

THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

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DESIGN FOR 'DOMESTICATION': THE DECOMMERCIALISATION OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contribution of design to the 'domestication' of traditional crafts: the reframing and support of such practices as amateur activities. Informed by twelve examples, six design strategies for the domestication of traditional crafts are identified and discussed.

This issue emerges from a research project investigating the role of design in developing and revitalising culturally significant designs, products and associated practices. Within this paper, we focus on strategies that seek to revitalise traditional crafts by supporting domestic activity. This topic is introduced through a discussion of commercialisation, a more common approach to revitalisation.

Two contemporary social trends support domestication: the strong interest – particularly in post-industrial countries – in provenance, local distinctiveness and authenticity; and the growth of maker culture and its ethos of amateur creativity.

We gather twelve examples of various formats – such as books, kits, online communities, videos, workshops and holidays – which support amateur activity. The examples are analysed via a matrix, which considers their characteristics in terms of two variables: the way in which knowledge is exchanged, and the degree of experimentation facilitated by the activity. By categorising the examples, we identify six domestication strategies, each of which involves a different combination of design activities. Finally, we discuss domestication in terms of skill and innovation, arguing that amateur practice has much to offer in both respects.

Keywords: tradition, craft, culture, revitalisation, amateur, design strategy,

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the contribution of design to the 'domestication' of traditional crafts: the reframing of such practices as amateur leisure activities. This issue emerges from a research project investigating the role of design in developing and revitalising designs, products and practices that are culturally significant: linked to local, regional and national communities through tradition and a sense of place.

Here, we will focus particularly on traditional craft practices. Such crafts are found in every culture and country, and we have looked across the whole world in outlining this topic. However, we will draw the majority of our examples of domestication from the UK, where many crafts are supported by vibrant amateur activity.

Today, traditional craft products face many challenges; they are often seen as being outdated or irrelevant in comparison with modern, mass-produced alternatives. However, people across the world are reassessing the value of crafts, seeing them as integral to their cultural heritage, with much to offer for the future in terms of sustainability, identity and wellbeing. Hence, we can observe diverse attempts to revitalise traditional crafts: that is, to develop and promote them in order that practice may continue into the future.

We feel that these revitalisation projects are strongly related to innovation. Although the term is often associated with technological progress, within our context innovation can also refer to initiatives that provide new ways of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next, or – more fundamentally – restore a sense of place and meaning to our material culture.

Before exploring our main area of interest – the domestication of traditional crafts – we will set the context by considering the more common approach of commercialisation. We are particularly interested in the role of design within commercialisation and domestication strategies, and are adopting a broad view of design, which encompasses not only the design of craft products themselves, but also areas such as branding, the redesign of production processes, and the communication of practical knowledge.

2 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

This research aims to develop a framework for the development and revitalisation of culturally significant designs, products and practices, for use by those engaging in such activities – whether governments, non-governmental organisations, businesses, enthusiast groups or committed individuals.

Our research involves an incremental process, drawing on a number of complementary methods. In the first phase, we have conducted a literature review to understand the common characteristics of these designs, products and practices, and the factors that affect their long-term survival or decline. We have gathered many accounts of crafts from around the world, which offer a holistic understanding of the situation in different contexts.

At present we are reviewing examples of culturally significant designs, products and practices that have been revitalised, in order to analyse the many ways in which design can contribute to such projects. A number of areas of interest have already emerged, including the focus of this paper: amateur activity and traditional crafts. From our current database of over 180 cases, we are selecting a number of exemplar initiatives to study in greater detail.

Building on this knowledge, we will then develop a framework that is intended to facilitate the planning, investigation, conceptualisation and processing of culturally significant design interventions, which can be applied in a range of contexts. The framework will be tested through a number of propositional design initiatives and external consultation, before being promoted to the craft and design community.

3 COMMERCIALISATION

While the main focus on this paper is domestication, we will first examine the more dominant approach of commercialisation. Our literature review has indicated countless examples from countries across the world. In some cases,

crafts have undergone a direct transition from domestic to commercial practice. For example, female embroiderers in Kutch, who now sell their work, remember a time when they only embroidered for their own families. As one of the women explains, 'We embroidered for ourselves, and our relations. Besides that we didn't embroider. Never! There was never an idea of anything but for our homes.' (The Masters' Voices: Traditional Design in Textile Arts of Kutch 2010). More frequently, initiatives aim to develop existing commercial enterprises by opening up new markets, beyond the local community (Cohen 1989) or improving the goods on offer in terms of aesthetic appeal, quality or utility. Hence, under the umbrella of 'commercialisation' we include projects that aim to initiate, develop or support commercial activity.

Although every situation will be different, we can observe common factors that drive commercialisation. As a society becomes modernised and industrialised, the ability of traditional craftspeople to continue operating on a domestic or local scale is adversely affected. The commercialisation of crafts has been seen as a way of sustaining elements of traditional culture, while providing a useful and accessible means of economic development (Friel & Santagata 2008). Commercialisation is still very much in practice today, coordinated by national and international initiatives. The Alliance for Artisan Enterprise, for example, aims 'to support the power and potential of the artisan sector, to create jobs, increase incomes, enhance cultural heritage and promote development that respects the uniqueness of people and place' (Alliance for Artisan Enterprise 2014).

We are in the preliminary stages of identifying strategies from the examples of commercialisation we have gathered. Excellent work has already been undertaken in this area, notably by Borges (2011) and the Craft Revival Trust (2005). Amongst the design-led strategies identified by Borges are the development of strong visual identities for traditional crafts; improving production processes; and the documentation of traditional patterns to enrich artisans' repertoires.

Perhaps the most frequently employed design strategy is the redesign of craft products to suit the needs of contemporary customers. The greater the geographical and cultural differences between makers and customers, the greater the changes in colour, form, pattern and purpose are likely to be (Craft Revival Trust 2005). Meanwhile, the economics of making items for sale places pressure on the time that can be spent on each item. This often has the effect of simplifying designs, making work coarser and so on (The Masters' Voices: Traditional Design in Textile Arts of Kutch 2010). Many people are concerned about these changes, which can lead to the so-called 'trinketisation' of crafts. However, as Cohen (1989) points out, these issues are not black and white. Consideration should be given to the degree of control that craftspeople have over their activities. Furthermore, it should be noted that all traditional crafts evolve in order to remain relevant, often in response to cross-cultural contact; in fact, such change should be seen as an inherent quality of tradition (Stankard 2010).

Despite the optimism surrounding commercialisation and the valuable contribution that can be made by design to this process, the challenges of modernisation and industrialisation are widespread and severe. It is evident that commercialisation carries no guarantee of long-lasting survival for traditional crafts. Although commercialisation appears to be the default option for many

working to revitalise traditional crafts, we argue that domestication is an important alternative approach that may have great value in many contexts.

4 DOMESTICATION

By domestication, we are referring to the repositioning of traditional crafts as amateur activities. Just as with commercialisation, we include activities that initiate, develop and support domestic practice. It should be noted that amateur and professional activity can, and does, co-exist. Therefore, domestication can be carried out in places where crafts are continuing to provide a living for communities of makers, as well as in contexts where professional craftspeople face severe challenges. We can think of domestication as involving decommercialisation – in recognition of the amateur nature of domestic practice – while acknowledging that new commercial opportunities may emerge, through increased demand for instruction, patterns and materials.

For an approach of domestication to be successful, there needs to be an appetite for both tradition and participation in making amongst non-professionals. Two contemporary social trends support such an appetite: the strong interest – particularly in post-industrial countries – in provenance, local distinctiveness and authenticity; and the growth of maker culture and its ethos of amateur creativity.

Gibson (2011: 20) describes a number of factors – including environmental concerns and suspicion of big brands – that have 'persuaded a certain type of (generally wealthy and middle class) consumer to think about provenance'. Heying (2010) argues that this trend is characteristic of a post-Fordist society, and leads people to rediscover the importance of place and local knowledge. Meanwhile, the past decade has seen a noticeable resurgence of making as a participatory activity, aided significantly by the connective power of the internet (Gauntlett, 2011). Although many contemporary making activities are based on new technologies, a new generation of makers is also discovering traditional crafts.

While these trends are often encountered separately, they are complementary: as people become dissatisfied with the offerings of modern industrial society, they start to search for more meaningful possessions, and gain interest in creating things for themselves. As Gibson and Heying have identified, these factors are more likely to be found in post-industrial cultures, and amongst those with time for leisure.

All of the elements supporting domestication can be found in the UK. There is not only an emergent culture of amateur making and a strong interest in local distinctiveness, but also many traditional crafts in danger of extinction (Heritage Crafts Association 2014). Interestingly, one isolated example suggests that these conditions may be emerging in parts of the world where commercialisation is still an important strategy, such as India.

Bishopston Trading was a fair trade company, set up in 1985 to support hand weavers in the South Indian village of K V Kuppam (Bishopston Voice 2013). Despite developing into a profitable ongoing enterprise, with several shops in the southwest of England, Bishopston closed in 2013. Carolyn Whitwell, the founder of the company, explained that this closure was mainly due to the success of an education scheme, which the enterprise had supported: 'Many of these children have now gone onto higher education. There are now not enough weavers in the

area to keep up with the supplies we need.' (quoted by Bishopston Voice 2013). Given that the goal of many craft commercialisation projects is economic development, it is easy to imagine that this situation may start to arise more frequently, and that the conditions for domestication may become more widespread in India in future.

5 STRATEGIES FOR DOMESTICATION

Our literature review has revealed little discussion of the domestication of traditional crafts. There is a relevant body of literature relating to DIY and amateur crafts, and the role of the professional designer in supporting amateur activity (e.g. Atkinson 2006). However, these sources tend not to deal with explicitly traditional or place-related crafts, or with revitalisation as an underpinning motivation.

With this in mind, we will use twelve examples to discuss the various formats – such as books, kits, online communities, videos, workshops and holidays – which support amateur activity, and consider the role of design within the examples we identify. We have drawn several of these examples from the culture of hand knitting, which has been a vibrant amateur craft since being reframed as a hobby for middle-class women in the mid-nineteenth century (Rutt 1987). Today, many localised traditions of knitting – such as Fair Isle, Shetland lace and Sanquhar knitting – are thriving. Although the majority of our examples cater for existing communities of amateur practitioners, the strategies they represent could be equally relevant to newly initiated domestication projects. In order to focus, we have excluded purely skills-based activities, examining only those that support amateur makers to produce their own crafted objects. We have purposely selected a broad range of examples, catering for absolute beginners to expert practitioners. While a few of the examples shown here represent well-established formats, such as the pattern book, 'make your own' kit or weekend workshop, others are contemporary innovations that have emerged within the supportive environment of amateur interest and internet-enabled connectivity described in the previous section. As we will see, even familiar formats can support experimentation *within* the crafts, which will arguably lead to further open-ended innovation.

We have plotted these examples in a matrix diagram (figure 1), according to two variables: the way in which knowledge is exchanged, and the degree of experimentation facilitated by the activity. Each variable is split into categories. As we will discuss below, the role of design differs between these categories, and so the shaded area on the diagram details the core design activities we have identified in each one. The intersections of the categories produce six domestication strategies, each of which involves a different combination of design activities. The matrix is an early contribution to the framework for design-led revitalisation that we aim to produce as a central output of the research.

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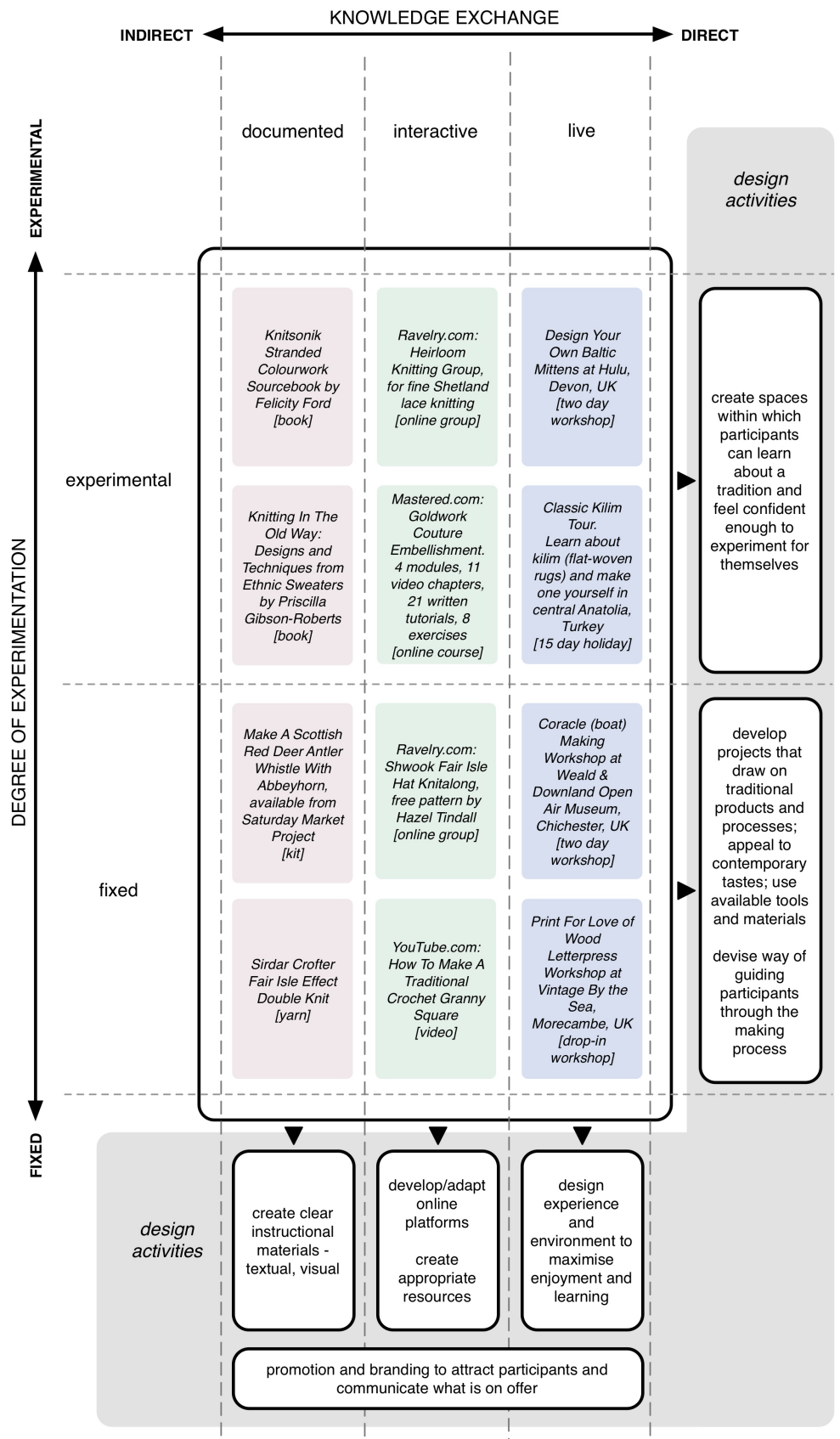


Figure 1 – Matrix showing examples of domestication and related design activities.

5.1 KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

We will discuss the two variables in turn, starting with the horizontal axis: the way in which knowledge is exchanged. We have divided the cases into three categories along this axis: *documented*, *interactive* and *live*. Within the *documented* category falls all of the written and visual documentation – in book or pattern form – which records and communicates knowledge about how to make craft objects. The category also includes kits – such as the horn whistle kit we have featured – which provide the materials required for a specific project, and even materials which mimic traditional patterns, such as the spray-dyed yarn that produces a multicoloured pattern reminiscent of Fair Isle knitting.

The *interactive* group includes instructional videos and online support. In some cases, this support is delivered by highly skilled professionals; this is the selling point of the Mastered.com goldwork embroidery online course. In other cases – such as the two examples associated with the knitters' social network, Ravelry.com – support is provided by peer communities. *Live* strategies refer to workshops of various types, where practitioners work together in a shared space.

Each category supports a different mode of knowledge exchange. Documented cases transmit knowledge indirectly; it is not usually possible to ask the author of a book for clarification, or to discuss one's individual ideas. In contrast, when tutors and learners – or communities of enthusiasts – are working in direct contact with one another, such as in a workshop situation, there are many opportunities for multi-directional knowledge transfer and open exploration. Interactive strategies lay somewhere in between; online tools facilitate interaction, but the potential to discuss material and tacit issues can be limited by the lack of physical proximity.

These groups are not mutually exclusive; we can readily imagine that the author of the *Knitsonik Stranded Colourwork Sourcebook* might run workshops on the creative methods documented in the book. Equally, the coracle workshop tutor might upload videos of particular techniques to support participants in the tasks they need to complete at home. The online 'knitalong' allows participants to gain support from others knitting the same Fair Isle hat pattern. As the matrix indicates, the design activities for each category are different, ranging from the design of instructional materials to the design of a live experience. Across all categories, design can contribute to promotion and branding, attracting potential participants and clearly communicating the opportunity that is on offer.

5.2 DEGREE OF EXPERIMENTATION

Let us now turn to the second variable: the degree of experimentation that is facilitated by the activity. We have divided this vertical axis into two categories: those which follow fixed patterns, and those which encourage and support experimentation within the scope of a traditional craft. There is some variation within each category; for example, the video which guides viewers in crocheting a 'granny square' communicates a prescribed design, while other patterns might invite some variation in terms of size, colour and layout. The workshop which supports participants to design their own Baltic mittens encourages makers to explore the creative potential of a particular tradition; *Knitting in the Old Way* does the same, but within more tightly bounded parameters. The example which goes the furthest in inviting experimentation is the *Knitsonik Stranded*

Colourwork Sourcebook. Author Felicity Ford encourages knitters to take inspiration from traditional Estonian and Shetland knitting, but to develop new multicoloured designs based on the colours and patterns of their own localities (Ford 2014).

Once again, we can identify different design challenges within each category. The *fixed* categories require the designer to design projects and patterns, while within the *experimental* categories, the designer is creating spaces within which makers can experiment for themselves. Interestingly, this spectrum of design activity – from examples in which designers create new designs, to those in which designers support others to design – can also be found in commercialisation projects; Borges (2011) describes a number of commercial initiatives that would correspond with each of these categories.

5.3 OTHER VARIABLES

There are, of course, further variables that differentiate these examples, which are not represented on this simple matrix. For example, the timescale of the activity: from a brief drop-in session, such as the letterpress workshop, to an extended residential experience, such as the 15-day kilim rug holiday in Turkey. The duration of a project affects the scale of the items that can be made, the scope for experimentation, and the amount of information about a tradition that can be shared. Another variable is the importance of place; some activities offer direct and 'authentic' access to the place with which a traditional craft is associated, while others disseminate the knowledge of a craft far from its origins.

6 DOMESTICATION, SKILL AND INNOVATION

Those already familiar with amateur craft activity are likely to recognise the value of domestic practice in terms of skill and innovation. However, there is a possibility that those with experience only within commercial revitalisation – and the professional designers involved in revitalisation projects – may assume that domestication carries the risk of a craft becoming simplified or stagnated. Therefore, we feel it is important to briefly discuss the relationship between amateur activity, skill and innovation.

6.1 SKILL

The domestication strategies discussed here cater for a wide range of skill levels, from beginner to expert. There is some correlation between the degree of experimentation and the level of skill; many fixed patterns and kits are aimed at those with low levels of skill, while experimental strategies tend to require a certain level of technical ability. Some may argue that the pursuit of strategies aimed at beginners risks the loss of expert knowledge – especially in the case of examples such as the spray-dyed 'Fair Isle' yarn, in which the 'skill' is largely transferred from knitter to yarn. However, within thriving amateur communities, such as that of hand knitting, there is great scope for makers to progress from beginner level to expert, gaining experience through a range of supports.

Commercial approaches have a tendency to deskill practitioners, with automated processes and off-the-shelf components replacing expensive skilled labour. As we discussed earlier, the economics of commercial activity also places pressure on the complexity and fineness of the crafts which are produced. Amateur

makers are able to take time and care; thus, amateur activity gives time for the development of equal, if not greater, expertise than professional practice.

There are some situations that participants would be more likely to treat as one-off experiences, and thus would not support the development of skills to a high level: crafts which produce items with limited use in contemporary life (such as a coracle) or require highly specialist equipment (such as letterpress printing). However, it is likely that the experience of making, albeit at a basic level, will raise awareness about the craft, and appreciation for the work of experts – thus potentially supporting the success of commercial craft enterprises.

6.2 INNOVATION

It may seem surprising to discuss innovation in relation to traditional crafts, which often appear to be static and unchanging. However, as we have mentioned previously, traditions must evolve in order to remain relevant and viable in contemporary life. It is important for practitioners of traditional crafts to have space to experiment and innovate – hence our interest in the degree of experimentation afforded by different domestication strategies. The experimental examples we have discussed deliver this capacity. However, it is important to note that fixed strategies do not necessarily 'lock in' makers to prescribed patterns. As makers gain confidence and develop their tacit knowledge, they often begin to adapt and deviate from patterns, and to seek out resources that will support them in doing so. Therefore, as with skill, we can see that the domestication strategies discussed here offer a means of progression to amateur practitioners.

Two examples of historical domestic practice provide evidence that amateur activity generates a high intensity of innovation. The embroiderers in Kutch, previously mentioned in the commercialisation section, describe how their former domestic activity involved a great degree of experimentation, with each artisan aiming to outdo her peers. In their experience, commercialisation has stifled this creative activity (The Masters' Voices: Traditional Design in Textile Arts of Kutch 2010). Davies makes a similar point about the vibrant culture of needlework on the Estonian island of Muhu: 'without the pressures of external commercial markets, the women of Muhu simply competed *among themselves* to produce domestic textiles of ever-more glorious variety, ornament and colour' (Davies 2012, original emphasis). These intriguing stories challenge any assumptions of amateur practice as conservative, and professional activity as inherently innovative.

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have proposed domestication as one possible approach to revitalisation, which would be appropriate in contexts where amateurs have the time and desire to engage in traditional crafts. Drawing on twelve examples, we have identified six domestication strategies:

- *Documented and fixed*, such as a kit providing materials and instruction to create a functional object using traditional techniques
- *Interactive and fixed*, such as an online 'knitalong' which connects knitters following the same set hat pattern
- *Live and fixed*, such as a drop-in workshop at which participants can have a go at letterpress printing

- *Documented and experimental*, such as a book facilitating experimentation within a knitting tradition
- *Interactive and experimental*, such as an online course promoting the creative use of a traditional embroidery technique
- *Live and experimental*, such as a holiday where participants can work alongside local artisans to design and make a traditional rug

Each strategy involves a different combination of design activities, and would need to be adapted according to the unique conditions of any revitalisation project. This paper represents work in progress; in future, we will develop our understanding of these domestication strategies – along with other approaches to revitalisation – through in-depth case studies and design-led investigations.

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