

# The Placemakers of Hong Kong

Roger Nissim

Commentaries by Nelson Chen

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# Contents

Foreword by Sr Chiu Kam Kuen	vi
The Placemakers of Hong Kong: Introduction, Background, and Definition for Hong Kong	viii
1. Hongkong Land's Footbridge Network in Central	1
2. Swire Properties: Taikoo Place	15
3. Twin Towers: Gateway Entry into Victoria Harbour	28
4. Lai Chi Wo: Exemplar of Sustainable Cultural Heritage Conservation	42
5. Transformation of the New Territories and Development of the Nine New Towns	62
6. The Future: Northern Metropolis Development Strategy	83
Afterword: From Space to Place and Humane Urbanism	104

# Foreword



The Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors is both pleased and proud to be involved with the publication of this book under its book-writing sponsorship initiative, because it considers it to be a suitable textbook relevant to local practice for the surveying industry and students.

The author, Sr Roger Nissim FHKIS, FRICS, was, in fact, a founding member of the Institute back in 1984. He brings his fifty years' worth of broad local real estate experience to the research and writing of this book, having worked in both the public and private sectors, and in the latter years, academia. In fact, the recent years have been very productive for him, as *The First Estates: The Story of Fairview Park and Hong Lok Yuen with Documents* was published in 2020; this book was followed by the fifth edition of his well-known *Land Administration and Practice in Hong Kong* in 2022. Both volumes were also published by Hong Kong University Press.

This book will serve a number of different purposes; firstly, as a reminder and statement of what local development companies, charitable organizations, as well as the government have been able to achieve in contributing to the enhancement of Hong Kong's evolving urban and rural landscape over the last few decades. Secondly, the book will be a useful teaching tool as it showcases five completed, contrasting case studies. The final case study examines the government's imaginative and creative plans for the future Northern Metropolis. It has potential, if executed properly, to be a very significant example of placemaking on a huge

scale over the coming two decades. Thus, the book should provide suitable reference material for both students and practitioners not only in the surveying field but also those in the architectural, urban design, and planning fields.

Finally, with its good range of visuals, the book will also be of interest to the wider Hong Kong public who may wish to better understand the story behind each of the six case studies presented.

Sr CHIU Kam Kuen  
President (2021–2022)  
Hong Kong Institute of Surveyors

# The Placemakers of Hong Kong: Introduction, Background, and Definition for Hong Kong

## Introduction

Since the inception and adoption of the term ‘placemaking’ by urban planners, architects, and landscape architects in the early 1970s, its primary use evolved as a community design and community development tool with special focus on urban public spaces.

The history of placemaking in the urban cities of the USA can, in fact, be traced back to the ground-breaking work in the 1960s of urban activists like Jane Jacobs (1916–2016) and William H Whyte (1917–1999). Jacob’s best-known and most influential work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was first published in 1961 as a critique of 1950s urban planning policy. Together, they started to introduce the idea of designing cities for people, not just for cars and shopping centres. Their work focused on the social and cultural importance of lively neighbourhoods and inviting public spaces: Jacobs encouraged everyday citizens to take ownership of the streets through her now famous idea of ‘eyes on the streets’, which was that in order for a street to be a safe place, ‘there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those who we might call the natural proprietors of the street’ (Jacobs 1961, 3).

Jacobs’ common-sense approach argued in favour of high-density mixed developments, saying that the mixture of workplaces and residences within a single neighbourhood generally assures the public that there are always people around keeping streets safe with their presence. She also states that there should be stores, bars, cafes, and restaurants within the same neighbourhoods and that ‘cities have a capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody’ (Jacobs 1961, 238).

In a recent biography of William H Whyte entitled *American Urbanist*, Richard K Rein notes that Whyte’s keen eye for urban observation and clear, insightful writing on human

behaviour in public spaces both preceded and enabled Jacobs to write as she did, as his key elements for creating vibrant social life in public spaces, such as bottom-up place design, aligned with hers. He was also an instrumental figure in getting her book published in 1961. Whyte was considered to be the mentor at the establishment of the Project for Public Places, whose work is discussed below.

Building on the wisdom of these two urban pioneers and others, a more collaborative community process emerged for creating and revitalizing public spaces. The process is centred around observing, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work, and play in a particular space in order to better understand their needs and aspirations for that space and for their community as a whole. With this knowledge, it is possible to create a common vision for that place.

However, it must be remembered that the Hong Kong situation is probably unique, with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government being such a dominant player in the overall development of the territory (as Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate), as well as being the landlord of all private land under the leasehold land system. All of this has resulted in rather rigid planning processes evolving over the past thirty-plus years that have become so institutionalized that community stakeholders and grassroots representatives have rarely had a meaningful chance to voice their own ideas and aspirations about the place they inhabit. The public planning consultation exercises that have been done locally in recent years are often seen as being purely cosmetic, with the government officials being very reluctant to take on board any criticisms or suggestions for change. This is regrettable because, done properly, such consultation and placemaking exercises would help break down the separate silos of city planners, architects, landscape architects, traffic engineers, building experts, land administrators, and urban designers, encouraging them to look beyond the narrow focus of their own professions, disciplines, and agendas with the objective of designing schemes for the benefit of the community as a whole. It is in this context that Hong Kong has had to develop its own version of placemaking, remembering that here real estate is more expensive than almost any other place in the world and therefore that public spaces come at a premium.

The American experiences reveal that common problems such as traffic-dominated streets, little-used parks, and isolated or underperforming development projects can be addressed, or altogether avoided, by embracing a model of placemaking that views a place in its entirety rather than zeroing in on isolated components.

Based on forty years of practical experience, the Project for Public Spaces (pps.org) has developed a number of principles of placemaking that offer guidelines to help communities. They can be summarized as follows: integrate diverse opinions into a cohesive vision; translate that vision into a plan and program of uses; and ensure a sustainable implementation of the plan. Turning a shared vision into reality – into a truly great place – means finding the patience to take small steps, to seriously listen, and to see what works best in a particular context.

Differentiating rural placemaking from the urban, the Project for Public Spaces gives the following thoughts and guidelines: 'Rural placemaking efforts must also focus on creating new, quality places by engaging all members of the community . . . the process – of consultation, mobilization and engagement – are just as important as the final outcome'.

Again, in the Hong Kong context, both the pre- and post-handover governments have operated very much on the principle that 'big brother knows best', so that the scope for meaningful community participation in the planning process has been very limited. Fortunately, the example of rural placemaking in Chapter 4 of this book demonstrates clearly how the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved have been able to more closely follow the original principles set out in the opening paragraphs.

In the end, the simplest contemporary definition of placemaking that I have found, courtesy of Mark A Wyckoff, former professor at Michigan State University Land Policy Institute, seems to be the most appropriate one to adopt for both the urban and rural Hong Kong examples: 'Placemaking is the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play, shop, learn and visit' (Wyckoff 2014).

Today, it is recognized that all place-based projects should rightly be considered as a form of placemaking if they are carefully designed with a physical form, are appropriate for their location, and have the potential to improve the local quality of life and attractiveness for additional development and redevelopment. Such placemaking thus has considerable utility as an economic development tool that both enables and encourages private sector participation as demonstrated by the three examples contained in this book: Hongkong Land's Central Footbridges, which came first and set the standard for such networks, followed by the Swire Group's redevelopment at Taikoo Place, and then Sun Hung Kai Properties' Twin Towers.

A feature of contemporary private sector developments in Hong Kong is the design of podium style buildings, which can have the effect of isolating them from neighbouring developments. The three private sector developments studied in this book show how the developers have attempted to overcome this problem by creating a network of pedestrian bridge links between adjoining properties that they also own in order to connect a series of buildings in an attractive way. This results in a positive act of placemaking that benefits all parties concerned: the tenants, the owners, and the passing public.

A word on how these examples were selected and chosen – the three private sector chapters were all case studies that I got to understand as I used and visited them regularly during my adjunct professorship for the Development Projects module of the MSc (Real Estate) course at the University of Hong Kong (2007–2017). As District Lands Officer in Sha Tin from 1980–1984 I was very closely involved with the development of that particular New Town and was naturally aware of the whole New Town development program in progress at that time. More recently, I have been a member of the Board of The Hong Kong Countryside Foundation since its inception in 2011 and have been privileged to see first-hand the Lai Chi



Wo project start and grow and continue to grow into, arguably, our leading example of rural placemaking.

It is worth pointing out that some of the older examples included in the book, such as the Central Footbridges, the Twin Towers, and the Nine New Towns, were designed and built before the concepts of placemaking and placekeeping were fully accepted and adopted in Hong Kong. However, a retrospective analysis has been able to show how they can, in fact, now be described in these contemporary terms. A good example can be found in Chapter 3, ‘The Evolution of ICC’s Master Planning’.

The final chapter of the book describes the planning of the Northern Metropolis Development Strategy (NMDS), which sets out the government’s ambitious, large-scale vision for the future development that aims to more closely connect Hong Kong with neighbouring Shenzhen so that, together, they can become the innovation and technology hub for the Greater Bay Area.

In 2016, Mark Wyckoff co-authored and published *Placemaking as an Economic Development Tool: A Placemaking Guidebook*, which supports the idea that placemaking should now be seen as a key component for predominantly economic development purposes; that means population, jobs, and income growth, with special focus on talent attraction and retention (Wyckoff 2016).

The NMDS would seem to fit in well with this contemporary form of strategic placemaking, hence its inclusion in the book.

## Placekeeping

In helping prepare the chapter on Taikoo Place, Swire Properties Ltd (Swire Properties), quite correctly, emphasized the importance to them of not only creating the original physical form of placemaking but also the need to give equal emphasis and resources to managing, maintaining, and constantly updating and improving the spaces they have created with a vigorous regime of placekeeping.

Placekeeping itself is a relatively new concept. Its theories can be traced back to Mel Burton and Nicola Dempsey, who published a paper entitled ‘Defining Placemaking: The Long-Term Management of Public Spaces’ in *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* (2012). From their abstract:

There has long been a focus in urban landscape and design on the creation of high-quality public space, or placemaking. Large amounts of capital continue to be spent on creating such spaces without adequate thought or resources for their long-term maintenance and management of public spaces, or placekeeping. While there may be continued policy rhetoric about the importance of placekeeping, particularly as public spaces are recognized for their important contribution to health, wellbeing, biodiversity and also their economic value, this has not however been supported in practice. There are examples in many cities where

public spaces are subject to poor management and maintenance practices. This is clearly visible where vandalism, litter, and damage to facilities and equipment occur, and people no longer feel safe or comfortable. Placekeeping is not simply about the physical environment, its design and maintenance, but also encompasses the interrelated and non-physical dimensions of partnerships, governance, funding, policy and evaluation. (Burton and Dempsey 2012, 11)

In 2016–17, the US Department of Arts and Culture gave their definition of placekeeping as ‘the active care and maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live and work there. It is not just preserving buildings but keeping cultural memories associated with a locale alive, while supporting the ability of the local people to maintain their way of life as they choose.’ (U.S. Department of Arts and Culture 2016).

The Lai Chi Wo project described in Chapter 4 of this book helps demonstrate an excellent Hong Kong example of this.

The six very different projects being included in this book help showcase these concepts, and, at the same time, help reinforce Hong Kong’s unique identity. In this regard, I am deeply indebted to Professor Nelson Chen FAIA FRIBA FHKIA, former director of the School of Architecture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (whose commentaries hereafter are annotated ‘NC’), in his role as my academic commentator, for his thoughtful critique of each of the chapters where he compares and contrasts each of the projects against international examples and practice, and for the apposite historical perspectives he gives.

In addition, he has kindly written an Afterword to help enhance our understanding of how Hong Kong has evolved in the past and may continue to evolve in the coming decades – all of which adds to the academic rigour of the book and will be well appreciated by fellow academics, students, practitioners, as well as general readers.

I am both grateful and appreciative of the cooperation I have received from Hongkong Land, Swire Properties, and Sun Hung Kai Properties with the provision of critical historical data as well as some of the visual images. This collaboration has helped ensure the accuracy of the text.

It is important to acknowledge the vital contribution that good quality private sector developments have done with regard to placemaking and placekeeping. It has to be accepted that these developers are not totally altruistic and are, ultimately, driven by profit. But as demonstrated with these three companies, they can also have a purpose beyond profit, such as now fully embracing the concepts of sustainable development with strong commitments to Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG). Hong Kong has gone through a very difficult period in recent years dealing with, and then slowly recovering from, the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. A review of the annual reports of the three private companies referred to above, covering the period up until the end of 2022, reveals that they were all able to describe the performance of their respective investment portfolios as being ‘resilient’ to these impacts. The quality of their respective placemaking

and placekeeping has thus proven to make good business sense, so the two objectives are not mutually exclusive but are, in fact, a classic win-win scenario.

In support of the above points, reference should also be made to recent comments made by the Urban Land Institute Hong Kong ([hongkong@uli.org](mailto:hongkong@uli.org)), who form part of an international membership-based, non-profit making research and educational organization, and who, in their Submission to the Chief Executive Elect in April 2022, observed that: ‘For many decades, the private sector has played a major role in the building of the new towns and related infrastructure. For example, the tremendously successful delivery of Sha Tin New Town and Tseung Kwan O New Town would not have been possible without the participation of the private sector.’

Hopefully, particularly with the development of the Northern Metropolis, more developers can be encouraged to participate and embrace this philosophy in the future.

Finally, in an attempt to start educating and exposing the younger generation of Hong Kong to the concepts and value of placemaking, the Swire Properties Placemaking Academy was established in 2019. It offers all Hong Kong university students annually a rare opportunity to form a team and compete to take the lead in a six-month project designing, planning, and executing the White Christmas Street Fair, which is the company’s annual year-end community celebration held in Taikoo Place. In addition to valuable hands-on experience, the students will be mentored by the company’s senior management, event-planning experts, and leaders from the design and community planning industries. The 2023 edition of this event was won by HKMU students.

A special thank you to my son-in-law, Daniel J Trotter, for all his invaluable help in the preparation and organization of this manuscript to ensure it complies with all the requirements of Hong Kong University Press.

Roger Nissim

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# Afterword: From Space to Place and Humane Urbanism

Nelson Chen

One of my first college classes in architecture, still memorable from over five decades ago, centred on a spirited discussion about ‘What is architecture?’ with comparisons of several definitions of architecture from the most fundamental and technical (‘the art and technique of designing and building’) to the artistic and lyrical (‘the learned game, correct and magnificent, of forms assembled in the light’, according to visionary modernist architect Le Corbusier).

Towards the end of this discussion and debate, my Harvard professor, Albert Szabo, shared his own personal definition of architecture as ‘the design of spaces for human activity’. Moreover, he added, ‘good architecture supports and enables those activities; great architecture *inspires* them’.

This understanding is reinforced with profound insight about architecture and its impact – unexpectedly not from a famous architect but from Winston Churchill, who observed, ‘We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.’ Expanded to a larger urban scale, the same might be observed for placemaking in our neighbourhoods and cities – how do they ultimately shape us as a society? In the design of space, how and when does abstract space become occupied place, whether at the scale of buildings, neighbourhoods, or cities? To support, enable, and, hopefully, even inspire our human activities?

Unlike individual buildings that reflect the architect’s vision, urban form represents a more collective will within a culture unique to that community. This has been the consistent theme and design methodology of a Pritzker Prize-winning architect, the late Fumihiko Maki, throughout his acclaimed career. As a young academic in the US, Maki authored an influential treatise titled ‘Investigations in Collective Form’ first published in 1964. It was required reading for architecture students of my generation in the 1970s. Perhaps in

reaction to the prevailing interest in those years of megastructures such as the Tokyo Project and others, this critical study by Maki focused instead on the city as formed by open spaces rather than building masses, respecting the specific character of an urban site, and the knitting together of buildings, urban spaces, streets, and footpaths (Maki 2018).

As he described it, 'Collective Form' represented groups of buildings – not single structures unrelated to each other – that have reason to be together over time and the resulting city as a pattern of events. At Hillside Terrace in Tokyo, this vision was realized as a kind of urban design lab that the practice of Maki and Associates designed incrementally over twenty-three years in six successive stages.

Its lesson and legacy are for us to remember that while architecture may ultimately be art, it is always a social art in service of society. Our ultimate goal should not be designing iconic buildings as objects but creating iconic places for people and their activities.

Thus, it is essential for all stakeholders – academic, professional, and especially the public at large – to understand their city as an urban lab that co-creates new knowledge and understanding of what constitutes truly sustainable development. In Hong Kong and throughout Asia, that sustainable development encompasses both high-density, high-rise urbanisation on the one hand and preserving what remains of the natural environment on the other.

From the case studies presented in this volume, placemaking operates at multiple scales – from gardens and parks in dense urban neighbourhoods to placekeeping in rural villages such as Lai Chi Wo; from elevated footbridges in Central to pedestrianised networks such as Taikoo Place; from mega-form urban complexes such as ICC and Taikoo Place to the formation of New Towns in the New Territories and the planned Northern Metropolis Development Strategy.

In this regard, the definition and understanding of placemaking is now being expanded by Roger Nissim beyond the original notions introduced by Jane Jacobs and William Whyte in order to encompass a much larger scale of urban and regional development with distinctive identity and characteristics defined by site context and morphology as well as the appropriate balance of built density, open space, mixed uses, linkage, and walkability. This definition also includes the notion and necessity of placekeeping to sustain the initial success of placemaking.

The origins of placemaking in North America in the 1970s were largely motivated by revitalising the downtowns of cities abandoned in favour of suburban living and mega mall shopping centres sustained by a lifestyle dependent on ubiquitous roads and cars. Land policy researchers such as Mark Wyckoff addressed various strategies to attract people back to the city by providing quality places – both public and private – to attract population, jobs, and income growth as well as achieve economic development benefits (Wyckoff et al. 2015).

From their historic origins, the oldest cities were experienced and understood from a human perspective while walking, say, five kilometres per hour. In the modern metropolis, new cities are largely experienced from motor vehicles at sixty kilometres per hour. As noted





**Figure 7.2:** LA Spaghetti Junction. Photograph courtesy of Kevin Payravi on Wikimedia Commons.

by the renowned urbanist Jan Gehl, the two predominant paradigms of twentieth century urban planning were ‘modernism and motorism’, leading to larger and larger buildings as *objects* with leftover spaces in between and not people-friendly cities filled with human-scaled *places*. According to Gehl, modern cities must transition back from a ‘traffic place’ to a ‘people place’.

As noted previously in this volume, Hong Kong residents enjoy less than 2.8 square metres of open space per person in its built-over land area, which is about one-half of Tokyo (5.8 square metres) and roughly one-third of Singapore (7.4 square metres) or Shanghai (7.8 square metres) – in any case, significantly below the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended standards of 9 square metres per person (Lai 2017). In the context of this high-density, high-rise urban condition, the few opportunities to capture physical space for placemaking then become paramount – whether indoors or outdoors, above ground or below, permanent or pop-up. Without these pockets of accessible social space for people and human activities, the stated goals of developing an equitable, healthy, and sustainable city are reduced to empty slogans rather than effective urban strategies.

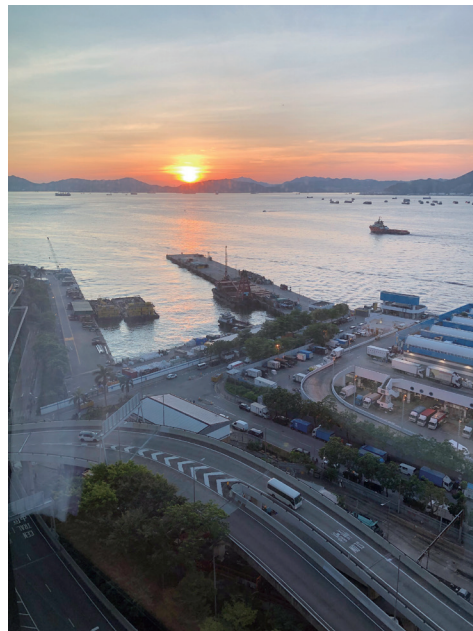
More often than not, however, these urban pocket spaces may be found interspersed among residential developments or adjacent to traffic roads with a high ratio of hardscape

vs soft landscaping, reflecting an ‘engineering approach’ that favours low maintenance over a more ‘nature-based solution’ with more trees and planting to offer basic human comfort from shading and vegetation to mitigate urban heat island effects and stormwater stagnation (Thilakaratne 2019).

It says something about the paucity of placemaking in densely developed Hong Kong that one of the most popular public spaces in the city in recent years has been the Western District Cargo Working Area – commonly known as ‘Instagram Pier’ – with its spectacular harbour views, especially at sunset. Even though it is not technically a public space, ‘Instagram Pier’ was popularly recognized in the 2013 Hong Kong Public Space Awards co-organised by Designing Hong Kong and Hong Kong Public Space Initiative. Despite its widespread popularity, the pier was closed in 2020 without prior notice by the government with a warning of HK\$10,000 in fines and six months in prison for members of the public caught entering this restricted working area.



**Figure 7.3a:** Western District Pier.  
Photograph courtesy of Nelson Chen.



**Figure 7.3b:** Western District Pier.  
Photograph courtesy of Nelson Chen.

Another unique and popular example of Hong Kong placemaking is the Mid-Levels to Central escalator, a covered pedestrian walkway that is the world's longest at 800 metres in length with 135 metres in climb that expands the definition and understanding of urban placemaking in the vertical dimension of a volumetric city characterised by high-rise density and connectivity.

And while it has been several decades in the making, the waterfront promenades on both Hong Kong and Kowloon sides of Victoria Harbour are finally taking shape as attractive and welcoming destinations for public enjoyment.

Despite extreme urban density, cramped living conditions and increasing income inequality as measured by the Gini Index, remarkable average life expectancy statistics from both the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank reveal that Hong Kong ranks first in the world at 85.1 years (88.1 for women, 82.8 for men) (UNDP, 2023). These impressive statistics were maintained even in the aftermath of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and appear to reflect numerous factors including its public healthcare system, nutritional diet, low infant mortality, and others. One major contributor must be the 'enabling environment' of a safe, walkable, compact city with easy access to a highly efficient public transportation system that promotes a more physically active lifestyle.

If more strategically located and well-designed public places for human activities are added and integrated in the city, not only life expectancy but the quality of life itself shall be greatly increased for people of all ages. In so doing, these public spaces will better reflect the values and aspirations of our city at a collective scale toward achieving an ecological and humane urbanism.

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# The Placemakers of Hong Kong

‘This book presents a wide cross-section of case studies where placemaking has demonstrably contributed to the cohesion and quality of life of the community. With the emergence of a more people-sensitive planning system and partnership between the public and private sectors, Roger Nissim shows that it is possible to create a sense of place even in a challenging urban environment like Hong Kong.’

—**Nicholas Brooke**, GBS, FRICS, FHKIS, Chairman, Professional Property Services Group

‘The author has expanded the meaning of “placemaking” by applying the concept to six very different examples in Hong Kong. His analysis presents and explains how the city’s development process works. This book is useful as reference material, for explaining processes, and as a showcase of the decision-making behind Hong Kong’s development history.’

—**Ian Brownlee**, Managing Director, Masterplan Limited, Planning and Development Consultants

‘This book is invaluable for anyone interested in the past, present, and future of urban planning and property development. Roger Nissim possesses unparalleled experience in the industry in Hong Kong.’

—**Christopher Law**, Founding Director, Oval Partnership

*The Placemakers of Hong Kong* pays homage to what local development companies, charitable organizations, as well as the government have been able to achieve in contributing to the enhancement of Hong Kong’s evolving urban and rural landscape. Far from being solely profit-driven, developers and urban planners have been vital to the community by creating and designing urban spaces for the public, increasing walkability, and embracing sustainable design—a process called ‘placemaking’. The book also recognizes that just as important are the subsequent placekeeping activities necessary to keep each project site relevant and up-to-date.

Featuring five case studies from the past and one that examines the ambitious and far-reaching plans for the Northern Metropolis, this book tells the story of Hong Kong’s miraculous urban development over the past few decades.

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