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Kloosterman, R.C.

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# New urbanity in the old city: Lessons from Amsterdam

Robert Kloosterman

## Putting Regeneration Plans in Perspective

The departure of large-scale manufacturing and logistical activities in the 1970s and '80s left at first gaping holes in many cities. Gaping holes in the employment base of the cities as factories, marshalling yards and docks were closed and large numbers of jobs were shed, but also in more physical terms thereby creating wide open, derelict spaces right next to a host of city centres in Europe and North America. The fate of large cities more generally, it seemed, could only be couched in pessimistic terms as both jobs and people had been leaving the cities for decades. Agglomeration economies appeared to be surpassed by agglomeration diseconomies as congestion, lack of space, unsafe streets and air pollution. If the glue of agglomeration economies becomes unstuck, the urban fabric, inevitably, unravels.

Urban environments, however, proved much more resilient and resourceful and became attractive again for work, living and leisure and cities bounced back in the closing decades of the 20th century (Cheshire 2006; Scott 2008). With the wisdom of hindsight we can see that already in the second half of the 1980s, when observers were still contemplating the imminent demise of large cities as viable places, things had taken a turn for the better. First, employment rebounded as transaction-intensive and, therefore, mostly urban-oriented activities (initially especially various producer services) expanded. The deepening of the process of globalisation with value chains covering ever more disparate locations contributed to the growth of spatially concentrated control and coordination functions. These transaction- and contact-intensive functions together with an elaborate supportive infrastructure of lawyers, consultancies, financial advisers etc. turned out to be drivers of strong economic growth in large cities (Sassen 1991/2001). Second, cities also re-emerged as attractive places for urban living, notably for large numbers of young, highly educated persons (Ley 1996). Their penchant for more individualised life styles kept them in the cities where they graduated or they moved to other cities where they could find the jobs and the amenities to support and develop a certain life style. The British writer Jonathan Raban was already clearly aware of this in his farsighted book *Soft City*, which was published in 1974. He depicted London as a complex mosaic of streets, squares, (cheap) apartments, shops, cafés, restaurants and exciting public spaces. Together they created a huge emporium with an extremely wide range of products, images, and ideas—from the mundane to the bizarre—with which young, upwardly mobile individuals could construct and assemble their own lifestyles and identities.

Whereas the rise of producers services after 1985 made its mark on urban landscapes chiefly in the form of concentrations of high-rise office towers, the 'new urbanites' showed up as initiators of processes of gentrification. Lots of former 19th and early 20th century working-class neighbourhoods were converted into vibrant (and eventually expensive) urban areas with tell-tale amenities such as vegetarian restaurants, galleries, design shops and boutiques (Zukin 1995). The gentrification did not remain limited to just residential areas from the industrial era. One can also witness the transformation of large-scale central urban industrial workplaces – such as factories, warehouses, beer breweries, gasworks, railroad yards and docklands – into apartments, office spaces, shops, restaurants, cafés, theatres, museums and other exhibition rooms.

These changes in function exemplify the transition from an industrial use of urban spaces to a post-industrial one and this process is intricately linked to the underlying shift in the technological mode of production from mechanical to digital. The cultural industries – now one of the mainstays of the digital city – figure prominently not just in bottom-up processes of gentrification with artists moving into deprived neighbourhoods, but also play an important role in top-down urban regeneration with cultural amenities spearheading the renewal of derelict urban landscapes as exemplified by The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Gomez 1998). Below, we will examine the role of cultural industries in two cases of urban regeneration; both situated in the Amsterdam Docklands. We start with a more general assessment of the socio-economic characteristics of the digital city.

## A Closer Look at the Digital City

Historically, cities have exploited their internal agglomeration economies – based on the classic urban triad of proximity, diversity and (critical) mass – as well as their external linkages which enabled them to specialise in certain forms of production (and consumption). Technological change and shifts in external linkages have continuously shaped and transformed urban landscapes. The most recent wave of structural changes has occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century when the introduction of digital technologies in conjunction with a rapidly expanding (global) network of external linkages has fundamentally reshaped the economy of many cities. Digitalisation and globalisation made cities return, after an industrial intermezzo of about two centuries, to their essential functions. More precisely, advanced consumer and producer services, coordination of spatially disparate tasks in the private and the public sector and also cultural industries have lead the way in creating vibrant urban economies once again (cf. Scott 2004: 461; Currid 2007). This apparent return to age-old urban functions involves, however, more than just a changing of the guards (Evans 2003). With the advent of a new production paradigm, not just dominant sectors change, but, moreover, the way production takes place and what

is produced alter. Any attempt to describe these fundamental changes will fall short of describing the complex reality of cities. To get a handle on the more general changes, we have summarised them under four headings.

## Leading sectors

The combined – and interrelated forces of digitalisation and globalisation have given rise to a post-industrial urban profile. The first component of this profile is anything but new. Cities are still the main sites of power and influence both in the public realm (the public sector remains a pillar of urban economies) and in the private sector (headquarters of multinationals).

The second component is related to these monitoring, control and coordinating activities, namely the advanced producer services which have emerged as a strong engine of urban growth after 1985. These services – from management consultancy to financial advice – have been pivotal in supporting the increasingly spatially fragmented chains of production and consumption (Sassen 1991/2001). They are strongly dependent on external economies (specialised labour pool, amenities, spillover) generated by proximity and are, hence, mainly concentrated in (large) cities (Hall and Pain 2006). The current financial crisis may put an end to the spectacular growth rates of the recent past, but these services will remain important in organising the globe-spanning arenas of production and consumption.

Whereas producer services are very much part of the private sector, the third component, the cluster of higher education/healthcare/research, is in many cases closely linked to, if not part of, the public sector. Universities, university hospitals, research institutes and higher vocational educational institutions are evidently important as generators of urban employment growth. The importance of knowledge as a source of competitiveness in a global economy has more recently once again boosted higher education and research. Healthcare, in most cases, institutionally linked to higher educational institutions, has also strengthened urban economies as its high income-elasticity and a greying population have pushed up expenditures.

The specialised consumer services (including tourism) constitute the fourth component of the economic profile of the digital city. The fragmentation of consumer markets has contributed to the rise of small niche markets catering to specific tastes. Larger cities have the necessary critical mass to sustain these niches. More and more, larger cities distinguish themselves through high-end consumer services with high-quality shopping facilities (e.g. flagship stores), high quality leisure (e.g. top-class restaurants; night clubs) and sports facilities both for spectators (e.g. sports stadiums) and participants (e.g. fitness centres). These amenities are not just for the inhabitants of a city, but also for its workers and, increasingly aimed at visitors and tourists. They evidently contribute to the quality of a place and, hence, following Richard Florida (2002), in helping to attracting high-skilled workers and boost economic development.

The fifth component comprises those economic activities concerned with producing and marketing goods and services permeated with aesthetic attributes. Their products are either immobile as they too have to be consumed at the place of production (Scott 2006) as in the case of theatres, museums, and festivals and here they partly overlap with the high-end consumer services. Or the products are mobile in which case they can be, in principle, consumed anywhere: recorded music, design products, books, fashion etc. Cultural industries are, in general, dependent on the classic triad of Marshallian agglomeration economies: specialised labour pool, a dedicated infrastructure and on more or less continuous spillover of knowledge. This makes them strongly oriented towards cities and within cities, towards city centres. A high-income elasticity has pushed up demand for products with aesthetic attributes and this, in turn, has fostered the growth of cultural industries.

We can find all kinds of hybridisation as, for example, between high-end consumer services and cultural industries. The clusters of economic activities are also interrelated in many ways as high-paid workers in the producer services generate demand for high-end consumer services and cultural industries. The presence of higher educational and research institutions attract a highly educated population which help to sustain local cultural industries and they help to supply the other clusters with highly specialised workers. These activities share a strong urban orientation as they are all dependent – although in different ways – on agglomeration economies generated by proximity, diversity and critical mass. The larger the city is, the higher are, in principle, the agglomeration economies. Moreover, the complex interlocking of the different clusters generates important emergent effects such as localised dedicated institutions and a local culture or atmosphere which partly feeds into its products which makes them hard to copy and, therefore, gives some protection to competition from elsewhere.

## **Technological-organisational aspects**

The arrival of a new production paradigm in the cities did not just involve appearance of new leading sectors. Ways of production have also changed with the advent of cheap computing power in combination with easy access to global digital networks. It has put an end to the dominance of the traditional industrial/fordist business model based on high fixed costs and, hence, economies of scale. Small-scale production, supported by a whole array of innovative producer services such as parcel delivery and ICT services (cf. Friedman 2005), has become profitable. Thanks to combinations of flexible production and digital linkages, small firms are able to exploit economies of scope. They cater to, often very volatile, niche markets – the long tail of the demand side – that clearly transcend the local. The small firms are usually transaction-intensive, working in local and, increasingly, non-local networks which underpin the chain of production. They are typically dependent on central urban locations, which offer the possibilities for relatively cheap face-to-face interactions. We

are seeing the emergence of a few large firms surrounded by a cloud of small firms delivering various kinds of highly specialised services. The re-emergence of small firms notably in producer services, consumer services, and cultural industries which rely on external economies for their profitability also reshapes the urban economy.

## **Labour practices**

With these shifts, knowledge has emerged as the key input for competitive economic activities. Highly refined, specialised and detailed knowledge of products, production processes, markets is key to compete on global but fragmented markets. This has further strengthened the agglomeration forces as (tacit) knowledge, in marked contrast to information which is highly mobile or “leaky”, tends to be more or less place-bound or “sticky”. Knowledge-intensive production in combination with digital technology asks for different forms of management. The large-scale, top-down, bureaucratic, Taylorist ways of production are giving way small-scale, cottage-like production with a strong reliance on self-management. Workers know their targets and they are up to some extent free to decide when and where they should work (as in the pre-industrial putting-out system). The rise of self-management can be seen in the rise of (highly educated) self-employed (one-person businesses), but also those who are formally workers are becoming more entrepreneurial. The boundary between being employed and self-employed can be very vague and blurred, especially in the cultural industries with its myriad of small firms and complex combinations of self-employment and temporary, part-time jobs. The traditional (predominantly male) industrial working class has largely disappeared from advanced urban economies in the developed world and been replaced by a much more diverse labour force comprising male and female workers in more balanced way.

## **Spatial consequences**

The emergence of a new economic profile in cities, digital technology, new ways of organising production on a firm level and on an individual level are inevitably also articulated spatially. Although the built environment may display significant inertia with respect to changes and earlier historical layers can usually still be seen, the developments described above are evidently altering the use of space in cities. Knowledge-intensive activities, dependent on frequent face-to-face contacts, are concentrated in dense areas of large cities. Such local clusters of specialised activities are pivotal in the global competition. Within these knowledge-intensive activities we should distinguish between those that are able to pay high rents (generally the activities related to power and coordination and producer services) and those that can only afford low rents (mostly cultural industries). The former can be found in prestigious central-business type of locations, while the latter usually opts for transition neighbourhoods (e.g. previous working-class neighbourhoods), quite centrally

located and able to sustain frequent face-to-face exchanges but much cheaper. Specialised consumer services can be found in or in the vicinity of both types of locations depending on the niche market they suppose to target. Activities less relying on frequent face-to-face contacts are pushed outside and the same can be said for large-scale amenities catering to a mass audience (e.g. sport stadiums).

These changes can be easily observed in many cities. There is, however, another set of changes going on partly behind the facade of the built environment. The shifts in labour practices allow for much more freedom with respect to the temporal and spatial combinations of work. This implies new patterns of mixing work, life, leisure on the level of a city, of a neighbourhood, a street and even on the level of an individual dwelling. The process of an increasing separation of functions, so characteristic of the industrial age, is now partly being reversed. The digital technology in combination with self-management now makes erratic and quite idiosyncratic spatio-temporal patterns of work possible. The digital nomads can be seen working in as people work at home, in cafés, restaurants, museums, or other “third spaces”. The digital city will experience new uses of urban space and new needs for certain (semi-) public urban amenities.

It is the contingent mix of the local historical context and the more general trends of change which help to shape the concrete opportunities and constraints for individual cities (cf. Hutton 2004). Against the backdrop of these structural changes and its own legacy, a city government has to devise policies to boost the competitiveness and the attractiveness. More and more, cities have now turned to cultural industries as an instrument to foster economic growth, employment and quality of place. Before we turn to two cases of the role of cultural industries in Amsterdam, we first take a look at them from a more general point of view.

## Cultural industries as an instrument of urban revitalisation

Cultural industries encompass a wide variety of activities – all geared towards adding semiotic and aesthetic value to goods or services, ranging from music making to advertising and from jewelry making to the staging of theatre plays (Pratt 1997; Scott 2004). Already in 2000, Peter Hall observed that:

*“Culture is now seen as the magic substitute for all the lost factories and warehouses, and as a device that will create a new urban image, making the city more attractive to mobile capital and mobile professional workers” (Hall 2000: 640).*

The Guggenheim in Bilbao is, of course the prime example of a policy based on the cultural industries, but as many articles in newspapers and magazines testify, it has become a quite common strategy to revamp run-down areas and put cities on the

map again. To bring some order to the various ways in which local culture can be used, the Italian urbanist Walter Santagata (2002) has suggested a fourfold division of clusters of cultural industries each with their own spatial articulation and governance characteristics:

*1. The industrial cultural districts*

These are the archetypical clusters of cultural industries with many small and medium size industries specialising in high-value added products and which are embedded in a local production milieu with its own dedicated supporting infrastructure for reproducing the skilled labour, matching demand and supply and maintaining quality standards. These industrial cultural districts originate "spontaneously": for more or less contingent reasons one firm or a set of firms initially locate in one place and a process of increasing returns is set in motion which strengthens their competitive position as external economies are generated on an ever larger scale. It would be very hard for a local government to initiate such a cluster, but it could help to accommodate a cluster and assist in creating these external economies (e.g. by supporting dedicated local educational institutions) once it is already there.

*2. The institutional cultural districts*

In this case, the competitive position of a particular industrial cultural district is supported by an institutional construction in which the government (national or even supranational) confers the right to the local producers to protect their product through the setting of a collective trademark and the allocation of property rights to a restricted area of production. The particular niche covered by the spatially concentrated producers is then fenced off by formal and legal boundaries further emphasising the importance of monopolistic competition in cultural industries. These districts tend to be more oriented towards the rural concentrations and can be found especially in wine and cheese making.

*3. The museum cultural districts*

These cultural districts are typically found in historical city centres. The anchor of such a district is a museum network often in conjunction with an artistic community. A large part of the production that takes place in these districts is "immobile" in the sense that it has to be consumed at the place of production: one has to go to the museum or theatre in order to enjoy its products. These cultural anchors are usually part of areas with a wider variety of amenities. The cultural anchors, though, are the main attractors for tourists and visitors. Large cities tend to have several of these *museum cultural districts* within their boundaries, whereas smaller cities typically have just one. These cultural anchors can be historical (Louvre, Paris) or newly established museums (Tate Modern, London). Recently, governments have been using these cultural anchors to transform derelict urban areas. Museums, public libraries and other large public amenities are becoming very important as attractors



and as markers of identity for specific locations within cities and for these cities themselves.

#### *4. Metropolitan cultural districts*

This type of cultural district is by definition part and parcel of the metropolitan environment. It combines aspects of the first type, the industrial cultural, with those of the third type, the museum cultural district. In a metropolitan cultural district we can find, therefore, both the production of immobile cultural products (museum, libraries, theatres, galleries art shops) and that of mobile cultural products (workshops, studios, ateliers). In addition, this type also comprises a supporting structure of amenities (restaurants, cafés, bookshops, magazine stands, night clubs, “third spaces” in between work and home where face-to-face contacts can take place). The combination of these different elements (encompassing working, living, leisure) makes metropolitan cultural districts more difficult to initiate than the more monofunctional museum cultural districts. These mixed-use districts tend to be very lively and attractive place to live, work and visit. They can help “to contrast economic industrial decline, and to design a new image of the city” (Santagata 2002: 16).

## **Cultural industries as strategic instruments in Amsterdam**

In Amsterdam, we can find two examples of emerging cultural districts in the former docklands east of the central station. One closely resembles the museum cultural district while the other one is more difficult to label as its emergence is not so much because of government intervention, but despite of it.

### **Case 1: The planning of a cultural anchor**

The Oosterdokseiland was conceived in the 1990s as a new cultural anchor for the city of Amsterdam. In retrospect, one can label the plans for this part of the IJ-oever as aiming at a museum cultural district. The city government was strongly involved in planning which amenities should be located there. The new city library, a new music hall and the new building for the Amsterdam Amsterdam Conservatory were all part of the plan. The plan also included parking places, office space, restaurants, shops and housing to achieve a mix of uses at the highly central location (five minutes walk from the central station). More definitive conclusions have to be, accordingly, postponed. We can, however, point at some interesting elements in the planning and even already in the implementation of this cultural anchor.

The Oosterdokseiland is clearly a top-down project in which the local government – the city of Amsterdam – in collaboration with the real-estate developer collaborate to create a cultural anchor with amenities in which cultural industries (with

immobile products) play a central role. The large scale or lumpiness of the amenities makes a strong involvement of the government inevitable. The constraints imposed by the public-private partnership necessitated the inclusion of other elements (office space, restaurants and shops, apartments) in high densities to make the project profitable. The city, right from the start, emphasized the need for architectural quality to give the Oosterdokseiland a distinct identity. The combination of functions has implicitly shifted the focus from creating a museum cultural district to creating a metropolitan cultural district.

Whereas the Oosterdokseiland was something of a black hole in the city where almost no one went, it has now become part of the itineraries of many inhabitants and visitors of Amsterdam. Even before its completion, the Oosterdokseiland, has turned out to be a cultural anchor able to attract large numbers. That the Oosterdokseiland has already surfaced on the mental map can be attributed for a substantial part to a more or less contingent event. The famous Amsterdam Museum of Modern Arts was looking for temporary space and set up shop on the ground floor of the former postal distribution centre. A turnaround was triggered, especially when on the top floor, a post-modern café and restaurant with breath-taking view of the old city was started. The floors in between, meanwhile, became occupied by small firms in the cultural industries: advertising agencies, web-design firms, architectural practices, photographers etc. This was, however temporary as the Post CS building had to be refurbished for its new office function and both the Museum and the cultural industries firms had to leave in the summer of 2008. By now, however, the meanwhile completed Amsterdam Public Library and the Amsterdam Conservatory (music school) are attracting large numbers of visitors and the Oosterdokseiland is indeed fulfilling its role as a cultural anchor. The present success of the Oosterdokseiland can thus be attributed to its central location, the strength of the cultural anchors (library, music hall, music school), and the quality of the architecture. The turnaround from a place to avoid to a place to be cannot be properly understood, however, without referring to the pioneering role of the Post CS building and the actors who were involved in this. These actors, the real-estate developer who was open to the temporary use of the building, the Stedelijk Museum, the daring entrepreneur who transformed the 11th floor of the building into restaurant with breathtaking views of the city life, both outside and inside the restaurant and the large number of workers who created a buzz in and around the place.

## **Case 2: Accommodating Cultural Industries**

The city made plans for a cultural centre on the Oosterdokseiland, the fingers of land in the IJ more to the east were, however planned as mostly monofunctional residential areas (Lebesque, 2006). When the more comprehensive Koolhaas masterplan for the whole southern part of the IJ River banks fell through, the area was divided into separate plots, each with its own masterplan (and architects). What was clear,

however, was that density should be very high, that the architectural quality should be high and innovative, but relating to the architectural heritage of the city centre of Amsterdam (Lebesque 2006: 99-101). Developers were allowed to come up with innovative design and this has resulted in a variegated architectural landscape with surprising designs combining seemingly traditional Amsterdam canal views with apartments with large spacious living rooms.

The design of the housing on Java Island and Sporenburg have attracted much attention from the architectural field (cf. De Botton 2006). The housing in combination with the spectacular views of low Dutch skies and the IJ River now frequently form the backdrop of television series. This outspoken architectural identity, moreover, has made living there very popular and these neighbourhoods, which were completed around the year 2000 or later, are very well able to compete with the older, more central parts of the city.

Attracting high-skilled workers nowadays in the digital era also means attracting business. Although the neighbourhoods were mainly intended as residential neighbourhoods, recent data show that the fairly recently completed Eastern Docklands are teeming with economic activities. A substantial part of these economic activities match the profile of the digital city as described above: small-scale, home-based businesses, notably in the creative industries (advertising, publishing, writing, the performing arts, the visual arts, architectural and other design), working for non-local markets and probably strongly dependent on ICT for their production.

## Lessons from Amsterdam

New economic activities, new uses of space, new ways of organising work, new spatial articulations are emerging in cities making them distinctly different in some key respects from their industrial predecessors. To be successful, urban regeneration projects have to match the larger transformation processes of the city by creating opportunities for the new activities and the new uses of space. Cultural industries can be used as instruments for regeneration, but there are clear caveats. One cannot create an industrial cultural district out of the blue, though one can help to create conditions as shown by the Eastern Docklands. One can use large cultural anchors to transform a particular area as has been proved in Bilbao, London, Paris and now also on the Oosterdokseiland in Amsterdam. These recent transformations of the Amsterdam Eastern Docklands into a buoyant part of the old city might have some larger lessons to offer. Many of these lessons were already formulated by Jane Jacobs (1961) when she criticised the modernist reordering of New York. In the digital city with its small firms, its embeddedness in the locality, its importance of public and semi-public (third) spaces, its dependence on face-to-face contacts and its deep integration of work, caring and leisure these lessons are arguably more poignant than ever. I have summarised these lessons under five headings.

*1. Plan for flexibility: leave spaces open*

It now seems that the Eastern Docklands are an example of a successful transition from an industrial to a post-industrial use. The carving up of the area into several plots with their own master plans created diversity. High densities helped to create an urban atmosphere. Notwithstanding these evident qualities, the Eastern Docklands are also victim of planners' hubris. The plans were notably designed to provide housing for couples without children (what were once called yuppies). Human nature does not, however, always follow the patterns envisaged by planners. Many of the couples did eventually get children and now the neighbourhoods suffer from a lack of childcare facilities and schools. Plans for transforming large areas inevitably suffer from a lumpiness determined by infrastructural, organisational and financial demands. One should, however, try to keep plans as open as possible on the level of the individual housing (which seem to be achieved in parts of the Eastern Docklands), but also on the level of the street and the neighbourhood if more and other functions should be needed. If indeed an industrial cultural district is developing in the Eastern Docklands, spaces for face-to-face contacts and many office buildings are needed to accommodate the local businesses.

*2. Plan for quality: architectonic quality will pay for itself*

Both the Oosterdokseiland and the Eastern Docklands have underlined the importance of high-quality architectural design. It helps to give a new neighbourhood a distinct identity. The architectural quality has to be realised on several levels: from the master plan to the interior of the individual houses. Large structures as bridges and public libraries can function as signature buildings.

*3. Co-operate with private actors, but preserve openness*

These large regeneration projects can usually only be realised in close collaboration with the private sector. One should, however, defend the public interest. In the Eastern Docklands, one essential element of urbanity is almost lacking: a fine-grained mix of housing and retail. The real-estate developer in conjunction with a large retail firm were able to help to draw up a zoning plan which does not allow dispersed small-scale retail and concentrates nearly all (large-scale) retail in one specific place. The neighbourhood might be now saved up to some extent by the boats on the ubiquitous quays, housing cafés and restaurants, the fact remains, however, that the retail landscape is more like a desert. Public bodies involved in planning should not allow private actors to dictate the zoning plans.

*4. Stimulate self-organisation and the importance local actors*

The early success of the Oosterdokseiland was clearly partly driven by the lucky presence of dynamic entrepreneurs who were able to see, on the one hand, which opportunities were on offer in this area, and on the other, what needs existed among the diffuse group of up and coming creative workers. The developer made space for them,

literally, and a cultural anchor appeared on the radar. As with space in the literal sense, regeneration plans should leave institutional space open for new actors who as gatekeepers are more in touch with new economic activities.

*5. No panacea for every city: dependent on urbane population*

The transformation of the Amsterdam Docklands seems to chime with the shifts in the socio-economic base of the city. The new urbanites are able to combine their lifestyles in highly urban environments and these are there on offer. They are able to start a business and they can tap into the rich networks of the nearby city centre. The Oosterdokseiland as cultural anchor also seems quite successful as the Public Library, the Amsterdam Conservatory and the Music Hall attract many people in day and night time. These achievements have been possible because Amsterdam has the critical mass of entrepreneurs, the urbane people with financial and cultural capital and an extensive local production system in the cultural industries. All plans for new urbanity in old cities can only work if there is a sound basis of old urbanity.

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