JAN-JUN 2022

INTERNATIONAL EDITION
Vol: 8, ISSUE: 1

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€ 16/$ 16



ARCHITECTURE



DESIGN



LANDSCAPE



URBAN PLANNING



RNI No.MAHENG/2014/58295

ISSN 2455-2380

Reciprocal Restoration for the Past, Present and Future

Adriana García and **Eri Yamagata** shine a light on indigenous land and the fight for the preservation of their historically significant spaces

Acknowledging Trauma Through Reciprocal Restoration

"In the settler's mind, land was property, real estate, capital or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: the identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolks, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belongs to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold." – Robin Wall Kimmerer

As designers who focus on making Los Angeles a resilient place for people, we must look for strategies that reflect an understanding that we have much to learn from how the land was managed before our cities emerged. We can first acknowledge the reciprocal relationships that historical displacement destroyed within indigenous communities. Robin Wall Kimmerer, scientist and author, describes such mutual relationships of 'reciprocal restoration' as the interdependency between cultural survival, healthy land and a responsible relationship between humans and the land. California tribes took care of the lands by burning, harvesting, tilling, pruning, sowing and tending them and, in exchange, received resources to sustain their lives and to celebrate life. The Los Angeles River watershed was the source of life, food, housing and transportation for the indigenous communities of Tongva, Kizh and Gabrielino. Its plant life, especially the willow forests, provided frames for housings and medicines similar to aspirin. Reed forests provided basketry and covering for the housing.[1] Families maintained, harvested and stewarded groves of mature oaks. indigenous people developed ways of using natural resources to meet human needs while their ancestral scientific knowledge revitalised and strengthened the land. Their practices did not degrade the ecological basis for their renewal or compromise resources required for future generations to meet their needs. These sustainable practices were possible for indigenous communities prior to Spanish colonisation and European settlement, while they still had sovereignty of their land. Reintroduction of indigenous sustainable practices based on their traditional ancestral scientific knowledge can restore healthy landscapes, conserve species and enhance biodiversity but, moreover, can re-establish a reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment for a truly sustainable future.[2]

Many indigenous communities were forced into labour and incarceration after the Spanish settlement in 1769. Many continued to be removed (or forced to relocate) to enable resource extraction like gold and oil, which degraded the nearby land and water while making the state prosperous. The Kizh and Tongva people, for countless generations, established complex social structures and lived sustainably off the land and its natural resources. Their sovereignty to this land has never been surrendered, rather it was unlawfully taken by Spanish colonisation and then seized under United States control. In 1852, negotiated treaties involving 25,000 California Native Americans acknowledging their sovereign nation and creating their reservations were rejected. As a result of this broken treaty, the state that once had the most indigenous communities inhabiting sovereign lands now has only a small amount of Indian controlled land. In 1491, before pre-colonial settlement of the lands that became the United States, 46 billion acres were under the care of Native people.[3] While espousing an idealised pristine beauty of wilderness, National Parks are part of this history of violent displacement of indigenous communities

Limited Native American land ownership means that tribes are forced to gather and hunt on public or private lands to continue their traditions. Such historical displacement has led to a high concentration of indigenous communities in urban areas. Los Angeles County has the highest number of Native Americans than any other county in the United States. Many of them, including Tongva, are not federally recognised, but are only acknowledged for their cultural ties to the lands. Throughout Los Angeles County, communities like the Tongva have lost their historical ties to their lands, no longer able to access and manage the lands that were

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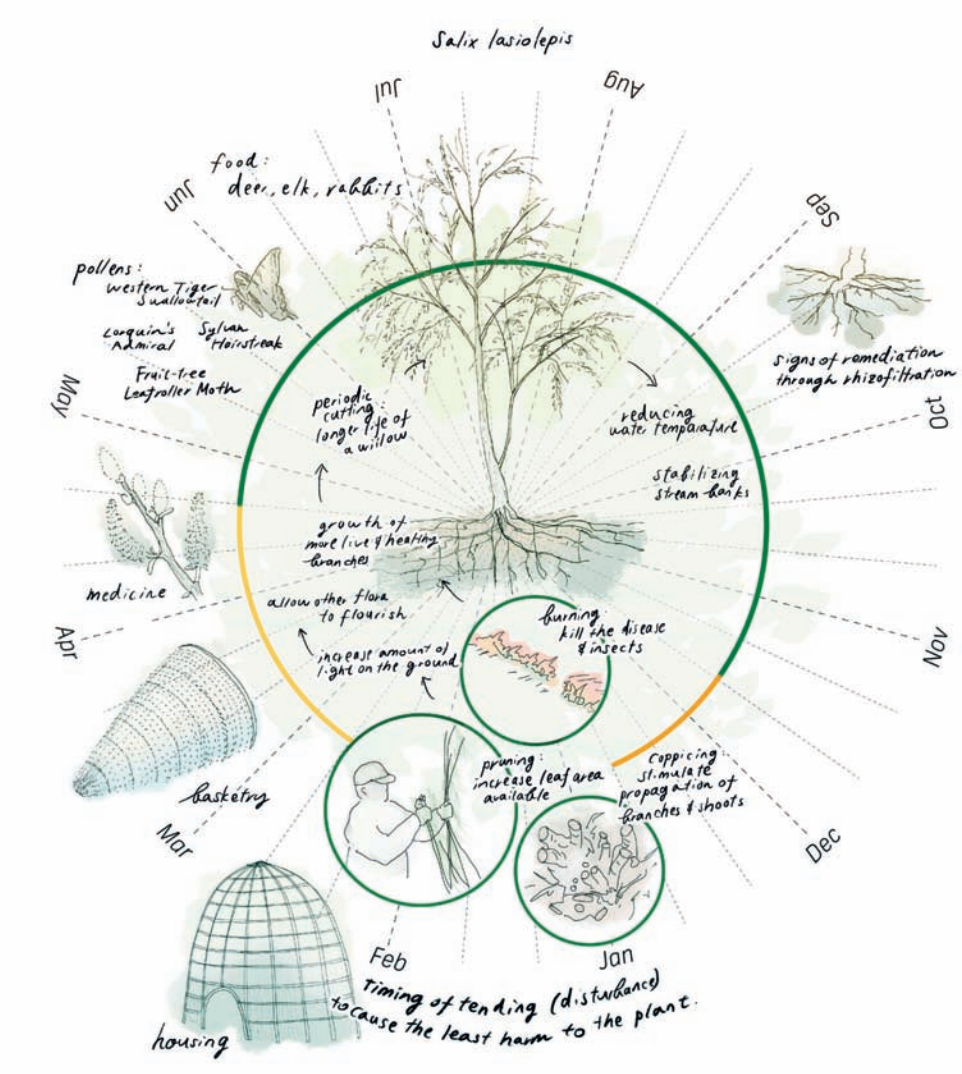


Reciprocal restoration, a willow's perspective

fundamental to their cultural and spiritual lives.

Today, land speculation and resource extraction continue to degrade our landscape, reducing habitat and making traditional ecological practices impossible for Native American indigenous communities. In October 2021, a ruptured pipeline off the coast of Orange County, California, released 126,000 gallons of oil into the ocean. The area is a tribal homeland to Acjachemen and Tongva villages, who worship the ocean through cultural and spiritual practices. As Kimmerer notes, for indigenous communities, land is their identity, honouring their ancestors and their geological connection to the environment sustained by the resources from the area. As the environment continues to be exploited, their identity is at great risk of disappearing. Los Angeles County holds the largest urban oilfields in the United States, polluting both air and water. Air and water quality within Los Angeles County has plummeted compared to a non-urbanised and industrialised baseline when Native Americans inhabited the region and maintained a healthy stewardship of their land.

The inability of indigenous communities to own sacred land further marginalises them, and many California tribes are still not federally recognised. This lack of recognition makes it harder for Native Americans to have any recourse in their efforts to reclaim sacred lands.

To move forward, we need to acknowledge these historic and ongoing inequities. Several state and local initiatives address the need for cultural reparations and have taken steps towards accountability. California passed a statement on Native American Ancestral lands in 2019 promising a due process in efforts to return lands to indigenous communities.

We exist in a world that will continue to be

in flux and evolve and, while we can never go back to the pre-settlement environment, we can change our design approach for the land and ecologies that our cities depend upon. Next, we look at several existing precedents within Los Angeles County that take a step towards new ecological models in the built environment.

Reciprocal Restoration Models

1. OurCounty: Los Angeles County's Sustainability Plan

"Before all of the concrete and the car exhaust, before all of the development and the extraction, Tovaangar pulsed luminescent and fruitful. All who inhabited her were tehoovet/healthy. Huhuunar/Grizzly Bears roamed through flowered meadows. Totoomshar/ Oak Trees flourished and Totoongvetam/the Tongva People filled their baskets to their brims with Kwakwaar/Acorns. We all ate well. Shahoovenax/ respect was ma'eete'/abundant and reciprocity ran through all of life. We tended to what we took, and we took only what we needed. We made offerings, and sometimes we offered ourselves."

– Megan Dorame ("Papaavetam/Water People," The Offing, June 11, 2019)

Los Angeles County's sustainability plan, 'OurCounty', establishes policies addressing inequity in access to basic resources and risks from Climate Change. The Sacred Places Institute (SPI), a Los Angeles-based environmental and social justice organisation, proposes that future sustainability actions need to acknowledge the loss of land suffered by indigenous people and to establish healthy stewardship practices of land management.

Los Angeles County worked with SPI and American Indian and Alaskan Natives (AIAN) in a series of tribal listening sessions. In these sessions, local tribal leadership and representatives were invited to share their concerns. The main concern was the lack of access to County lands, since the tribal community relies on public lands for ceremonial and cultural practices.

The proposed initiatives included:

1. Improve land use and land management policies to make County-owned land and plant materials accessible to local tribal nations and their citizens.
2. Ensure that local tribes have dedicated space to engage in cultural, traditional and religious practices.
3. Prioritise training and educational opportunities for the County workforce to improve cultural literacy related to local tribes and the Native American population.
4. Develop countywide policies and programmes to improve government-to-government relations.
5. Leverage County resources and authority to



Paved history

Parks can conserve or restore sacred spaces, allowing people to connect to the land and to heal

increase awareness of and foster respect for Native American history, communities and knowledge.

6. Adopt a formal acknowledgment of the harm against tribal nations and Native American people in which the County has been complicit, develop processes to address the harm and invest in a project to document the historical relationship between the County and Native Americans.

These recommendations also included specific actions such as: returning the land to indigenous tribes, hiring local tribal practitioners for land management and stewardship, providing cultural easements and storage or community space close to water bodies, educating County staff on tribal knowledge, adopting a countywide tribal consultation policy and increasing visibility of the tribes in public space to raise awareness.[4]

Alexandra Ferguson, Executive Director for LA City/County Native American Indian Commission (LANAIC) explained that equity was a core theme in the OurCounty plan to prioritise improvements to environmental quality for the most vulnerable communities. Ferguson said, "for some communities, equity in access means a public park to be open… but for the indigenous community, equity in access means resources are accessible for them to use for sacred rituals and cultural purposes."

Parks can conserve or restore sacred spaces, allowing people to connect to the land and to heal.

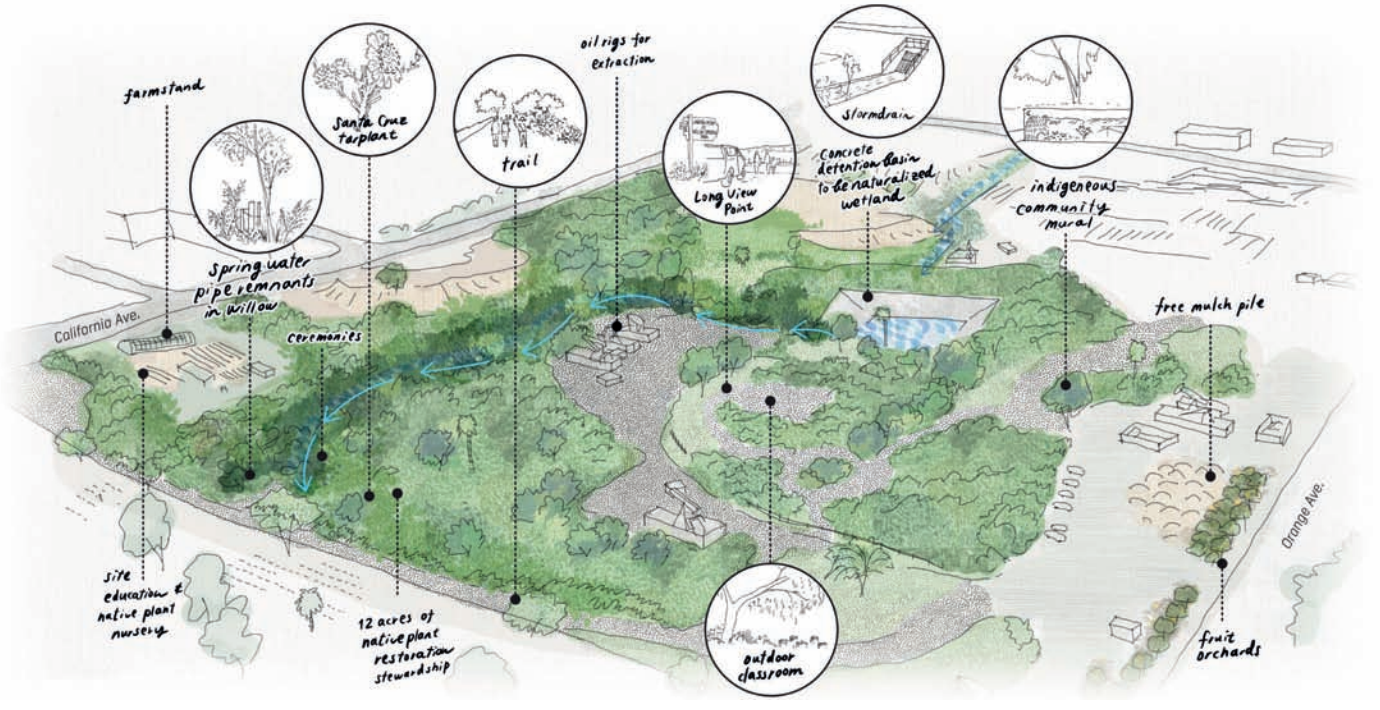
2. Willow Springs Wetlands Restoration Project

"How should I turn back the clock for you to see through my Ancestors' eyes? We sat on the banks of rivers waiting for the fish to bite. The basic necessities of life existed an arm's length away. The water meant life. It still does today. The river, its water, is the lifeline of our people. For the present settlers it is a tributary for pollution, commerce and invasion. For us it is everything." – Robert Bracamontes and Robert Garcia, (Native Americans, Urban Waters, and Civic Engagement: The L.A. River).

Healing the land that underwent anthropologically and ecologically traumatic events can help heal the displaced people and and the flora and fauna. While the County of Los Angeles contains multiple degraded sites due to industrial developments and other harmful events, such sites could become places for reciprocal restoration as parks and public lands, where people can rekindle their relationship with the land through environmental stewardship practices.

Willow Springs Park sits on ancestral and unceded territory of the Kizh and Tongva People. Artesian springs supported a riparian habitat full of willows, mulefat and other native plants. What is now known as Willow Springs Park is a 48-acre property owned by the City of Long Beach since its founding in 1882. At that time, the city

Willow Springs Park



Their sovereignty to this land has never been surrendered, it was unlawfully taken by Spanish colonisation and then seized under United States control

planned a great 200-acre park to celebrate the city's water lands. Significant degradation occurred after settlement and from oil extraction starting in 1921. By 1922 the spring had been turned into a concrete reservoir. Oil drilling persists today, with less intensity and some dedicated restoration areas. In early 2013, the city adopted a master plan that accommodated native plants and wetland restoration. In a century, the city went from a vision for a grand park that would have been the largest open space in the city, to an oilfield, to the gradual reclaiming of nature.

The Office of Sustainability is restoring Willow Springs wetlands in partnership with the Parks, Recreation and Marine Department. The wetlands restoration project began in 2017 when 12 acres of degraded riparian and coastal sage scrub habitat were funded for restoration. One acre of the site in particular includes strategies to benefit the environment, including flood abatement, erosion control and water-quality improvement. Vernal pools, bioswales (vegetated shallow depressions that capture and filter stormwater runoff) and a water-retention basin that diverts water from the Los Angeles River are other restoration strategies for the site. The park provides hands-on educational workshops and sustainability practices. Community members learn about and observe native plants, including rare plants like the southern tar plant now growing onsite. The habitat restoration supports local fauna such as cotton tail rabbits, coyotes and birds of prey. Restoration planting strategies at Willow Springs consisted of planting larger-sized native shrubs in small patches throughout the site and broadcasting seeds in between them so that the plants could propagate themselves and disperse throughout the site. Maintenance consists of removing invasive plants such as mustard to allow the native plants to thrive. The Long Beach Sustainability Office created a stewardship programme called Sustainability Ambassadors, where youth can gain hands-on experience maintaining the park. The site provides green jobs training for youth to work with the Native Plant Coordinator to learn about green infrastructure, horticulture, ecological restoration and other sustainable practices.

Another goal of the restoration efforts is to provide access for indigenous communities to harvest plants and use the grounds for cultural, spiritual, medicinal and sustenance purposes. This allows them to connect with the land by tending to it. The Office of Sustainability builds relationships with local indigenous communities while taking care of the reintroduced native plants. Tending land is a process that is inherently healing, as people form connections with it, learning about the land's needs while they harvest. Access to the land can bring back memories of traditional knowledge that help heal generational trauma. The native plant programme prioritises volunteer and internship opportunities for people who identify as Black, indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC). The presence of indigenous/BIPOC volunteers and interns empowers BIPOC visitors to feel comfortable using the park as they need to, such as practicing traditional gathering and other ceremonial and spiritual practices.

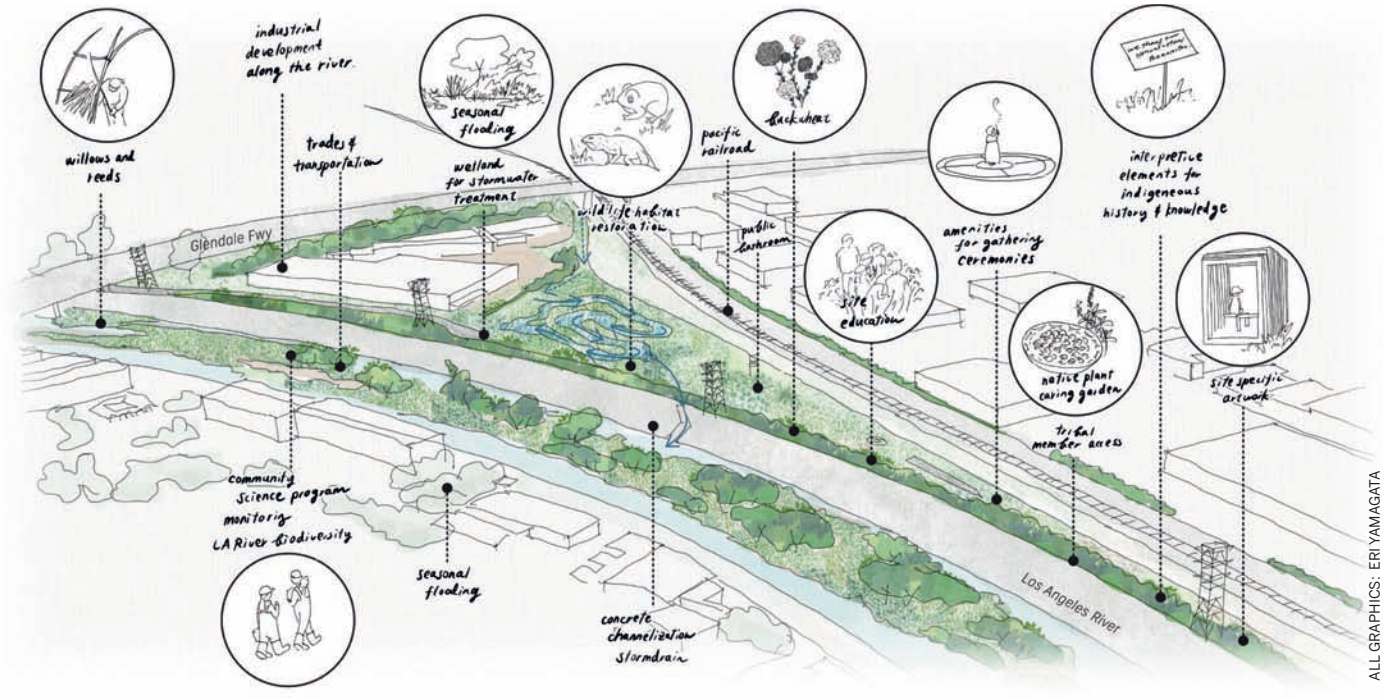
3. The Bowtie Project

"Communities can help to make sustainability programmes more equitable where those programmes incorporate their localised and lived experiences, histories, and perspectives. Methods like participatory decision-making help to equip and engage residents to advance sustainability. This can help ensure the inclusion of groups that have been traditionally underrepresented and limited from decision-making spaces due to institutional discrimination and other barriers such as language, transportation, and financial and time costs."
– OurCounty: Los Angeles Countywide Sustainability Plan

The Bowtie Parcel sits on ancestral and unceded territory of the Kizh and Tongva communities adjacent to the Los Angeles River, where the headwaters come from the traditional lands of the Chumash tribe. The parcel is an 18-acre industrial parcel in the City of Los Angeles, purchased by the California State Department of Parks and Recreation in 2003. Its former use as a Pacific Railroad yard operation site resulted in soil pollution. The River is contained in a concrete channel built in the 1930s to protect adjacent properties from seasonal flooding.

The Bowtie Youth Council is a group of local youth activists, organised and trained by Clockshop, a local arts and cultural programming non-profit, that advocates equitable public space. In summer 2021, the Youth Council met with California State Parks representatives to demand land sovereignty of the Bowtie including: creating meaningful space for indigenous residents; land acknowledgement; change of park name; collaboration with local indigenous peoples in planning, implementation and land maintenance; education; free access to tribe members; access for local tribal members to harvest native and sacred plants for their practices; amenities for gathering rituals.

The California State Department of Parks and Recreation has taken steps toward becoming advocates for indigenous practices of land management, including tending and growing culturally and spiritually significant plants for indigenous communities.



ALL GRAPHICS: ERI YAMAGATA

Around September, the fence line of the Bowtie Parcel overflows with blooming buckwheat, used for medicinal practices and ceremonies by the Tongva people. While recreation and leisure are often prioritised in open space design, landscape architects should incorporate opportunities to support indigenous culture and religion as a vital strategy for building resilience and sustainability.

Future Vision: Design with Reciprocal Restoration in Mind

"*Restoration is imperative for healing the earth, but reciprocity is imperative for long-lasting, successful restoration. Like other mindful practices, ecological restoration can be viewed as an act of reciprocity in which humans exercise the caregiving responsibility for the ecosystem that sustains them. We restore land and the land restores us.*" – Robin Wall Kimmerer

As environmental designers, we are particularly interested in looking beyond technologies to address Climate Change for models of ecological stewardship that provide restored attitudes towards the lands we inhabit. When working with public space, whether federally owned or private, we must acknowledge the land and recognise its history and importance to indigenous communities. Land acknowledgement recognises indigenous stewards of the land we are guests on, and honours their connection to it. We must go one step further and integrate indigenous communities' needs into public spaces. Providing sacred spaces for indigenous communities to conduct their ceremonial and spiritual practices is key to rekindling their connection with the land and also for restoring non-indigenous communities' relationship with the environment. Advocating equitable access to land for indigenous communities includes getting to know these communities, who were displaced and continue to be displaced. Design can be a reciprocal process, prioritising the act of listening. This includes meeting with tribal organisations and communities and establishing an ongoing professional relationship. Inclusive design is an active process. It is our responsibility to make sure marginalised communities are meaningfully engaged in the design process. Such a process occurs with multiple agencies coming together, placing indigenous representatives at the centre and lifting their religion, culture, practice and ancestral scientific knowledge that shaped the landscapes we inhabit today. A more sustainable future for all of us, both indigenous and non-indigenous alike, depends on designing with and for indigenous communities. ●

(Edited by Allen Compton, SALT Landscape Architects, and Claire Latané, CalPoly Pomona)

Bowtie Project

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