

Envisioning Urban Futures with Children and Young People

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Introduction

The needs of children and young people living in cities are considerable and extend well beyond parks, playgrounds and skateboard facilities, yet when urban planners and designers consider how best to provide for a city's young residents, these are often the first features that come to mind.

Concern for the child, or children, as "users of the city" is gaining currency for a number of reasons, including a shared aspiration among many cities to be more diverse and inclusive, which in this case, calls for children and families to be accommodated. Further, to attract this population to reside in the city—bringing their attendant social, cultural and economic benefits—cities must offer access to appropriate and affordable housing, in proximity to good quality open space, schools, public transport, and a safe and amenable public domain.

The headline of a recent *Sydney Morning Herald* news story referred to "Sydney's own Manhattan project". The reporter identified 19 office blocks in the CBD scheduled for conversion to high density residential over the next few years. The article noted that, over the next 20 years, these projects would bring into the centre of Sydney a projected 80 percent increase in the total number of residents in the 0-17 year old age group (Cummins 2015, p8). Notwithstanding the impact this will have on the concentration of population in the CBD, a major concern featured in the article was for the provision of early childhood education and long day care centres. This was based on the sensible view that families with working parents will require these services. However, the article no discussion about the likely character of the new housing on offer, impact on existing schools, quality of local streetscapes, or access to public open space, much less nature. Nor was there mention of how the City of Sydney would consult with families, children, or young people, about their anticipated needs.

Sydney's CBD is not the only urban area experiencing an increase in the population of households with children. Children are an increasing proportion of the population across the inner-city neighbourhoods of Sydney, as can be seen in the total numbers of 0-9 year olds in neighbourhoods which are showing significant increases in the years between 2006 and 2011 (City of Sydney Community Profiles, <http://profile.id.com.au/>). This also appears to be a trend nationwide. According to ABS data (as of June 2013), Australia had a population of 4.37 million children under the age of 15 years, which accounted for about 19% of the total population. This represents

an increase of 6.6% in this age group, or a total of 271,200 children, during in the five years previous to that. Comparing the states, the Northern Territory had the highest proportion of children over the others (22% of its total population), while South Australia had the lowest (18%). The statistical area level 4s (SA4s) with the highest proportions of children were Northern Territory-Outback (25%); Queensland-Outback (24%); and Sydney-Blacktown (23%). The urban areas with the lowest proportions of children were the inner-city SA4s of Sydney-City and Inner South (10%); Melbourne- Inner (12%); and Brisbane Inner City (14%) (<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3235.0#PARALINK4>, accessed 11 June 2015).

While there is a perception that most families and children currently reside and/or would prefer to reside in the outer suburbs of Australian cities, there is evidence that more children are living in higher density settings (Randolph/ARACY). As has been cited, that is the reality for Sydney and increasingly for other Australian cities, as well. Whitzman and Mizrachi note: 'Despite inadequate social infrastructure, it is projected that over 10,000 children aged under 15 will live in the City of Melbourne by 2021, representing a doubling of the child population over 2006 figures' (2012, p234).

Will growing up in an Australian city be a good or bad experience? Regardless, it's simply going to be an increasing reality. As Torres points out: 'Questioning whether children should or should not live in cities is a pointless exercise. Instead, the most pertinent question seems to be: 'How can we make cities better places to grow up?' (2009, p6). To answer that question and achieve the goal of creating family- and child-friendly cities and communities, we must enlist the views of children and young people themselves.

Background to the contemporary discussion

The contemporary concern for the needs of children as users of the city is not new. However, the social issues associated with urban childhoods have shifted and taken on slightly different dimensions over the past several decades. The steady flow of research and writing about urban childhood started in the early 1970s with the project undertaken for UNICEF by renowned urban planner and designer, Kevin Lynch: "Growing up in Cities" (1971-1975). This project tracked the lived experiences of children in nine communities of four countries; including Australia, where the project was based in the Melbourne suburb of Braybrook. Colin Ward's often-cited book, *The Child in the City*, was published around this time, as well (Ward 1977). And in 1978, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was introduced in the UN General Assembly (later adopted by the UN in 1989; Australia ratifying it in 1990).

The UN's International Year of the Child in 1979 was conceived as a means of promoting the proposed Convention and itself was the catalyst for a number of other significant initiatives. In New South Wales, for example, the NSW Planning Department published *Planning with Children in Mind* (de Monchaux 1981). This detailed report revealed some of the issues of children living in NSW cities and summoned planners and urban designers to focus their attention on the needs of children and young people in planning decisions, beyond simply providing playgrounds and schools.

Accounting for the needs of children has, historically, been answered by providing the requisite number of parks and playgrounds, distributed according to whatever were the current planning standards of the day. An understanding that children's interaction with the built environment reached further than these sites was expanded with the "The Playful City" Conference, convened in Berkeley in 1990. This gathering of academics and practitioners addressed the full range of urban systems and settings that impact the daily lives of children, young people and families, including: housing and neighbourhoods, marketplaces, transportation, child-serving institutions (childcare, youth centres, schools, cultural facilities, health care), and communication and information systems (a theme that would have an even more significant impact in 2015). Parks, playgrounds and open space were in the mix, but not the sole settings given consideration.

In parallel with this broadened scope of concern, was a focus on engaging with children and young people in genuinely participative modes, as seen in the pioneering work of Roger Hart, Louise Chawla, and David Driskell for UNESCO in the 1980s and 1990s (Hart 1997; Chawla 2002; Driskell 2002). Their publications identified exemplary projects around the globe that sought to bring these marginalised age groups into the processes of planning and designing for future environments and systems. The UN Conferences on Environment and Development, at which Agenda 21 was adopted, along with documents ratified at Habitats I, II, and III, all repeatedly endorsed the view that "child participation is considered as a key strategy for sustainable development" (Torres 2009, p6). And so, the involvement of children and young people in decision making that would affect their futures was linked to conceptions of sustainable development, and was a valid and significant part of the process.

Most of this work has evolved under the banner of promoting children's rights as articulated in the CRC, and in the past 10-15 years has become foundational to the current Child-Friendly Cities (CFC) initiative. CFC is capturing the imagination of many cities and communities and, in some cases, encouraging individual agencies and organisations to commit resources and activities to enabling children and young people's participation in decision making processes that will impact on their future opportunities.

UNESCO's Child Friendly Cities movement was promoted locally by UNICEF and championed in Australia by academic Dr Karen Malone and others (Malone 2006). The book, *Creating Child Friendly Cities* included papers presented at a national symposium convened in Brisbane, bringing together research and practice interest around these issues (Gleeson and Sipe 2006). The international movement to promote children's rights and children's participation in shaping their future environments took hold in Australia, and is now also linked to the current discourse on *liveable cities*, *healthy cities*, *social sustainability*, and urban *resilience*.

It was in this context that the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children initiated an inquiry into Children, Young People and the Built Environment in 2005. It is difficult to point to a single, specific catalyst that prompted the inquiry. However, with the increasing activity of the United Nations around the CFC movement, along with Australia's obligation to report back in 2008 to the UN on its progress relative to the Convention, the issue of children, young people and the built environment began to gain currency among academics and built environment professionals alike.

The aims of the Inquiry, the first of its kind in Australia, were to initiate a discussion about how built environment policies and practices impact the lives of children and young people, and envision opportunities associated with 'child friendly cities'. It was intended that the findings would 'help inform the wider debates within Australia and internationally on child- and youth-friendly environments' (Parliament of NSW 2006, p.ix). Over 57 individual submissions were received and numerous presentations made during the inquiry from academics and professionals, as well as representatives of state and local government agencies that provide services for children and young people; all with knowledge, experience, and best interests of children and young people in mind. However, there were no direct submissions from children and young people themselves, and so the inquiry process missed an opportunity to enact one of fundamental principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, which states:

States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the view of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (quoted in Shier 2001, p108).

The 2006 report on the findings does note a review of planning processes undertaken in the context of the inquiry and that review highlighted 'the importance of participatory strategies, in which children and young people are included and involved in critical decisions, including master planning processes' (Parliament of NSW 2006, p.xvi).

A follow up review of the inquiry was conducted in 2010, and in response to two of the key

recommendations in the findings of the 2006 inquiry, the NSW Commission for Children and Young People convened an advisory group, representing key peak bodies in state government, the organisation representing local government, and representatives from the professional institutes of architecture, planning and landscape architecture. A key recommendation of the Inquiry which that group quickly acted upon was commissioning a series of “awareness raising sessions” which invited key state and local government agencies. The authors were engaged to develop and deliver the series of four, half-day symposia focusing on the issues and generating further discussion about more effective ways of bringing together representatives from state and local government and from built environment professions to consider what, if any, progress had been made against the Inquiry’s recommendations and to document and present examples of successful engagement with children and young people in the urban planning and design decision making processes. Broadly, those attending the four symposia concluded there were some encouraging examples of players and processes that were increasing children’s environmental opportunities and enhancing the quality of everyday environments and their potential value in children’s lives. In the feedback requested at the conclusion of the sessions, however, indicated participants were motivated to ensure their respective agencies or practices were more effectively engaged with children and young people.

Different kinds of participation

It is important to understand what we mean by “participation”, although it would seem to be a self-evident concept, eg. taking part in something, or being actively involved. However, there are various ways to describe and enact participation, particularly when working with children and young people (Clark and Percy-Smith 2006, p1). In fact, a special issue of *Children, Youth and Environments* journal in 2006 was entirely devoted to the topic of participation. Papers in that issue identified multiple understandings of how children and young people’s participation is interpreted, such as:

- participation as learning and experience
- young people being surveyed as service users to provide their opinions about their level of satisfaction
- participation as a requirement within city planning processes
- a collaborative process of learning and change through dialogue
- participation seen to empower young people and encourage their social action
- as research participants
- facilitating or modelling political involvement, eg Australia’s National Youth Roundtable held in 2005 (Clark and Percy-Smith 2006, p3).

A major concern is that, in too many cases, activities that are called “participation” focus too much on adult priorities rather than those of children and young people (Clark and Percy-Smith, p2).

Roger Hart’s familiar 8-step ladder of children’s participation (Hart 1997), based on Sherry Arnstein’s familiar ladder of participation (1969), considers that at its peak, participation can be child-initiated and directed, with decisions shared with adults; while at the lower rungs of the model, at best, children’s participation is little more than manipulation, decoration or tokenism (Hart 1997).

Seeking a simpler expression of the possibilities for participation with children and young people, Harry Shier proposed an alternative five-level and three-stage model (avoiding the ‘ladder’ metaphor) that considers how children might participate, overlaid with a self-assessment that an organisation makes as to its degree of commitment to the process of empowerment. In Shier’s model of participation, there is not a “peak” level at which children are initiating activities on their own; the premise being that children and adults are in partnership as they interact to make decisions. Regarding the role of adults in this model, Shier suggests three stages on a “pathway” to readiness for individuals or organisations to commit to sharing the power with children and young people in participation processes .

Firstly, Shier’s five levels of children’s participation are as follows:

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
3. Children’s views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making (Shier 2001, p110).

Organisations, and individual workers within them, assess what point they are at in making a commitment to the process. Shier refers three stages: *openings*, *opportunities* and *obligations*. At the opening stage, there is an intention to facilitate participation. Perhaps a policy is in place that requires participation, but it may or may not proceed until an opportunity arises. This second stage is when the knowledge and resources to facilitate participation are in place. Finally, obligations are established when there is a policy built in to the system requiring children’s participation and staff are obliged to work with children at a specific level of participation (Shier 2006, p17).

Shier summarises his model in this statement: 'To fully achieve level five, therefore, requires an explicit commitment on the part of adults to share their power, that is to give some of it away' (Shier 2001, p115).

High level endorsement participation processes

In Australia, at the state level, both Victoria and Western Australia have been active in promoting children's participation through child friendly cities initiatives. For example, the Victorian Local Government Association has produced a toolkit for local government agencies to use in promoting child-friendly cities and communities (2014) that not only reminds officials of the commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but also puts forth the Victorian Child Friendly Cities and Communities Charter (2014?). The Charter elaborates on the CRC and articulates a series of principles relevant to the local context. The second principle attends to the issue of participation: 'Respect and dignity for children to express their individual opinions, participate in and contribute to decisions about their communities and their wellbeing' (VLGA 2014, p4). In reference to Shier's model, local governments that adopt the CFCC Charter and undertake the steps outlined in the VLGA toolkit would be considered midway on the 'path to participation'; that is, between the stages of *opportunity* and *obligation* (Shier 2001). Full implementation of children and young people's participation ultimately is enacted at the local government level, in the context of specific projects or planning initiatives.

In Western Australia (WA), the Commission for Children and Young People's publication, *Building Spaces and Places for Children and Young People*, generated by a research project that asked children and young people, from five to 18 years of age, living across Western Australia, what they considered important to their wellbeing. The findings drew on nearly 1000 responses and among the key messages was this response about the built environment: 'They want a built environment that welcomes rather than excludes children and young people. Being acknowledged and listened to and having their ideas taken seriously make young people feel they are respected' (WACCYP 2011, p5). The findings were endorsed by the president of the WA Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) and the WA Government Architect, who commented: 'Our buildings, places and spaces have an indelible impact on the wellbeing of the young people of our society. We must shape the built environment with children and youth at the very heart of our considerations' (WACCYP 2011, p3).

Of all the built environment-related professional organisations, the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) has embraced the concept of Child Friendly Cities and children's participation most explicitly.

PIA's policy on this topic notes: 'Planners are in a unique position to directly impact the creation of child friendly cities and communities. PIA supports the characteristics of a Child Friendly City identified by UNICEF' (PIA 2007). As per the focus of this paper, the policy highlights the right of children and young people to be involved in decision making that affects their lives. Further, the benefits of taking this orientation to planning has the potential 'broad economic, social and cultural benefits...and is a long term investment in the life of that community' (*ibid*). In other words, this is not just about children's needs. As the VLGA document summed it up: 'Cities and communities that cater for children, cater for all people' (2014, p1).

As a professional institute, PIA itself is not implementing participation activities, *per se*. In adopting a position statement on child friendly cities, the professional body is publicly communicating its stance on the issue and the expectation is that its members will align their professional practice with the values inherent in the statement. This is a significant step that would be excellent to see other built environment peak bodies emulate. Additionally, to acknowledge best practice in achieving the intent of this policy, in 2012 PIA's New South Wales group introduced a project award for Planning for Children and Young People. In this way, professional institutes can be effective in moving practice **toward more inclusive participation processes, and toward the level of *obligation*, to use Shier's terminology.**

Overcoming perceived barriers

However, the PIA statement acknowledges there remain numerous systemic barriers and challenges to including children and young people's participation in the routine aspects of planning, such as:

- How can children be involved in decision making processes, given limited resources and dominance of other issues (such as ageing population)?
- How do we counter a perceived growing tendency to design children out of built environments through gated or exclusionary design?
- How do professionals and those advocating for better decision making about working with and for children and young people get access to research and information?
- How do we combat the sometimes narrow sectoralism ('silo mentality') that operates in many state and local government organisations, eg. where do children's issues fit in a Local Government structure? (PIA 2007, p3).

The barriers are not only created by public agencies; sometimes the perspectives of children, young people and their families also prevent full engagement. For example, in some cases, family situations may 'compromise the ability of parents to support their children in participatory initiatives', which might be the case in areas of low SES neighbourhoods or areas where 'few resources remain for 'elective' activities such as involvement in community life' (Torres 2009, p8). With this in mind, participatory activities that are associated with schools may be more successful as there is an institutional structure to support the children's involvement.

The National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) undertook an Australia-wide investigation to identify specific barriers that prevent young people from full participation in their communities.

What they discovered included institutional reluctance, perception that participation processes were time- and resource-intensive, and that the usual means of interacting with their constituents were fairly inflexible. There were also barriers related to young people's attitudes and/or social position that meant they were unfamiliar with how participatory processes work, how to interact productively with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, expressed cynicism about participation processes (NYARS 2008).

The NYARS report offered what they considered as 'best practice for participation processes' with young people, comprising three key points are:

- successful participation needs to be youth led.
- successful participation is long-term and purposeful.
- participation needs to be creative and fun for young people, and use media such as the internet (NYARS 2008, p64-66).

Best practice examples of participation

Over the past 10 years many projects have been undertaken around Australia, demonstrating effective ways to invite children and young people's participation in the planning for shared future. In some cases, they have introduced new policies and practices aimed at identifying the remaining obstacles for these residents' voices to be heard in planning and design processes. The Child Friendly Cities program has been an impetus in many of the early undertakings, however the danger is that "child friendliness" takes on a checklist approach and becomes a marketing slogan rather than genuinely involving the participation of children and young people in the planning design of new communities, for example. The City of Bendigo, for example, was the first Australian city to be officially recognised as a child-friendly city, and has inspired other local

governments to follow suit. A several exemplary projects which have gained recognition for their innovation are briefly reviewed below.

Tweed Shire Council

The 2013 NSW PIA Award for Planning for Children and Young People was given to Tweed Shire Council for its *Youth Strategy "Speak Out" Strategic Plan, 2013-2017*. The youth strategy sits within Council's suite of strategic and operational plans, including the Community Strategic Plan, the four-year Delivery Program, the annual Operational Plan and associated Budget, which should ensure its list of actions will not be overlooked. The Youth Strategy is an exemplary document, worthy of PIA's recognition, largely because it was produced using a wide-range of best practice participatory activities. These included workshops and surveys, 'vox pops' (short, impromptu videos of person-in-the-street commentaries), a 'Speak Out' website and Facebook page, mail-back postcards distributed to all high school students in the LGA, and two forums with local government officers. Council acknowledged the significance of investing time in these activities: 'By participating in the planning and delivery of decisions that affect them, young people will have the opportunity to feel more connected to where they live' (Cred 2012, p7).

The strategic outcomes that were identified in the process are summarised in the following points:

Tweed's 'Young People'...:

- are valued members of the community and engaged in decisions that affect them
- feel proud of where they live, with access to quality spaces and places
- are involved in local events and a range of creative, sporting and social activities
- have access to a range of education, employment and career opportunities
- feel safe and protected from drugs, alcohol and violence
- can get around and have access to services and affordable places to live (Cred Consultants 2012, p10).

Of these six outcomes, the second and final points relate mostly directly to *built* environment outcomes, while the first one commits the Council to continuing to engage with young people in decision making regarding the issues that affect them. Each outcome is followed by a detailed list of, in some cases, up to 18 specific actions that Council commits to implementing over the four-year life of the plan. Potentially, this is a powerful document that can be monitored over the years to validate changes that occur and its overall effectiveness in maintaining an active connection with the children and young people of Tweed Shire. While the product is excellent, the process of getting to it is especially worthy of replication.

Stockland, Brooks Reach Development at Dapto, NSW

The first PIA recognition for an outstanding project that addressed Planning for Children and Young People was awarded in 2012 to demonstrate “how children and young people have participated in a project aimed at encouraging their active and creative use of the built environment” (PIA online 2012). The winner was a project in the new Illawarra community Brooks Reach. In creating this new community, Stockland undertook what was considered to be ‘an industry-leading approach’ to understanding the perceptions and aspirations for the local environment by those who would likely use it most—children. Working with Dr Karen Malone, University of Western Sydney’s School of Education, developed an independent research project in which over 150 local primary school children, aged 5-10 years of age, were invited to investigate their environment, using cameras and drawings, and to participate in series of workshops and activities between April and July 2011. The children provided their views on what a child-friendly neighbourhood might look like. Their submissions were analysed by a group of Year 5 children and the results informed the brief for the design of a new environment that Stockland used in commissioning JMD Landscape Architects.

Looking at this as a model of children as co-researchers, and evaluating it against Shier’s model, this project is an example of children’s views being taken into account and them having involvement in decision making processes. Stockland committed to more than a tokenistic consultation process with the children, creating and resourcing the processes that enabled their involvement with imagining qualities of a future residential environment. Finally, they delivered opinions about the character of a specific feature of the development that would eventually be part of their everyday lives in new community.

City of Melbourne’s Children’s Plan and Youth Policy

Social planners in the City of Melbourne undertook the development of their *Children’s Plan, 2010- 2013* having committed to a child-friendly city approach. Working with the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood, consultations were carried out with children as young as three years old, and up to 12 years of age. To capture the needs of children aged birth to two years, parents were consulted. For the first time, their Children’s Plan was ‘written with children and for children’ (City of Melbourne 2010a, p8).

The Children’s Plan developed seven themes, each one expressing an ‘outcome’ and a series of specific actions. Themes 1 and 2 are particularly relevant to this paper. Theme One underscores the City’s commitment to the rights of children, and in the list of actions undertake to: ‘give children meaningful opportunities to participation in the design, development, and evaluation of the municipality of

Melbourne' (City of Melbourne 2010a, p15). Theme Five relates to the natural and urban environment, noting that these settings should be 'shaped by children and families, rather than by planners and professionals exclusively' (City of Melbourne 2010a, p23).

A complementary document, *Youth Policy—Empowering Young People's Policy 2010-2013* was produced in parallel with the Children's Plan. In that document, the demographic significance of this age group was highlighted: 'One third of the City of Melbourne's population is aged between 12 and 25 years, and young people aged 20 to 24 years make up one of the largest overseas-born groups in the municipality (City of Melbourne 2010b, p2). This plan identified five goals, the first one addressing participation, leadership and empowerment. The fundamental outcome for this goal was for young people to 'actively participate in, and contribute to, the social, cultural, creative, recreational and civic life of the city' (City of Melbourne 2010b, p8).

The Children's Plan and the Youth Policy remain active commitments within the City's community services section of its website, while it notes that the more recently developed document, *Melbourne for All People Strategy 2014-17* sets out the ways in which the City of Melbourne will 'connect, support and engage people throughout their lives from 0 to 100+' (www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/CommunityServices). This most recent document incorporates numerous preceding council policies and strategic plans, including *The Children's Plan: Children's Rights, Children's Voices 2010-13* and *Empowering Young People: Young People's Policy 2010-13*. This signals an approach to public involvement where children and young people's participation truly becomes a customary way of operating, and moves the City of Melbourne toward the *obligations* stage of Shier's model.

Conclusions

Ultimately, as planners and designers imagining future more inclusive urban communities, our ambitions must be to deliver urban environments that boost children and young people's capacities for full participation as active and engaged citizens. As the populations of Australian cities continue to grow, the prospect is for the proportion of children and young people in those cities to also increase. Planning, designing, and developing cities solely from the perspective of adult needs runs the risk of creating neighbourhoods that will not attract and retain the diversity of population we recognise as essential to achieving the balanced social, cultural and economic qualities to which we aspire.

As the project examples cited in this paper demonstrate, children and young people are capable of meaningful participation in planning and decision making processes. Adults must commit to creating the opportunities for them to participate and commit to sharing the power in the processes of urban

governance and management, visioning urban futures. That includes moving into the highest levels of participation as described by Shier, where children become genuinely involved in decision making and, where appropriate, share the power and responsibility for the decisions that are made (Shier 2006).

Finally, the 'future generations', of which we too often speak in the abstract—particularly, in the context of sustainability—are those children and young people who are part of our lives *today*. They are capable of contributing to the conversation on planning for shared future environments, especially those that directly impact the quality of their daily lives, eg play environments, school grounds, local neighbourhoods, community places, transport and safer streets, the public domain. Engagement with children and young people should occur early and throughout the process of planning and design. Importantly, this introduces them to imagining future possibilities, considering the needs of others, sharing community resources, identifying values, understanding the consequences of choosing to take one action over another—all skills that are central to preparing them for an active citizenship in which they take responsibility for the sustainability of their future communities. As Torres comments: 'Childhood...is a time in which children can build ties with their communities and even transform them...(they are) interactive individuals who are both influenced by their living environment and capable of influencing it' (2009, p4).

If our ambitions are to deliver high quality, more inclusive urban environments for everyone, and to bolster children and young people's capacities for future participation as active and engaged citizens. We must take heed of a closing comment in the Final Report of the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry: 'Failure to create child- and youth friendly environments will be to the detriment of all society, not just children and young people' (NSW Parliament, p44).

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