's most prominent architects and architectural historians. Since 1964, he has taught full-time at the Faculty of Architecture of Havana and has been a Visiting Professor in Harvard University's Urban Planning and Design school. In his essay "Havana Forever, Forever Havana", Coyula poses a set of questions reflecting the concerns of a man deeply involved in his city's heritage and development. The following is a selection of the questions most relevant to this essay's concerns:²⁶

- How can we steer what will inevitably be million-dollar investments into the dilapidated central districts in order to prevent gentrification and the dislocation of current residents to the margins? If inevitable, what action is needed to assure an adequate social mix in the redeveloped central areas?
- How much of a capital layout is required to carry out redevelopment, who will provide it and how will it be recuperated?
- How should "trade-off" or equitable options be presented throughout the planning procedure in order to help decision-making as well as to later explain those decisions?
- In a city whose built frame and ways of urban living were mainly determined by the middle and lower-middle class, what would be a post-modern equivalent of those disappeared social sectors at the end of a millennium marked by the ambivalent sign of globalization?
- What does "local" mean --what will be the scale of local action and who will the actors be? Who of these actors should define priorities and how?
- Where will the necessary resources come from to allow a more decentralized, grassroots participation? If in fact, the one who pays controls, how do those who cannot afford to pay, dream of controlling?



Figure 27: Sun-bathed waterfront buildings and the afternoon trickle of pedestrian traffic.

10. Conclusion: Demonstrated Ingenuity

Challenges face Havana left and right: combining decentralized community planning with a centralized government, and realizing the plan's components while under embargo, are alone a sufficient set of concerns.

Overcoming these challenges however is less of an option than a responsibility, if Havana is to advance. Failing to do so would come at a heavy cost. The symptoms of rapid, unplanned overdevelopment have manifested themselves in other Latin American cities through gentrification, unchecked land speculation, highways of disproportionate size, competing high rise developments, neighborhood loss of identity, indistinguishable building complexes, uncapped pollution, sprawling shanty towns, chronic traffic jams, and the disappearance of urban green spaces. To name a few.

The Cuban people, however, have a longstanding history of answering to unexpected obstacles, restrictive circumstances, and limited resources with high resilience and unmatched creativity. Such reactions are in themselves a celebration of Cuban ingenuity and affirmations of the larger Cuban outlook towards struggle.

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