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Conceptual Matter

On Thinking and Making Conceptual Architecture

by **ERIC LUM**

I want to argue that conceptual art and conceptual architecture are two fundamentally different disciplines and that conceptual architecture is weakest when it tries to imitate conceptual art and neglects its architectural properties. By *conceptual art* I mean work that makes primary the “immaterial” ideas that define its artistic concepts and that makes secondary its object status and method of production. By *conceptual architecture* I mean that work which tries to do what conceptual art does while retaining some of the distinctive characteristics of architecture. Practitioners of conceptual architecture have included (to various extents and in various ways) Archigram, Superstudio, Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Diller + Scofidio, John Hejduk, and Daniel Libeskind.

To understand the differences between conceptual art and conceptual architecture, it is useful to return to Marcel Duchamp’s critique of object fetishization in art. Duchamp’s readymade objects, beginning with the 1913 *Bicycle Wheel*, forced a series of doubts about the glorified intellectual contribution and individual labor of the artist, the definition of the art object, its value, material, auratic status, and place within the modern art market and museum. The materials comprising his art were neither precious nor typical, but a deliberate negation of the conventions that defined the art object.

Post-1945 conceptual art picks up Duchamp’s doubts and provocations in the context of a much more developed art market. By then, conventional cultural reception demanded the return of Duchamp’s readymades to the status of odd but ultimately identifiable works of high art (indeed, by exten-

sion, the odder, the more unique and “artistic” these works would be). The auratic envelope of both artist and artwork returned full force at mid-century in Abstract Expressionism. (Subsequently, Duchamp’s work was seen less as a critique of artistic convention than as a precursor of Pop Art’s transformation of mass culture into high art.)

It was clear to the younger generation of artists in the ’60s that the then current work of mainstream artists and their social station had changed little since the 19th-century salon. In an attempt to shift the work of the artist from manual to intellectual production, conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt argued that the central contribution of the artist was the creation of ideas. Like mathematical theorems, Kosuth wrote, “Works of art are analytic propositions.”¹ Similarly, LeWitt’s statement that “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art,”² attempted to shift the emphasis from the artist to the making. A consequent step in the conceptualists’ critique was to abandon art’s institutional frame expressed by the museum and gallery architecture that legitimated it. Performance art, land art, and video art were attacks on the traditional sites of artistic display and collection. Belgian Marcel Broodthaers’s, Frenchman Daniel Buren’s, and German-American Hans Haacke’s strategic interventions attempted to reveal and transform the conventional relationships between art and institution.³ Broodthaers’s making his own studio in 1968 into a public “museum,” Buren’s attempts to dominate physically the space of the institutions in which he displays his work, and Haacke’s political art pieces that transform the museum from private archive into public forum are works that critique and refashion the institutions that display their art. That these strategies, like the others, ultimately collapsed in the face of the relentless charge of a global high art culture is also well documented; what is more pertinent for us is art’s reappearance in books, magazines, newspapers; broadcast and internet media (e.g., references to art in Madonna and David Bowie music videos); commercials and consumer goods (e.g., Philippe Stark toothbrushes and iMac computers as consumer-grade sculptures). Art is now quite placeless and scattered.

I am retracing this history to point out a contrast between conceptual art and those architectural practices that claim affinity with these events and texts. The strategies of conceptual art grew out of concerns with the conditions of its production, its display, and its aura; architecture—conceptual or not—operates differently. Unlike the manual labors of most artists, architects have rarely participated in the construction of their designs (indeed, architects are legally bound from directly participating). Whereas conceptual art attempted to question its conventional display and market, if anything, “high concept” architecture seems to rely on its institutional display in order to legitimate its operations. Finally, the reification, the “thing-ification,” of the traditional artwork was directly tied to its object sin-

gularity, which conceptual artists attempted to dispel; in distinction, the architectural object’s distinctiveness is precisely that which imparts its aura.

The question here is not whether architecture is “legitimate” as an art form or is concerned with the ideation of form, but specifically how it operates or defines itself. When architecture is presented not as building technology, social development, or economic production, but rather as *art*, it operates in a different role—neither as building nor its representation but rather as a specific kind of cultural commodity. As such, it asks to be redefined in relation to its sister objects. If, for instance, architecture sees itself as a conceptual activity, the label is affiliated with a host of other conceptual art practices that have been legitimated elsewhere in the art world. Making this connection depends on a (usually formal) resemblance to these other objects. Conceptual architecture then participates—or at least attempts to align itself—within a cultural ecosystem that defines its participants and its objects as possessing a privileging aura. If, as art historian and Getty Research Institute director Thomas Crow caustically observed, the artistic avant-garde acts as the “research and development” arm of the culture industry, then architecture in this sense certainly belongs to the arts.⁴

To explore these aspects more closely, we need to understand how conceptualism has operated in contemporary architectural practice. One aspect hinges on the radical appearance of conceptual architecture’s forms, which not coincidentally resemble those of conceptual artworks. This emphasis on formal uniqueness contrasts with the deliberate repetition of artists such as Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, and Carl Andre, whose works put into sharp relief the question of an artwork’s critical and market value as directly tied to its singular identity⁵ (contrast this, for instance, with Rem Koolhaas’s attempts to create entirely different forms with each new project).

Conceptual art’s focus on process during the ’60s was an attempt to banish a number of conventions around the work of art: art as reified totem, art as static shape, aesthetic formalism, the manual contribution of the artist to the work, and so on. However, the invocation of art in architecture had a rather different series of concerns. For instance, Peter Eisenman’s citation of process art practices in his early house projects, while invoking LeWitt’s ideas, was ultimately attempting to mimic his forms. Similarly, Daniel Libeskind’s *Micromegas* drawing series, ostensibly a critique of what constitutes the architectural, also neatly recalled Al Held’s black and white paintings from the ’70s. It is especially telling that these works invoked both the canonic forms displayed in the *Modern Architecture* show and those of more contemporary works displayed in the influential New York galleries. Indeed, Colin Rowe had remarked on this deliberate conflation early on, as well as the contradictions such an association raised.⁶ We need not revisit the ensuing discus-

sions around the *physique* and *morale*, the style versus the social ethics of Modern architecture; we need only say that conceptual architecture had little interest in reworking the artistic conventions the conceptual art movement was trying so hard to dispel. Ultimately, even those few architectural projects that attempted to reproduce process wound up creating *objects*—more or less interesting—but nonetheless architectural objects resembling forms of art.

Conceptual architecture during the '70s thus neatly overlapped the International Style, minimalist aesthetics, and conceptual art strategies. Borrowing from Sol LeWitt's and Lawrence Weiner's arguments on the primacy of the generating idea over its material properties, Eisenman's notion of an "autonomous" architecture privileging form over construction gained currency in critical and academic circles, while other architects such as Rossi and Hejduk came under the formalist label (perhaps incorrectly).⁷ Ironically, the conceptual artists' emphasis on process, which ostensibly attempted to lessen the reifying aspects of the art object, returned to precisely highlight those aspects in "autonomous" architecture. Not coincidentally, fine art galleries such as Max Protetch in New York began in the early '80s to specialize in the exhibition and sale of the architect-artist's drawings and models, thus implicitly returning architecture and the architect to an institutionalized avant-garde.

This strain of architectural formalism continues with us today with work such as Greg Lynn and Douglas Garafolo's biomorphic forms, Preston Scott Cohen's geometric investigations, Diller + Scofidio's art-related practices, and Daniel Libeskind's presentation of architecture as unique sculptural presence. While the shape-investigations themselves vary in execution and form, they are essentially variations evolving from the same design legacy.

Perhaps the most far-reaching implications for the profession, however, lie in formalism's emphasis on the making of often compelling architectural images. Imitating conceptual art's attempts to negate the material aspects of the artwork, architecture has premiated its schematic diagram and photogenic appearance, suppressing the material particulars of its construction. The invocation of conceptual architecture seemed to be accompanied by, or interpreted as, a marked lack of care given to the fabrication of the architectural object, the exigencies of the construction process, its material components, their methods of assembly, climate, weathering, and so on. Buildings constructed from these drawings often yielded a host of problems (like peeling paint, cracked tiles, water damage, and sloppy construction).⁸

In distinction, conceptual art's position on materiality should not be mistaken for a forgetful indifference towards the making of the artwork; rather, dematerialization in this sense was a deliberate attack upon traditional modes of making.⁹ Joseph Kosuth's and Lawrence Weiner's use of photostats in their art-language investigations, for instance,

questioned the conventional, honorific materiality of traditional artistic production. Similarly, Sol LeWitt's written instructions for his wall murals are specific about how they are to be produced. His cube sculptures were constructed from wood, fiberglass, aluminum, and steel, depending on their scale and environment and on the availability of manufacturing processes. The inability to read their material status, intended by LeWitt, paradoxically implies the high quality of manufacturing required to hide the traces of their making (minimalism as a constructed aesthetic is rather more difficult, it could be argued, than a tectonic of revealed joinery). Equally, the erosion and submergence of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* cannot be read as lack of foresight on the part of the artist; its natural changes form an essential aspect of the work. This contrasts with simply ignoring the inevitable weathering of a building's material components.

A major part of the difficulty with conceptually driven projects such as Eisenman's Wexner Center or Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin being able to successfully promote their ideas over the tectonics of the building is that it requires a suspension of belief in architecture's physicality, its obstinate object nature. When so much rides on the perception that what one is seeing and walking in is not so much a building as an idea, then the building as constructed object needs to disappear, replaced by something not quite a building. The disappearance of such traditional building details as drip edges, flashing, expansion joints, window frames, and so on, helps enable this perception, but in the process fails basic criteria of building. In the case of the Jewish Museum, the power of the original concept is reduced as it moves from a two-dimensional diagram to a museum with structural, mechanical, and service concerns. As such, the idea suffers from having to be built, while the building's functional requirements need to accommodate the vagaries of the architect's design.¹⁰

Thus conceptual architecture as it has been and in many instances still is being practiced today is equated with a lack of understanding of general building principles, shoddy construction, and ignorance of (if not antipathy towards) the needs of the client.¹¹ The corollary to this belief is that those buildings that are well constructed, closely identified with their material properties, respond to client requirements, and built on time and on budget are rarely interesting as conceptual projects.¹² Yet this divide is not a given—a serious practice that incorporates both the conceptual and the material as common, rather than as diametrically opposed goals is possible. Stephen Holl's sensitive understanding of the material contributions of architecture and Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron's sophisticated constructions attest to this possibility. Among emerging practitioners, Michael Bell's critical reinvention of modern architecture's tectonic language, Maya Lin's careful balance of material, concept, and site, and Roberto Behar and Rosario Marquardt's typological-social

investigations of the city present other ways in which the material fact of architecture can be seriously incorporated with its conceptual underpinnings.

The implications of a rigid approach towards the conceptual, ostensibly admirable for its defiance of the forces of capital and its disciplinary focus on architectural form, lies in the widening gap between conceptual thinking and building construction—as if the two were mutually exclusive. Consequently, for those projects that manage to reach the construction phase, there is a notable impoverishment at the level of the detail. Beyond the simplistic mimicry of a design sketch, there is often a lack of continuity in scale and design development, from overall form to small details, from initial concept to finished building, that is able to transform the initial, often very powerful design concept into an equally convincing construction.

The well-known Korean Presbyterian Church by Greg Lynn Form, Michael McInturf Architects, and Garofalo Architects is one such example of powerful visual images making a difficult transition into structure. The building yields a less convincing demonstration of its conceptual aspirations than do its renderings. What appears is an unsatisfying attempt at keeping the building true to the fluid, biomorphic quality of images enabled through the use of character animation software; unbending steel and undifferentiated metal siding make for something that looks ultimately more like a low-tech, big box warehouse than the high-concept autonomous object it is intended to be. Process, which is also featured here, is frozen and turned into architectural artifact. Making this a more successful project is not dependent on its being a more conventional design or having more refined details, but rather on further thinking of the work as an act of construction.

For those projects that exist solely on paper (intentionally or not),¹³ the counter-argument is that this introspective work on form is not meant for public consumption, that it is primarily intended as pure research. There are several problems with this, not all of which can be blamed on the architect. One is the rate at which this work is consumed by students and media. The rapidly decreasing intervals between the initial publication of a project, its recirculation in media streams, and its inevitable imitation in architectural studios form a now essential economy of images in contemporary architectural culture. This other production outside of building becomes necessary for all kinds of reasons: academic tenure and promotion; self-publicity on the lecture circuit; firm marketing; and professional, scholarly, and exhibition publication. Thus the never-intended-as-building circulates as something not clearly that.

One might argue that architecture as formal research is a valid practice in academia. Fair enough. The problem arises when it is assumed that the production of images is what architects principally do. For the architecture student,

this is taken too often to imply that the design of buildings stops at the final presentation, that further elucidations are merely “details” rather than integral aspects. The technicians (which include associated architects, structural and mechanical engineers, and other consultants) are inclined to guess at design motives, misread or misunderstand them, or worst, treat the project in the most conventional (i.e., banal) manner possible. Hence the all-too-common gap between a compelling design idea and its unremarkable construction. In disregarding the specific materialization of a project, concept architects leave all kinds of design decisions to those responsible for the construction documents.

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If conceptual design is seriously interested in contributing to a wider range of architectural discourse, then it needs to also take these other, ostensibly extraformal issues into account. Conceptual architecture’s failures are intimately related to its failure to consider its physical and technical particulars. Even if a theoretical project is never meant to be built, it should take into consideration questions about structure, tectonics, weathering, and materiality; otherwise, the concept is destined to be slight as an *architectural* work. Projects that stop their critical thinking at the conceptual or schematic design phase do not fully consider what architecture is or can be.

A good counterexample here is the work of John Hejduk, ostensibly a “conceptual” architect who produced many drawings but relatively few built projects. What makes both his drawings and his built work compelling is their grounding in a material and tectonic specificity, even at their most abstract. Wall House I, first conceived in the mid-’50s, is simultaneously an homage to Miesian construction as well as Palladian composition. Forty years later, *Church Complex B* continues to demonstrate the highly specific tectonic nature of Hejduk’s thinking, even at his most speculative and poetic. The fact that several of his drawings, such as *The Collapse of Time* and the *Masque* projects, have later been constructed testifies to this understanding of the limits of architectural discourse and the relationship between drawing and construction.

Part of the confusion around what is “properly” conceptual in architecture is the reliance on presentation and reception of the conceptual through superficial forms rather than underlying critical intentions. Dematerialization in art was not about ignoring the material per se; rather, it concerned a different conception of the relationship between materiality and art production. Robert Morris’s “Steam” sculptures, for instance, did not eliminate their materiality but rather incorporated an unusual understanding of what sculpture is and how it is made. Other conceptual artists, such as Michael Baldwin and Terry Atkinson, used a variety of nontraditional modes of making as part of this questioning of artistic production.¹⁴ The dematerialized in this context became another

er aspect of thinking though materiality and artistic production; it certainly did not imply that questions of materiality and making were unimportant to making buildings.

A rethinking of a critical architectural practice should not merely imitate art's appearances; architecture that attempts to simply emulate art comes off as imitation, and in the process encounters architecture's particular limitations. Diller + Scofidio's Blur Building is one such example of advocating shape over process. Unlike Morris's or Fujiko Nakayo's steam and fog projects, which acknowledge and work with the ephemeral and environmental nature of their media, the Blur project fought against the winds whipping off Lake Geneva in an attempt to produce the illusion of a static cloud hovering over the water, as was depicted in their seductive renderings; what appeared most often instead was a high-tech water-spraying machine.

Rather than fighting architecture's physicality (which, I am arguing, is intrinsic even to its conceptualization), it would be easier and ultimately more productive to work within its limitations of material and manufacture; overlooked aspects unique to architecture revolve around its physical condition, its means and methods of making, its particular relationship to society, culture, politics, the economy, the environment, technology, among many other things. At the same time architecture has specific kinds of operations that other practices do not.¹⁵ These are issues that, like those specific to art's particular disciplinary, social, cultural, and economic role, bear critical investigation.

To be clear, this is not a call for a new kind of formalism, or an apology for craft-based "tectonics," or a nostalgic return to "truth to materials." On the latter, Edward Ford has eloquently written on the disparity between Modern architecture's desire for tectonic purity and structural expressionism and the rather convoluted steps required to maintain this illusion.¹⁶ Equally, the introduction of new synthetic and composite materials in architecture has given the lie to any simplistic formula regarding the "proper" use of materials in architecture. At the same time these new materials—plastics, carbon fiber, Kevlar, and so on—have specific physical properties that counter the tempting belief, especially among architecture students, that through the magic of these materials, materiality itself can be ignored in favor of shape-making.

Architecture exists in the entirety of its productive processes, from thinking and writing to drawing and building, including consideration of materials, structure, cost, technique, and relationship to other practices, events, and places. What connects these various aspects is architecture's reference to its object nature. Projects, built or unbuilt, that do not consider this physicality closely, are less successful *as architecture*. This statement can be read as simultaneously reactionary, dogmatic, or obvious, but there is, I believe, no easy way around it.

There are several practices that consider material as an essential aspect of their critical design thinking. Rafael Moneo's use of brick in the National Museum of Roman Art in Merida, for instance, is explicitly not about the traditional employment of load bearing masonry; the brick is a patently veneered surface, and the laying of the modules becomes an exercise in demonstrating its artificial, abstract nature.¹⁷ Similarly, Tadao Ando's *Japanese* employment of concrete (different in his foreign work) does not simply mimic Le Corbusier's and Kahn's walls; rather the particular manner in which the formwork is constructed and the pour is controlled is closer to the craft tradition of Japanese ceramics. Evoking *wabi-sabi*, the sense of temporality and imperfection, the concrete surfaces are not flat and mechanical, but instead deliberately billow and strain against the forms to create the illusion of paper, of a worked and natural surface. Again, this is not simply about a certain level of craft; this presentation of the material becomes an intrinsic part of the concept, as well as the construction, of the building.

Koolhaas's acknowledgement of the thorny conditions of contemporary building practices and the limited role of the contemporary architect has led him to produce a rather ironic discourse on materiality and making.¹⁸ The new McCormick Tribune Campus Center at IIT demonstrates some of these issues: in presenting spackled drywall as a finished surface and the exposure of "dirty details" such as metal studs and non-aligning joints (something Frank Gehry did twenty years earlier), this new "non-aesthetic" claims to literally expose how buildings are now put together. Whether this is actually a critical "theory" or merely a reflection of a limited budget turned into a "discourse" is uncertain; nonetheless, it refocuses our architectural attention on architecture as building.

Finally, even Eisenman has turned, at least tentatively, towards the material in his short-lived collaboration with Richard Serra on the Holocaust Memorial project in Berlin. Constructed of 2,700 concrete blocks, the memorial evokes not only associations with tombstones, pillars, grids, landscapes, mazes, and so on, but its very material condition also becomes an intrinsic, haptic aspect in the conceptual *reading* of this project. Material matters; the specific physical properties of these individual tablets—their coloring, surface texture, reflectivity, scale, spacing, etc.—all will have a profound effect on the success or failure of the architectural concept. These examples demonstrate that a profound and thorough involvement in *making* need not be an embarrassment or an indicator of the architect's anti-intellectualism. Instead it is the mark of the conceptually ample, rich, and robust. □

NOTES

1. Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," first published in *Studio International*, October 1969; reprinted in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 20.

2. Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, Summer 1967, 80.
3. See Ann Rorimer, "Reevaluating the Object of Collecting and Display," *The Art Bulletin*, March 1995, 21–24. Ironically, Rorimer sees these artists' attacks on the institutional and architectural context of their work as an opportunity for museums to revise their notions of collection and display, in other words, precisely to regain authority over those works and artists that attempt to present a critique of this relationship between artist and institution.
4. Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 215–264.
5. See Jeffrey Inaba, "Carl Andre's Same Old Stuff," *Assemblage*, August 1999, 36–61.
6. Colin Rowe, "Introduction," *Five Architects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 3–7.
7. See for instance *Harvard Architectural Review*, winter 1984, on "Autonomous Architecture." Interestingly, architects who worked on typological issues, such as Rossi, Diana Agrest, and Mario Gandelsonas, were also placed under the banner of autonomous architecture, even though their concern with the historical and political dimensions of urban building clearly refuted this attachment.
8. D.K. Dietsch here discusses the deteriorating condition of Michael Graves's Portland Civic Building in "Postmodern Ruins," *Architecture*, July 1997, 13, while Suzanne Frank recalls the various weather and construction related issues of Eisenman's *House VI* in "The Client's Response" in *Peter Eisenman's House VI: A Client's Response* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1994), 49–72. To be sure, many of these problems were a direct result of budgetary limitations and contractors unaccustomed to unconventional designs, but aren't these factors also part of the architect's professional responsibilities?
9. Here, Lucy Lippard was well aware of the dangers such an extreme position, as the critique against traditional forms of art-making were simplistically read as a new form of primitivism: "The danger, or fallacy, of an *ultra*-conceptual art is that it will be 'appreciated' for the wrong reasons, that it will, like Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* or *Large Glass*, come to be mainly an ingratiating object of aesthetic pleasure instead of the stringently metaphysical vehicle for an idea intended. The idea has to be awfully good to compete with the object, and few contemporary ideas . . . are finally that good." Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International*, February 1968, 203.
10. See Ken Gorbey, "Der Auftrag, das Publikum, das erzählerische Konzept," *Museums Journal: Berichte aus den Museen, Schlässern und Sammlungen in Berlin und Potsdam* 13, July 2001, 48–51.
11. Nancy Nall, "Architecture was House's Beauty and its Downfall," *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, August 2, 2002; Mark Lamster, "The Vexner Center," *Metropolis*, July 2001, <www.metropolismag.com/html/content_0701/ob/ob09.html>.
12. In those "conceptual" projects that were well constructed, such as Bernard Tschumi's *La Villette* park in Paris, the contribution of the engineer (in this case Peter Rice) was significant enough that its technical details threaten to overwhelm its diagrammatic origins in favor of a somewhat romanticized Constructivist aesthetic.
13. Eisenman's *House X* is the example *par excellence* of a real project turned virtual by default, after seven plus years of schematic design.
14. Charles Harrison writes: "Though the legacy of Pop Art and the interests of art-and-technology both featured in the early work of some of them, the more significant gambits involved forms of art which seemed designed either to test or to resist the habits and assumptions of mainstream Modernist production and connoisseurship, based as these were seen to be in protocols which mystified both production and interpretation. These early works included paintings in unvaried monochrome, 'paintings' made of mirrors, paintings composed of words and numbers, 'sculptures' painted with acid, 'forms' detectable only by electromagnetic means, 'objects' in hypothetical form, and so on." Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 20.
15. For instance, Sol LeWitt here describes his distinction between art and architecture: "Architecture and three-dimensional art are of completely opposite natures. The former is concerned with making an area with a specific function. Architecture, whether it is a work of art or not, must be utilitarian or else fail completely. Art is not utilitarian. When three-dimensional art starts to take on some of the characteristics of architecture such as forming utilitarian areas it

weakens its function as art. When the viewer is dwarfed by the large size of a piece, this domination emphasizes the physical and emotive power of the form at the expense of losing the idea of the piece." In other words, art that becomes utilitarian does not make it "architectural," only less convincing as art; similarly, architecture that denies its utilitarian, practical nature is weak architecture. Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, Summer 1967, 83.

16. Edward R. Ford, *The Details of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 351–356.
17. Rafael Moneo, "The Idea of Lasting," *Perspecta* 24, 1987, 146–157.
18. Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).

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