

# Remote Places, Public Spaces

The Story of Creative  
Works with Ten Small  
Communities

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# 2. Power Relations in Participatory Design Practices in Small and Remote Places

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Small and remote communities, often nestled amid breathtaking natural landscapes, have long been on the periphery of conventional development paradigms. The cultural identities and distinct challenges of remote areas are increasingly acknowledged as essential to the broader socioeconomic environment (Membretti et al., 2022). Sustaining these rural areas is not only necessary but also optimal in the pursuit of equitable and sustainable development.

The necessity for regeneration in these regions has resulted in an increasing recognition that successful rural policies and practices must move beyond conventional top-down and *creative city* approaches (Landry, 2000; Florida, 2002). Smaller communities have more opportunities to overcome their challenges if they give up on formulaic creative city initiatives, which may have been successful in urban areas, and switch to a holistic approach to local development that emphasises embracing creativity across ecosystems (OECD, 2018). Due to its intricate nature, the OECD highlights the significance of involving a wide array of stakeholders in transformation processes, including implementing multi-level governance structures in formulating rural policies and practices (OECD, 2020). This necessitates a fundamental change in perspective, whereby the involvement of local stakeholders is prioritised in the development and execution of practices and policies specifically crafted to align with the distinct goals and ambitions of small and remote communities.

When different but sometimes overlapping 'communities of practice' are involved in the transformation processes and policy development of remote areas, we must consider the various manifestations of power dynamics (Wenger, 1999). To better understand small and remote places' unique power dynamics, we deem it necessary to first unpack the concept of power, presuming neither to be exhaustive nor to be experts in the field.

## Unpacking the concept of power: agency, ownership and representation

Most individuals have an intuitive understanding of what the concept of power entails. In the literature about power studies – ranging from political theory to environmental studies, from political geography to social theory – there are two fundamentally opposing perspectives, one perceiving power as dominance, also referred to as '*power over*', and one recognising power as empowerment, commonly conceptualised as '*power to*' (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021; Haugaard, 2012).

Follett (1940) describes the concept of *power over* as a coercive form of power, which later studies (Townsend et al., 1999; Allen, 1998; Rowlands, 1997) identify as an actor's capability to constrain the choices accessible to another actor or group of actors on a considerable scale.

By contrast, '*power to*' can be construed as empowerment. Follett (1940) and Arendt (1957; 1970) understand power to (as well as *power with*,

which consists of the collective exercise of *power to*) as a coactive form of power. The power to act in concert has the emancipating potential to liberate and empower people to do something, despite their social status, to achieve a more equitable distribution of power. Hence, empowerment is a process actors take to increase their capacity and contextual power to meet their goals, leading to transformative action (Coy et al., 2021). In their perceived power and capacity to act intentionally, individuals can choose and feel empowered to do so within their environments.

Scholars either align themselves with one of the two sides or attempt to reconcile the two perspectives, conceiving power as a nuanced cloud of concepts (Haugaard, 2012; Allen, 1999). The common threads across these views are that power arises from the presence of or potential for connection among agents (Dahl, 1957; Haugaard, 2012) and that power emerges as an ability to do something in these relationships (Pitkin, 1972; Haugaard, 2012). In other words, power can be said to exist when there is a relationship between agents who are able to do something in such a relationship.

Leveraging these conceptualisations, we have tentatively disentangled and focused on three facets influencing power that we deem relevant in the context of small and remote places: agency, ownership, and representation. The following is a brief overview of these three dimensions, acknowledging that these definitions could be deepened.

**Agency** is "the power to originate action" (Bandura, 2001, p. 3). It can be defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own decisions (Coy et al., 2021). Pitkin (1972) suggests that the concept of agency refers to the concept of '*power to*', or the "capacity to shape action, which partly depends on access to resources, partly on power/knowledge" (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2016, p. 143). It embodies purposeful engagement and acknowledges individuals not as passive entities but as dynamic forces capable of influencing the social, political, natural, and technological landscapes they inhabit. It implies a departure from deterministic narratives to recognise the autonomy and efficacy of actors in navigating their circumstances (Pisor et al., 2022).

**Ownership** is construed as the acquisition of meaningful stakes in the processes and feelings of responsibility and pride regarding the outcomes of a multi-partner project (Light et al., 2013; Van Rijn & Stappers, 2008). Expanding this definition beyond the conventional notion of holding

physical or tangible assets, we interpret ownership as the willingness and responsibility of community members to proactively shape the future trajectories of their small and remote places. In other words, the will to take ownership of the processes and impacts shaping their future. This involves influencing decision-making processes and, ultimately, fostering a collective investment in the results of development initiatives (Light et al., 2013).

**Representation** concerns the equitable and accurate portrayal of people's identities, perspectives, and needs within social structures. Pitkin (1967) offers possibly the most essential definition: to represent means to "make present again." According to this definition, community representation is the act of making people's voices, ideas, and perspectives "present" in social processes. The concept moves beyond plain visibility: community representation entails the authentic reflection of multiple voices, experiences, and cultures in decision-making processes, institutions, and media that might be fostered through the active participation of diverse, marginalised, and underrepresented communities in these social structures.

The intricate interplay of agency, ownership, and representation takes place at the blurred and ambiguous boundary and intersection between power over and power to, shaping the manifestations and dynamics of power within a context-specific social milieu.

## Power dynamics in small and remote places

Power dynamics are primarily evident when different communities of practice interact. Within the scope of our interest, to understand the power dynamics in small and remote places, we will first distinguish between two communities of practice: the 'community' and the 'public administration'.

**Communities** are the "socio-cultural grouping and milieu to which people would expect, advocate, or wish to belong, (...) the arena in which one learns and largely continues to practise being social" (Rapport & Overing, 2000, p. 63). Communities may be determined based on administrative, geographical, or conceptual boundaries (Alexiou et al., 2013), making them multifaceted, as they encompass individuals from diverse backgrounds that do not "represent a consistent body of individuals sharing the same ideas, perceptions and interests" (Titz et al., 2018, p. 2, as cited in Meriläinen et al., 2021). The community

"serves as a symbolic resource, repository, and referent for a variety of identities, and its [success] is to continue to encompass these by a common symbolic boundary" (Rapport & Overing, 2000, p. 63). Hence, communities are neither homogeneous nor singular units (Titz et al., 2018; Walmsley, 2006, as cited in Meriläinen et al., 2021), therefore incorporating inherent conflicts that require recognition and acknowledgement for their challenges and creative potential (Alexiou et al., 2013). This group of actors can often bring empirical knowledge, experience and situated values, legitimisation and support, creating an authorising environment (Moore, 1995).

**Public administrations** (PAs) refer to diverse groups of people constituting policymakers, administrators, municipal representatives, elected officials who own transitioning political roles, and bureaucracy functionaries with more stable roles. Each of these groups defines, pursues, and enacts their agendas. PAs define, pursue, implement, and coordinate public policies, agendas, institutional tools, services, institutional memory, resource access, and operational capabilities (Moore, 1995). It includes government institutions' systems, performance, and activities at different levels.

When these two communities of practice come together, the actors involved will inevitably have varying degrees of power. These manifest in the amount of tangible or intangible resources they have access to, their positionality, and their connections. For example, a recurring power imbalance occurs when external interventions are implemented without local input. This perpetuates a cycle where affected community members become passive recipients, lacking agency, ownership, and representation in the development of their place. At the same time, public administration may fall short in taking initiative, making decisions, and effectively addressing the needs and priorities of the community it serves (Evers, 2010). The asymmetrical expression of this relationship results in a power imbalance, namely an unequal distribution of power, be it *power over* or *power to*. It is crucial to tackle this power imbalance because reframing it provides PAs with opportunities for a more sustainable, valuable, and democratic change. Power is not fixed; it is dynamic and can evolve over time based on changing circumstances, roles, and capacities. Recognising the need for a more inclusive, community-driven approach, using participatory design methods emerges as an appropriate way to address the imbalances within existing rural policies and practices. We will explore the background of

participatory practices and highlight the design's ability to balance the power dynamics embedded in the communities of practice of small and remote places.

## Evolution and impact of participatory design

Participatory Design (PD) emerged during the 1970s in Scandinavia as a response to the growing need for inclusivity in decision-making processes related to new technologies and work organisation (Ehn, 1988; Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Björgvinsson et al., 2010). This participatory ethos laid the foundation for co-design, a closely aligned approach that shares its roots with PD. The scope of PD research and practice has broadened beyond the workplace and is now actively engaged in several facets of life. Contemporary PD reflects a paradigm shift from traditional top-down design models to more collaborative and democratised approaches, emphasising the active involvement of end-users throughout the design process. As PD and co-design advance, there is a commitment to moving beyond mere consultation of participants towards higher levels of engagement, striving for genuine partnership and citizen control (Bødker & Pekkola, 2010; Simonsen & Robertson, 2013; Hansen et al., 2019; Teli et al., 2020). Following the evolving discourse on participatory practices, we recognise the imperative of empowering communities to be active decision-makers for their future. Paying attention to power relations and empowering weak and marginalised groups with resources has been the priority of PD research (Björgvinsson et al., 2010). PD advocates a change in democratic design, calling for a shift towards carefully designed processes founded on the distribution of agency and co-created visions for a better future (Rosa et al., 2021).

As design practices move to the public domain, many discourses of participation in design fail to understand the complexity of working in a democratic approach, ignoring that involving users in a project leads to addressing issues of politics and power. Whereas design encourages people to interact in new ways, design often produces (and reproduces) social relationships and systemic power dynamics. These relationships are not only built after using a design product, service, or system, but they are also reproduced in the PD process, where actors with different access to power exchange with one another (Tomasini Giannini & Mulder, 2022, p. 111).

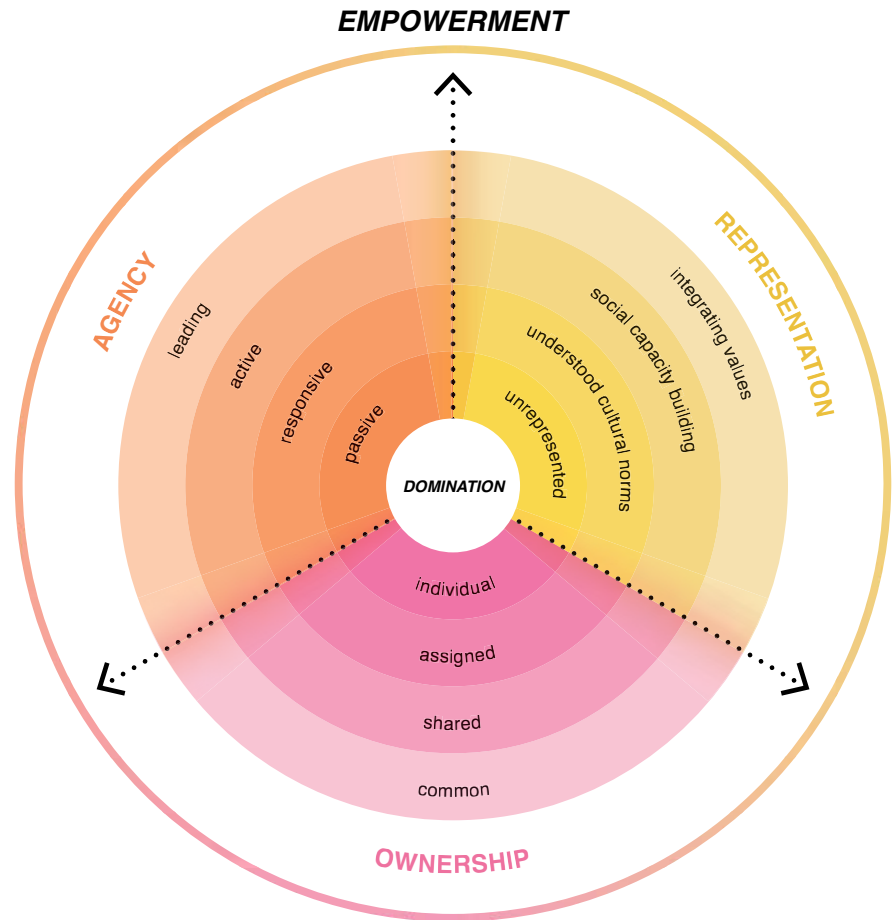
In the realm of design, PD, which puts emphasis on empathy, user-centred methodologies, and community engagement, has become a transformative force, influencing power dynamics in small and remote places. These principles empower local citizens to partake in decision-making processes actively, extending their influence to the planning and development of public spaces, local infrastructure, and social services. Such active involvement not only fosters a sense of empowerment but also contributes to the cultivation of increased horizontal manifestations of democracy. Democracy requires that participatory processes redefine power relationships, which would bring to the surface essential matters pertaining to ownership and sovereignty, and the governance structure (Herlo & Joost, 2019). This shift transforms governance into a collective endeavour that empowers local authorities, public administration, and the communities they represent. Incorporating participatory elements into the design and planning process ensures that development projects align with the distinct requirements and aspirations of these smaller and remote regions.

## Participatory design: shifting power relations

Before outlining the differences in power allocation among the different communities of practice in small and remote places and their subsequent shift thanks to PD practices, we need to consider a third community of practice: designers. Designers often introduce resources and methodologies that, through PD, can shift power dynamics within a community (Meriläinen et al., 2021) while assuming the role of facilitator, guide, and interface between the community and the public administration. At the same time, we must consider the managerial aspects potentially introducing imbalances in project ownership, mostly stemming from designers' professional knowledge and over-guidance. These complexities create a challenging arena for project realisation in any context, especially in distant and sparsely populated areas.

Given the nature of small and remote places, notably their number of inhabitants, these communities of practice tend to overlap. For instance, a member of the SMOTIES partnership – Clear Village Trustee Limited, working in the small and remote village of Penmachno (Wales, UK) – is both a designer and an inhabitant of the village. Thus, the roles are blurred, and the power dynamics manifest uniquely. Taking this into account, we

Figure 1: The dimensions of power: from domination to empowerment.  
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will outline how PD practices can, with the mediation of designers and the active involvement of the respective actors, shift their positionalities concerning the three aforementioned dimensions of power – agency, ownership, and representation – in small and remote places (Figure 1).

In the context of small and remote places, the dynamics of agency distribution between the community and public administration are intricate and multifaceted. The agency of a community varies much, based on, for example, efficient local administration, community activation, education, and economic prospects, which enhance the community’s capacity to assume a more proactive or authoritative position in its progress. The SMOTIES project has shown that

community agency frequently ranges between little participation and significant engagement. Community members have limited involvement in decision-making processes and initiatives in the former. In the latter, communities actively participate in and initiate communal activities. Certain actors may find themselves on the periphery of decision-making processes, either in design or policy, hindering their ability to advocate their needs. Community members distribute themselves along this spectrum, with some exhibiting a lack of interest for the common good, while some rely heavily on the intervention of public administration to address their needs, from responding to external events to adapting to emerging challenges through small efforts because of their



Figure 2: Memory mapping in the initial stages of engaging the local community. © Christina Galani for the University of the Aegean



Figure 3: Co-design workshop with the locals to explore the possible and desirable functions of the public space of intervention. © Polimi DESIS Lab



limited autonomy. This may also lead to many of their valuable insights and traditional (even ecological) knowledge being overlooked, leading to suboptimal use of resources and inappropriate decisions. An instance of this challenge, arising from the co-creative processes conducted by the SMOTIES partners at the University of the Aegean (Figure 2), highlighted that, owing to time constraints, numerous well-informed members of the local community were only able to contribute to the discussions minimally and only during specific phases of the project. This circumstance significantly impacted the pool of ideas and the decision-making processes of the broader team of participants.

Some community members, defined as their village's "local heroes" in the SMOTIES project, may develop an interest in governing the municipality. Therefore, most of the highly engaged residents in small remote places assume the responsibility of public administrators, thereby blurring the lines between their being part of the community or the public administration. As in any other context, the public administration agency is defined by institutional power, authority in decision-making, and access to resources. Several aspects, including local governing systems, the efficacy of leadership, financial resources, community participation, and the overall capability of the administration, determine a public administration's level of agency. Assuming a more active or leadership role typically entails having more local autonomy, engaging with the community more significantly, and having the authority to develop and execute policies and programmes customised to address the unique community requirements they serve. Public administrators substantially impact the direction of community development by introducing agendas, institutional tools, and operational capacities. This suggests that the degree of agency within a small and remote community is more significant than we imagine. However, it also hints that the actions of individuals assuming such hybrid roles and qualities could hinder the ability to generate a constructive conversation due to underlying dynamics potentially mixing legitimisation and support with individual interests and community dynamics. For example, SMOTIES partner Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano started working in the village of Albugnano (Italy), because of its connection with local heroes who, at the time, were part of the local PA (Figure 3). Upon beginning the research phase of the project, the differing visions of the PA members became more evident, polarising the members' interests and

resulting in a shift in strategy by the SMOTIES team. The SMOTIES team had to reassess its stakeholders and the public spaces it planned to work on, ultimately resulting in an extension of the project. The team therefore highlighted the fact that participatory processes take time to carefully articulate the dialogue and interactions between designers, PAs, and citizens within iterative times for action and reaction.

While the increased authority of a public administration is crucial for efficient governance, it also requires careful balance to prevent potential disparities in power dynamics. PD effectively addresses this dynamic by actively involving community members in projects, aiming to engage them in decision-making processes, thereby empowering communities by granting them more agency. PD challenges PAs to move beyond tokenistic approaches, which not only fail to distribute agency to the community but also result in a loss of trust by the people, who believe that their contributions are not given due consideration. Some PAs may exhibit reluctance towards engaging in participatory activities due to concerns about possible barriers, conflicts, the belief that decision-making should stick to conventional bureaucratic procedures, and, while a shift is conducive to a sense of shared responsibility and inclusivity, the fear of losing authority over a territory. The SMOTIES project has proved that while, in theory, PAs are more than open to engaging with PD when put into practice, they find it challenging to understand the language, methods, and lengthy procedures of PD practices. PAs are built around order and control, and PD questions this, encouraging PAs to genuinely engage in collaborative efforts with the community and providing it with the tools, resources, procedures, and knowledge to act. In the best-case scenario, PD can bring more agency to the community, allowing them to lead and co-manage processes and projects. To achieve this objective, the Art & Design Department of the Universidade da Madeira, a SMOTIES partner, created a feature film in which local actors, including a few local heroes, were interviewed. The video was presented and screened at an outdoor public event, which brought the entire community together. The community welcomed the video, instilling a strong sense of agency and belonging, which encouraged further engagement in participatory practices.

Representation has been commonly associated with the expression of perspectives through voting mechanisms. However, our perspective contends that the intricate processes of

representation extend far beyond the confines of voting rituals, permeating our daily lives. This is particularly evident in small and remote places, where the degrees of community representation exhibit considerable variability. Active community members tend to have more visibility and representation than those who do not actively participate in communal activities. Conversely, the voices of individuals less engaged in community affairs may be overlooked and inadequately assessed. This diversity in representation is accentuated in the context of foreign communities, where recognition and consideration of their diversity in government and public service provision often lag. Foreigners grappling with challenges such as linguistic barriers, lack of voting rights, cultural differences, limited access to information, and unfamiliarity with local customs may find themselves excluded from various initiatives. In certain instances, these communities may opt for a more independent existence, leading to what could be perceived as a “parallel” life detached from the mainstream activities of their village. However, there have been instances where embracing diversity has become a cornerstone of small and remote places, fuelling innovative initiatives and inspiring novel business models. For all these reasons, the representation of small and remote communities tends to be less varied, primarily amplifying the voices of the most active participants. This limitation is compounded by the struggle of these communities to cultivate and leverage a social capital representative of their entirety. The exclusivity often associated with the “veteran” community and the low population density of small and remote places contribute to the challenges faced in building a comprehensive and inclusive social capital reflective of the diverse voices within the community. If we take into consideration the fact that often, some of the ‘veteran’ members of the community are also those who take part in local government, then the representation gap increases even further. While PAs play an essential role in representing the community’s voice, the success of their representation depends on, among others, transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness to the varied perspectives within the community. It is crucial to strike a balance between the structured representation of PAs and genuine community involvement to guarantee that the community’s collective voice is acknowledged and actively influences decisions that affect its well-being. By incorporating the perspectives of different actors, including those on the periphery of traditional decision-making, PD not only empowers

individuals to advocate their needs and provide empirical knowledge, but also incorporates the values of the whole community in decisions and projects.

The low habitation density significantly impacts ownership dynamics in small and remote places. Ownership varies and is present at the individual level and the community public administration level, where ownership is increasing for communities and decreasing for public administrations. Ownership may stay at a personal level, with people having individual ownership of their homes and land, sharing only public spaces. Ownership often aligns with longstanding cultural and communal practices in some traditional contexts. The community may collectively own or manage land and resources, with land tenure systems influenced by cultural traditions. Ownership in this context is deeply rooted in historical practices and reflects the communal ties developed over generations. Finally, the distinctive attributes of small and remote regions have been increasingly seen as an opportunity for developing and prototyping new ownership models. The very constraints that infrastructure scarcity imposes may motivate the investigation of alternative ownership models. In such contexts, where traditional systems may be lacking or inadequately developed, communities are compelled to employ innovative approaches to possess and administer resources jointly. If a community has been formed around or has integrated communal infrastructure, ownership is common to all the community’s members, as they deliberately choose to share and collectively own essential infrastructure, particularly in terms of energy systems, water resources, and other utilities. The ownership of these shared resources is often guided by collaborative decision-making processes that prioritise sustainability and self-sufficiency. Residents may actively participate in managing and maintaining shared infrastructure, contributing to a sense of collective ownership over essential services. Designers play a crucial role in balancing the dynamics within these complex communities of small and remote places. However, more often than not, designers enter a design project as external observers, not fully immersed in the ongoing dialogues, debates, and narratives within these places. Recognising this, it becomes imperative for designers to acknowledge, empathise with, and actively listen to the actors involved in the processes, with a particular focus on amplifying the voices that are often left unheard. In the realm of PD, the success of any practice hinges on the ability of collaborators, including designers,

to understand the nuances of the community. Designers, acting as facilitators, guides, and interfaces between non-homogeneous communities, play a key role in translating the actors' needs.

## Conclusions

Moving towards just and sustainable small and remote communities necessitates re-evaluating traditional developmental approaches. Prioritising diverse stakeholder involvement and balancing power dynamics in relation to the dimensions of agency, ownership, and representation are essential for a meaningful shift towards equitable rural development. Within an array of options, the discipline of design offers the PD approach, which serves as a democratisation tool. PD integrates fundamental methodologies for equitable power distribution among participants, cultivating a shared trust among community members, officials, and designers.

The implementation of PD practices in public administration encounters challenges for several reasons: i) bureaucratic processes may fear loss of control; ii) PD practices travel on a slower wavelength, which doesn't align with the commonly faster-paced nature of PAs, thus the difficulty to comprehend the "meaningful inefficiency" (Gordon & Mugar, 2020) of the participatory process; iii) the impacts of PD practices may be more valuable from a qualitative perspective, while PAs are more quantitative, which makes it more difficult to appreciate, communicate and take accountability for the results of the work from their point of view; and, finally, iv) all the previous points make PD an expensive process to undertake.

However, if we reflect on the core mission of PAs – to initiate action, make decisions, and effectively meet the needs of the community they serve – we advocate a more forward-thinking approach. We encourage PAs to be visionary, demonstrating the courage to actively engage in and support participatory processes. This involves participating in design processes, embracing uncertainties, making space and time for such processes, and overcoming inherent challenges. It entails entrusting small and remote communities and assuming a safeguarding role in overseeing these participatory endeavours. This approach seeks to mitigate injustices, promote an equitable allocation of power, and foster the development of new narratives concerning those who have influenced our society so far and should be part of its future (Costanza-Chock, 2020). This shift aligns with a governance model prioritising its community's empowerment.

SMOTIES has been an excellent opportunity to put the participatory design approach into practice in complex real-life contexts. It highlighted some very positive experiences and, at the same time, pointed out some challenging aspects. We could have told you a different story, but participatory practices leverage the democratic expression of needs, desires, and ideas, and these might differ within the same community of place, especially if the roles of its inhabitants are blurred owing to the different emerging dimensions of the community.

As SMOTIES has shown, while there may be hurdles along the way, participatory practices acknowledge and act upon balancing power relations, which is a crucial step for constructing a future that is inclusive, democratic, and equitable for everyone.

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