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GATED COMMUNITIES; IMAGES OF SUSTAINABILITY;AL-REHAB & MADINATY CASE STUDIES

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GATED COMMUNITIES; IMAGES OF SUSTAINABILITY;AL-REHAB & MADINATY CASE STUDIES

Abstract

The surge of newly developed gated communities (GC's)/ neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the Greater Cairo Region has triggered research to understand the unprecedented phenomenon in Egypt in the late 1990's. This paper investigates images of a sustainable lifestyle from the perspective of the residents of two communities; Al-Rehab and Madinaty. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are followed to explore and document residents' perception of a sustainable lifestyle promised in these two-gated communities. Indepth interviews and a survey were conducted to assess reasons behind the move to these new communities that were a new trend in urban development in Egypt in the 90's. Thematic and statistical analysis shows poetic images of soft sustainability that contradict to what a real future might be.

Keywords

Al-Rehab city, Gated Communities, Madinaty city, Sustainability

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outskirts of the Greater Cairo Region has triggered research to understand the unprecedented phenomenon in Egypt in the late 1990's. This paper investigates images of a sustainable lifestyle from the perspective of the residents of two communities; Al-Rehab and Madinaty. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are followed to explore and document residents' perception of a sustainable lifestyle promised in these two-gated communities. In-depth interviews and a survey were conducted to assess reasons behind the move to these new communities that were a new trend in urban development in Egypt in the 90's. Thematic and statistical analysis shows poetic images of soft sustainability that contradict to what a real future might be.

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1. INTRODUCTION

While Problems in developed countries are mainly related to quality of urban life; those in Less Developed Countries are often questions of life and death, such as problems of poverty, clean water availability, waste, pollution, and congestion (Shamsul Haque, 2000).

Besides, many paradoxes characterize the scene. For instance, while everything is going global, individual isolation grows; while wealth increases, extreme poverty also increases; while science and technology offer incredible opportunities for survival, the risk of humankind's extermination looms larger and larger (Wieslaw, 2001).

Amid these circumstances, the phenomenon of Gated Communities (GC's) as urban residential developments started to highlight the scene in some countries as the case in Egypt. This old/ new pattern of development was a response to the fear of crime in urban areas in many countries, but in Egypt the move to GC's was claimed to be a move a better quality of life and not for safety concerns. GC's in the contemporary form emerged in Egypt since the mid-1990s in the new cities and satellites around the Greater Cairo Region (GCR) . They started to attract the rich and upper classes to live in luxurious lifestyle communities with leisure activities and amenities, and surrounded by gates and high walls.

According to Adham (2005), the idea of creating 'gated housing communities' is not new to our era, yet, even returns to Fatimid Cairo, which as a whole was a gated city. The same precedent of today's discussed GC's is more relevant to what Adham (2005) exposes as the holiday resort village of al-Ma'mura, then located east of Alexandria, Financed and established by the state owned company bearing the same name, al-Ma'mura was a semi-public development. This changed in the 1980s when a group of resort villages were rapidly built along the Mediterranean coast west of Alexandria — Marabella, Maraqa, Marina, to name a few. Fig (1) shows the surge of gated communities in the greater Cairo region.

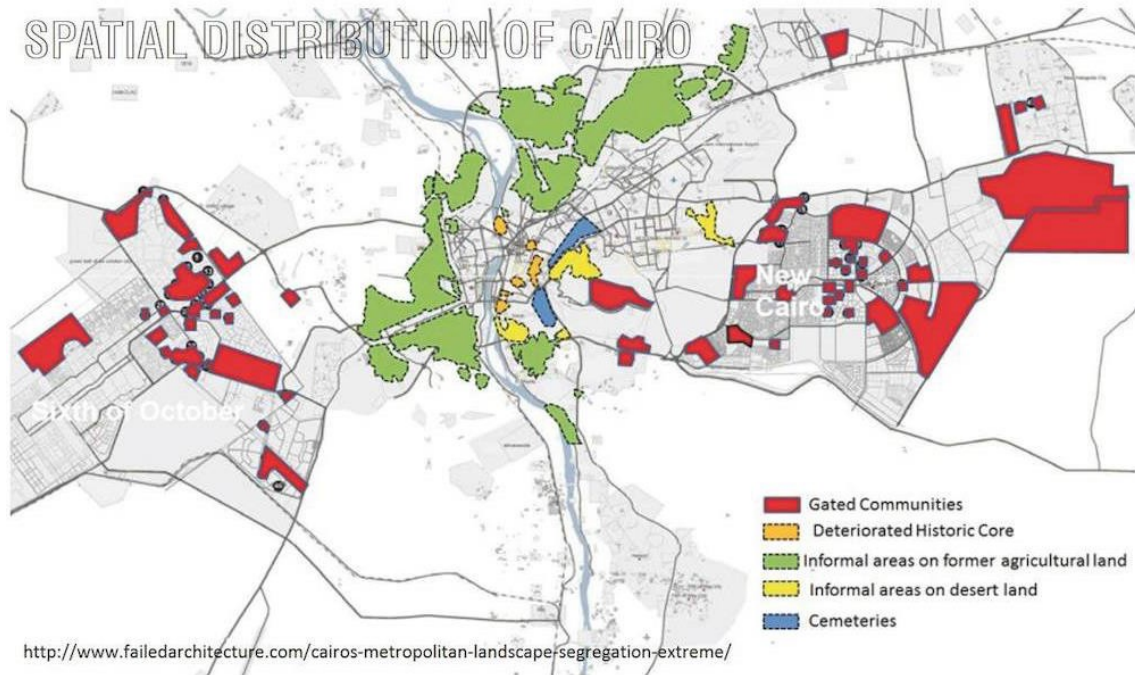


Fig. 1 Gated communities distribution around Cairo
Reference: <http://www.urban-comm.gov.eg> July 2018

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODOLOGY:

“.... We enjoy the greenery, kids love going to the club. It’s mostly safe here... but still you know You have to keep an eye on them. I guess it was safer long time ago where I was raised in old Cairo. It was more fun eeehhh...”

These are the words of one of Al-Rehab GC residents. One might think that it says it all. Our expectations, fears, and aspirations by moving into one of those acclaimed GC’s. Although some body of research have been conducted about GC’s; its origins, planning, architectural styles and urban features, very few ones tackled the sustainability concept from a philosophical stand point. Through this paper, the researchers tend to explore the circle of life of people living in two of these GC’s; Al-Rehab and Madinaty cities. How do people view their lives in such contexts and how would that reflect on a sustainable future that we all strive to.

The research follows a qualitative approach using secondary available data and primary data collected through some surveys and interviews with residents. For logistics issues, we used a snowball sample. The researchers started a couple of interviews with residents who agreed to join the investigation. Those respondents introduced us to other residents from their circle of friends. Collecting information and analysis went simultaneously. As we moved on developing our thematic analysis, we agreed to settle on whatever information we had. This could be considered as a pilot study for future research planned to take place in the area.

3. CASE STUDIES PRESENTATIONS:

The closest eastward cities from Cairo are Al Rehab City (20km east) then Madinaty (35km). Both have been planned to incorporate housing for all income levels, the two cities include a good service distribution including all amenities and services. This includes commercial, recreational, leisure, medical and educational facilities.

Housing patterns in GC's vary as well; independent villas (2 floors), and walk-up apartments (2 – 5 floors). Where the built-up area should not exceed 40%. Each GC enjoys a good amount of open green areas for semi-public use, places for children play, a club (sportive and social), mosques and a church for daily services. Project management is usually the responsibility of the owner company until all residential units are sold, then a union of homeowners is founded to take over (Metwally, M. and others, 2013).

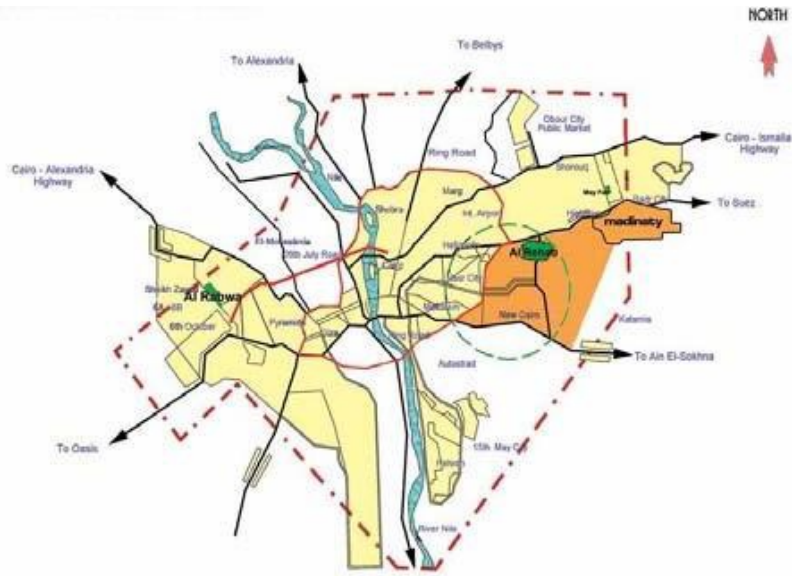


Fig. 2 The two Gated Communities (El Rehab and Madenty) in Great Cairo
Reference: <http://www.madinaty.com> July 2018

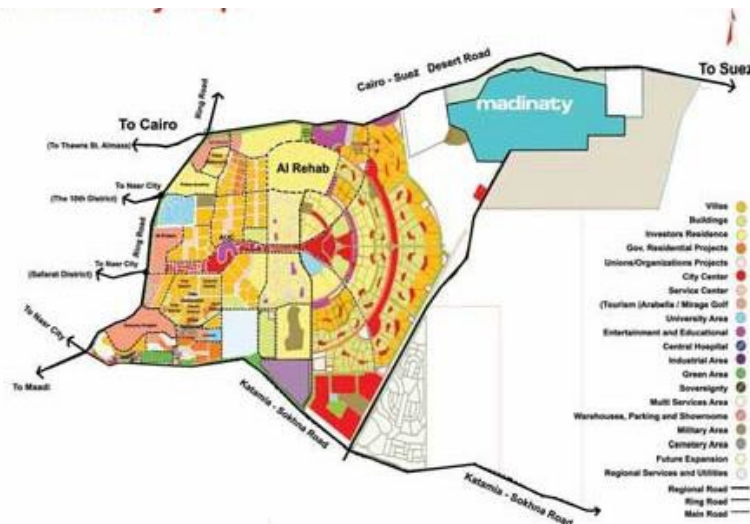


Fig. 3 The two Gated Communities (El Rehab and Madenty) in Great Cairo
Reference: <http://www.madinaty.com> July 2018

3.1 Al Rehab Site Plan

Al Rehab is a private sector constructed and built district, situated on the North-East side of New Cairo, planned to serve as a fully fledged community, which creates a comprehensive integrated residential scheme within the New Cairo plan. It covers an area of ten Square km to accommodate 200 thousand residents. The district includes educational, medical, commercial, recreational and maintenance facilities distributed among the different neighbourhoods (phases).

The Project constitutes ten whole neighbourhoods, with size ranging from 1 square km to 1.28 square km. The residential clusters vary from apartments buildings to villas, with different models and sizes all surrounded by greenery and connected through pedestrian paths that extend to connect them to the different phases. Pedestrian paths cut through, equipped with benches and adorned with a lot of plants and greenery.



Fig. 4 Al Rehab District Master plan
Reference: <http://www.rehaby.net> July 2018



Fig. 5 Cluster Master Plan (Al Rehab)
Reference: <http://www.rehaby.net> July 2018



Fig. 6 Plan & Perspective of residential building (Al Rehab)
Reference: <http://www.rehaby.net> July 2018



Fig. 7 Plan & Perspective of villa (Al Rehab)
Reference: <http://www.rehaby.net> July 2018

3.2. Madinaty Site Plan

Madinaty is centrally located among several new and existing settlements in the northeast Greater Cairo Region, situated to the immediate south of the Cairo–Suez Road and is approximately 35 km from metropolitan Cairo. With an area of approximately 33600 square km,

The project objective is to establish a setting that maintains a high quality lifestyle, provide a unique sense of "place", and create a successful financial basis of development and forward positive and sustainable environmental principles.

The GC provides a major urban node within outskirts of Cairo, recognizable from within the overall community. The project is a mixed development, including residential areas, commercial/retail areas, school, hospital and similar service facilities. Residential areas are divided into two sectors; villas and residential buildings with areas of dwellings varying from 42 m² to 324 m² both of these groups are divided internally into sub areas.



Fig. 8 Madinaty District Master plan
Reference: <http://www.madinaty.com> July 2018

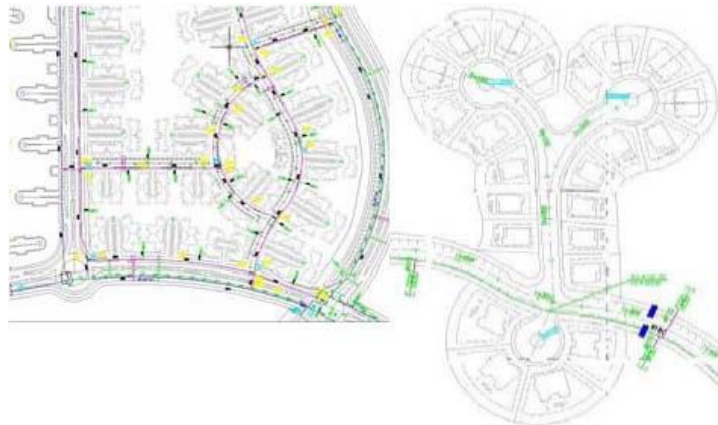


Fig. 9 Cluster Master Plan (Madinaty)
Reference: <http://www.madinaty.com> July 2018



Fig. 10 Plan and perspective of a residential building (Madinaty)
Reference: <http://www.madinaty.com> July 2018



Fig. 11 Plan & Perspective of villa (Madinaty)
Reference: <http://www.madinaty.com> July 2018

Both case studies have distinct community centres that offer a variety of land uses including retail, recreational and civic uses that offer the needs of local residents. Also the districts planning encourages residents to walk more and allow them to accomplish more in one trip, resulting in an overall reduction in the number of trips. Overall network design is well connected both internally and to surrounding uses, to allow users to choose from a variety of transportation modes including walking and biking.

Districts are designed into a more green and walkable communities. These include four types of green spaces; urban parks, streetscapes, linear parks and tree-lined boulevards and streets. Secondary streets would also include landscaping at the corners of the blocks. Urban parks are incorporated into the block structure. The square, park, or plazas are at least 50 feet wide at a point perpendicular to each entry. Districts' planning encourages residents to walk more and allow them to accomplish more in one trip, resulting in an overall reduction in the number of trips.

Generally speaking, the environment is safe for users. All could move easily during daytime between different destinations. Landscape is designed with native or adapted plants to reduce or eliminate irrigation requirements. However, the architecture in the two cities doesn't reflect local heritage or appropriateness to a desert environment.



Fig. 12 Minimum building height-to-street-width ratio of 1:3, Al Rehab City
Reference: photographed by the author July 2018



Fig. 13 Madinaty District Master plan
Reference: <http://www.madinaty.com> July 2018



Fig. 14 Minimum building height-to-street-width ratio of 1:3, Al Rehab City
Reference: photographed by the author July 2018



Fig. 15 Gated communities distribution around Cairo
Reference: <http://www.urban-comm.gov.eg> July 2018

4. Discussion and results:

One could start a discussion by stating that almost 70% of the studied sample came from Cairo (Nasr City and Misr Al-Jadidah) which is the closest formal districts to Al-Rehab and Madinaty; 30% came from different formal districts; 90% of housing units satisfy the values of privacy, serenity and quietness; Working residents have their work in Cairo; 35% use city buses 65% use their private cars for this distance; The underprivileged classes have access to the spaces inside the gates only as workers; maids, gardeners, chauffeurs and others; 60% of the families have in-house maids and drivers (source: collected data 2017).

Though numbers sometimes satisfy the ego of bystanders, it highly conceals high quality realities. That's why narrative analysis –for some such as naturalists- is a better way to understand what lies beneath. Going

to the field needs one to listen and observe carefully without any prior conceptions about the topic being investigated. A critical eye would catch the underlying themes, concepts and even emotions.

5. Shattered images:

Hind; a resident of Madinaty says:

“I want to live and raise my children in a clean and safe environment. I was raised in Misr Eljadidah and I think I have had a nice safe and nurturing childhood. That’s not the case anymore ...”.

“... You know... I moved here cause I was really pissed off stories in media about harassment, human organs theft, etc. Those stories escalated especially after 2011, you know... the revolution and the mess we went through and after”

Soheir, living in Al-Rehab since 2010 adds:

“... We moved here some years ago. I recall American movies; couples living in nice homes, surrounded by greenery everywhere, kids playing around. Its perfect for me, but the cost is a bit high and urges us to work harder to sustain that lifestyle....”

“.... We enjoy the greenery, kids love going to the club. It is mostly safe here... but still ... you know You have to keep an eye on them. I guess it was safer long time ago where I was raised in old Cairo. It was even more fun eeehhhh...”

Khaled from Madinaty says:

“... I don’t need to commute everyday as others do. I have my own business and I can do some online work. I select times to commute to escape traffic”.

A closer look at this sample of quotes collected through conducted interviews gives us some clues about the realities of living in such GC’s. One would sense great content, though tinted with some inner fears of the unknown!

To start with, and borrowing from the arena of research methodology, one cannot explore a research problem without raising issues of construct validity, i.e., how would one define a variable of interest? In our case, it’s possibly “images for a sustainable lifestyle”. As for an “image,” it is an illusory form, a mental picture of something not actually present, or simply a mental conception held in common by members of group and symbolic of a basic attitude and orientation (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary).

When it comes to sustainability, are we on the “right” track for a sustainable future? Is there a right and wrong way to define sustainability? Actually, one faces a major problem because there is no single -agreed on- definition for the term (Redclift, 1992). This loose definition certainly reflects negatively on the flow and credibility of any study.

Available literature argues that within the urban planning profession, several phases could be identified regarding western approaches to environmental concerns. From the early sixties with its environmental upheavals and perils, growth management concepts evolved coupled with strategies for enabling economic and technological modernization. During the last three decades ecology has replaced amenity as the focus of public debate (Healy, 1993). Recently, with all current and future environmental perils, sustainability became a viable alternative to economic development. In 1989, the term gained more momentum being endorsed by the Brundtland report that defined it as meeting the needs of the present generation without comprising the needs of future generations (Brundtland, 1989).

Also, interpretations of sustainable development and its implications have been contradictory. Some refer that to the term itself, which is treacherously ambiguous (Lele, 1991). Others claim that the various interpretations of sustainable development are caused not by poor understanding, but rather by ideological differences and reluctance of many to acknowledge the implications of the underlying message. The deliberate vagueness of the concept is a reflection of power politics and political bargaining on the global and local scenes (Redclift, 1992). This simply has lead to two possible interpretations to sustainability, “hard” or more radical aiming at ecological and social transformation and justice (Friedmann, 1992) and “soft,” looking at more sensitive growth.

Throughout our interviews, sustainability as a term wasn’t raised bluntly in the abstract form or meaning. We tried only to extract the elements of a sustainable living from the words of people involved, their gestures and behaviors and compare it to available literature. The two aforementioned images of sustainability –soft and hard- aren’t reflected equally in our study. Only the soft image prevails as reflected in the words of residents like Hind and Soheir. Living in a GC is all about enjoying greenery, quietness, safety and security.

Any concern about the cost of this lifestyle on the surrounding bigger context is negligible. One would call it a self-centered lifestyle.

Data and literature show that people are driven out to GC's by different forces: environmental, economic and financial, and cultural. Of these factors, the need for security, the polite term for fear, is a major one; as Adler (1995) said: everybody wants to be on the far side of the freeway.

Also, this phenomenon has been referred -according to some researchers- to issues of social segregation, or neo-liberal consumption patterns. Denis (2006) proposes that gated communities are originally marketed through the fear created by the media from 'the other'. Daher (2011), says that citizens in the Middle East are motivated daily by the boom in real-estate development; through local newspapers, TV advertisements and billboards which market real-estate development in the form of exclusive business towers and high-end gated communities. However, he adds that they represent a strong form of privatization of public space, and add a lot to the segregation of the community.

Nowadays, new GC's go up behind ochre-colored stucco walls six feet high, with guards and gates between the public roads and the inner sanctum of residential streets (Blakely, 1997). No wonder they are so sterile; sterility is designed into them. Brian Berry (1976) explained that this is the result of the reassertion of fundamental predispositions of the mainstream culture including the love of newness, the desire to be near nature, the freedom to move and the wish to maintain the individuality of the homogeneous subgroup. Others such as Adham (2005) and Said (2013) propose that gated communities in Cairo now offer what Cairo no longer has: clean, organized, human-scaled, and green environments.

Talking to Layla, a woman in her forties who moved to Al-Rehab some years ago, she says:

"... Oh my God, a dream really came true. Everything ...almost everything they promised is happening. Things happen, even without us asking for it! Isn't that great? I know that we don't have a say to what is needed or required in our community, ... all is preset and designed ... Isn't that great!

Soheir from Al-Rehab adds saying:

"... I love where we stay now...it's safe, quiet, and neat, ... like an island. No loud noises like we used to have in our old neighborhood. Sometimes though it's scary ... you know silence. I know some people next doors but not all are friendly though ..."

"... It's mostly a homogeneous community, ... you know, we are away from those who cannot fit into this lifestyle".

Only minor clues to the hard sustainability image could be seen when residents raise issues of community participation and involvement. Nevertheless, this is only utilitarian in the essence that residents look only for the good of their immediate community. Nobody cares for those who reside outside the gate! This could be understood as growing of social degradation represented by social inclusion and exclusion. It relates to poverty of not being a citizen; poverty related to the impossibility of being part of a city and of making choices, or to the restrictions of the space of choices really available to everybody (Wieslaw, 2001).

"The man who moved from blue to white collar work also moved into a new social world, where his old ways of living were no longer acceptable. Where he once bowled and played canasta, now he had to play bridge and golf. His wife had to raise the kids without the support of the parents and sisters and aunts who had usually done so much to make the task of caring for young children bearable".

(Frederick Siegel, quoted in Bellah et al, 1991)

Do these words ring any bells? Do we all recall changes in the Egyptian community during the late 1970's and on? What about social class changes, and mobility that took place with many cultural upheavals? Any closer look at socioeconomic data of our subjects reveals such issues, which are somewhat similar, though, more devastating in consequences than what Siegel described above. Any consideration to Spatial equity planning, access to natural resources, cost of maintaining landscapes amid scarcity of water resources expected in the coming few years? Actually interviewees foresee none of these issues.

6. Finally:

“... At least we have secured a place for the kids to grow safely with somewhat similar, ... you know ... people of the same cultural and economic background”.

Nahed, a Madinaty resident since 2006

Nahed's words depict other residents' thoughts and expectations. Here, one recalls a phrase written by Sir Edward Coke in the seventeenth century, when he said: "For a man's house is his castle" (quoted in Helms, 1991). This sure relates to the Egyptian scene where GC residents love the idea of living independently, rather than in concert with neighbors. This reflects a rising cultural axiom that implies a preference for territoriality, a defensive, rather than cooperative life style.

From a hard sustainability standpoint, collected data reveal that residents of the studied GC's are self-centered, driven by the mainstream media superficial claims of sustainability. Green loans, golf courses and high walls are from reaching a self-sustaining future for any of these residents or their counterparts behind gates. All views lean toward a soft sustainability version.

“We live in self-imposed exile from communal conversation and action. The public square is naked; politics has lost its soul. Individualism has become cancerous. We live in an age of narcissism and pursue loneliness. These expressions are alarming because they indicate that we have no common life, that what holds us all together is a cold and impersonal design” (Borgmann, 1992).

According to some researchers as Neuman (1992) GC's are devoid of a sense of community and are the forced choice of consumers in a "supply-driven market."

Based on what the researchers have encountered throughout this journey, one would doubt the prevalence of a sustainable future for these GC's and their surrounding context. Individualism and centrism are the main driving forces for lifestyles prevailing there.

Future proposed research could be more focused on issues of social capital in GC's, Politics of involvement, inclusion and exclusion in such communities. The authors find this realm a step forward towards informing the civil community of the real promises of sustainability to our common future inside and outside high-fortified gates.

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