

why isn't anyone talking about moabit?



Moiblising Moabit – Ecological Class Struggle

Political Architecture : Critical Sustainability

Tom Silbiger 2023/24

While many praise Berlin's cool neighbourhoods like Kreuzberg and Prenzlauer Berg, no one seems to talk about Moabit. It's not cool enough to be in magazines or tourist v/blogs.

The art scene hasn't noticed it yet. Most of the listed art galleries are closed, have no opening hours or reviews online, and no signs at the entrances. The biggest museum (after the Hamburger Bahnhof) is a vintage car repair workshop with an extensive display area.

Even the municipal bureaus don't give the proper attention to Moabit. There is almost no social and economical information available. Moabit's Rathaus (municipal office) doesn't hold all civil services needed for the residents, some services are provided in Wedding or Mitte.

The neighbourhood landscape is being ruled by ruins of former industrial facilities and power stations, alongside still active factories, small-medium industry, wholesale vendors, and a harbour. The eastern part has already changed drastically—from no man's land to a luxury mixed-use complex that most of Moabit's existing residents can't afford.

Moabit is connected with the Siemensstadt neighbourhood through extensive infrastructure and, further West, Spandau. Together they act as the industrial area of Berlin—where goods received and dispatched, waste separated to its components, electricity produced, and many products are manufactured.

These images were taken in September-October 2023 and serve as a testimony to the current state of the Moabit-Siemensstadt area.

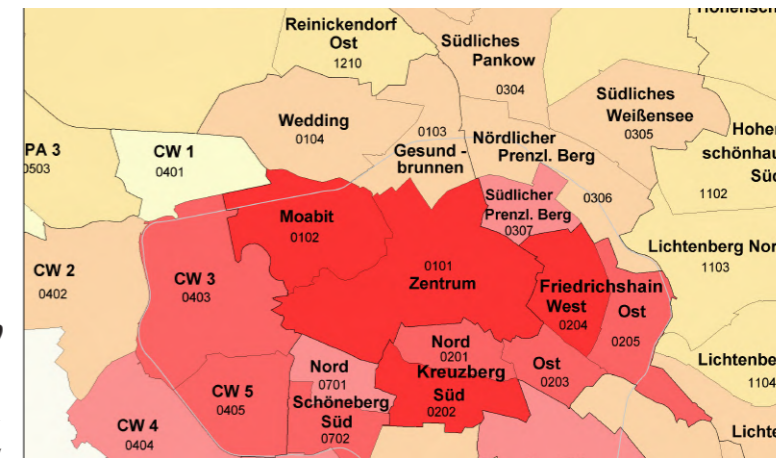




super gentrification—building in the past 10 years

Dr. Andrej Holm, a sociologist in Humboldt University of Berlin, explains the different stages of gentrification. ‘*Super gentrification*’ is when luxurious buildings are erected where there were once affordable residential units. This phenomenon can be politically initiated—when announcing urban renewal plans, or privately financed by entrepreneurs with the support of the public.

Europacity is a 61 hectare area in East Moabit. It contains 3,000 apartments and office space for 16,500 people. Most of the buildings were built in the last 10 years. They look different from all other buildings in the neighbourhood—sleek glass facade offices, separate trash bins for waste management outside the residential buildings, broad sidewalks close to the water but without access to it, and contemporary-generic design.



rent price/sqm, 2020

by Senate Department for Urban development, building and living



super gentrification—rare finding

The picture to the left depicts the only residential building active construction site in Moabit. It is a 7 stories high, hybrid wood structure building with commercial space at ground level, offices and 30 micro apartments (35-40m²). Construction is scheduled to end in 2024.

The building replaces a one-story Edeka supermarket.

The only other construction site is another office building, close to the Spree in East Moabit.



*Drawing by
AHM Architects*





modernisation gentrification—renovations

The state of Berlin's law differentiates between types of renovations: a) extensions and major construction work can be categorised as 'modernisation'. It allows property management and housing companies to raise the rent for existing residents due to house improvements. b) 'Maintenance' work, like fixing the usual wear-and-tear of the building parts. The costs are covered by the tenants themselves, forcing some of them to move or for the buildings to be neglected.

Before the 'super gentrification' phase, there is a period of extensive modernisation of existing buildings, Dr. Andrej Holm claims. On many occasions, in other parts of Berlin, after and during the renovation period rent prices rise due to the improvement of living conditions and better standards. Long term rental contracts are very protected in Germany, Whereas short term contracts allow landlords to raise prices without modernisation. 'Rent gap' is when the potential value of property is higher than its current yielding profit. When the gap is closing, constructing new and luxurious buildings seems more profitable.

Along the Northern bank of the Spree, a few old residential buildings were restored in the past 10 years. This is also where most of the new buildings (built in the past 5 years) could be found outside Europacity. I believe that the relatively progressive improvement in this area is owed to the earlier developments and urban plans on the south bank of the river, as well as the construction of office buildings to the East from the beginning of the 2000s.

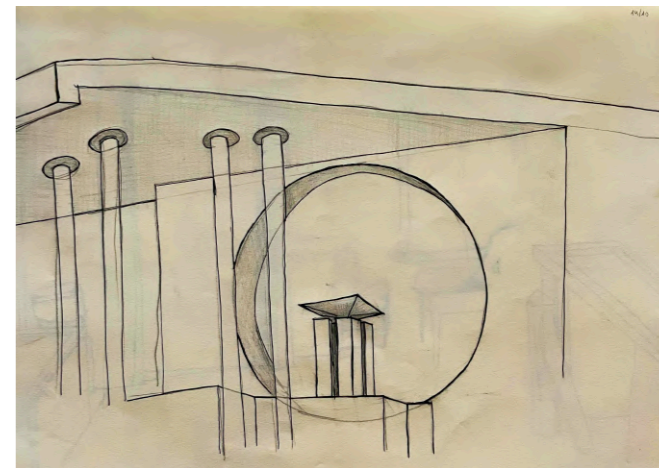


changes along the Spree—from industry to offices

The neighbourhood was only incorporated into Berlin in 1861. It was thought of as a remote area, a suburb, a good place for replacing the existing factories and power plants that were polluting Berlin's city centre. In the beginning and middle of the 19th century, many facilities were erected in Moabit's central and southern parts, mainly close to the Spree river.

Nowadays, most of the industrial buildings are long gone or renovated for accommodating mainly offices, but also spaces for retail and higher education usage. The Eastern area of the Spree bank is accessible via a walkway and some green areas, however, few areas are restricted and privatised. The commercial buildings extended their territory all the way up to the water.

While the East seems to be flourishing, the West side is still neglected. Deserted or rundown industrial ruins can be seen, especially along the Charlottenburger verbindungsk (canal).



*View of the Carillon bell tower
from Kanzlergarten, Moabit*







pioneer gentrification—art galleries and museums

I mapped 18 art galleries. I went to see most of them, or at least tried to. Half of them didn't present opening hours on their websites or on google maps. Many of them have less than 5 reviews, if any. While walking right past most of the galleries you won't even notice them, no signs indicate that there is something behind the glass windows, surely not an exhibition.

There are 5 museums in the Neighbourhood. One of them is the well known Hamburger Bahnhof—built in 1846 as the train station connecting Berlin with Hamburg until 1884, It then became an exhibition space. The second biggest museum in Moabit is the Classic-Remise Berlin—a huge warehouse for classic and exotic car repair workshops. Built in the 1920s as a tram depot, the building hosts many cars on display next to the workers who have been fixing and maintaining them since 2003.

The Braun Sammlung Ettel museum has a display of the electric appliances made by the company, it is open for a total of 12 hours a week. The Dependance Mitte museum inside Moabit Rathaus is a modest display in a meeting room and a corridor on the 2nd floor of the building. The Museum der Trostfrauen was opened in October 2022. It is dedicated to the 'comfort women' which were used as sex slaves to Japanese military officers during World War II. It is open for 8 hours a week.

There are more than 400 active art galleries in Berlin (not including pop-ups).

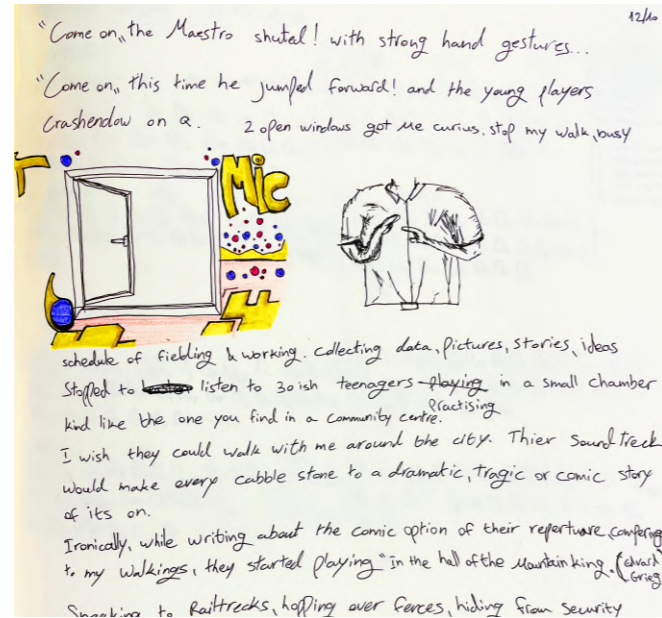




pioneer gentrification—creative participants

How does gentrification start? Usually, the low rent attracts artists and young people. Reasonably priced apartments allow them to spend more time on developing their art, as well as finding cheap locations for exhibitions and studios. They are the pioneers of gentrification, moving into an area as a “[...]group that originates or helps open up a new line of thought or activity or a new method or technical development”.

After a small community has settled in, pubs, coffee shops, unique shops, and affordable hanging spots start to open. In the past decades another sign for the beginning of pioneer gentrification are small green/ecological initiatives.



*Notes taken while listening to a youth
orchestra rehearsal, outside Festsaal der
Berliner Stadtmission*





major players—courts and incarceration facilities

In 1955 the Moabit prison (Zellengefängnis) closed down after 106 years of operating. It was once the model prison of Prussia. In 1881 another prison was opened just 700 metres away—the JVA correctional centre, which is still active today. Between the years 1902-1906 a new courthouse was erected next to it. It is the biggest court in the EU, one of the last projects in ‘Wilhelm Ring’ massive urban development plans. The Tiergarten District Court was planned to be semi-sufficient with its own power plant, water tower, communication tower, extensive ventilation system, central heating system, elevators, and overlaying corridors to separate the different crowds.

Just a few kilometres away, another correctional facility is operating with more than 600 prisoners. It acts as the HQ of the justice system of Berlin and also contains a hospital for prisoners, main IT offices, training academy among other facilities.

Many political prisoners were held in Moabit’s prisons. From Emil Max Hödel, who failed to assassinate the German emperor Wilhelm I in 1878, many communist party leaders, to the German resistance members whose failed assassination attempt of Hitler is widely known as “Operation Valkyrie”. Dr. Andrej Holm, whom I mentioned earlier, was also held prisoner here while his accomplices with the radical left wing arsonist group were investigated.





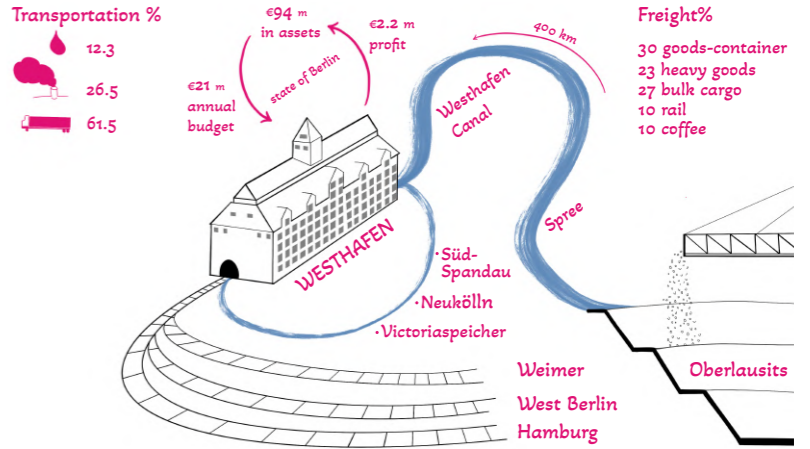


major players—BEHALA

Westhafen (the West harbour) was constructed in 1923. With its inauguration BEHALA (Berlin Hafen und Lagerhausgesellschaft) was established as a company owned by the state of Berlin. Its main task is operating all 4 ports of the city including all storage facilities, handling goods, reprocessing construction waste and contaminated soil, freight transportation, and more. BEHALA is also in charge of all freight railways, meaning all railways that are not used for public commuting. In 2022 its annual budget (provided by the state) was €21 million and it yielded €2.2 million profit, mainly from renting facilities and warehouses.

While the productivity of Berlin's harbours is declining, For example, The old warehouses and offices at Victoriaspeicher (Kreuzberg) are mainly rented for media companies and studios, Westhafen is growing and absorbing some of the workload from the others. There are a few expansion plans in the near future.

The Harbour is not under the Moabit jurisdiction, but under its own.



major players—BEHALA

11/10 | West | 15.00-16.00



coming 56 + 8 people

D- 321 private- 102

going 36

PL- 15 van- 61

13/10 | West | 10.40-11.40



coming 67 + 3 people & 1 baby

By- 3 semi tr.- 52

going 61

BG- 1 container- 38

13/10 | East | 09.15-10.15

coming 60 + 30 people + 1 dog

RO- 1 open cont.- 30

going 59 + 11 people

RKS- 1 crane- 23

tanker- 17

concrete- 14

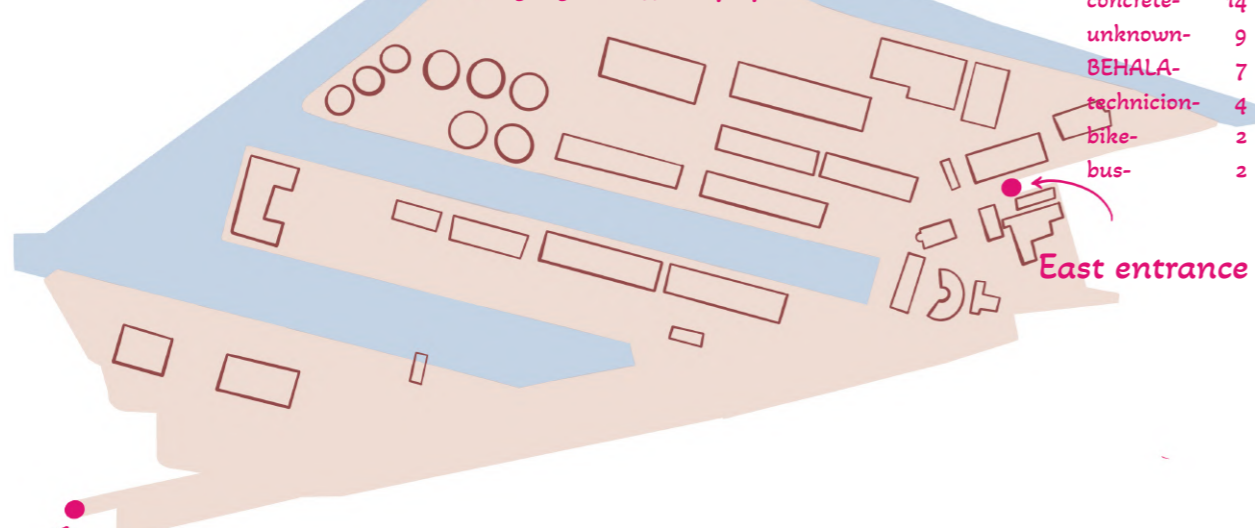
unknown- 9

BEHALA- 7

technician- 4

bike- 2

bus- 2



East entrance

West entrance

Westhafen motor traffic



Siemensstadt Square





major players—Siemens

At the end of the 19th century the Siemens-Halske company decided to re-group all of its factories into one big area, instead of being scattered across Berlin. The wasteland area was bought and new industrial structures started to operate in 1899, only in 1904 the first residential buildings were accommodated. By 1914 there were 7,000 residents living in the now called Siemensstadt neighbourhood and 23,000 employees worked in the factories.

Siemens took upon itself to build roads and railways that connect the area to its surroundings. The train tracks used to connect the main factories and HQ building to Moabit and Westhafen, and enabled people to commute further to the main stations in the city. During the S-bahn workers' strike in 1980 more than half of the lines were shut down, and several of them were left completely closed, such as the Jungfernheide-Gartenfeld —also known as the Siemens Railway.

By 2030 the Siemens Railway will be renovated and reconnected to the rest of Berlin's commuting lines. The restoration cost is estimated to be €500 million and is part of a big urban plan which adds 3,000 apartments to the 13,000 existing residents, as well as multiple office buildings, research and education facilities, commercial, retail and leisure spaces.



Siemens headquarters, 1914



the lucky few — allotment gardens

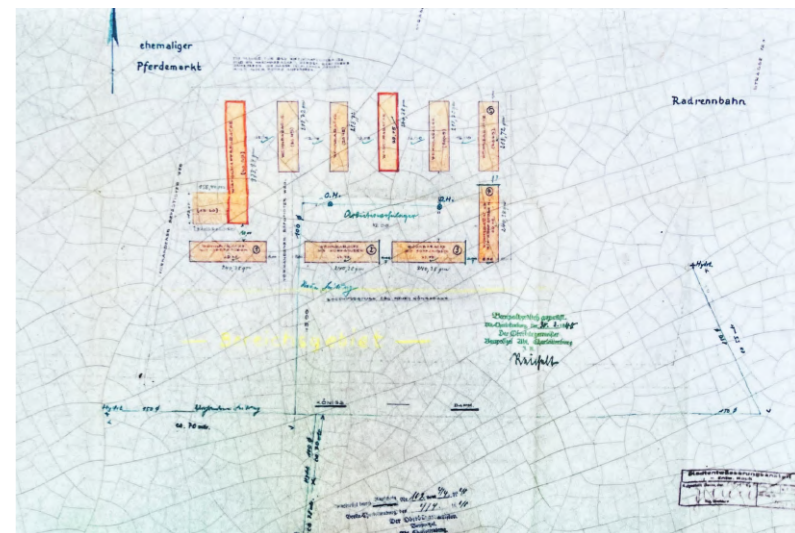


the lucky few—allotment gardens

I was invited for coffee and cake on a bright sunny Sunday at Dr. Lidia Gasperoni's allotment garden, one of 6,300 in Charlottensburger association. Lidia alongside her family and friends hosted me for a couple of hours. We talked about the allotments' area, Moabit—where they live, and the city. I learnt that most owners are blue collar workers from a low socio-economic status, and the allotment gardens started here in the early 20th century.

During World War II barracks were constructed near the Plötzensee prison, where some gardens are located. It is estimated that 500,000 people were forced to work in this labour camp in the years 1939-1945, and many of them German. The Inmates were later transferred to death camps in East Germany and Poland, departing from the freight decks in North Moabit.

Due to the scarcity of resources and the blockage of supply to West Berlin after the war, the citizens of Berlin relied on the garden owners' fresh food production.









train walk—typologies along the tracks

The Siemens train tracks are 4.5 km long; they connect the far west side of Siemensstadt to Moabit. However, a part of the connecting bridge between the two sides of the Westhafen Canal has been demolished after the 1980s workers strikes and some of the rails have been removed to allow expansion of the working freight and commute lanes. It is still possible to notice where the track lay due to the use of black gravel stones and occasional scraps of metal and wood beams.

I walked along the deserted lines back and forth, sometimes hidden, sometimes visible to pedestrians, workers in the office across the street, municipal clerks, construction workers, residents, school kids, animals, and insects.



*A trace of a fox's lunch on the tracks,
he revealed himself later*



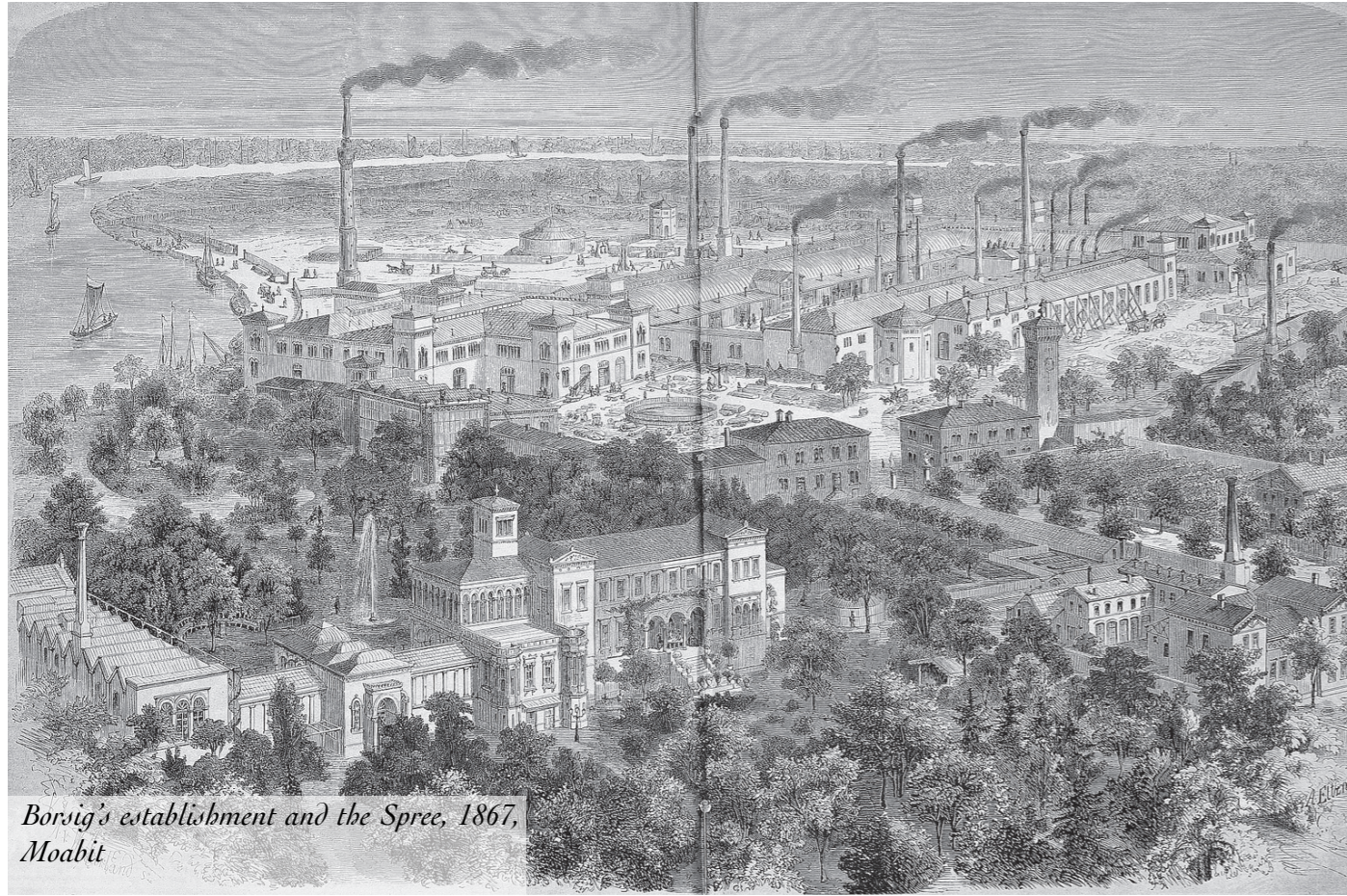


changes—riots across Berlin

On September 19th, 1910, the workers of Ernst Kupfer & Co.—a coal trade company on Sickingenstraße (North West Moabit) began protesting due to low salaries and bad working conditions. 30,000 workers from the North industrial area of Moabit joined, they were 15-20% of the total residents of the neighbourhood at the time. The first day of the protests ended after the intervention of the biggest police force seen by that time, two workers died and more than a hundred seriously injured. The 'Moabit Riots' sparked protests in other parts of Berlin and Germany for months to come, mainly in the coal related factories.

Depicted in the picture is the Weimar army forces (Reichswehr) camping outside Moabit municipal office (Bürgeramt Rathaus Tiergarten) on February 26th, 1919. They were sent to deal with the Ruhr uprising forces—Social Democrat workers led by left-wing parties and workers unions. The “Red Ruhr Army” 50,000 members fought across Germany against the Government and right-wing troops (Freikorps—free regiments). Riots, demonstrations, and unrest in Moabit also happened in the 1950s, late 1968, 1980s, and on other occasions.





Borsig's establishment and the Spree, 1867, Moabit



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