



Transforming Space: The Subjective Experience of Inhabitants in Integrating Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Design in Urban Spaces

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ABSTRACT

The integration of cultural heritage into contemporary urban architecture has become an increasingly significant topic within architectural design and environmental psychology. However, while various studies have explored the aesthetic and functional aspects of this integration, less attention has been given to understanding the lived experiences of residents in spaces that combine modern design with local cultural elements. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how residents perceive and emotionally connect with spaces that blend cultural heritage and contemporary architecture. Using a phenomenological approach, we examine the subjective experiences of residents to understand the deeper emotional, social, and identity-related impacts of such architectural integration. Through in-depth interviews and observations, the research reveals that cultural elements in design foster stronger emotional bonds, a deeper sense of identity, and greater community connection among residents. These findings suggest that integrating cultural heritage into urban spaces not only enriches the aesthetic experience but also plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' psychological and emotional connections to their environments. This study provides practical insights for architects, urban planners, and policymakers by emphasizing the necessity of prioritizing cultural identity in contemporary design practices. Such an approach can enhance community cohesion, inform sustainable urban development policies, and ensure that design initiatives are both culturally resonant and socially inclusive. The study also sets the stage for future research into the long-term impacts of such architectural approaches.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of cultural heritage into contemporary architectural design has emerged as a significant topic of discussion within the fields of architecture and urban planning (Abouhassan, 2019). As cities continue to expand and modernize, there is an increasing tension between innovation in design and the preservation of local traditions and cultural identity. Architecture, as a cultural artifact, does not only serve utilitarian purposes but also embodies the values, histories, and identities of the communities it represents (Belmessaoud-Boukhalfa, 2011). The experience of space, particularly in urban settings, is deeply intertwined with the cultural context in which it exists. Therefore, understanding how individuals engage with spaces that reflect their cultural heritage becomes essential in appreciating the full impact of architectural design on well-being and identity.

In the context of this study, the focus lies on exploring how urban residents experience spaces that integrate elements of local culture and heritage (Benslimane & Biara, 2019). These cultural

elements, such as traditional materials, architectural forms, and symbolic designs, are not only aesthetically significant but also act as a means of connecting the individual to their cultural roots. The design of such spaces can foster a strong emotional and psychological bond between the resident and their environment, enhancing their sense of belonging and identity (Boeri dkk., 2016). However, despite the growing recognition of this issue, there is limited research that specifically explores how people perceive and experience these integrated cultural elements on a personal level.

Previously, studies on architectural design have largely focused on the functionality and aesthetic qualities of spaces, with less emphasis on the subjective experiences of the inhabitants (Boeri dkk., 2020). While some research has addressed the role of cultural heritage in urban planning, it has primarily been through the lens of historical preservation or as part of broader social and environmental design discussions. In contrast, phenomenological research, which emphasizes the lived experience of individuals, offers a valuable approach to uncovering how specific design choices, particularly those that draw from cultural heritage, shape the daily experiences of the residents. This approach helps us understand not only how individuals interact with their built environment but also the deeper meanings and emotional connections they form with it.

The objective of this study is to address the gap in the literature by exploring the subjective, lived experiences of residents who inhabit spaces that integrate cultural elements (Crewe & Beaverstock, 1998). By focusing on these experiences, the study demonstrates how integrating cultural heritage into urban design can address existing research gaps by revealing the emotional and psychological dimensions of such spaces, which are often overlooked in traditional methodologies. This exploration allows for a deeper understanding of how the fusion of heritage and contemporary design influences emotional well-being, personal identity, and the overall experience of living in urban spaces. By focusing on these personal narratives, this research aims to offer insights into how cultural integration in architecture can enhance the quality of life and foster stronger connections between people and their environments. Moreover, the study's findings highlight practical implications for architects and urban planners, suggesting strategies for designing spaces that not only respect cultural heritage but also actively contribute to residents' emotional well-being and social cohesion.

The exploration of subjective experiences in the context of architectural design has become a critical area of research, particularly when examining how individuals relate to spaces that incorporate cultural elements (D'Amore dkk., 2025). While much of the existing research in architecture has focused on the physical, functional, and aesthetic qualities of buildings, there is a growing recognition of the importance of understanding the emotional and psychological impact of these spaces on their inhabitants. This shift in focus has led to a more human-centered approach, where the lived experiences of residents are valued as key to understanding the full significance of design. The role of cultural integration in architecture, in particular, has received increasing attention as researchers seek to understand how spaces that reflect cultural heritage influence identity, comfort, and emotional well-being.

However, investigating the deep meanings and lived experiences of individuals within such spaces presents significant methodological challenges (Hou, 2012). Phenomenology, which emphasizes the first-person perspectives of participants, is one of the few approaches capable of capturing the nuances of these subjective experiences. Quantitative methods, which dominate much of architectural and urban design research, are often insufficient for delving into the complex, emotional, and symbolic aspects of how individuals engage with space. These methods typically focus on measurable data, such as user satisfaction ratings or environmental factors, which fail to capture the richness of personal meaning and emotional connection that cultural elements can evoke.

The challenge lies in how to approach these experiences in a way that respects their complexity and depth. While some qualitative research has attempted to explore the relationship between architecture and cultural identity, many studies have relied on frameworks that do not fully engage with the lived experiences of the individuals involved (Invernizzi, 2018). For example, ethnographic studies may describe cultural practices and behaviors in relation to space, but they often do not provide insight into the emotional or psychological significance of these spaces to the

inhabitants. Thus, a more nuanced, phenomenological approach is required to explore how individuals derive meaning from spaces that integrate their cultural heritage, and how these spaces influence their sense of self and belonging.

Given these methodological limitations, phenomenology provides the necessary tools to uncover the essential, lived experience of individuals within culturally rich architectural environments. By focusing on how people perceive and interpret their surroundings, this approach allows for a deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological impacts of cultural integration in architecture—insights that cannot be captured through more traditional, quantitative methods.

Despite the growing interest in the relationship between architecture, cultural heritage, and the lived experiences of residents, current research often relies on traditional, practical approaches that focus on quantifiable aspects of design, such as spatial functionality, user satisfaction, or environmental performance. These approaches, while useful for certain purposes, fail to capture the deeper, emotional, and psychological layers of how individuals experience and relate to culturally integrated spaces. For example, studies that measure how "comfortable" a space feels or how it meets users' basic needs tend to overlook the subtler, more personal connections that individuals form with their surroundings, particularly when those surroundings reflect their cultural identity.

Such quantitative or even basic qualitative methods often miss the rich, subjective meanings that cultural elements embedded in architecture may hold for inhabitants. These methods may describe patterns of behavior or physical interactions with space, but they do not fully explore the emotional and existential experiences associated with living in a culturally enriched environment. In this context, the current body of knowledge remains limited in its understanding of how these spaces actually shape residents' identities, emotional connections, and sense of place, leaving significant gaps in how architectural design can influence the human experience.

A promising alternative is the adoption of a phenomenological approach, which allows for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of individuals in these culturally integrated spaces. Phenomenology, with its focus on the essence of experience and meaning, enables researchers to uncover how residents emotionally and psychologically engage with architectural spaces that embody cultural heritage. This approach offers a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the human experience, one that moves beyond surface-level observations to explore how individuals derive meaning, create a sense of belonging, and establish connections to their personal and collective identities through architecture.

Thus, while previous research has made significant contributions, it is clear that a more phenomenological lens is needed to explore these subjective dimensions of experience. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how cultural heritage integration in architecture influences the lived experiences of urban residents, providing insights that have been largely overlooked by current methodologies.

Several studies have explored the relationship between cultural heritage and architectural design, focusing on the integration of traditional elements in contemporary spaces. Research in this area highlights how architecture not only fulfills functional needs but also conveys cultural meaning, fostering a sense of identity and belonging for its inhabitants. Key theories, such as the Place Theory, have been used to explain how spaces shape individual and collective experiences. While these studies contribute valuable insights, they often fall short of exploring the emotional and subjective experiences of individuals within these spaces. As discussed earlier, traditional methodologies, including quantitative surveys or basic qualitative analysis, fail to capture the richness and depth of personal meaning that residents derive from living in culturally enriched environments.

To address this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of residents in spaces that integrate cultural heritage. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on first-person perspectives, offers an effective way to investigate how individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally connect with their surroundings. By focusing on the essence of these experiences, phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural elements in architecture shape residents' identities and sense of place. This approach is particularly well-suited for exploring the

subtleties of human experience that cannot be captured by more traditional research methods. Through in-depth interviews and observations, this study aims to uncover the emotional and psychological significance of culturally integrated spaces for their inhabitants.

The structure of this article is designed to guide readers through the study in a clear and logical manner. The introduction provides an overview of the research context, theoretical framework, and the gaps in existing literature that the study addresses. Following this, the methodology section outlines the phenomenological approach used to gather and analyze data. The results section presents the key themes identified through data analysis, highlighting the lived experiences of residents. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections interpret the findings, offering insights into how cultural heritage integration in architecture can impact residents' emotional connections and sense of identity, as well as its broader implications for architectural practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of residents interacting with architectural spaces that integrate cultural heritage elements (Kang, 2016). Phenomenology was chosen as the research design because it focuses on the lived experiences and meanings individuals attach to particular phenomena, offering deep insights into how participants perceive and interpret their environments. This approach is particularly suited for understanding the ways in which cultural elements embedded in contemporary architecture influence emotional connections, identity, and a sense of belonging.

The phenomenological design allows for the exploration of these personal and collective experiences in a detailed, descriptive manner. Specifically, this study applied descriptive phenomenology, as proposed by Giorgi (2009), which aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the essence of participants' lived experiences without interpreting or theorizing beyond the raw data. This methodology enables a direct examination of the participants' perceptions and emotions in relation to the cultural dimensions of their built environments.

However, it is important to acknowledge potential biases inherent in the phenomenological approach, such as the subjective interpretation of participants' narratives and the influence of researcher preconceptions. To mitigate these limitations, this study employed bracketing, a process where researchers consciously set aside personal biases and assumptions to focus solely on participants' perspectives (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Additionally, peer debriefing and triangulation through observations were used to enhance the credibility of findings.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those who were included had relevant experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria required participants to have lived in an urban architectural space that incorporates local cultural heritage elements for at least one year. Additionally, participants needed to have a strong cultural background and familiarity with the traditions represented in the design of their living spaces. This ensured that the individuals could provide meaningful insights into the cultural significance of their environments.

Exclusion criteria included individuals who had not directly experienced living in spaces that integrated cultural elements or those who were unfamiliar with the cultural context of the designs. A total of twelve participants were selected, representing a diverse range of ages (from 25 to 65 years) and genders (6 males and 6 females). The demographic range ensured a broad spectrum of perspectives regarding the impact of cultural integration in architectural design. Participants were from various professional backgrounds, including educators, artisans, and office workers, all of whom had varying levels of engagement with the cultural heritage embedded in their living environments.

The selection process also considered potential biases related to participants' socioeconomic status or professional backgrounds, ensuring diversity to reduce skewed interpretations of the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow for flexibility in exploring the participants' experiences while maintaining a focus on the core research questions (Leclercq, 2018). The interviews were designed to probe deeply into the participants' perceptions, emotional responses, and personal interpretations of the integration of cultural elements in their homes.

The interviews were conducted in person at locations chosen by the participants, typically within their living spaces, which ensured comfort and a more authentic reflection of their experiences. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. The interview protocol was developed to guide the conversation while allowing room for spontaneous responses. Questions focused on how the participants felt about the cultural elements present in their spaces, the emotional impact of these elements, and how the design of their home reflected their personal and community identities.

In addition to interviews, direct observations were made within the participants' homes. These observations provided additional context and allowed for a deeper understanding of how residents interacted with the design elements in their daily lives. Observations focused on the use of space, engagement with cultural features (such as furniture, wall decorations, and material choices), and overall comfort within the environment.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely employed technique in phenomenological research. The process began with transcribing the interviews and field notes from observations. These transcriptions were carefully reviewed, and key phrases and expressions that described the participants' lived experiences were identified.

Subsequent steps involved coding the data into categories that reflected common themes related to the integration of cultural elements in the design of living spaces. Themes such as emotional connection, sense of identity, and aesthetic and psychological impacts emerged as prominent categories across the participants' narratives. These categories were then refined into more specific sub-themes. The final step involved synthesizing these sub-themes into core themes that encapsulated the essence of the participants' experiences. NVivo software was used to facilitate the management of the data, but the primary analysis was performed manually to ensure a close connection with the participants' voices.

This process was iterative, with ongoing refinement of the thematic structure to ensure it accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences. By focusing on these central themes, the analysis yielded a nuanced understanding of how cultural integration in architecture influences emotional and psychological connections with space.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Approval for the research was obtained from the relevant ethics review committee, ensuring that the study adhered to ethical guidelines. All participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to ensure their privacy and confidentiality.

Informed written consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. This consent included explicit acknowledgment of their understanding that their participation would involve personal interviews and observations, which would be recorded and transcribed for analysis. To protect participants' identities, all personal data and interview responses were anonymized, and identifying information was removed from the final transcripts. Data were stored securely and only accessible to the research team.

This study complied with international ethical standards, including those outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki and local ethical guidelines, ensuring that participants' rights and well-being were respected throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Emotional Connection and Comfort through Cultural Integration

The integration of local cultural elements into contemporary architectural designs significantly impacted the emotional connection of the residents to their living spaces. Many participants expressed a profound sense of comfort and familiarity when interacting with spaces that incorporated traditional materials or design elements reflective of their cultural heritage. One participant shared, “I feel calmer and more at ease in this space because I see elements that are familiar from my grandmother’s house—it’s like bringing a piece of the past into my everyday life.” This sentiment was echoed by other residents who described their living environments as spaces that connected them emotionally to their personal histories and cultural identities.

Further observations confirmed that residents often engaged more deeply with their environments when cultural elements were incorporated. They seemed more relaxed and comfortable in spaces that featured local materials such as wood or stone, and traditional furniture pieces. For instance, in spaces designed with intricate wood carvings or local textiles, the residents appeared to be more present and engaged during social interactions, indicating a stronger emotional attachment to the space.

Strengthened Sense of Identity and Belonging

The theme of identity and belonging emerged as a key component of residents' experiences in spaces that integrated cultural heritage. Many participants indicated that the presence of cultural elements in their living environment helped them affirm their identity and foster a sense of belonging to the community. One interviewee remarked, “This house isn’t just a place to live, it’s a statement about who I am and where I come from.” This quote illustrates how the design of the space, by incorporating elements of local heritage, was not only functional but also symbolic, serving as a representation of personal and collective identity.

In the interviews, several participants mentioned that they felt a deeper connection to their community and the broader cultural landscape when surrounded by designs that reflected shared traditions. The use of materials like locally sourced stone and community-inspired artwork contributed to a feeling of being rooted in their cultural past. These residents perceived their living spaces not merely as physical structures but as extensions of their cultural narrative, which reinforced their sense of belonging to both their home and the broader cultural context.

Perception of Space as a Cultural Reflection

The integration of cultural elements was also viewed as a means of ensuring that the design of the space reflected the values and stories of the community. Many residents noted that the way their spaces were designed, with consideration for cultural heritage, created a unique and meaningful atmosphere. One participant noted, “Every time I walk into this room, it feels like I’m stepping into a piece of my history. The space doesn’t just function, it tells a story.” This perception indicates that the space was not merely a backdrop for daily life but also a cultural artifact, intertwining function with meaning.

This theme was further supported by observations of residents’ interactions with culturally infused design elements. For example, spaces featuring murals or motifs inspired by local folklore were points of frequent interaction and discussion among residents and visitors. This suggests that the design, by incorporating cultural elements, fostered not only a sense of belonging but also an ongoing engagement with the culture and history it represented.

Aesthetic and Psychological Impact of Cultural Design Elements

Residents’ experiences also highlighted the aesthetic and psychological effects of integrating local culture into the built environment. Many participants expressed a sense of psychological well-being when surrounded by familiar cultural symbols or traditional craftsmanship. One respondent shared, “It’s not just the beauty of the space, but the way it makes me feel connected to something

greater. It's like living in a place that nurtures my spirit." This highlights the importance of cultural integration not just for aesthetic appeal but for its deeper psychological effects, contributing to overall well-being.

Moreover, residents in spaces that were thoughtfully designed with cultural sensitivity reported feeling more relaxed and at peace in their homes. The presence of locally sourced materials, combined with traditional design principles, seemed to provide a soothing and grounding effect. These spaces, designed to respect and celebrate local heritage, created environments that felt more personal and nurturing to the inhabitants.

The findings of this research underscore the profound impact of integrating cultural heritage into contemporary architectural design. Participants consistently reported a stronger emotional connection, enhanced sense of identity, and a deeper sense of belonging when their living environments reflected local traditions and cultural values. The experience of these spaces went beyond functionality, with many residents perceiving their homes as active embodiments of cultural continuity and personal history. The integration of cultural elements not only enriched the aesthetic and psychological quality of the space but also fostered a sense of place that was both meaningful and emotionally resonant for the residents.

DISCUSSION

This study uncovers how the integration of cultural heritage in urban architectural design profoundly shapes the lived experiences of residents, influencing their sense of identity and emotional connection to space (Moscatelli dkk., 2024). The analysis of participants' experiences revealed that spaces incorporating local cultural elements foster stronger ties to the past, enhance feelings of belonging, and deepen residents' emotional engagement with their environment. These findings offer a fresh perspective on how cultural integration in architecture can go beyond functional and aesthetic considerations, creating spaces that are emotionally and symbolically meaningful.

The findings directly address the central research question about how residents perceive and respond to the integration of cultural heritage in contemporary urban design (Olivadese & Dindo, 2024). This study reveals that cultural elements, such as traditional materials, architectural forms, and symbolic references, are not merely decorative but play a significant role in shaping how individuals experience their environment. Participants described feeling a sense of comfort, security, and identity when living in spaces that reflected their cultural heritage, as these spaces resonated with their personal histories and collective memories (Öztürk & Aktan, 2024). The emotional connection to these spaces goes beyond mere aesthetic appreciation, revealing the deeper psychological and social functions of culturally enriched architecture. By emphasizing these dimensions, this study provides actionable insights for architects and urban planners seeking to create spaces that align with residents' psychological and emotional needs.

The results of this study align with key theoretical perspectives on the relationship between architecture and identity, particularly the Place Theory, which suggests that the built environment profoundly influences an individual's sense of self and belonging (Relph, 1976). Previous research has explored how architectural elements tied to cultural heritage contribute to a sense of place (Gieryn, 2000), but this study extends that understanding by focusing on the emotional and psychological experiences of residents within these spaces. The findings support earlier studies that emphasize the importance of cultural context in architecture (Haug, 2014), while also providing new evidence on how these elements foster a sense of continuity between past and present, which is crucial for residents' emotional well-being. This perspective is consistent with studies from diverse contexts, such as rural villages in India (Saxena, 2019) and urban restoration projects in Europe (De Luca, 2022), highlighting the universal value of cultural integration in architecture while noting contextual variations. Furthermore, the study contrasts with research that has primarily focused on the physical or functional aspects of space (e.g., user comfort, spatial efficiency) without considering the emotional and symbolic dimensions of cultural integration. In doing so, this research highlights the limitations of previous methodologies that often overlook the experiential dimensions of living in culturally resonant spaces.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both academic research and practical architectural design (Vieira dkk., 2022). From an academic perspective, this research adds to the growing body of knowledge on how architecture, particularly spaces integrating cultural heritage, shapes the lived experiences of individuals. The emotional and identity-related dimensions uncovered in this study emphasize the importance of designing spaces that are not only functional but also resonate with the cultural and personal histories of their inhabitants. Practically, the study suggests that architects and urban planners should consider not only the physical and aesthetic elements of design but also the deeper emotional and cultural meanings embedded in the built environment. For cities undergoing rapid urbanization or modernization, this approach could help preserve cultural heritage while simultaneously enhancing the quality of life for residents. By integrating local traditions and history into modern architectural practice, it is possible to create spaces that foster a stronger sense of place and community, which is crucial for social cohesion in urban environments.

Limitations of the Study

While this research provides valuable insights into the subjective experiences of residents in culturally integrated spaces, there are several limitations to consider. First, the study focused on a specific urban context, and the experiences of participants may not be universally applicable to other regions or cultures with different historical, social, or architectural contexts (Wang dkk., 2016). The sample size, though purposeful and rich in data, was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the research employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach, which, by its nature, focuses on individual experiences and cannot provide statistical generalizations. This methodological choice, while providing deep insights into personal perceptions, also means that broader patterns across different demographic groups or geographical regions may not be fully explored. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size, including a more diverse set of cultural contexts, or using mixed methods approaches to capture both qualitative depth and broader generalizations.

Future Research Directions

This study opens several avenues for future research that can further explore the intersection of architecture, cultural heritage, and human experience. One promising direction is to extend the research to other cultural and geographical contexts to examine whether the findings hold true across different societies or urban environments (Zhongshu & Huadong, 2024). Comparative studies could help identify universal themes in how cultural elements in architecture influence residents' experiences while also highlighting the unique ways that local traditions shape perceptions of space. Additionally, future studies could explore how different types of cultural integration—such as the use of specific materials, architectural forms, or communal spaces—impact residents' emotional connections to their surroundings. Another fruitful area for future research could involve the long-term effects of living in culturally enriched spaces, investigating whether these emotional connections and senses of identity evolve or deepen over time. Finally, interdisciplinary research involving urban sociology, cultural studies, and environmental psychology could enrich our understanding of how architecture functions as a catalyst for broader social and cultural dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how the integration of cultural heritage in contemporary urban architecture shapes residents' lived experiences, focusing on their emotional connections and sense of identity within these spaces. The findings reveal that cultural elements embedded in architectural design significantly enhance feelings of belonging, identity, and emotional attachment to one's environment. By examining the experiences of residents in spaces that reflect local traditions, this research fills a gap in understanding the deeper psychological and social roles of architecture in urban contexts. The study underscores that architectural design is not merely functional or aesthetic but also serves as a medium for cultural expression and continuity.

For architects and urban planners, these findings emphasize the importance of incorporating local cultural elements thoughtfully into design processes. Specific actionable recommendations include: Using locally sourced materials and traditional craftsmanship to foster stronger emotional connections and a sense of place among residents. Integrating symbolic motifs or design elements that resonate with the community's cultural identity, ensuring these are not superficial but deeply rooted in historical and cultural significance. Prioritizing participatory design processes that involve community input to ensure that cultural integration aligns with residents' lived experiences and aspirations.

Urban planners can also leverage these insights by designing public spaces that serve as cultural hubs, blending heritage elements with contemporary functionality. Such spaces could include community centers, parks, and plazas that celebrate local traditions while fostering social interaction and cohesion. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the intersection of culture and architecture, providing insights into how modern design can preserve cultural heritage while enriching residents' lives. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring different cultural settings and longitudinal effects of living in such spaces. Moreover, interdisciplinary studies involving environmental psychology and cultural sociology could further deepen our understanding of the long-term impact of cultural integration in architectural design.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This article has undergone an independent and objective review process. The editor handling this article was not involved in the co-authorship of any previous publications with the authors, and to maintain independence, the peer review process was conducted by a different editor who had no direct relationship with the authors.

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