

Remote Places, Public Spaces



The Story of Creative
Works with Ten Small
Communities

Birkhäuser

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Works with Ten Small
Communities

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7.

Learning and Knowing a Territory Through Walking and Exploration: Design Tools and Approaches in Dialogue with Other Sciences

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Walking is a cognitive, learning experience that amplifies all the senses, and acts on selective and interpretive skills. Choosing to cross the territory on foot means to have a physical, emotional, and aesthetic experience, which allows us to reach a new consciousness of the daily landscapes, and to overcome the prejudice towards spaces that are taken for granted, and which can then be narrated, translated, and experienced in various forms and at different times. This necessarily starts from the assumption that “every map is a project”, and the mapping operations are firmly rooted in a design process.

This article focuses on the methodological research work conducted by the authors in peripheral, rural, and urban contexts of Madeira Island. Approaches, tools, and languages from adjacent disciplinary fields converge to define a research framework of methods. The starting point is therefore the description of field work in the form of various walking workshops, which focused on actively involving learning communities in processes of awareness and transformation.

1. Learning about field work in design education while walking in Estreito da Calheta

This article began with a series of experiences carried out during the spring of 2023 within the teaching activities of the Design 4 semester course of the Bachelor in Design at the University of Madeira. In collaboration with the SMOTIES project, the course was dedicated to the work of listening to, studying, and representing Estreito da Calheta, a small village some distance from Funchal, the main centre of the island of Madeira (Figures 1a, b). It was therefore considered to be a peripheral place, a periphery of a periphery, a rural context far from the city, an island within an island.¹ Although it is now easily reachable by car, many of the students of the Design 4 course (mostly from Madeira) did not know Estreito da Calheta, except for passing by in the car without ever stopping or from hearsay.

During the course we had the opportunity to host two short workshops, the first with Noemi Satta and the second with Cristina Renzoni and Chiara Nifosi.

The first workshop focused on participatory processes and especially on the first step, i.e., the research phase. Due to its cognitive character, the research phase is never neutral and asks us to design and choose paths of exploration. Making a transformation means first of all working on awareness and the ability to break out of one's own clichés, starting from the first phase of any project or process.

The second workshop was dedicated to introducing the students to field work experiences in urban planning. Unlike Urban Planning or Architecture students, Design students in this Bachelor's programme normally have fewer opportunities to look at very different scales, and their gaze often is limited to the scale of the work done with their hands or with the computer. The aim here was to stimulate the gaze towards different scales, from small to large, in order to be able to read the landscape in a more complex and articulated way and begin to see interconnections. In addition to this, we also wanted to introduce the use and design of maps as non-neutral tools produced by a work of choice, interpretation, and subsequent representation (Figures 2a, b, c; Figures 3a, b, c, d).

1. Before the construction of main roads, the life in different places of the island was pretty isolated, and to reach the main city it took hours and sometimes days of travel. See the film *Estreito é o tempo* by Hugo Olim, 2023

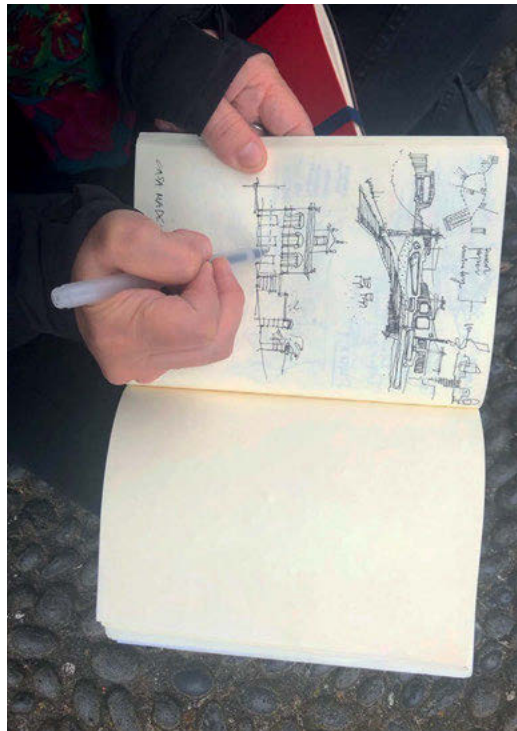
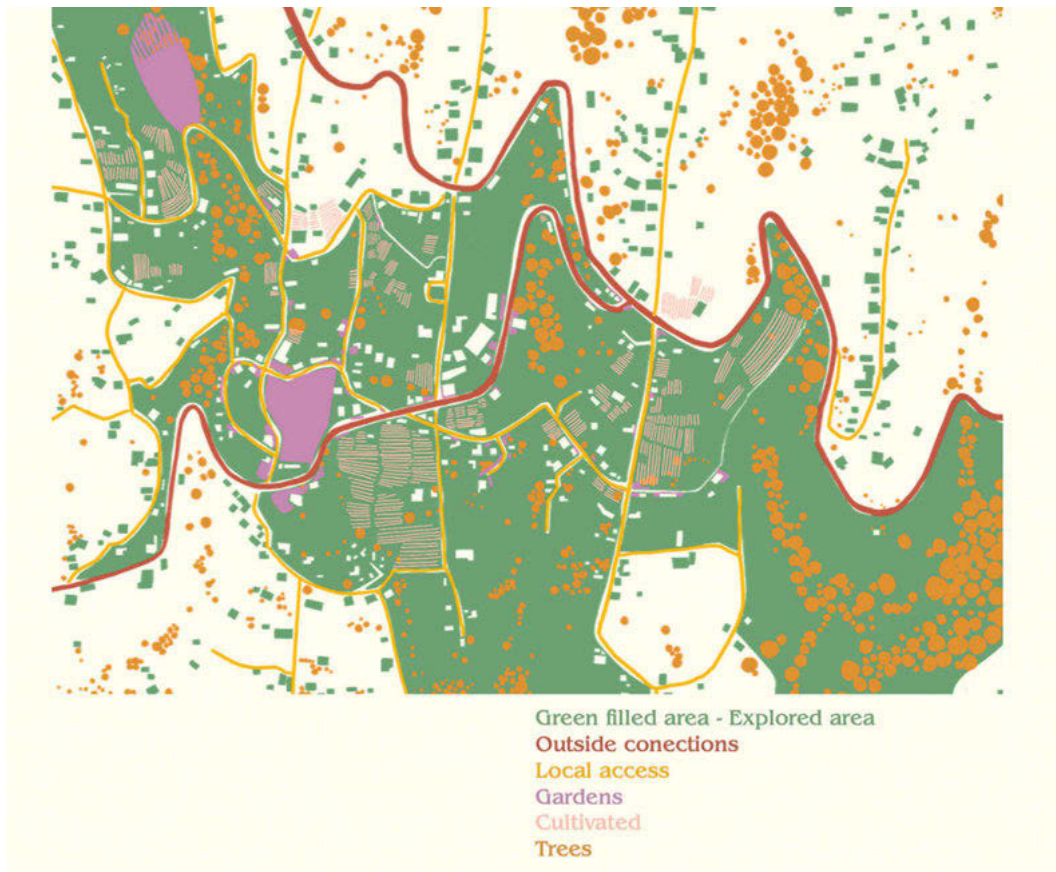


Figure 1a: First field work with Design 4 students. Estreito da Calheta, March 2024

Figure 1b: Fieldnotes – from the workshop led by Chiara Nifosi and Cristina Renzoni. Estreito da Calheta, April 2024

Figures 2a, b, c: Field work elaborations
by Design 4 student
José Pinho





Figures 3a, b, c, d: Field work elaborations by Design 4 students Helena Câmara, Inês Rodrigues, Mariana Carvalho

But let's take a step back: why did we decide to dedicate a course to field work and to walking as a way of learning within a design curriculum? Primarily because, precisely from the perspective of imagining an educational path that makes sense in a context like that of the island of Madeira, we believe that it makes sense for research and reflection to be carried out in the context of place. Doing this means getting to know and re-know the Atlantic island, with its natural history of around six million years and its relatively recent anthropic history. This means reflecting on various issues: from the often-violent environmental impact of design; to the risk of losing a specific local cultural heritage and as well as the biodiversity developed over time in a context partially separated from the rest of the world (De Luca & Bertolotti, 2024); to the specific potential and design needs in insular contexts (Wahl, 2016); up to the question of limits, interconnections, and ecology (Borgnino, 2022).

To do this it is important to explore field work while walking in design practice as well (Bertolotti & Vezzani, 2021; De Luca & Bertolotti, 2023). Walking is in fact a practice that has always allowed us to know ourselves and the world (Solnit, 2000; Ingold & Vergunst, 2008; Kagge, 2019; Gros, 2023). It is a slow movement, which contrasts with the frenetic rhythms of contemporary life (Kagge, 2015; Gros, 2023), allowing a type of integrated learning and inviting reflexivity and slow thinking (Maffei, 2014). In placing our feet and being in contact with the ground, in breathing, in being able to give ourselves time to perceive the breath and the body, we can experience, in walking, being terrestrial (Latour, 2018) and how we are part of the landscape, where everything is interconnected and interdependent (Gros, 2023). Walking can be a practice that allows us to observe how we walk with nonhumans (Gooch, 2008) and to delve deeper into how we belong to communities that coexist in the ruins of a world in deep crisis (Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

In the following paragraphs we will delve into some of the themes that underpinned the teaching and workshop experiences mentioned above. In Paragraph 2 Noemi Satta introduces the importance of reflecting about stereotypes before beginning any field work; in Paragraph 3 Chiara Nifosi tells us how an expedition on foot can be considered an act of translation; and in Paragraph 4 Cristina Renzoni describes how maps are narratives that interpret a territory and that they are in all respects the result of a project.

2. Stereotypes and overturning of clichés: from the postcard to the territory

Participatory processes aim to involve both larger or smaller communities, on a territorial basis or on individual interests, in making decisions and effecting concrete changes with respect to specific issues in their territory or field of interest. Every initial research phase, and the territorial exploration most importantly, asks for balance between one's prior knowledge and the edge of the unknown that may turn into surprise and thus into new questions.

In the research phase, one works on power, and on voice, not only in a metaphorical sense but also in the ability to say in one's own words what the problems are, and what the solutions are. A large body of literature links critical awareness (Freire, 1998), or the use of dissent (Hirshmann, 1982), with the possibility of finding one's own autonomous capacity to represent and determine his or her own future (Appadurai, 2004), one's capacity for change. This is related to the possibility of imagining (Mulgan, 2022) politically new places, ways of living and solving fundamental issues related to democracy, the environment, health, schools, etc.

Thus, territorial exploration plays an essential role in defining if and how the desired local or social change can take place: one of the first goals is to redefine the research questions, trying to enable everyone – professionals, experts, inhabitants – to first of all recognise their own reading filters: such as the negative stigma surrounding suburbs for example, starting with the very term itself, which has now come to mean a marginalised and disadvantaged place. From the initial conception of the research we work on awareness of “automatisms” and “estrangement”, that is, on the procedure that in other spheres (literary criticism, and specifically Russian formalism) serves to help to observe anew what we already know.

Automatism and estrangement, or knowing how to initiate reflection on words and images, is one of the approaches to return to “looking at things”, even ordinary or familiar things, as if seeing them for the first time. This is all the more fundamental to unhinging the fatalist perception of “nothing can change”: from recognising the usual definitions, labels, representations, visions, and words, to multiplying and comparing viewpoints to move towards changing the lenses of observation, which are the keys of research.

The workshop that prepares an exploration often uses 'material objects', simple and immediate devices, such as picture cards specifically structured for brain storming (Eno & Schmidt, 1975). Others from the artistic sphere (Lai, 2002) can be used to hack common concepts and clichés, or can resort to tourist postcards of a specific place to be explored. There is nothing more useful for observing clichés, partial representations of the whole ("the place only in bloom", "the island all sea"), and the main narrative characterisations.

Noble examples in this sense are those of Bruno Munari with his surreal postcards playing precisely with clichés, and Rodari to work with fantastic hypotheses (1973), to introduce the hypothetical "What if..." not only within a pedagogical pathway but in general as a trick to find, in exploration and research, new questions and new paths to work on, and also to enable change (Figures 4a, b, c).

Dealing with the capacity to renew the political and poetic imagination of a place is even more important when working in marginal areas, defined by their distance from a so-called 'centre'. What defines is therefore the other, with hetero-directed parameters that are certainly not autonomously generated.

Thus words such as: periphery, island, rural, interior, mountain, or if you extend the reasoning, young, old, women, workers, unemployed, and so on, assume fixed meanings, which tend to influence the discourse – of the citizens and the experts – meanings that can instead be overturned, rethought, renewed. We all learn together to make a lateral shift, to apply lateral thinking. Such work prepares the participants to take the floor, to tell their own stories from their own point of view: these are phases of community learning, where innovation is first and foremost linked to conceiving issues, problems, and possible solutions in new terms. The community (even a temporary community) learns to care, to look anew, to give voice and find new words, to give body to places and vocations with their exploring and walking bodies, and to create their own paths towards solutions.

3. Translating landscapes. Research by design: methodological and operative approaches

"Urban planning is done on foot", one of urbanist Bernardo Secchi's best-known lessons, reflects the experiences conducted in Madeira, which consider walking in places as a fundamental part

of the design and the implementation process. A territorial transformation, today more than ever, needs to 'enter into the folds' of contexts (Fini, 2015), which, before being designed and changed, must be listened to and deeply understood.

To decodify and represent the stratification and complexity of territorial elements relationship and its coexistence capability, the proposed learning/teaching methodology explores the threshold between the walk within the territory and the translation of this experience into maps and drawings, with the awareness that this work of selection and interpretation is also a substantial part of the project.

In the words of Umberto Eco, translating means 'saying almost the same thing'. In his book *Esperienze di traduzione. Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (2013), Eco argues that translation is not about comparing two languages but is about the interpretation of a text in two different languages, thus involving a shift between cultures. Translation is one of the forms of interpretation, and interpretation should always aim to rediscover the intention of the text, what it says in relation to the language in which it is expressed and in the cultural context in which it was born. The faithful translator must choose a 'linguistic unfaithfulness' which guarantees the textual one. Urban designers undertake this same action in translating the complexity of the territory into the language of drawing, having to understand and use other disciplines, external to their field. Given a text – or a territory that André Corboz compared to a palimpsest, a written and rewritten text – what must the translators/interpreters render of that text in their work of decomposition, selection, interpretation, and reassembly?

During surveys with students, we walk, decoding the space, investigating things and people, animals and plants, nature and culture, forms and materials, practices and techniques, spatial adaptations of transformation and inertia over time, looking for and building its 'vocabulary' before identifying questions and needs. From the walking experience, the urban design practice makes the 'workspace' derive. The construction of the workspace, preparatory to scenario development and transformation or adaptation, is a critical moment. It is a form of 'translation' (Figures 5a, b, c).

This methodology, which takes up the original intuition of Ian L. McHarg, in his 1969 *Design with Nature*, seeks to translate the close relationships and interdependencies between the natural and anthropised environments. This implies working in a multidisciplinary, multi-scalar and

Figures 4a, b, c: Images from the workshop led by Noemi Satta. Funchal. The workshop with Noemi Satta started by the group sharing and looking at postcards of Madeira, and ended by sharing the experiences of the walks and all the new questions that emerged. Funchal, March 2024





Images from the workshop led by Chiara Nifosi and Cristina Renzoni, Madeira, April 2024

Figure 5a: The day before the visit to Estreito da Calheta, students showed their initial notes and reflections made after their previous visit.

Figure 5b: Looking together at the water systems in Estreito da Calheta

Figure 5c: Observing the notes from the walk in Estreito da Calheta, April 2024



multi-temporal approach. For example, to learn from the 'raw material' of landscapes over time, we relate climate and geology – their performance, constraints and resources – to flora, fauna and human society.

A particular role within these relationships is played by the soil, a multidisciplinary strategic key to better understand climate change phenomena and to test the ecological transition integrating disciplines (biological, hydrogeological, agroforestry, etc.).

Aldo Sestini, one of the greatest geographer-geologists of the 20th century, in his drawings and texts of the Italian Touring Club's "The Landscape" in *Conosci l'Italia vol. 7* of 1963, highlights that the specificity of each landscape (of nature, of society, of activities and economies) is closely linked to its subsoil: "at the base of the landscape is [...] the earth's surface, not as a whole, but in its individual traits" (Sestini, 1963). Similarly, Bernardo Secchi later reiterates the importance of looking at the ground not as a plane but of considering it in its "thickness" (Secchi, 1986). Finally, soil is not an inert element, but a living organism. A strong image in this sense comes to us from Wes Jackson, founder of The Land Institute, who compares the soil to the elastic and resistant membrane that gives rise to many life forms, the placenta, and warns us that it is progressively losing these properties (Jackson, 1980).

The other important aspect is to understand and represent the time of the transformation processes of the places explored. In our exercise, the present condition of landscapes is often reflected, but also its evolution compared with the past and the potential projection towards the future. In a recent piece entitled "How cities will fossilise", David Farrier tells us in a very lucid way how all human actions leave a geological legacy that lasts for millennia, and how some interventions last much longer than others. Using the words of the ecologist Aldo Leopold, we must start "thinking like a mountain", and the geologist Marcia Bjornerud, speaking to us about "timefulness", underlines the need to think in a "polytemporal" way and within geological times to establish, learning from the past, our journey towards the future.

Finally, to translate phenomena such as the loss of biodiversity or climate change but also activities that are phenomena of a global scope that must however be understood and resolved locally, it is necessary to work at all scales of investigation.

An explored landscape is returned as an evolving, productive and integrated hybrid

system, which responds to these multiple relationships and which combines into new environmental and architectural entities, generating new languages (Waldheim, 2016). The internal behaviour of these entities, their interaction as parts of complex systems and their potential, are assembled in multi-scalar, multi-temporal and multidisciplinary systemic static drawings (Berger, 2013) that return the multitude of information, direct and indirect data collected, and scientific knowledge, and which will support the design processes.

To conclude and return to the beginning of the chapter, urban planning done on foot in real space aims not only to get out of the classroom but also outside the walls of administrative urban planning.

In his very recent book *Sentieri Metropolitan*, Gianni Biondillo reminds us that we learned to walk and therefore we became intelligent, not the other way around, and that it was thanks to the intelligence of our feet that our self-awareness arose (Biondillo, 2022).

4. Narrative cartographies: the map as a project

Maps represent a powerful tool to understand, visualise, and refine interpretations of spatial and social realms. Mapping is integral to a reflexive process of sense-making, going beyond "a plastic metaphor of reality" towards elaborating interpretative keys to access the current world to a plurality of actors (Casti, 2014). Becoming critically aware of the processual nature of the map is an operation of research and theoretical and operational inquiry into the tools at our disposal for understanding and acting in space. For this reason, acquiring this awareness is a fundamental step in the learning paths of disciplines that deal from multiple perspectives with the territory and the material dimension of the relations between space and society, where a primary role is played by who is observing and from where. A map is a way we choose to interpret a certain set of information. Every map stems from the viewpoint of someone who observes a territory and intends to create a description of it. Any cartographic representation is (implicitly or explicitly) an expression of this viewpoint from the very beginning: in deciding what the centre of the map is and in determining its frame; in selecting data and sets of information to be represented or not; in highlighting some aspects rather than others. Therefore, each map results from a sequence of selection operations, and the definition and refinement of

the set of arguments supporting those choices is a cornerstone of the process.

In a sort of stratigraphic exercise, the mapping process requires us to identify, recognise, and name the elemental components that articulate the field of inquiry by isolating and extrapolating from context. Such decomposition allows for simplification and captures issues often hidden by information overload and layering in search of the relationships between types of spaces, places, subjects, and uses. Critical description questions the roles and functionings of individual elements in determining the whole and seeks to grasp the rules of the game, the principles through which the system builds and changes. Each map is a selection, an interpretation that fills the blanks between observed territorial phenomena with meaning and sense, explicitly attributing weights and values. From this perspective, the conscious selection and collection of places, objects, and natures is crucial in setting up a catalogue of species of spaces (or species in spaces), measuring their morphologies and dynamics.

The narrative turn of the 1990s in the social sciences contributed to a renewed debate on the narrative potential of cartography: it paved the way for some lines of research and experimentation at the intersection of different fields of knowledge. In particular, the perspective of narrative cartography, intersecting the intertwined nature of stories and maps (Bodenhamer et al., 2015; Roth, 2021), offers insights and suggestions into the plurality of roles, forms, and messages that a mapping process can convey. Maps outline narratives while noting, highlighting, or neglecting aspects and qualities. By moving between scales and translating information and phenomena, the explorer turns into a cartographer and storyteller: maps recompose a unified narrative that unfolds the paths followed and that reconstructs the unfolding of a story. This story returns materials, sequences, temporal articulations, mutual influences, and causal links; simultaneously, it gives them a shape and a name.

The map is not the territory, but an interpretation of it. Its supposed objectivity, conveyed by the measurement of space, is mediated by a plurality of interacting factors: representations, stereotypes, investigation demands, power dynamics, sensibilities. Awareness of the processual and narrative nature of mapping allows us to confront its generative nature in more direct ways. The map as a project. The interpretative narrative of the territory is a key step in the creative process underlying the knowledge of a territory and any possible project for its future. Each map

is, therefore, itself a project. All decisions made in choosing the point of view and field of relevance to extend the map, selecting the data, identifying the themes, and elaborating the narrative are the (more or less conscious) outcome of design thinking operations. From this perspective, spatial explorations driven through mapping processes represent a fruitful tool to discuss and reinvent theoretical and operative methodologies in learning processes.

5. Conclusions

Periphery

The route recounted in this chapter expresses a double deviation, one linked to the very fact of doing research and experimentation in so-called peripheral, marginal areas, where naturally the attention and presence of studies, research, and projects is less. A second deviation is expressed precisely by not stopping at the fixed meaning of some terms and instead seeking the polysemy of words, places, facts, and groups. Is “periphery” perhaps a non-central point of view? Is it even more interesting as it is lateral? Is “island” always linked to connections with the mainland (terra firma) or could it be a place to experiment with different connections and relationships? Is “map” an always dynamic reading of reality according to criteria defined from time to time by those who draw it? Whose point of view is a “postcard” telling and reflecting? What is its narrative?

The non-neutrality of research

Doing research means asking valid questions as a first step to making the research itself truly effective. Design processes are never neutral: whether they are linked to participation (with different phases ranging from desk research to the sharing of choices and decisions), to urban planning research, or to educational and training paths. The group of researchers, professionals, mediators, students, citizens, teachers, scientists, and so on, offers an almost pre-indicated research path starting from their professional grids. How can we work with a critical conscience on our own personal grids, on our own non-neutrality, or rather on our own subjectivity, sharing in a group and assuming that the group itself is a multiple and choral factor of influence on the area of analysis and research?

In the previous paragraphs we described how these questions have become opportunities to experiment with a group in training, and at the same time to exercise the critical ability of

2. The idea of taking a question for a walk is practised in the Street Wisdom project – <https://www.streetwisdom.org/>

being with one's own body and one's knowledge in a dynamic relationship with the territory and with what the territory expresses. We have seen how working on stereotypes or perceptive grids is the first step towards dismantling clichés and reviewing the very questions that give rise to the research. This is an aspect that calls into question the propensity of all of us to rely on reassuring narratives rather than trying to observe whether some definitions and narratives can be opened, articulated, read, and interpreted in their natural polysemy.

Doing research while walking can really help us in this sense, precisely because walking can be a way to ask yourself many questions and make them more complex: the slow pace of walking helps to focus in a different way on the tangible and intangible elements that make up and give life to a place. Walking and elaborating questions together can help in building learning communities (Hooks, 2003). And with this learning community in motion, we can take questions for walks,² and experience and live questions together (Wahl, 2016).

Subjectivity and interpretation

Through the *fil rouge* of walking and drawing as a method of exploration, the entire sequence of workshops (conducted by students and groups of teachers and multidisciplinary professionals) describes activities where subjectivity and interpretation are made evident.

The entire path unfolded through critical concepts and approaches. This happened in the terrain, sometimes easy and sometimes rugged, of Madeira, also bringing into play the body's ability to perceive and feel and therefore to translate another complex system of information into research questions.

All this calls for a political and poetic responsibility, of building semantic fields for the territories where we operate, research, and do education. A responsibility that begins with asking new questions and arrives with the critical awareness that the translation and representation of a landscape is a work of selecting elements, assuming many disciplinary points of view, and of interpretation. This means making bridges between contents, in a dynamic work, in a work of negotiation and of making meaning and re-signification within a shared environment (Izard, 2018).

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