

## The Role of the “Sense of Place” Concept in Improving Architectural Conservation Quality\*

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### Abstract

Although, subjective aspects of architectural spaces were taken into consideration by scientific circles during last few decades and after the development of environmental sciences, current experiences in the field of maintaining architectural heritage in Iran shows the little attention paid to this aspect, against the focus given to the structure and function in related planning. The “sense of place” concept, as one of environmental science’s meanings, has helped specialists and designers to identify subjective characteristics of natural and built spaces. This paper believes that by considering the “sense of place” notion, spatial aspects of conservation can be recognized and can form practical strategies to establish a comprehensive connection between space and human beings. Due to the fact that the “sense of place” shapes the relation between human and space by introducing the meanings of space, it will be a proper basis for cognition of the meanings of heritage spaces and explanation of an appropriate attitude towards protective measures. According to this view, the hypothesis are; A. Semantic preservation is the main basis of architectural conservation, B. Paying attention to the “sense of place” is an important part of semantic protection and C. Conservation that is based on the “sense of place” explains the pattern of physical and functional conservation. Studying the relation between architectural conservation and the “sense of place” shows that recognizing the “sense of place” in heritage spaces, results in understanding their structure and character, and thus leads the architectural protection towards policies containing physical and functional measures which finally results in the preservation of people’s sense of belonging to those spaces. This research is done by relying on analytical and descriptive methods and using interpretation and classification of library resources.

### Keywords

Semantic Conservation, Sense of Place Conservation, Physical Conservation, Functional Conservation.

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## Research framework

This article explores the subject of conservation considering environmental phenomenology viewpoint and “sense of place” issues. This approach propounds specific analytic perspectives in the area of conservation. As a result, by investigating practical experiences of heritage space conservation in Iran, it can be understood that because of tangibility of physical and functional specifications of spaces, this section has attracted the main attention of conservation architects and has been a major priority within the intervention process. However, quality of space and desirability rate depends on aspects which are less tangible, such as “sense of place”. From the phenomenological point of view, in fact, sensory judgments is the criterion for evaluating space and reacting towards it, and is the main causes in deciding to remain in a space and use it, and also tendency to return back again or refrain from going there.

“Sense of place” that is formed based on a pleasant sense of harmony and familiarity with the environment seeking to the perceive its meanings, leads to the humanization of the atmosphere and consequently causes connection between people and the space, and increases people’s tendency to be present and acceptability and exploitation of the place so that it has a determinant role in the amount of attracted and active audiences in the space, a factor which the life or death of the space depends on. This fundamental essence of the “sense of place” reveals the necessity of paying attention to it in all areas related to environmental planning and design, and so, in the field of preserving heritage spaces; that is why in the protective recommendations of the Burra charter, the concept of place is considered, and maintaining the meanings of environment are important as a presupposition for achieving the “sense of place”. Since the mid-twentieth century when the focus of environmental science authorities was attracted to human’s non-material needs in relation to environment and sensory- semantic aspects of space, conservation architects understood the significance of non- material features of heritage

spaces which form in connection with humans and their mental perceptions; in fact, place, from phenomenological point of view is a center in which humans experiences their existence with meaningful events and incidents, and at the same time, is a point where through it humans orientate in the environment and manipulates it (Norberg schulz, 1975). Therefore this concept can be found in the Venice charter and Fielden’s opinion and even in ICOMOS guidelines in 1993 concerning education relating conservation that clearly noted the issue of preserving the meaning of the monuments. According to what was mentioned, while trying to explain the notion of genuine conservation this article seeks to find a proper attitude in order to create solutions for maintaining the “sense of place” and continuing the historical process of heritage space meaningfulness. With regards to the article’s hypothesis that believes sensory-semantic protection of heritage space is the ultimate goal of conservation, and for achieving the practical measures of authentic preservation, it is necessary to find scientific answers for the following questions: A. Does appropriate conservation mean semantic conservation? B. Can the “sense of place” be considered as the most important concept of semantic conservation? C. Does protecting the “sense of place” explain and determine the solutions of physical and functional protection?

## Introduction

Studying experiences of architectural heritage conservation before the nineteenth century A.D shows that conservation had been mostly a complex of measures for confronting erosive factors and improving the physical condition of architectural heritage in order to sustain them physically and functionally, and in a few cases artistic, aesthetic and symbolic aspects of these monuments were also considered. Since the nineteenth century although preservation theorists and architects have had different perceptions of this notion, but in all cases, likewise, tangible and visible aspects of heritage monuments have been considered more than their

sensory and emotional aspects, because architectural monuments are still believed to be consisted of purely physical and objective aspects, whereas there is more to comprehend from monuments beyond their physics. Therefore what this article has deemed from the conservation notion is a set of actions that makes heritage environment perception and communication possible. The hypothesis of this article is also based on the principle that subjective, sensory and semantic characteristics of monuments are authentic parts of them and it is necessary for the concept and act of preservation maintaining such features; in other words, it is better for any protective action to be at service for maintaining these features.

In recent decades, with concepts arising in relation to human environment in scientific and philosophical areas as well as environmental sciences, views on qualitative aspects of space were developed, and their non- physical facets were considered. Such a change in attitude also influenced the subject of heritage space preservation and made relevant authorities not only deem it as an action for optimizing and sustaining objective aspects of monuments, but also as an operation which takes mental traits of architectural heritage into account. Therefore, the present paper does not consider conservation as a set of actions limited to physical and functional works, but thinks it is a process during which the human's subjective, sensory, semantic and interactive relation with heritage space revitalizes.

### **A. History and concept of architectural conservation**

The term conservation means preserving specific values. In other words, it makes sense when continuity of valuable objects, which are known as part of society's culture or life, is involved. Thus generally, architectural preservation means protecting valuable architectures or architectural values. Although architectural values are attributed to the concept of space, these values cover a wide range of categories from physical issues to spatial ones throughout the history of architectural conservation. For example,

Alois Riegl categorizes the values of heritage spaces to monumental value and contemporary value (Jokilehto, 2015: 238) and Cesare Brandi considers historic and aesthetic aspects of monuments.

Preservation of past architectural monuments is as old as the monuments themselves, and available evidences and documents indicate that throughout the history measures have always been taken for this purpose. In the second half of the eighteenth century advent of new historic consciousness resulted in the beginning of the modern conservation era. Bellori and Winckelmann conjectured the principles of modern conservation [in the seventeenth and eighteenth] for the first time and other theorists gradually compiled it (Jokilehto, 2015: 329). In the eighteenth century, the first international co-operation was done in this field and in the twentieth century ICCROM and ICOMOS –international centers that are responsible for studying cultural heritage, historic monuments and sites, and protecting them- were established.

Gradually with the growth of scientific views in this field the concept of conservation, became more accurate, and shifted from physical and tangible areas towards subjective aspects; as it is mentioned in the Venice charter (1964), Fielden's remarks (1928), paragraph (3) of ICOMOS guidelines concerning teaching conservation (1993) and in the Burra charter. According to these documents, conservation is a set of actions that leads human to achieve values, meaning and messages which are hidden in heritage spaces; for example, in the Burra charter with the use of the word "place", humanistic aspects of cultural-historical spaces have been emphasized.

Another one of the first evidences which represents attention to the status of sensory issues and humanistic relations with space in the conservation area, is Pugin's comment in the first half of the nineteenth century which indicated that the only way to guarantee appreciation and respect for historic monuments are restoration of feelings, which means stimulating the ancient emotions and believed that this is the only way through which monuments can be restored in the same former glorious state

(Jokilehto, 2015: 122). When Architects were seeking restoration of architectural heritages and not conserving them, Pugin's comment represented his attention to returning to the original "sense of place" of heritage spaces by restoring spaces to their initial condition. Studying the history of the conservation notion shows that regarding different definitions of this concept, for explaining proper actions taking place it is necessary to know its various aspects.

#### • **Various aspects of architectural conservation**

Architectural conservation covers an extensive range of objective and physical subjects to subjective and semantic affairs; studying the history of conservation shows that objective conservation is a well-known subject. From the past to the present time, conservation architects' attention is gradually distracted from physical characteristics to the meanings and subjective features of heritage spaces. In fact, physical conservation is one of the different levels of conservation (Figure 1) that theorists have addressed in detail, and conservation architects have considered them in their practical measures; generally, physical conservation methods can be placed in several categories: A. Preserving status quo (anti restoration theory), B. Removing the annexes and preserving genuineness of the monument (stylistic cleaning), C. Completing unfinished parts of the building, D. Maintaining heritage monuments with their valuable annexations, E. Rebuilding and renewal of the monument's structure based on available historic documents and evidences (historical restoration); in fact, a part of the meaning of space, is dependent on its physical characteristics in other words, physical characteristics, are subjective frozen values of places.

In the mid- nineteenth century with the issue of revitalization as complementary action of conservation being brought up by Camillo Boito, durability of these buildings is ensured by accepting new functions. Originally the aim of awarding new functions to these spaces is flowing life through them,

and after that, attracting attention and care to the place. Functional conservation is one of the different levels of the conservation concept (Figure 1) that if the rate of side- effects resulting from people's presence on the buildings could be controlled new functions will have effective roles in the realization of conservation because of creating sense of space and meaning.

Another level of conservation deals with an issue beyond the buildings themselves which is related to the infrastructure of building formation and deals with the link of the building with it, and the status of the monument in the mentioned infrastructure, along with the changes which it has accepted overtime. With the expansion of urbanization and development of contemporary constructions, the connection with context becomes more significant; the context surrounding a monument may change so much that its position becomes weak; also in some cases, heritage monuments may move from its location to a new place. In both cases, the environment in which the building is formed has been destroyed and spatial sense and message of the monument has been weakened. In different periods of the conservation history, the quality of relations with infrastructure has been noted because part of the heritage monument's identity is dependent on the context of its emergence and formation, and also historic and cultural changes made over time. One clear example of advertence to this issue can be observed in Camillo Sitte's comments and the Athen charter. Subjects related to meaning perception also show that a part of heritage space meanings are dependent on their structural relation with the context.

Functional aspects of building, physical characteristics and the quality of relations with the context are three important issues in the conservation concept which based on them protective actions become meaningful and creates a kind of sensory connection between human and space. in fact, organizing received messages from these elements based on mental rules and formats, during the process of perception, leads to the clarification of environmental meanings,

with an objectivity becoming meaningful and sensory-semantic relations between human and space progressing, “sense of place” and sense of belonging towards that space increases and has an effective role on the continuity of life in heritage space. Originally “sense of place” explains a kind of subjective, emotional and functional connection of people with a place; most of the time this feeling makes people feel the sense of belonging towards special places or perceive the meaning of that place (Tuan, 1974; Williams & Carr, 1993). Thus, authentic conservation means to keep semantic relations between human and space alive; therefore the main concept of conservation can be defined as “semantic conservation” while its various aspects can be interpreted (Fig. 1).

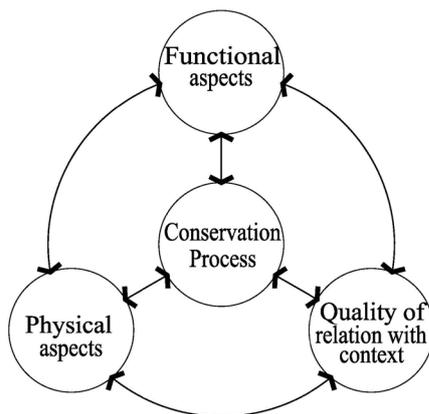


Fig. 1. A pattern for explaining different aspects of architectural conservation. Source: authors.

• **Semantic Conservation**

The basic aim of architectural conservation is enhancing human’s connection with heritage spaces through introducing and clarifying the message of those spaces. In fact becoming meaningful, for space, is a beginning for deepening sensory connections (sense of belonging) towards it. Since some decades ago, with new subjects being propounded in environmental science, attitudes in the field of architectural conservation also went beyond tangible features, and issues such as values,

messages and meanings of spaces were noted in the related recommendations and texts as major issues of conservation, so the purpose of conservation (restoration) is representing and maintaining the values of heritage monuments according to paragraph (9) of the Venice charter (1964) (Orbasli, 2016: 105) and Fielden believes that it is known presenting existing messages in cultural heritage (Hojjat, 2001: 142-143). Also according to paragraph 3 of ICOMOS guidelines about teaching and educating conservation of monuments, complexes, and sites, conservation, in addition to prolonging the life of cultural heritage is an action for clarifying their messages (Jokilehto, 2015: 347). Thus conservation of cultural heritage is defined as an action of “making them known” and providing the possibility to perceive them; As the Burra charter also considers respecting the meanings of architectural heritage and other related meanings as reminders of the monument, in the field of conservation, as well as their tangible features. Since becoming meaningful is the beginning of sensory connection deepening for a space, although above-mentioned issues do not explain the way the “sense of place” concept affects conservation, but expresses the importance of maintaining people’s sensory connections with heritage environments when operating conservation actions.

Due to the fact that any manipulation of the structure, function and infrastructure of historic buildings affects the “sense of place”; therefore, physical, functional and urban texture conservations via making the meaning of place scrutable, affect the quality of people’s presence and inhabitation in those spaces, and forms their relation with the space. One of important matters of contemporary architectural conservation in our country is neglecting semantic and sensory aspects of heritage spaces that cause annihilation of past-architectural values. Nowadays, one of the valuable concepts which study people’s connection with different environments is the meaning of “sense of place”, which means “belonging to man-made and/or natural environments”; while

we see space as an open and abstract field place is part of space that is occupied by a person or a thing, and has value and meaning (Madanipour, 2000: 32). For understanding the way the meaning of “sense of place” affects conservation of heritage spaces, it is necessary to explore the relation between “sense of place” and architectural conservation.

### **B. Sense of place and architectural conservation**

Authentic conservation means a conservation that reinforces human’s relation with heritage space and enhances human’s belonging to heritage spaces. Undoubtedly, realization of authentic conservation depends on related aspects of the “sense of place” in heritage buildings because “sense of place” is a common point of human and space, and without this feeling spatial concepts cannot introduce the quality of places, as somebody may feel lonely among a society and one may be in a place and feel placeless. Sense of place leads to conformity, belonging and human’s love towards a special place and this belonging helps an individual communicate with other places; therefore the meaning of conservation should include preservation of “sense of place” for heritage sites. Thus architectural conservation makes the “sense of place” in heritage spaces feasible in a level beyond body and function of architectural monuments.

Hence, conservation is originally a set of measures which leads to the formation of “sense of place” through making meanings of the environment scrutable. In the past the basis of “sense of place” or “spirit of place” included live and dynamic awareness of familiar environments, a ritual and religious repetition and a friendship feeling with a place, but today, the value and respect which were hidden in the previous “spirit of place” are not considered. Therefore, it is necessary to study the meaning of “sense of place” and its common point with architectural conservation.

#### **• Meaning of “Sense of Place”**

The “sense of place” results from human’s internal

relation, his/her subjective imaginations and environmental characteristics. This concept, from one hand, originates in subjective experiences, and on the another hand, is influenced by objective and external context of the environment which causes reminiscence of one place. In general the word “sense” in the expression “sense of place” mostly means sentiment, affection, judgment, and the experience of the entire place or is the ability of space to create a special sense or a belonging sense in people.

“Sense of place regarding the record of accomplished studies in humanities, like psychology, sociology, architecture and geography, has been defined by descriptive, phenomenological and scientific methods and viewpoints. In phenomenology, place is a center in which, humans experience their existence by means of meaningful incidents and events and also is a point that makes human orientation and manipulation possible. From this perspective place is meaningful and finds character by meanings of the place. Relph believes that place is not only a location for an object but it is a location is the place along with everything that occupies it and makes it a meaningful phenomenon.

The scientific or empirical point of view is also based on the exact cognition of the components and the features of the place with no presupposition and judgment and through the definition of environment and human variables. According to this view place is a locus or a section of space that finds a specific identity through elements being in it. Therefore place is not an abstract concept and does not mean a location without any connections with people but is a kind of relation between human and objects and other creatures (Gruter, 1999). According to Canter’s opinion place is a part of natural or human-made space, which has a specific conceptual and materialistic range and is the result of interconnection and reaction between three factors of human behavior, concepts, and relevant physical features. Thomas Niss presents a more complete version of Canter’s model and a framework for studying human and the environment.

In his opinion place is a social-physical system that is interpreted by the unity of physical environment, activities, and also human connections and relations and it cannot be explained without considering these factors. In general, from a scientific point of view the four factors of concepts, activities, physical characteristics and human relations are amongst important factors of creating the “sense of place”.

**• Sense of place and architectural conservation**

Due to the fact that one of the important roles of building architecture is to substantiate and objectify the “sense of place”, architectural conservation means also preserving the existing “sense of place” in heritage spaces. The existential aim of constructing and building is converting the site into a place; it means revealing that group of meanings which potentially are presented in the given environment (Norberg Schulz, 1996: 422); considering the fact that architectural conservation, mainly, means semantic conservation in which any manipulation in structure, function and context is accomplished with the purpose of maintaining the message of heritage space and, on the another hand, from phenomenological and scientific perspective, place is a meaningful issue that defines human’s existence and humans manipulates the space through this meaning. “Meaning” can be known as a common point of architectural conservation and sense of place (Fig. 2). Figure 2 shows that architectural conservation and “sense of place” affect the physical features, functions and activities, urban texture and are influenced by them in order to make architectural and heritage spaces meaningful.

“Sense of place” in heritage spaces may change

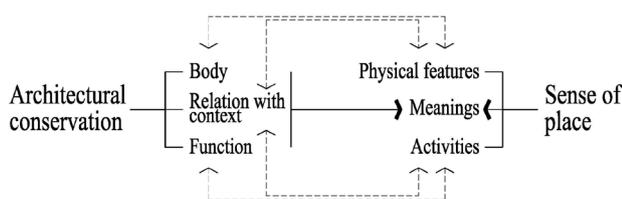


Fig. 2. Schema for showing that “sense of place” is a meaningful issue and architectural conservation intends to revive the meaning of space.

Source: authors.

according to alterations in their structure during their lifetime, and conservation actions should be able to provoke “sense of place” in their users; each place should have the capacity of receiving different contents with certain limits; a place which is created just for a special purpose will soon become useless. ... A place may be interpreted in different ways. Protecting and conserving the “sense of place” means that its essence should be objectified in new fields...; therefore, place includes properties which contains various degrees of immutability and stability (Norberg Schulz, 1996: 422); considering common points between architectural conservation and “sense of place” it can be concluded that “sense of place” is an appropriate point for beginning architectural conservation.

**C. Conservation based on “sense of place”**

Sense of place in heritage spaces is notable from several aspects. Heritage spaces change through time which affects their “sense of place”; it should be noted that although structures of place are not stable and change through time, but places maintain their identity; in other words, a heritage place has the potential of accepting different contents in its identity framework. The purpose of conservation is providing the users with the conditions so they can perceive the “sense of place” of heritage spaces.

**• Conservation in new conditions**

Due to the advancement in environmental science and psychology in different fields, especially in the area of architecture and urbanism, the subject of architectural conservation requires to be interpreted through such an attitude to obtain strategies of architectural conservation in new conditions with the aim of maintaining the message of heritage buildings and creating the sense of belonging in people. The concept of “sense of place” is a psychological subject and has close relations with architecture and urban spaces and one of the factors of identification and analysis of such spaces, is the “sense of place” of those spaces. Figures (1, 2) show that understanding the “sense of place” in heritage spaces can be an appropriate source of conservation actions, therefore,

in this section we investigate how the “sense of place” impacts architectural conservation.

Table 1 clearly shows that there are similar and corresponding concepts among well-known elements of conservation and “sense of place”. Generally the table expresses that, first of all, physical features and activities are reckoned as important aspects of conservation because manipulating them, undoubtedly, affects the “sense of place” of architectural spaces; secondly, physical and functional relations in heritage spaces with their surrounding environment also creates spatial meanings, as a result, the table 1 can be described as followed:

- a) The structure of heritage buildings is an important part of its identity and forms its sense of place. Intervention in the body- as a component of the “sense of place”- leads to the intervention in sense of place.
- b) Physical connections of buildings with their environment are preserved in a way that it takes over a part of the task to create urban spaces for public activities.
- c) Physical structures of heritage spaces have specific meanings. Therefore, intervention in the structure must reinforce and transfer these meanings in order to make the space familiar for people to maintain the human-space relation overtime.
- d) Heritage spaces have had proportional physical connections with their surrounding texture at the time of construction and with the development of modern textures around these spaces, it is necessary for physical features of new texture to help reinforce and clarify the status of heritage spaces.
- e) One of the ways of relating heritage spaces with their surrounding context, is their collaboration in providing spaces for activities, and also collective and urban functions that creates connection between heritage spaces and urban texture. Therefore, it is necessary for heritage buildings to accept new functions within their identity framework.
- f) A part of the meaningfulness of heritage spaces depends on the type of their relation with adjacent

buildings in urban textures which manipulation in this field either physical or functional can affect the position of heritage spaces.

g) Functions create specific physical features, based on their administrative structures. In other words, physical traits of heritage spaces have been formed based on their initial functions, so if conservation of such spaces requires the definition of a new function, it is necessary for the new function to be proportional with physical features of that space, since considering physical characteristics means paying attention to the “sense of place”.

h) Functions of spaces create preparation for the presence of people and beginning of their sense of belonging towards the space, and consequently, the feeling of responsibility to the space through providing humanistic activities within heritage spaces.

i) The presence of functions, other than museum functions inside heritage spaces leads to the continuation of people’s presence in the space as well as reinforcing historical continuance of the “sense of place”.

### **Pattern of architectural conservation**

According to what is expressed in this article architectural conservation originally is a set of actions that makes it possible for the “sense of place” in heritage buildings to be created and promoted, and by organizing correct protective measures, it preserves their message and concept. Physical and functional features of heritage spaces are a part of factors that constitute meanings of place by which conservation architects can improve the capability of perception of space through proper interventions. Therefore figure (3) explains that because of being meaningful, “the “sense of place” influences protective methods and this effectiveness is realized through manipulation in activities and structure of heritage monuments and in this way, the “sense of place” of the heritage spaces, becomes scrutable. It seems that because of the possibility of access to “sense of place” in heritage spaces, people who

are in contact with these spaces are encouraged to refer to them and do various activities in them and with durability of their presence in space and cognition of the functional-physical features of space, they feel a belonging sense towards that space and finally the heritage space turns into a meaningful and valuable place”.

sense of Place Architectural Conservation	Physical features	Activities	Meanings
Body	a.	b.	c.
Relation with context	d.	e.	f.
Function	g.	h.	i.

Table1. Solutions of architectural conservation in the new period. Source: authors.

**Discussion and conclusion**

History of architectural conservation shows that conservation affairs have started from physical restorations, and with the passage of time has been so influenced by environmental science that, in recent years, the meanings of heritage spaces and their “sense of place” have been the center of theorists’ and conservation architects’ attention. After identifying and analyzing the relation of architectural conservation concept with “sense of place” This article, explores the action and reaction between these two concepts and finally by defining effective factors on these two concepts, explains their common points and differences in the form of matrix, and establishes a foundation for the manner of thinking about previous conservations, and enhances the quality of protected spaces. Conservation based on “sense of place” is a base for linking architectural spaces with humans and the new world. In fact preserving the “sense of place” is an authentic and stable kind that links heritage spaces to new life. Figure (3) shows that the “sense of place” concept influences architectural conservation through revealing the meanings of heritage spaces and makes their faded or lost “sense of place” scrutable through proper physical-functional actions; as a result, people’s presence in these spaces has increased, and also due to performing new activities in such spaces, gradually, people’s belonging sense enhances and they feel responsible towards preservation and conservation of them and thus all of these ensure the survival of heritage spaces. Table 1 shows that the set of measures of architectural conservation in three fields of structure, function and historic context can affect the meaning, physical features, activities, and consequently, the “sense of place” in a space. Correct protective actions result in making the meanings scrutable as well as making attainment to the “sense of place” possible. In conclusion, it can increase people’s belonging sense towards the space; therefore authentic architectural conservation means semantic conservation of heritage spaces and so the “sense of place” concept can be known as the proem of semantic conservation (Fig. 3).

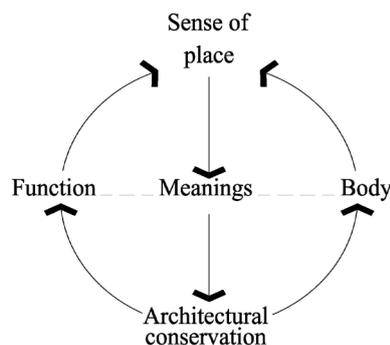


Fig. 3. A model for explaining the process of the effectiveness of the "sense of place" concept on physical and functional conservation. Source: authors.

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