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# PARADIGM SHIFT: A CASE STUDY OF TRANSNATIONAL COLLABORATION FOR A HIGH-PROFILE DESIGN COMPETITION IN SHANGHAI, CHINA

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## Abstract

*The topic of this paper centers on the paradigm shift in transnational design collaboration for high-profile design competitions which are fiercely contested in major Chinese cities. In view of the fact that most writings on design competitions prefer some successful stories rather than the equally instructive ones telling why others fail, this paper will look at the issues from a different perspective by providing an unusual case of collaboration. The intention is to offer some original insights into understanding the emerging situation which probably constitutes one of the future trends in design competitions. By reviewing the current performance of design competitions which greatly influence the development of collaboration paradigm, this paper investigates a collaboration case with an emerging form, a controversial process and mixed outcomes. Questionnaire survey and case study are used in this study. Despite a single case investigation, there are strong reasons to believe that it serves as a precursor of a major shift over the coming decades in the evolution of transnational collaboration in high-profile design competitions in China.*

**Keywords:** paradigm shift, transnational collaboration, high-profile design competition, leadership, changing roles

## INTRODUCTION

The past several decades have witnessed a global proliferation of major projects of larger size and greater complexity. In view of their magnitude, competitions have been introduced as a key means for procuring quality designs (Nasar, 1999, Gutman, 1988, American Institute of Architects, 1988, McGhie et al., 1996, Spreiregen, 1979, Strong, 1976, 1996). While competitions become part of the routine to get major contracts, winning entries is a promising road to prestige and profit. In China, a significant portion of major projects is made up of large-scale public building projects (LSPBP) which refer to office, commercial, tourist, science, education, cultural, health, communications, and transportation buildings, with a threshold gross floor area of 20,000 sqm (The Ministry of Construction of the People's Republic of China et al., 2007). High-profile design competitions for LSPBP are not only mandatory but also fiercely contested, which stimulates multi-architect collaboration. Such a competition-via-collaboration phenomenon looks like a *paradox* for its involvers.

A review shows that most public press and research literature on design competitions prefer some successful collaboration cases with glamorous photographs of winning proposals, rather than the equally instructive stories telling why others fail. To bridge the gap, this paper

investigates an unconventional case aiming at offering an original insight into *why* this model originates and *how* it operates, with the specific purposes listed as follows:

- To identify the establishment of the mainstream collaboration model.
- To identify the characteristics and assess the current performance of this model.
- To explain the inevitability of the emerging model and determine its significance.
- To locate key variables which influence the performance of this new model.

Accordingly, this paper is composed of two parts utilizing *questionnaire survey* and *case study* respectively to achieve the objective stated above. The first part forms the context of the current performance of LSPBP. Findings from a recent questionnaire survey are analyzed to identify the challenges and problems that have profound implications for the evolution of collaboration paradigms. The second part reports on an investigation into a unique collaboration case of a high-profile competition in Shanghai, China in 2007.

## **OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE**

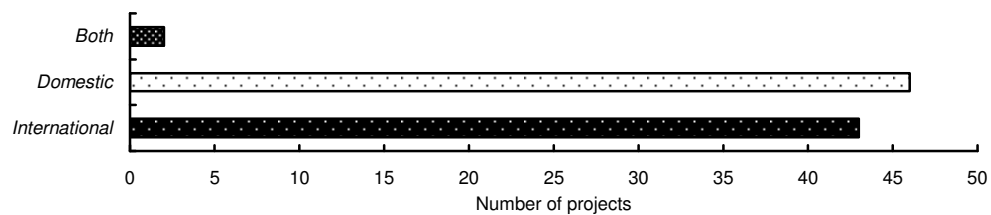
Fueled by a major project craze, global demands for design services have been soaring. In this connection, China constitutes a good case in point. Thanks to the economic reform pushed by a modernization-oriented policy, the past three decades have witnessed nationwide upsurges in construction volume. Up until 2004, the annual construction expenditure has reached US\$375 billion, an equivalent of 16% of China's GDP (N/A, 2004). Public clients among others have enthusiastically sought signature architecture as branding tools for city marketing. This trend becomes conspicuous in major cities where landmarks mushroom and competition architecture is brought to the spotlight. Since LSPBP are conceptualized as major public venues and conspicuous urban icons, their design challenges not only come in the increased size of individual projects or the total construction volume, but also reflect the greater sophistication in building functionality, client organization and stakeholders. In this connection, the results of a questionnaire survey in early 2009 offer ample evidence. Among the 90 samples of LSPBP located in 25 Chinese major cities and developed during the past five years (2003-2008), 74% occupied a gross floor area of 50,000 sqm or above. A total number of 16 building prototypes were documented; and more than half (56%) of the projects were mixed-use in nature, ranging from two to four different combinations of the basic types listed in the official definition. Governmental and corporate clients predominated in the whole scene by an absolute majority of 97%.

## **COMPETITION AND COLLABORATION**

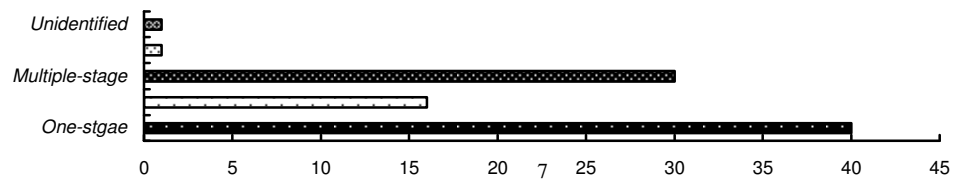
In view of their magnitude, an open or invited architectural competition is compulsory for LSPBP unless otherwise specified by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China (MHURD) (2008). Given this, winning competitions becomes a jumpstart for getting major contracts, which constitutes the fundamental reason behind a rapid growth in transnational collaboration between domestic and overseas design agencies. In the discussion so far, the vital concern is with the *nature* of the case that will be unfolded in the second part of this paper: whether it is a fleeting episode, or it will become a turning point? Therefore, it is necessary to form the context by first tracing the evolutionary process of the *production* and *collaboration model* of LSPBP design competitions.

### **Heated Competition**

At the initial stage of the opening-up policy in China, supply in the high-end design market lagged far behind demand, evidenced by a lack of design originality, expertise and experience to cope with building complexity commonly found in most domestic design professionals. This niche was quickly identified and filled by international-oriented design firms based in North America, Western Europe and Japan. With a clear intention of tapping the huge market potential, these overseas firms began to “invade” the New World of China. Their presence has largely compensated for the deficiency of their Chinese counterparts. With more competitors and rising expectations from clients, high-profile design competitions become the battleground with its intensity reflected in four major dimensions.



**Figure. 1:** Competition Scope



**Figure. 2:** Number of stages of Design Competitions

*Firstly*, the highly selective nature of these competitions makes the presence of its competitors a noticeable event: getting shortlisted is already a success in its own right. According to the survey, 88 out of the total 90 clients procured their designs through competitions, leaving only two through no-bid contracts. Fig.1 also shows that international and domestic competitions almost equaled each other, with the highest-profile design competitions usually in invited format and of international reach. *Secondly*, the length and number of stages in a single competition are also key intensity index. As illustrated by Fig.2, 30 out of the total 88 design competitions were going through multiple-stages, which is uncommon in Europe and North America. “Two-stage” is the maximum according to international standards, because there is no such term as “multiple-stage” in existing western literature on design competitions (e.g. (McGhie et al., 1996, American Institute of Architects, 1988, Nasar, 1999, Spreiregen, 1979, Strong, 1976, 1996). *Thirdly*, demanding clients not only look for trendy designs but also require them to be finished within rigorous budgets and under tight schedules. One to two months is the standard lead period for competitors to work out everything from elaborate renderings to demonstration models. In 2007, one high-profile competition for an 800,000-sqm LSPBP in Shanghai gave participants only 20 work days. *Fourthly*, despite the fact that the fee gap has been narrowed to the North American level, clients are expecting much more (Perkins, 2008). In fact, the tangible short-term remunerations are usually assumed not to outweigh the costs for domestic practices, let alone

overseas firms. All these require more balanced thoughts between the attractions of intangible rewards in the long run against the prospect of a daunting workload at present.

### **Increasing Collaboration**

An increasing number of competitors, whether emerging or renowned, have found themselves overwhelmed by the daunting competition tasks beyond the capacity of any single practice. Hence, it makes sense to choose a collaborative approach through the establishment of a short-term consortium that pools resources, subdivides tasks, spreads risks and creates a desired synergy effect. For foreign firms aiming at international work, an arguable stepping-stone is to participate in international competitions by teaming up with domestic firms who think alike. In Mainland China, language barrier is a key determinant for this strategy. Not only does the language of Chinese predominate in business communications, but it is the sole official language in bilingual documents of international competitions. This appears as good news for domestic institutions and firms who were willing yet unable to perform well before. Despite some deficiencies mentioned earlier, they do have other strong points, such as close ties with prospective clients and an enriched pool of design talents at relatively low-cost. Their assistance is essential for overseas firms in complicated networking and sophisticated design systems in China. All these form the foundation of transnational collaboration.

### **Controversial Product**

As a principal stimulant to the design process (Spreiregen, 1979), competitions have generated controversial outcomes. While the presence of overseas firms is conducive to a competing and collaborative process (Best and Valence, 1999) for all competitors through mutual exchanges of design expertise and resource sharing, competition projects are not without problems. In over-zealous pursuit of an international image (Marshall, 2003), many clients crave for oversized and hyperbolized image buildings. Driven more by grabbing the job than developing a responsible solution, many competitors also vie with each other by offering freaky but rootless designs, leaving exorbitant expenditures for future operations and maintenance. Mounting criticisms over the proliferation of transnational designs have reached a new high that it was high time to look for remedy solutions.

### **Joint Issuance**

In early 2007, a long-awaited public document entitled *Several opinions on enhancing the administration of large-scale public building projects* was issued by the then Ministry of Construction (now MHURD) together with four other Ministries (2007). Such an unprecedented joint effort is manifested in itself, both to highlight pressing issues concerning especially government-funded LSPBP, and to provide guidelines for the corrective actions to be taken. The most outstanding issues are the undue design emphasis on building appearance irrespective of economic and efficiency constraints and other key factors in play, and a lack of appreciation of the local historic and traditional features. As these are directly related to competition architecture, MHURD (2008) began to keep a tighter rein by revising the regulations governing design competitions. Prescriptions include the limitation on the number of international design competitions and the implementation of the national treatment applicable to overseas firms in terms of the remunerations and rewards.

### **Mainstream Paradigm**

As a driving force in LSPBP, public clients are also identified as *organization clients* featuring their disposition of regarding buildings with pure rational and instrumental mentality (Gutman, 1988). Through frequent orchestration of international design competitions, they have been coming of age. To maintain a balance between novelty and

buildability, they prefer adding a local ‘flavor’ to the international reach, which has helped shape a popular paradigm in transnational collaboration. In general, a top-tier overseas firm is invited to collaborate with a domestic institute and takes the design lead. Its local design partner, often large-scale and well-connected, fine-tunes the exotic idea to better fit the local setting and taste; and enjoys the subsequent lion share in labor-intensive construction document phase where its counterpart is unable to deliver for both legal and operational difficulties. Such a complementary strategy is easy to win over most clients. Along the process, domestic institutes have been growing “more competent and confident” (Perkins, 2008). This promises a shift in collaboration paradigm on which the case study focuses.

## **CASE STUDY**

To shed light on the subject of transnational collaboration, this part reports on a collaboration case representing a break away with the above mainstream paradigm. It may not be an excellent example for all to follow, but will hopefully offer an original insight into its uniqueness and an instructive lesson for future operations.

### **Project Overview**

Initiated in 2004 for an upcoming mega-event in Shanghai China, the competition project is a 14,000-sqm convention center perceived as a flagship both for the event - a leading venue for conferences, forums and banquets, and beyond the event - an Asian premier for the high-end convention and exhibition market. A typical organization client (Gutman, 1988), the client was a large state-owned enterprise specialized in convention and exhibition businesses in the local market. Designated for the post-event facility management and operations, the client sought a building solution, in line with the requirements from the government sector, both to fill the market gap of international-oriented convention facilities and to cater to variegated users from the public to political figures here and abroad.

### **Prelude and Formation**

When it comes to *how* the unusual collaboration came into being, a prelude to the design competition is worth noting. As this project would constitute the first of a series of flagships to set the tone for a future city sub-center, great care was taken during the project initiation stage. This is highlighted by an unprecedented international program consultation event two months before the design competition. In the screening stage, ten well-reputed domestic and foreign agencies were invited to develop an elaborate program report based on the client framework version. To bring in a good balance of different design approaches, the final deliverables were required to demonstrate experience and research with comparable cases in convention facilities worldwide. A multi-disciplinary jury composed of key stakeholders, design professionals and facility managers was set up to review the ten entries whose quality would determine whether the participators could enter into the next-stage competition. In addition, each shortlisted overseas firm should secure a domestic partner, and vice versa.

In the end, seven transnational design consortiums entered into the highly anticipated competition. In line with the mainstream collaboration model, each of the other six consortiums was formed between a large-scale domestic institutes and a top-tier international firm. The consortium under study distinguished itself from the rest by its unique composition of collaborators: a large-scale domestic design group with thousands of staff and many satellite offices in major Chinese cities, and a newcomer – a mid-sized overseas firm mainly composed of 100 architects. The organizational configuration of the domestic firm falls into

a typical bureaucratic type featuring a clear distinction between operations and management, as well as a strong separation of design from production (Kaderlan, 1991). Excellent in providing a full array of design services, it was long regarded as a mainstay among powerful clients. Experienced in collaboration with top-tier international firms, it had grown into the most desired domestic partner for overseas firms. Its foreign partner, on the other hand, is a professional organization (Kaderlan, 1991) adopting decentralized partnership. Previously unknown to the market, the firm stood out in this programming consultation event with its excellent presentation that deeply impressed both the client and its future partner.

Two reasons account for the formation of such an unconventional consortium. One is closely tied to the client requirements. Based on a thorough assessment of the current convention market in the local, neighboring, domestic, Asian and international scope, the client concluded that a mixed-use convention center with an adjacent high-end hotel and exhibition and retail facilities would best fit for the city. This preference played a key role in helping the domestic design group made up its mind to ally with this newcomer rather than other overseas big names, since the overseas firm not only came from the birthplace of this facility model but acquired significant expertise and design experience in this prototype. The other reason for the domestic giant's preference of this newcomer is for its own sake: to make up for its deficiency in database of international convention facilities and to take the design lead by collaborating with a smaller and younger practice.

### **Changing Roles, Conflicting Route**

This competition was coincidentally launched soon after the domestic design group reoriented itself to a new development strategy emphasizing more on originality than on productivity. This is understandable as major clients did hold a suspicious attitude towards domestic institutes in terms of design originality. The impact of this organizational policy shift was quickly felt. After years' serving as a local guide, the local giant was determined to win the competition and yearned for a role shifting to demonstrate its new strength. To that end, it adopted an *outside-in* method featuring the function-follows-form method, by regarding formal expression as the most convincing way to show design originality. Accordingly, a task force involving three internal design departments was assembled to develop numerous schemes of the building shell; while a support team was to lay out all functional components based on the form. With abundant in-house resources, it also wanted to settle everything within its own system.

As for the overseas firm, lack of a local satellite office was a stumbling block for a newcomer. Faced with daunting competition tasks, it was left with no choice but to collaborate. Contrary to their counterpart, it worked the other way round. Experienced in how to deal with multi-functional convention programs, it worked *inside-out* to let form follows function. It also teamed up with overseas consulting firms specialized in developing business plans for convention centers in East and Southeast Asia; and recommended the client to secure other leading international consultants in structural, landscape and sustainability design at the early stage. However, because of overly concern of the short-term reward, the firm managed poorly to communicate well with its partner and proceed inefficiently on key decisions within the firm's partners. Strictly following the overseas norm of counting the profit and loss on a weekly basis, the firm refused to adapt to the local way of doing business and reluctant to divert more design architects to work side by side with its domestic partner.

With such entirely different approaches, conflicts often arose when both were in front of the drawing board. The strong motivation of the domestic giant to take the lead made every joint

design review meeting an escalated internal fight with an overlap of work. Despite months of twists and turns, the design proposal by the consortium was finally announced as the winning entry. Ironically, the consortium finally fell apart and each party worked independently in the post-competition revision period; and the overseas firm resigned the commission in the end.

## **FINDINGS, COLLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Changing Scene**

The intensity of high-profile international competitions for LSPBP in Mainland China serves as a driving force in shaping a mainstream collaboration paradigm featuring well-established domestic institutes and top-tier overseas firms. Despite a win-win solution with a dream combination, the transnational production is problematic with outstanding concerns over its suitability to China's own situations and missing linkage between architecture and cultural identity, which puts the paradigm under question. In response to the mounting criticism, state regulators made their stance clear with the issuance of two highly-correlated guidance documents governing LSPBP and its design competition in 2007 and 2008. Although the two still devoid of operational details, there is little doubt that the keynote is a shift towards more emphasis on domestic expertise and away from former reliance on foreign expertise. This will have far-reaching implications for the development of transnational collaboration.

Previously, most leading overseas practices have been selective with competitions, which is due largely to the one-sided situation when their domestic counterparts trailed in handling the complexity of LSPBP. However, such predominant advantages are dwindling away as domestic firms made substantial progress with abundant opportunities to learn from their foreign competitors and collaborators. More overseas later-comers have begun repositioning themselves to less competitive markets in second- and third-tier cities to avoid 'competition casualties'. To play safe, even veteran players have started deploying resources to other places as a survival means. On the contrary, domestic agencies have become more demanding in competitions and their design partners. According to the follow-up personal correspondence with its marketing director, the design group in this Case would no longer actively seek any collaboration with overseas firms, unless the client insisted on a transnational design consortium be formed as a prerequisite to an invited competition.

### **Lessons Learnt**

#### *Initiation and Process*

To open up a new overseas market, *reputation* or *expertise* hold the key to making a firm stand out among others. Hence, the reference value of the Case just presented lies in how to make a newcomer become 'visible' to its potential clients and local partners. The client preference and the strategic repositioning of the domestic partner serve as key determinants in the formation of this unconventional collaboration. Newcomers do not enjoy the same privilege as the well-established who can be more selective in which competition to participate and with whom to collaborate. A quick fix for this disadvantage is to identify a market niche leading to a need of a design forte, and to market the expertise and experience to those in need at the right time.

In legitimating the existence of a joint venture, Clough *et al.* (2005) identify four key elements on a common and equal ground: contract, vision, interest and control. There is, however, a fifth dimension: *organizational personality* (Boyd and Chinyio, 2006). Although intended originally to identify different types of client organization, the concept also has



parallel to multi-architect collaboration as an implicit determinant which has been rarely mentioned previously. If the collaborators with contradictory personalities are unwilling to make rational compromise, the collaboration will probably end sorely as in this case.

### *Leadership and Vision*

The traditional and still pervasive concept of *leadership* lays great stress on single-handedness as is well demonstrated in this Case. On the contrary, the concept is upgraded as an ability of rejection of “determinism - a belief in one's ability to ‘make a difference’ (Wikipedia contributors, 2009). Design collaboration is with no doubt teamwork, and by no means, an individualism show-off. Stronger domestic institutes still have a fear for such *collaborative leadership*. There is a fine line between assertiveness and aggressiveness and it is difficult for any novice to fully grasp the subtleness in a rush.

A significant investment, both tangible and intangible, is typical of landing a first job in China (Perkins, 2008). This requires great patience that is built on a long-range vision. Unfortunately, the overseas firm operates in a typical “quick-in-and-quick-out” manner. With the project checkbook always in red, it finally gave up all previous efforts to enter the market. Even the consortium won the competition, the firm has not received enough attention in media and among peers. The dilemma of win-the-battle-but-lose-the-war largely stems from its un-preparedness for making a critical *début*. There was no clear vision to participate in such a competition: to be merely a profit-driven exercise or as a critical first step towards a good marketing strategy? It is the emphasis that makes the difference.

### *Client and Competitor Relationship*

Partnership management gives design space for growth by providing a framework of orderly thinking (Emmitt, 1999). However, the capacity of the space largely depends on how skillful the art of management is. In this regard, one important thing the client could have been able to intervene in the matter is to flatten team management to put the design consortium under control for the sake of a better design product, rather than let the two solve their disputes internally and hopelessly because of totally different approaches and hierarchical management style in common. This leads to a need of reconsideration of the traditional role the client plays in a competition project. Hence, the question is whether or not, for the sake of the final competition product, a client shall continue to take a traditional detached stance when confronted with an emerging situation.

### **Significance of Change**

This paper has outlined the driving forces in design competitions for LSPBP in general and high-profile transnational collaboration in particular. Despite the current economic turmoil sweeping across the world, China is still one of the best places for design professionals to venture in terms of the number, scale and diversity of projects in the foreseeable future. This will continue to create substantial competition opportunities as well as collaboration stories, but only in the climate under sizable transformation. It is, therefore, useful for competitors to keep a close eye on any early hint of change. Furthermore, the distinction between this emerging paradigm and the still-predominant formula is not a simple role-swap, but a more profound mentality change. Despite a single case investigation, there are two reasons to regard this case as a *precursor* of a major shift. One comes from the greater government intervention on competition regulation. Through the interpretation of the shifting policy, it is manifested that the top regulators want to reset the pace and direction for LSPBP. It is yet to be seen how the change in the rules of the game will influence the future trend of transnational collaboration. However, with more emphasis on the construction of

accountability system, more and tougher policies are expected to be in the pipeline. After all, liberalization of the locals from overseas expertise and integration of foreign knowledge into the domestic system hold the key to the success of the development of a nation (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The process may be winding but the effort will pay off in the long run as proved by historical evidence.

The other is related to the issue of Chinese design concept dominating much of the debate in recent years. These concerns have been acting as a source of growing anxiety and urge among large-scale domestic institutes in pursuit of an identity in design reputation after playing a supporting role in transnational collaboration over decades. Nevertheless, hasty decisions may inevitably lead to problematic outcomes. Changing roles will certainly cause a mixed feeling within an organization. If it has taken decades for quantitative accumulation to make this qualitative breakthrough, it will again require years of practice to get familiar with each other's new role in forming a united front to achieve a better outcome. Moreover, the shift in strength between domestic and foreign firms has helped shape a new era of pluralism market in which the traditional "masculine competitiveness" is no longer the only interpretation for a strong leadership. As the two major competitors have been more evenly matched, the focus of gaining an upper hand has been turned into seeking a win-win solution which gives birth to an emerging concept of *collaboration leadership*.

### **Paradigm and Process**

Research is to develop models to enhance the performance of practice. However, a static model oftentimes catches more attention than *why* it comes into being and *how* it processes and evolves. As Emmitt (2007) points out, team formation only accounts for about 1% effort while team maintenance requires the rest 99% to make the process work. This traditional product-oriented view shall be combined with a process-oriented one in that the later offers more constructive suggestions to future practice, which is what this paper has worked on. As for invited competition, it is insightful for participators to understand *why* and *how* the client makes the decision on the shortlisted firms and *whether* a design consortium is a prerequisite for eligibility, as all these will largely affect the preference of team composition by potential design partners in the local market.

From multiple lessons in practice, it is clear that collaboration is a viable strategy in winning competition, but no single model can guarantee a definite success. A new paradigm, like any new and clinically untested medicine, has to experience a trial-and-error period. Without exception, this Case represents an emerging paradigm out of a challenging task, with a brand-new form, a controversial process and mixed outcomes. Despite the success of the competition result, this model itself proves a failure. For collaborators, it may be a real stress test to adjust their decision-making styles respectively and cooperatively when confronting with changing roles as in this Case. The risk is that the known rationale to draw the strong points from others to offset one's own weakness to achieve a common goal does not necessarily suppress the unilateral desire of heroism, and that may turn a promising collaboration into a troubled one. It may be more sensible for both parties to acknowledge the emerging reality, redefine their respective strategy and reposition themselves in a reciprocal and constructive manner. Therefore, when choosing the final consortium, one improvement area for the client could be to look at, besides each party's design portfolios, their track records in collaborating with others. The more successful collaboration cases achieved in the past, the higher level of compatibility during the process of team working in the future. Despite its mingled nature, this Case indicates that the quality of the decision-making process will eventually determine the quality of the outcome. Even the most

correctly designed model cannot avoid practical deviation into some conflicts along the process. However, conflicts are valuable if handled in a constructive manner. In order for similar emerging collaboration model to survive and success, *collaborative leadership* will find its own significance in the future.

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