

PRESERVATION
ACTION COUNCIL



CONTINUITY

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*Right: a local early 20th century
crate label probably manufactured at
Muirson Label on Stockton St.*





From the President

San Francisco Chronicle "Architext" columnist **Arrol Gellner** rightly questions the new green architecture movement that advocates the reuse old building materials and the trendiness of architectural salvage yards: "While there's little doubt that we should utilize the sundry bits and pieces of buildings that have met their maker, the wider question is whether we should be demolishing these buildings in the first place. . . . Impatient and shortsighted bureaucrats among us like to insist that renovating buildings is uneconomical, since it's often more expensive than simply building new ones. Well, so what?" Indeed. As the old adage goes: you get what you pay for.

* * * * *

Preservationists have reason to cheer San Jose's Strong Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI). Prompted by PAC*SJ board member **Don Gagliardi**, the SNI Project Area Committee (an elected 52-member body of community residents advising the city council on the initiative) made a unanimous policy recommendation that the city complete historic surveys of properties in older neighborhoods as a prelude for protecting historic properties and districts. The city council adopted the recommendation at its June 11 meeting, directing staff to develop an informational work plan for performing historical surveys in the SNI project area. Clearly, vocal citizens attentive to the public process can make a difference. We need to protect our older neighborhoods from those who found them attractive enough to move there in the first place but who really want a McMansion. Neighborhoods should consider becoming historic districts, thereby providing more protection for buildings.

* * * * *

PAC*SJ thanks the **Farrington Historical Fdn.** for its generous grant of \$10,000. Grant funds were used to create and staff a local historic preservation resource center, to increase membership, increase volunteer involvement and visibility in the community, to increase revenue to support the goals of PAC*SJ, and support its board of directors. The Farrington Historical Fdn. is a local nonprofit dedicated to preserving the legacy of the past, contributing to the local community, and promoting an appreciation of our heritage. Grants are awarded primarily for historic preservation, arts and cultural activities.

PAC*SJ also thanks the **Sourisseau Academy** for its grant of \$500 for the creation of the Walking Tour of Naglee Park Souvenir Brochure and **Bonnie Montgomery** for her very fine work researching, writing, and laying out the beautiful brochure. Copies of the brochure, examining the history, architecture and founding families of Naglee Park are available from PAC*SJ for \$5, or \$3 for members (*call 998-8105*). The Sourisseau Academy is a program of the history dept. at San Jose State University. Grants are awarded for projects researching or relating to the history of Santa Clara County.



*PAC*SJ president Pat Curia*

'Renovating buildings is often more expensive than building new ones. So what? You get what you pay for.'

Thanks as well to the **National Trust for Historic Preservation** for its \$1,000 seed grant to hire a consultant for creating a financial stability plan. "With these start-up dollars, PAC*SJ joins the hundreds of other communities and organizations across the country actively ensuring that America's architectural and cultural heritage is preserved," National Trust president **Richard Moe** announced July 9. National Trust is a private, nonprofit membership organization chartered by Congress to encourage public participation in historic preservation.

* * * * *

Now is the time to go through those closets and attics. PAC*SJ's annual salvage and garage sale runs from Fri. August 23 at 5 pm and on Sat. and Sun. August 24-25 from 7:30 am to 4 pm daily at my house, 260 S. 13th St. in Naglee Park. Donated sale items (architectural salvage, household goods, furniture, antiques, etc.) are tax deductible. Volunteers are needed and invited to the post-sale barbecue Sunday afternoon in my backyard. *Call 998-8105.*

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Watchdog Report

San Jose Mercury News columnist Leigh Weimers' acerbic wit is normally second only to mine own, but he set my tail whirling with glee with his recent reference to certain unnamed humanities in Sacramento as "clueless clucks." Don't get me wrong; some of my best friends are chickens! But Weimers outdid me this time, and his phrase is so apropos that I can't resist absconding with it and applying it a few two-legged fowls roosting a bit closer to home!

First place among the Clueless Cluck awards and a twenty-bark salute goes to county assessor Larry Stone, his architect, and our esteemed Planning Comm'n for proposing and approving a development which will demolish the historic Muirson Label Bldg., an important remnant of the early fruit packing industry. This in spite of the Landmark Comm'n's recommendation that the building undergo restoration for reuse as affordable housing. A whole flock of clueless clucks!

Can't rest on my haunches without mentioning past and present projects which could easily qualify their originators for a Clueless Cluck award. The ongoing development of vacant office buildings; huge city subsidies for establishments that vaporize into the night or never show up to begin with; the continuing saga of a new city hall with upward zooming costs in both money and damage to historic buildings and neighborhoods; developers that don't give a fig for anything but enlarging the bottom line. Ah, yes, there is a fertile field of possible nominees. Thanks, Leigh, for the use of your finely-turned phraseology.

* * * * *

Kibbles are my favorite snack, and I must admit there have been a few handouts lately from the two-legged top varmints running our fair city. Looks like Mark's Hot Dogs (giant orange) is finally going to make its move to a new location around the corner on Capitol Ave. Hot diggity dog! I wanna march in that parade! Thanks to the collaboration of the Planning and Public Works Depts. (following some serious ankle biting) for substantially altering requirements and costs for masonry walls and storm drains at the new location, which allowed owner Demos Panetlides to preserve this small piece of vernacular architecture.

* * * * *

Cheers for the completion of one of PAC*SJ's earliest efforts to preserve local history. Ten years ago, they campaigned to save the historic Bernal Gulnac Joice House from demolition, and efforts were rewarded at the June grand opening for this important part of early Rancho history at which Judge Paul Bernal spoke.

* * * * *



The endangered Muirson Label Plant on Stockton St. made fruit and vegetable crate labels like the one shown above.

'First place among the Clueless Cluck awards and a twenty-bark salute goes to county assessor Larry Stone, his architect, and our Planning Comm'n for proposing and approving a development which will demolish the historic Muirson Label Bldg., an important remnant of the early fruit packing industry. . . . A whole flock of clueless clucks!'

There's a litter of new puppies known as CIM Group preparing to take on what the Palladium desperados left dangling when they rode out of town, but on a much smaller scale. So far, looks like this pack is sniffing the right trail, but us old dogs will have our ears cocked, snout to the ground and eyes ever watchful. Gr-r-r-r!

— The Dog



Above: The historic Muirson Label Plant on Stockton St. The city's Planning Commission has recommended that it be demolished to make way for a housing complex despite opposition from preservationists and neighboring residents.

Label Me Endangered: Historic Muirson Label Plant Buildings May be Demolished

*by April Halberstadt
and Don Gagliardi*

The Muirson Label buildings, perhaps the only remaining industrial buildings designed by renowned local architect William Binder (*see, Douglas, "William Binder: San Jose's First Major Modern Architect, Continuity, Spring 2001, at pp. 10-12*), will be demolished to make way for a high density housing project if developers and San Jose's Planning Commn. have their way.

Although listed as "Structures of Merit" on the city's historic resources inventory and reportedly eligible for local, state and national landmark status, the Muirson buildings' significance in local history may not be enough to save them.

Muirson Label, located at 425-435 Stockton Ave., "played an important role

'Although listed as Structures of Merit on the city's historic resources inventory and eligible for landmark status, the Muirson buildings' significance in local history may not be enough to save them.'

in San Jose's agricultural industry, creating the images of the Valley of Heart's Delight seen worldwide via the colorful labels on fruit crates and containers," says Mary Macdonald, president of the Shasta-Hanchett Park Neighborhood Assn., which encompasses the area where the factory is located.

Muirson Label manufactured the labels affixed to the Valley's fruit and vegetable produce packaging. "These labels and crates are now highly collectible pieces of our history," Macdonald continues. "Many were designed by Ralph Rambo, whose histories of the Valley were treasured by local schoolchildren."

A well-connected developer is now proposing that Muirson Label be demolished to make way for a housing

development. The Planning Commn. has given the project the green light. The project has so much momentum that nothing short of a PAC* SJ lawsuit may prevent the demolition of yet another remnant of San Jose's agricultural past.

A Legacy of San Jose's Fruit Packing District

Muirson Label, single story industrial buildings, were designed to gather the maximum amount of light for workers. The unique sawtooth roofs held scores of windows, allowing the design and printing operation of Muirson Label Co. to be performed with the good natural daylight that was so essential to this type of manufacturing.

The architecture of the buildings, both interior and exterior is largely intact. The County of Santa Clara Environmental Resources Agency, commenting on the draft EIR, points out: "if it can be established that Binder designed the later additions on the buildings the historic resource could prove to be a rare example of industrial design by an important San Jose architect."

The Muirson Label Co. is located in the heart of what was San Jose's famous fruit packing district. Fruit packing was the mainstay of San Jose's economy for more than a century, and the industrial buildings clustered near Stockton Ave. and The Alameda were at the hub for this Valley-wide enterprise.

Located nearby are Del Monte's Plant 51, the site of early canning and fruit processing operations dating to the 1870s, the Southern Pacific RR roundhouse and freight terminal, the Western Pacific freighthouse (recently demolished), the Union Ice Co. and a wide-range of related industries such as box and can manufacturers. Many of these structures still exist and are being renovated.

Rambo prepared a manuscript in 1963 entitled "Plant Life," which is a history of the Muirson Label plant. The manuscript remains to be published, and PAC* SJ has urged that it published as a

'The Muirson Label Co. buildings are located in the heart of what was San Jose's famous fruit packing district. Fruit packing was a mainstay of San Jose's economy for more than a century, and the industrial buildings clustered near Stockton Ave. were at its hub.'

potential mitigation measure if the labelling plant is destroyed.

A Printing Industry Dynasty

In addition to its fruitpacking heritage, Muirson Label is an important structure because it is linked to a Valley dynasty that pioneered the local printing industry.

George Muirson, founder and owner of Muirson Label Co., was the patriarch of a family that dominated the San Jose printing industry for generations. Muirson was of Scots ancestry; his father had emigrated from Scotland as a young man, bringing his bride, Eliza McKay Muirson.

George learned the printing trade and became the business manager for the *San Jose Morning Times*. He operated a printing company, bringing his nephew Theodore McKay Wright into the business. The company was known as Muirson Wright Printing. According to one family member, when Wright went to work one morning he found the presses already turning out still another fruit label jog. He remarked in disgust:



Above: a San Jose pear crate label depicting the Lick Observatory on Mt. Hamilton.

“Is that all we’re going to print, box labels?”

Shortly after, according to historian Charlene Duval, the business divided. Muirson Label was formed to print labels, Wright-Eley Printing handled the more traditional printing assignments.

George Muirson and his wife had no children, but George did bring another nephew, Theodore’s younger brother Charles, into the label business. While Theodore Wright built the Wright-Eley Co., his brother Charles was the vice-president and sales manager of Muirson Label.

Another branch of the family specialized in journalism. George Muirson’s sister Christie married Horace G. Wright and they entered the newspaper business around 1872, publishing the *Santa Clara Messenger*. They later bought a paper in Paso Robles, and their daughter Mabel Wright Street became the editor. The third generation of newswriters, Olive Street Engwicht, was the first woman graduated from the journalism department at San Jose State University.

The dynasty continued with Christie Engwicht, named for her great-grandmother, the pioneering publisher. Christie started working for the *San Jose Mercury* as a student and continued after graduation.

The Muirson-Wright-McKay clan and its offspring dominated the business for generations. The business continued into recent times with younger family members taking over as older ones retired. T.M. Wright died in 1946, but a printing company still occupies his business on N. Second St. Leonard McKay, another descendant, still operates McKay Printing and his inimitable Memorabilia of San Jose shop near the Peralta Adobe.

Muirson Label was bought out by International Paper in the 1960s, but the business continued under fourth generation Whitney Wright until the plant was finally closed in the 1970s.

A Proposal for Demolition

‘The planning director “brought this project forward in violation of the City Council Policy on Preservation of Historic Landmarks. . . . The policy affects any designated [landmarks], or structures that qualify. Besides the policy direction, which public officials are obliged to follow . . . the policy has specific guidelines [requiring] findings justifying alteration or demolition of a landmark structure. No draft findings are provided.’

— *Pat Curia*
*PAC*SJ*
President

Seven Hills Property proposes to build a 260-unit four-building housing complex on the west side of Stockton Ave., between Cinnabar St. and Lenzen Ave., to be known as Cinnabar Commons. The residential buildings would be as many as six-stories high and have a mixture of studio, one-, two-, and three-bedroom units.

The draft EIR for the project admits that a “reduced scale adaptive reuse alternative . . . would keep the existing Muirson Company buildings on site and modify them so that they can be converted to residential use.” Purportedly, this would yield approximately 40 loft-style units. New construction could then occur on the southern portion of the site, consisting of eight-story high rise buildings to accommodate the balance of the 260 units proposed.

However, the draft EIR says, “[t]he added height of the new reconfigured buildings may be visually intrusive to the existing neighborhood and could create more severe shade and shadow impacts on nearby single-family residences.” Accordingly, alternative reuse is rejected by the document.

PAC*SJ Criticizes the Draft EIR

The draft EIR proposes *no mitigation measures whatsoever* to address the significant impacts to historic resources by demolition of the Muirson Label buildings.

“We agree with the DEIR in that the project as proposed will have significant impacts on cultural resources, but also believe that the DEIR inadequately discusses these impacts and incompletely addresses mitigations and alternatives,”

PAC*SJ president Pat Curia wrote in a formal commentary on the draft EIR submitted to the Planning Dept. on May 6.

Curia also pointed out that the city planning director “brought this project forward in violation of the

City Council Policy on Preservation of Historic Landmarks. This policy, adopted on December 8, 1998, encourages strongly the preservation and adaptive reuse of landmark structures. The policy affects any designated [landmarks], or structures that qualify [for landmark status]. Besides the policy direction noted above, which public officials are obliged to follow when processing development applications such as this rezoning, the policy has specific guidelines . . . [including requiring] Findings justifying alteration or demolition of a landmark structure. No draft findings are provided.”

The First Amendment to the DEIR, dated May 10, 2002, responds briefly and obliquely: “The project has complied with the City Council Policy on the Preservation of Historic Landmarks *to the extent possible.*” (Emphasis added).

In other words, the Planning Dept. tacitly admits having violated the city policy. No explanation is offered why factual findings could not have been provided.

Curia also pointed out in PAC*SJ’s commentary that “similar adaptive reuse projects have been undertaken in the recent past on similar sites . . . such as the two Del Monte sites currently under renovation for adaptive reuse for loft housing. What is unique about the Muirson Label site that sets it apart from other projects where this potential impact has been adequately mitigated? The DEIR does not provide adequate assessment of this issue.”

The Planning Dept. responded: “[S]ubsurface contamination is a condition unique to this site presumably associated with the label printing business and other uses of the site which are unlike canning operations at the Del Monte plants.”

This, however begs the question why high density housing can be built on a site without cleaning up the subsurface contamination.

PAC*SJ’s critical comments concerning the draft EIR were echoed by the local neighborhood association and by the County’s environmental resources

“As much as our community desperately needs affordable housing, it also needs housing with a heart, soul and sense of history. The loss of historic and cultural resources under this project is unacceptable . . . There are few historic warehouses left in San Jose, and the Muirson Label Factory is among the most historic and architecturally significant.”

— *Mary Macdonald
President,
Shasta-Hanchett
Neighborhood
Assn.*

agency.

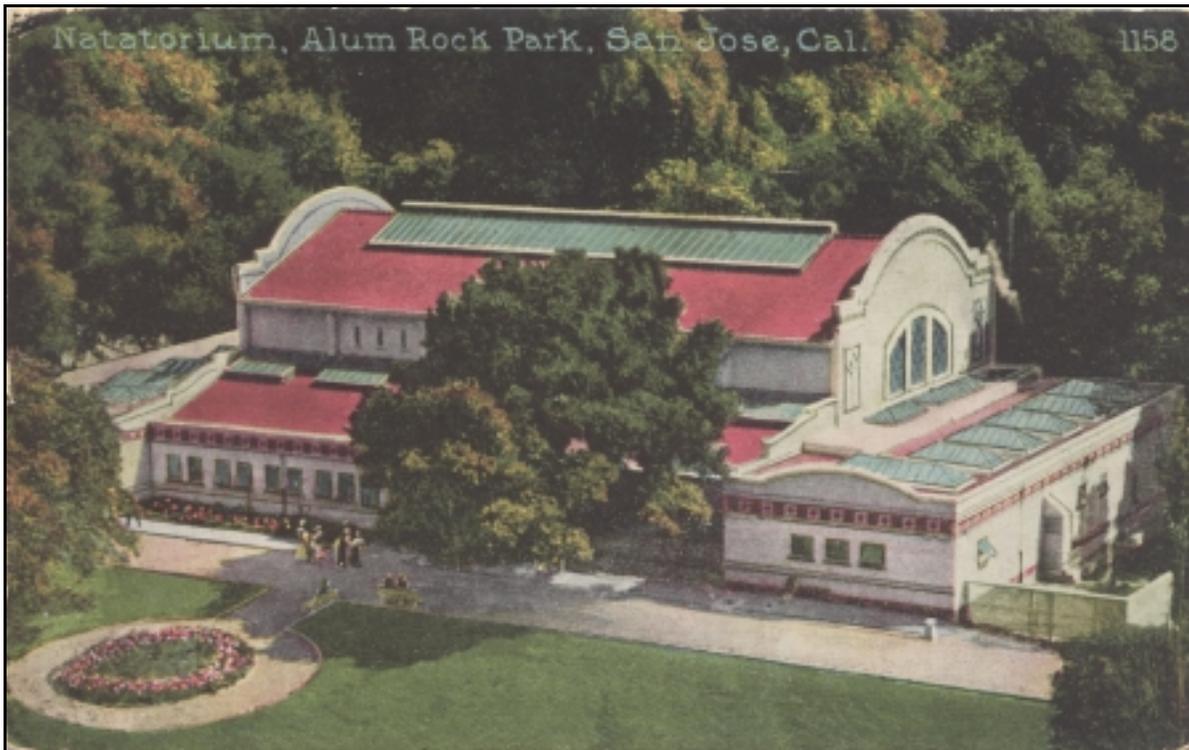
“The retention of the Muirson Label Company building should be further explored as a mitigation measure,” the County of Santa Clara Environmental Resources Agency declared in a May 3, 2002 commentary on the draft EIR. “The building is currently occupied and appears, in its present use(s) to be economically viable.”

And Shasta-Hanchett Neighborhood Assn. president Macdonald wrote: “As much as our community desperately needs affordable housing, it also needs housing with a heart, soul and sense of history. The loss of historic and cultural resources under this project is unacceptable . . . The failure to fully evaluate adaptive reuse alternatives is more than an unfortunate avoidable impact, it is unacceptable. There are few historic warehouses left in San Jose, and the Muirson Label Factory is among the most historic and architecturally significant.”

The neighborhood association gathered more than 200 signatures in a petition drive against the project.

Despite the absence of mitigation measures and notwithstanding the pointed critique of preservationists and public watchdogs, the Planning Commn. certified the draft EIR on July 10. Planning commissioner Xavier Campos, brother of city councilmember Nora Campos, reportedly stated in effect that housing people is more important than preserving history.

PAC*SJ filed an appeal on July 15 which as of press time was scheduled to go before the city council on August 20.



*The Alum Rock
Park Natatorium.*

*All photos and
vintage
postcards
courtesy of Jack
Douglas.*

They Left Their Mark: Architect Series

Ernest Curtis: William Binder's Junior Partner Also Left Imprint on San Jose *(Part 2 of 2)*

by Jack Douglas

Ernest N. Curtis, partner of San Jose's dominant architectural firm of Binder and Curtis, was a major contributor in the planning of important structures in San Jose from 1920 to 1950.

As a planning commissioner and architectural consultant for the city and county, his influence is still felt today. Some might call him the father of the civic center – our current city hall, courts, jail and county buildings.

Curtis was born in San Jose in 1889. His father was a local builder who constructed and lived in one of the first homes in the new Naglee Park development. Ernest would build a home and raise a family there as well.

*'Ernest N. Curtis,
partner of San Jose's
dominant
architectural firm of
Binder and Curtis,
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contributor in the
planning of important
structures in San Jose
from 1920 to 1950.'*

Like his partner, William Binder, Curtis also served an apprenticeship under the distinguished local architect George W. Page. Curtis worked as a draftsman in Binder's office prior to joining the Army during World War I. Binder, with major commissions coming in from the developer T.S. Montgomery, welcomed Curtis back as a full partner in 1918.

The booming 1920s brought many changes to cities across the nation, and the former agricultural village of San Jose was no exception. New construction techniques allowed buildings to grow stronger and taller, and Binder and Curtis was the earliest local firm to design such projects.

These included the Commercial Bldg. on N. First St., the Twohy and the

Burrell Bldgs., San Jose Hospital, the Hart Mansion, Hale's Dept. Store, the Hippodrome Theatre, the Hester (Towne) Theater and the Natatorium (swimming pool) at Alum Rock Park.

According to Warren Heid, who worked in the Binder and Curtis offices on San Carlos St., Binder went into semi-retirement during the Great Depression, when projects were few. From then on the plans were more exclusively those of Curtis.

Curtis had an artistic touch that manifested itself in such buildings as the Civic Auditorium and the San Jose Water Company Bldg. on W. Santa Clara St., with its distinctive ship's prow ornamentation above the front entrance.

The Civic Auditorium, for which Montgomery donated the site, was Curtis' supreme achievement during the 1930s. Incorporated in it are a number of artistic embellishments, from the colorful tiles in the lobby to the molded figures in the auditorium's Montgomery Theater. These buildings, along with the Fire Station on E. Julian St., show the first influence of Modernism in the firm's repertoire.

Also in the 1930s, Curtis drew up plans for numerous luxury homes for members of our professional classes. He used a variety of traditional styles, such as the Tudor homes in Naglee Park, the neo-Colonial Sewell Brown home in Los Gatos and the Spanish Colonial home of Roy McCallum in Hollister. The latter was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997.

Advocate for a Real Civic Center

In the years when city planning was a one-man department, Curtis employed his expertise as a member of the advisory Planning Commission and helped establish firm procedures for San Jose's growth.



Above: San Jose Hospital, since torn down. Left: the Commercial Bldg., a San Jose landmark at 28 N. First St.

From top to bottom: San Jose's Civic Auditorium, the San Jose Water Co. Bldg. and Curtis' Naglee Park home.

'Curtis had an artistic touch that manifested itself in such buildings as the Civic Auditorium and the San Jose Water Company Bldg. on W. Santa Clara St., with its distinctive ship's prow ornamentation above the front entrance.'



After World War II, he was an advocate of the unified civic center which materialized after his death in 1956. All the arguments which he espoused for a new civic center, for example combining city and county facilities in one accessible location, are just as valid today as they were then.

Yet current San Jose officials seem dedicated to separating the two by bringing city hall downtown and calling it the "Civic Center." Ernest Curtis would not be pleased.





Newest Preservationist. Baby Ruby Smith and mom, PAC**SJ* boardmember and webmistress Julia Howlett.



Historic Palm Haven Home Tour Saturday September 8

Held in conjunction with Willow Glen Founder's day, the tour highlights the history of the historic Palm Haven neighborhood. Proceeds from the tour will be used to restore the historic columns marking the entranceways to the neighborhood and to educate visitors about Palm Haven and its past. Six Homes will be on tour from 10 am to 5 pm. Tickets are \$20. Volunteers are needed as docents and room monitors and receive a free ticket. To volunteer or purchase tickets, contact Mike at (408) 650-8100 or mail@palmhaven.info.

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Please complete this form, enclose it with your check made payable to 'Preservation Action Council of San Jose' and mail to:

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PO Box 2287
San Jose, CA 95109-2287

CALENDAR

August

19 PAC SJ Board Meeting
7 pm Le Petit Trianon
72 N. 5th St.

23-25 Salvage & Garage Sale
6-8 pm Fri. 8/23
(PAC* SJ members only)
7:30 am - 4pm Sat. 8/24
8 am - 2 pm Sun. 8/25
260 S. 13th St.

September

23 PAC SJ Board Meeting
7 pm Le Petit Trianon
72 N. 5th St.

October

21 PAC SJ Board Meeting
7 pm Le Petit Trianon
72 N. 5th St.



The Preservation Action Council of San Jose is a nonprofit membership organization providing information to property owners and education to the public and promoting programs and policies for historic preservation and compatible new architectural design.

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