

Revitalising Public Spaces at **Night** in Feijenoord and Noordereiland

Graduation Research

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Spatial Design
Futures and Presence

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My previous work focused on light and colour, exploring their standardised connotation and impact on human behaviour. My current research focuses on Rotterdam South, an area undergoing much change, with many overlooked empty public spaces as the focus is on new residential projects. With a feminist perspective, I aim to switch the focus and bring light onto the invisible control mechanisms established by the municipality. Through participatory design, I aim to reactivate public spaces to facilitate encounters and human connections. With this project, I investigate light design's impact on public spaces in Feijenoord and Noordereiland.

I live in Rotterdam South in Afrikaanderwijk and work in Blaak. Every night after my shift, I notice how the city changes as I bike further south. Starting from the busy, bright area of Blaak, the noise fades as I cross Willemsbrug. After crossing Koninginnebrug, the lights dim. When I pass Rotterdam Zuid train station, it gets quieter and darker until I reach home, where it's completely silent. This daily experience has sparked my interest in understanding why these neighbourhoods are so overlooked at night.

We live in a world where everything moves too fast and feels surreal, leading us to disconnect from reality. I believe human connection is a crucial element that gives our lives meaning, especially in a context where many different ethnicities collide, such as in Feijenoord and Noordereiland. Encountering and community building create understanding, empathy, and a sense of shared responsibility for our neighbourhood. As a designer, I aim to create spaces that facilitate these meaningful encounters.

How to facilitate Encounters in Noordereiland and Feijenoord Public Spaces at Night?

Feminist Approach

How can I take a feminist approach in my design and research process to benefit the local communities?

In my positioning journey to design with people for people, it was important for me to start this project by taking a feminist approach. Taking this perspective while researching helps me reflect on overlooked aspects and go beyond standardised norms. "Architecture needs to be a verb, to architect, to make it a caretaking practice" Elke Krasny¹. It's a tool for me to design with a purpose and put people in the centre of the project. "Having a feminist view aims to maintain the public space as inclusive, caring, comfortable, sociable and playful" Leslie Kern².

Set Norms

"What is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying: the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition." Pierre Bourdieu's 1972³. Public safety and the organisation of public spaces operate silently and, therefore, have become set norms that we follow blindly. These aspects of public life are often conceived and structured by a narrow group that does not represent the diversity of the population. This creates standardised public space that is unfit for the residents and, therefore, unused. Leslie Kern's 'Feminist City'² expose this imbalance "...Set up to support and facilitate the traditional genre role of men and with men's experiences as the 'norms' with little regard to women's day to day experience of city life".

The playground at Persoondam in Feijenoord lacks appropriate amenities, features concrete flooring sharp objects, and lacks seating for caregivers. The disconnect between architects' vision and inhabitants' needs makes the playgrounds dysfunctional, prioritising aesthetic appeal over functionality. This is a similar issue as Caroline Criado Perez raises in invisible women⁴; she exposes how design processes (in this case, cooking stoves), often dominated by men, overlook the diverse needs of women, resulting in impractical solutions.



Persoondam playground Feijenoord.



Persoondam playground Feijenoord.

The perpetuation of silent traditions, such as how public spaces have been designed without inclusive consideration, perpetuates inequalities and hinders the realisation of truly functional and inclusive environments. These norms forget about human connection and other play options, promoting an individualistic lifestyle. To go beyond these set norms, it is essential to include marginalised voices in the planning and design processes, ensuring that public spaces reflect the diverse needs and experiences of all inhabitants.

While the Gemeente Rotterdam still use standardised norms, some international firms seek innovative solutions. The Swedish firm White Arkitekter, with their Flickrum⁷ project, observed that "young boys make up 80% of the users of shared spaces", leaving young girls' needs being overlooked. They co-designed a public space with teenage girls from Skarpnäck Municipality to address this (fig5.b). The girls designed elements for encounters and new forms of play, such as seats facing each other, aiming for intimacy. This project, to me, shows the need to include not just women but all users in the design process. It highlights the importance of listening to users' voices and designing public spaces collaboratively for people with people.



Ons Park, Noordereiland singular bench design.

Control

After setting norms, control and regulation are embedded in the design. Over time, these norms become ingrained in us and appear logical and familiar despite their impracticality. Parks, for example, often feature open layouts without privacy, promoting safety but in reality serving as tools of control, inhibiting illegal activities³⁹. It can be argued that it's a safety precaution, but this regulation hides the real aim of controlling the people in the park through its open design. Leslie Kern exposes this effect² "There is a sense of control that women feel in a city⁴², it doesn't come intentionally, but it is ingrained in us due to education and social norms. Social norms that have been constructed over centuries and seem unbreakable rules. These rules were set up by white men and now impact the way we think and interact."

In Rotterdam South, the influence of male-centric planning can be seen in the controlled public spaces, such as Ons Park. However, one public space stands out: Hefpark, a community-driven initiative where nature reclaims its wild essence and social interaction is encouraged. Coincidentally, it is a women's initiative. Ingrid Baron and Greta Vercruyce show the transformative potential of diverse perspectives in shaping urban environments⁶. As Elke Krasny explains in her lecture¹, architecture embodies representation and control. Historically, influential figures used architecture to assert dominance, whereas women have used it for nurturing and care.

Initiatives like Hefpark and De Sportkantine, while less attractive to the municipality, resonate deeply within the local community. These initiatives embrace inclusivity and encourage encounter and social interaction. These examples show the potential of feminist perspectives in reshaping urban landscapes, challenging set norms, and advocating for more equitable and community-centric environments.



Hef park, Feijenoord, wild and free.



De Sport Kantine, outside and inside . Figure 1B



Ons Park, Noordereiland, sectioned and structured.

Invisibility

In her lecture, Elke Krasny stated¹ “Care can be invisible because its effect is to appear as if nothing has happened before; it can be positive as well negative”. A negative example is Ons Park facilities discouraging homeless people from using the space as shelter³⁹. A positive example of care is the trash picking workshop by the community centre, Iedereen aan boord in Noordereiland. While seemingly mundane, these hidden processes shape our engagement with public spaces, ultimately dictating their utilisation.

Another invisible process is the formation of mental maps. Leslie Kern described these maps² as “A living dynamic map that changes constantly with our experiences, the map is a living collage with images, words and emotions layered over our neighbourhoods and travel routes”. This concept resonates deeply with the locals of Feyenoord and Noordereiland, as exemplified by the insights gained during the night walks, where residents Betty and Francine recalled avoiding certain areas due to past negative encounters. (fig7C)

These invisible processes impact the design of public spaces. In Vienna, a shift has occurred in urban planning, embracing a feminist approach aimed at providing equitable access to urban resources for all. This progressive movement has transformed Vienna into one of Europe’s safest and most livable cities. Projects like Frauen-Werk-Stadt⁸ show the profound impact of public space facilities on our interactions and well-being, highlighting the need for adopting diverse perspectives in designing spaces that resonate with local communities. By embracing alternative perspectives and prioritising inclusivity, we can create environments that truly matter and foster a sense of belonging for all.



15 March 2024, cleaning Noordereiland. Figure 1D



Front door of Iedereen aan boord.



A view into one of the courtyards at Women-Work City, Franziska Ullmann. Figure 5A

Social Context

How do different social contexts impact the design and use of public spaces?

History

Feijenoord has a rich history due to its maritime activity; its rapid industrialisation has shaped its urban landscape and demographic. Its population was first farmers and fishermen¹⁰, then Feijenoord transformed into an urban district filled with industrial dock houses and infrastructure due to the establishment of shipyards like Wilton-Feijenoord¹¹. However, the devastation of WWII and the relocation of the port created significant changes. Locals lost their jobs, which led to relying on the social welfare system¹², and investors turned empty industrial spaces into residential and commercial areas¹².

Noordereiland followed a similar evolution as Feijenoord; initially home to immigrant dock workers, it has become a melting pot of cultures and socioeconomic classes. In 2023, only 49,42% of the population had a Dutch nationality, of which 20% had a migration background¹⁸. Despite WWII's destruction, Noordereiland has flourished economically because of its uniqueness and residential focus. However, the meticulous planning and categorisation of public spaces by the municipality⁴⁴ has created a somewhat sterile environment, which does not reflect the residents' needs and desires.

In both neighbourhoods, social initiatives demonstrate residents' desire to reclaim and reshape their surroundings. Yet, these efforts often remain confined to private spaces such as in Tante Nino (fig1A), as the rigid structures imposed by the municipality regulations limit their impact on public spaces. More significant organisations, such as Citylab010 and Rust in de requiring, promote social initiative in the city centre. While Feijenoord and Noordereiland have unique histories and urban landscapes, the disconnect between the built environment and residents' personalities highlights the need for more inclusive and community-driven approaches to urban planning.

See Appendix Figure 2 for more archive pictures .



Inside a dumping shed at Nassauhaven, Men pushing waste into wasting boats.1904¹⁶



Aerial view of Nieuwe Maas, Feijenoord, 1923¹⁷



A speaker asking people to live in De peperklip. 1981¹⁸



- Cafe, restaurant, bakery
- Hotel
- Church, Mosque
- Doctor, supermarket, sport
- Art, community center

- Public space
- Parking
- Industries and offices
- Park and green areas

Map of all the facilities in Noordereiland and Feijenoord.

For more details see appendix, figure 3.



Field Research



Wander around



Field Research



Strolling around

Public Spaces At Night

How does light influence the way locals experience public space in Noordereiland and Feijenoord?

How do the locals interact with the public spaces?

How does light impact social interaction?

How do locals interact with each other?



Light experiment, Hefpark.

As the demographics of Noordereiland and Feijenoord keep evolving, the public spaces remain the same, following standardised norms that fail to accommodate the community's changing needs. Therefore, as the sun sets, these neighbourhoods become empty. To understand the underutilisation of these spaces at night, I set to research the impact of lighting on human interaction after dark.

Light has an aura that influences how we experience space and impacts our usage and interaction in space. Light festivals such as the Amsterdam Light Festival²⁵ and Glow²⁶ in the Netherlands support this claim. Over one million visited the light festival in Amsterdam in 2023 for its 12th edition²⁷. The event revitalises dark corners of cities and transforms them into vibrant meeting spots. While tourists mainly come to see the artwork, locals benefit from these installations for socialising and relaxation. Despite their temporary nature, these festivals demonstrate the transformative potential of light and art in reactivating public spaces. Sadly, these areas become empty and unused once the festivals end. These festivals are a clear example that light and art have the power to reactivate public places.

Beyond these temporary light events, permanent lighting interventions address real-life issues. For example, Jean Baptiste Guerlesquin's LED light beams²⁸ in a Strasbourg tunnel transformed a previously dark and intimidating passage into a safe and inviting space, encouraging pedestrian use at night. Similarly, Eleftheria Deko's "Mystery 89" project in Greece installed LED circles in public spaces²⁹, attracting people to gather around her artwork and turning the lights into nighttime landmarks. These examples showcase how strategic lighting designs can enhance safety, promote social interaction, and revitalise public spaces permanently.



Light installation of Jean Baptiste in a Tunnel in Strasbourg²⁸

To see more artworks see figure 5



Light installation from Atelier Haute Cuisine²⁵



Light installation of Eleftheria Deko in Greece²⁹

Noordereiland and Feijenoord had a light intervention in the Koninginnebrug houses. In 2018, the artist Maria Vera²⁰ installed her work in the four bridge towers, reviving the houses at night by lighting the windows. Unfortunately, the municipality judged the upkeep too demanding and decided to turn it off, leaving this artwork abandoned and meaningless without lights, making the neighbourhood dark again.

Without light artworks, the lighting in these neighbourhoods is similar to any other residential area. A notable observation is the use of different types of lighting connotating different street importance levels. Main roads like Maaskade, the outer ring of Noordereiland, have taller and brighter street lights, prioritising traffic safety due to higher vehicle volume. On the other hand, inner streets like Sleephellingstraat have softer lighting to minimise disturbance to residents. This is what the Rotterdam municipality sets as norms³¹, but in France, motorways are unlit, relying only on car lights for visibility³². Surprisingly, in Feijenoord, dwellings near big streets like Feijenoordkade are equipped with bright street lights, which is intrusive. To counter this, the floorplan of these dwellings positions the bedrooms toward the inner yard³⁴. (fig6)

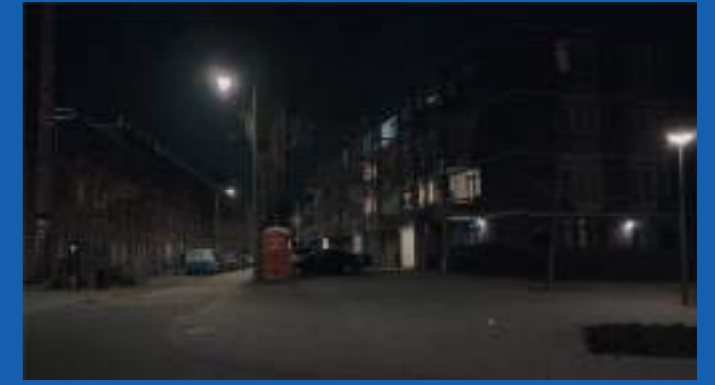


Light installation of Maria Vera in Rotterdam³⁰. Figure 4A

Figure 3D



Naassauhaven, only source of light is from habitation



Feijenoorddijk, two street lights colliding



Feijenoordhaven, blinded by football club



Hoffmainstraat, blinded by Erasmus bridge



Thorbeckestraat, decorative lights



Leliestraat, a spectrum of light



Hoffmanplein, older lights



Sleephellingstraat, residential lights

The relationship between light and public space is multifaceted, demonstrated by both temporary interventions and permanent work. While light festivals revitalise urban spaces temporarily, permanent lighting designs address real-life issues and reshape the nighttime experience in public spaces. Strategic lighting choices enhance safety and comfort and connect with cultural norms and societal priorities. As seen in Rotterdam, different lights can transform streets and promote social interaction and encounters. In conclusion, the careful consideration of lighting design is essential in creating inclusive and safe public spaces that cater to the needs of inhabitants.

Night Walk

For more details see appendix, fig 4B and fig 7

Once I gained knowledge of these areas' facilities and light elements, I wanted to deepen my understanding of why locals do not use these public spaces at night. Using night walks as a research method, I engaged with residents of Noordereiland and Feijenoord to explore their space uses at night. I created two-night walks, one for Feijenoord and one for Noordereiland. During 1h30 minutes, I made participants rediscover eight public spaces.

I distributed 400 flyers in the two neighbourhoods and ten posters in different community centres and other businesses to gather people. This outreach connected me with individuals invested in social initiatives and helped me build a supportive network for my project.

Creating these night walks not only helped me gain deeper knowledge of the social context but also made me test different methods to facilitate emotional expression among participants. I used memory, images and songs as a medium for the participants to express themselves. After two walks, I realised that music as a medium wasn't so effective. I asked people to connect the place with a song, and they found it very hard. I tried to enlarge this question by asking them to connect the place with paintings or books, but it failed. It became apparent that people found it challenging to convey their emotions through different sensory mediums. An effective method was abstract images; I asked the participants to choose one image from 40 that represented the place they were in. They could connect what they see with another visual medium, staying in the same sensory perspective. Through their interpretation of shapes and colours, they could go deeper and share how the space made them feel. Each image embodied a different meaning as different participants chose it, unconsciously infuse with their past experiences, making the image's meaning specific to the moment they were experiencing.



Koozie, Noordereiland.



Stampioenstraat, Feijenoord.



Night Walk 2, Noordereiland. 3 April 2024.

In this research paper, I was unable to convey the whole experience of the Night walks. I attached the Night Walk zine in the appendix, where I collected the participants' words and images and translated our journey.

Public spaces after dark

The participants loved the tours to rediscover their neighbourhoods and experience them at night. Many do not dare to go outside once it's dark due to the lack of amenities and the darkness, especially women who expressed safety concerns. During one of the Feijenoord walks, Betty said, "I don't walk around here at night; young adults aren't nice once it's dark; you never know what dark corners hide", talking about Heldereiplein. The fear of potential dangers led women to stay indoors as a precaution. This is why summer days are anticipated; more extended daylight allows locals to utilise outdoor spaces in the evenings⁴⁶. The effect of extended daylight became evident during my tours, as the last two were scheduled after the time change. In contrast to the first tour, where public spaces were deserted, the later ones saw children playing outdoors, highlighting the impact of natural light on human behaviour.

Claiming space

Summer brings light and warmth, attracting people to spend more time outdoors and adjust their daily activities to enjoy the sun. Residents often extend their living and dining spaces onto the streets, with chairs and tables set up on sidewalks, along with plants to claim the area. During the Noordereiland walk, Mirte showed us her outdoor living space, a wooden table, and some plants, where she enjoys lunch outside on sunny days. While this behaviour is common in both neighbourhoods, it is less seen in Noordereiland. According to residents, one reason for this is the narrower sidewalks, which make them sit closer to traffic, ruining the "Gezellig" atmosphere. Noordereiland residents who participated in the walks expressed a desire for seats along the Maas River. Despite attempts to claim parts of the riverbank, these efforts were unsuccessful as authorities maintain the space as public.



Mirte's outdoor living room, Roentgenstraat.

Shared space

Despite gathering in public settings, locals seek ways to personalise and recreate a sense of privacy, highlighting our individualistic tendencies in space usage. Interestingly, participants value the interactions and connections they made during the walks a lot, prioritising conversation over exploration. This reflects a need for connection, which often conflicts with our individualistic tendencies. Residents of social housing actively seek encounters through community-driven events, like the Street Kitchen event in Noordereiland. A few participants were from social housing and were proud to show how they transformed shared spaces into personalised communal areas, creating a sense of belonging and community. Residents of Stampioenstraat emphasised the importance of neighbourhood connection through hosting events to keep community spirit. This contrasts with apartment blocks in Noordereiland, which lack opportunities for such encounters. These observations show that social initiatives play a crucial role in facilitating encounters and shaping local behaviour.

Connection with Neighbours

Despite the rich cultural diversity present in both areas, there is significant segregation among the local population. While on paper, this diversity suggests an environment where cultures can mix and learn from each other, in reality, locals stay within groups with shared characteristics. The Muslim community, for instance, remains largely isolated, preferring to interact within their own community and using the infrastructure they've developed themselves. During my research, particularly during Ramadan, I found it challenging to connect with these community members. Expats act similarly in the sense that they also look to connect with people of their own nationality, as explained by Nikos and Gabriele. This segregation leads to a lack of unity and tension, despite locals claiming to accept and attempt to connect with others. Even among neighbours who share the same nationality, connections are often lost, with many participants admitting to not knowing their neighbours. The exception lies within social housing communities, where residents actively engage with their neighbours. While community centres serve as places for exchange, it's primarily through children that true integration occurs. In playgrounds, children from diverse backgrounds come together, encouraging their parents to interact with one another.

Green space

Due to their amenities, playgrounds serve as primary meeting spots, attracting children and adults. Participants noted that their children facilitated connections that turned into friendships. Some expressed teenage memories of sneaking into closed playgrounds to drink and socialise, which made me question play elements for adults. After playgrounds close, attention shifts to parks like Hef Park, which is filled with facilities but remains dormant until activated by human initiative. Ons Park features a small football court, but like other parks, it becomes unused after dark. Locals perceive their parks as unwelcoming due to their emptiness and proximity to houses, feeling observed and unable to relax. Therefore, they go for more vibrant spaces like Het Park or Kralingenbos. While playgrounds and parks are essential public spaces for social interaction, their limited accessibility and lack of amenities at night highlight the need for more inclusive and inviting play elements for adults in urban environments.



Stampioenstraat, Feijenoord, social housing.



Leliestraat, Noordereiland, apartment blocks.

Conclusion

At night, Noordereiland and Feijenoord often remain unexplored and underutilised by locals due to inadequate facilities and insufficient lighting. This creates a sense of insecurity, particularly among women. The emptiness reinforces the disconnection between communities and discourages encounters.

Locals also don't take the time to explore their neighbourhood. The residents take the same route every day, especially in Noordereiland, where there are no offices. The big outer roads of the island become hectic, and the sound of cars bouncing on the inner dwellings creates a sense of urgency. Because of that, the dark corners are left abandoned and unused once the sun comes down.

Despite this, there is a growing desire for connection among locals, demonstrated by the social initiatives and community centres that aim to revitalise the neighbourhoods. The emergence of walking groups, such as the independently organised groups at Afrikaanderplein and the Boompjes towers, proves this desire for connection and highlights the potential for activities promoting community bonds. However, these are all daytime walking groups (fig7H), which shows me that night walking needs to be democratised.

It's essential to acknowledge the limitations of these observations, as they are based on interactions with a limited demographic and do not fully represent the area's diversity. These conclusions will guide my design, but I will also consider the multifaceted identities of these neighbourhoods.

In this research, I realised the transformative potential of reimagining street lighting design through a care-oriented lens that prioritises community well-being and social interaction. By infusing a feminist perspective into the design process, we can create light elements that not only enhance safety but also facilitate encounters and encourage locals to engage with their surroundings.

As Pelle Ehn said, "Refining patterns in urban design can revitalise local planning traditions and empower residents to actively shape and reclaim their environment". This approach calls for designing inclusive public spaces that encourage meaningful connections and enrich community life.



Night Walk 2|1, Feijenoord. 26 March 2024.

Light Design

Pelle Ehn explains that the essence of urban design lies in its ability to reflect its inhabitants' lived experiences and aspirations. However, set norms and control mechanisms often block this potential, resulting in standardised public spaces that fail to reflect the desires of residents. Feijenoord and Noordereiland, despite their rich culture, are confronted with this disconnection, leading to segregation and tension among residents. The inadequacy of existing public spaces and poor lighting design create an unwelcoming atmosphere at night. The absence of facilities and the lack of consideration for diverse users emphasises this problem. However, initiatives like de Sport Kantine offer glimpses of inclusivity and community cohesion, showcasing the impact of different perspectives in shaping urban environments.

Public spaces in these neighbourhoods are activated through community-driven programming. Through research and interviews, it became evident that programming is essential for space reactivation. Initiatives like Street kitchens and community centre events are essential in creating connections between locals (fig7G). Light designer Carlijn Timmermans stressed that people need to be encouraged to do the first step, which can be done through programming (fig8C). Drawing inspiration from community initiatives like Tante Nino, we can guide locals on how to utilise their public spaces and shift their mindset and attitude by showcasing their potential with the aim of creating a sense of belonging and encouraging encounters.

The inadequate lighting at night creates an unpleasant and unsafe atmosphere, which the municipality uses to discourage encounters. This proves to me the need to focus lighting in these neighbourhoods, given the impact the different street lights have on local's behaviour. Despite the space and structures available, darkness makes them unused, such as the playground in Hefpark. Vera Wegener, a light designer, suggested illuminating existing structures instead of imposing new designs to resonate more with residents (fig 8B). By focusing on light, I aim to help residents rediscover their environment, using their familiarity with the place to create stronger connections.

I want to follow Pelle Ehn's participatory design concept, creating something locals can truly claim as theirs. To achieve this, my design must have open and flexible boundaries, allowing users to adapt it and thus care more for it. During the night walk, participants were invited to modify the tour and express themselves using different mediums, exemplifying this approach. Designer Thijs Masthoff emphasised the importance of involving locals in the design process to ensure their voices are heard (fig 8D). By contributing to the design, locals feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for it. Participatory design is essential for engaging residents in co-creating their environments, leading to encounter and reactivation of public space.

In my design, I want to acknowledge and address invisible processes by embracing alternative perspectives, such as feminist theory, to facilitate encounters. I aim to take an inclusive perspective that encourages locals to reclaim and activate existing spaces rather than imposing new structures. This involves reimagining lighting strategies to not only enhance safety but also promote social interaction and community engagement. Using the transformative potential of light and participatory design, I can create inclusive and safe public spaces that aim for meaningful encounters. Involving people in the design process creates attachment, while programming showcases the potential of a space. In conclusion, careful consideration of lighting design and participatory methods is essential in creating inclusive and safe public spaces that cater to the different needs of locals and facilitate encounters.



HefPark, Feijenoord.



Machine Kamer passage, Noordereiland. To get ideas flowing and the design going, I rented some LED lights and tested the impact of colour on different locations in the areas. The atmosphere changed as soon as the light turned on, with blue and purple hues creating an invitation to sit and converse.



HefPark under two different lights. For more light experiments see figure 3D and fig 9.



Pelle Ehn³⁵

“Giving form to our experience by producing **objects** that congeal this experience into thingness.”

Manon Richard

“Giving form to our experience by igniting **spaces** that congeal this experience into thingness.”



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