

Preventing Green Gentrification in US Cities

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Executive Summary

Background

Green gentrification refers to the process in which the building of new parks, greenways, or other forms of greenspace in urban neighborhoods leads to rising property values and rents, displacing low-income residents and causing financial stress and negative health impacts for remaining residents. Green gentrification often results in the loss of social and cultural capital for marginalized communities, as existing social networks are disrupted as newcomers with higher incomes and different backgrounds move into the neighborhood.

Issue Analysis

Urban political ecology theory proposes that urban infrastructure changes are mainly driven by those with greater political and economic power. Urban greening initiatives are often motivated by profit gain, either initiated by market development or through nonprofits which are typically funded through private capital and are influenced by funders. Large scale greening projects contribute to the most rapid gentrification processes, however small-scale projects, such as tree planting, are not immune to gentrification influences. Increasing community and equity focus of greening projects and putting in place anti-displacement measures could prevent the negative impact of green gentrification.

Proposed Solutions

Policy options aimed at preventing green gentrification were evaluated based on community and equity focus, provision of affordable housing, additional community benefits, and feasibility in most city governments. The first policy option was inclusionary zoning, which requires developers to designate a certain percentage of housing units at affordable rates. Community benefits agreements (CBAs) are another way to require developers to provide benefits to the community such as affordable housing and job creation. However, inclusionary housing and CBAs depend on the rental market and have been inefficient in producing meaningful housing thus far. Other policy options include increasing protections for low-income renters, such as rent control, which has been shown to be effective in avoiding displacement from current housing but can also reduce the availability of affordable rental housing. Community Land Trusts (CLT) are one way to transfer ownership of land away from profit-based corporations toward community coalitions or nonprofits in order to secure long term affordability. A final policy solution, applicable only to publicly funded park projects, is to require and give funding priority for park grants which include a detailed anti-displacement and long-term evaluation plan.

Strategic Recommendations

While recommendations need to be tailored to specific city conditions, such as politics and funding of city government, CLTs were rated the strongest across all policy options. City governments can encourage the creation and maintenance of CLTs for combined green development and affordable housing or in neighborhoods at high risk for green gentrification by providing funding priority and other financial incentives, such as low interest loans. Any policy considered should include long term evaluation to monitor gentrification processes.

Introduction

Urban greenspace has typically been associated with positive impacts for the surrounding neighborhood environment¹. However green gentrification describes the phenomenon of rising rents and property values in neighborhoods after greening initiatives take place, leading to increased financial stress and negative health impacts for longtime residents.² Though green gentrification is a relatively new concept, researchers across the US, Europe and Asia have documented its impacts, with one study finding that 17 of 28 cities in Europe and the US experienced gentrification following greening initiatives (such as the building of new parks and greenways).³ While greenways and parks improve neighborhood health through increased use of communal space, this impact is not always shared equally. For example, a recent study found that increased greenspace was tied to better self-rated health in gentrifying neighborhoods for higher but not for lower SES residents.⁴ Other studies have found that when installation of new greenspace co-occurs with gentrification processes, existing social networks within neighborhoods change and low-income minority residents' sense of community is diminished through the removal of former residents and the influx of newer, wealthier residents.⁵ These processes, coupled with discrimination can cause minority residents to avoid greenspaces and even self-isolate from the neighborhood community.

Much of the previous literature surrounding equity in greenspace has focused on distributional equity, or how greenspace is distributed in communities, and procedural equity, involving who makes decisions on how new greenspaces are used⁶. There is significant evidentiary support for distributional inequities in greenspace. A literature review of 17 articles found a consistent association between neighborhood racial segregation and greenspace access, both in the number and size of greenspaces and number of amenities offered at available greenspaces⁷. Community organizations aimed at distributional equity have mainly focused on installing parks, gardens, and other greenspaces in low-income communities lacking greenspace, while those focused on procedural equity made efforts to include these communities in decision making about how greenspace is used.^{8,9} Though these efforts are an improvement over greenspace advocacy that ignores equity, they do not address whether greenspace is a priority for marginalized communities or consider other potential land uses, such as the installation of affordable housing.

Greenspace projects that do not address gentrification and displacement risks instead may be targets or covers for growth coalitions seeking to increase land profits. It is estimated that each year on average 2.7 million households are threatened with eviction.¹⁰ Housing is not only an important aspect of wealth accumulation which has been historically marked by discriminatory policies but is extremely vital to human health¹¹. The objective of this memo is to explore what types of policies are required to prevent green gentrification. The overall recommendation of this proposal is to pair preventative gentrification measures which create and continue affordable housing with greening initiatives and the larger involvement of communities in land use decision making.

Issue Analysis

Urban political ecology theory suggests that those with higher political and economic power are the largest drivers of changes in urban infrastructure.¹² Many researchers have long argued that urban greening initiatives are typically driven by market development and capitalistic gain. Scholars such as Gould and Lewis have suggested that much of green gentrification is the result of coordination between city agencies and development organizations, dubbed the ‘green growth machine’, as rising real estate values benefit both parties through increased tax revenues for the city and profit margins for real estate developers.¹²

Many greening projects in recent decades have taken place through city partnership with nonprofits. Some have suggested that nonprofit involvement is beneficial and should increase equity by providing greater community focus. However, nonprofits largely rely on private capital as a source of funding, meaning that wealthy investors are most likely to make final decisions about where and why greening initiatives occur.⁸ For example, Foo’s ethnographic analysis of greening initiatives in Baltimore, Boston, and Philadelphia suggests that when the housing market is weak, grassroots and environmental coalitions play a larger role in the drive for greenspace.¹³ While these groups have a larger stated emphasis on greenspace as a health benefit to the community, these initiatives are unlikely to be funded unless they are supported by the business community, redistributing the power and leadership in these initiatives from neighborhood led groups to more affluent community members. A study of nonprofits involved in Chicago’s Rails to Trails program found consistent issues with division and lack of communication between greening nonprofits and affordable housing agencies in the planning process.⁸ Additionally, many of the organizations interviewed suggested that the city’s choice to delegate control of the project to green or environmental nonprofits was a deliberate move to ensure the project was completed without protest, as green nonprofits are often seen as apolitical and a universal good, and any concerns about affordable housing would be deflected away from its offices.

Some suggest that large scale infrastructure projects are the largest drivers of the gentrification growth machine. New York City’s High Line Park provides one such an example of a large scale project where profit took priority over equity.¹⁴ The nonprofit “Friends of the High Line” (FHL) spearheaded the project, focusing their marketing on how the financial gains from the park would benefit the city. Though some small efforts were made to include those living in the surrounding neighborhoods, most low income residents were interested in how the park could benefit them, mainly in maintaining affordable housing and provision of jobs, which were deemed to be unattainable by FHL.¹⁵ Lang and Rothenburg note that New York City’s laws protected some of the affordable housing located near the High Line, but ultimately shops and restaurants that catered to lower income residents were replaced by high end and luxury equivalents.¹⁵ In a more recent 2020 study using geospatial analysis techniques, it was found that installation of the High Line resulted in a 35% increase in housing values, particularly in residences with a view of the High Line.¹⁶ Taxpayers provided approximately \$132 million of the \$152 million costs to build the park, the rest of which were paid for by private funders, many

of whom had real estate interests in the neighborhood. Studies of large-scale greening projects in Chicago and Atlanta have encountered similar issues to those documented by the High Line.¹⁷

Though large-scale greening projects seem to be associated with the most rapid gentrification processes, smaller scale greening, such as tree planting, has also been tied to rising land cost and rent. For example, a study in Portland Oregon of tree planting by the nonprofit Friends of Trees found that tree planting was associated with increased housing prices.¹⁸ This trend did not become significant until 6 years post planting, however effects doubled after 12 years, indicating that these small changes may add up over years, especially as trees grow and provide more canopy coverage. A study of tree planting by four nonprofit organizations in the Midwest and Eastern United States found that while tree planting efforts were concentrated in low income and tree sparse areas, tree planting was less likely to occur in low income neighborhoods that were majority racial or ethnic minorities, suggesting that nonprofits with smaller green infrastructure goals may also lack an equity focus.¹⁹

A strong policy aimed at preventing negative impacts of green gentrification on low income and minority residents will have the following features:

Community-based and Equity Focused: :

Active participation and communication by and between community members and impacted stakeholders, including residents, community organizations, and local businesses should be included. Community members should be able to provide input at each stage of the policy including the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Input from community members most impacted by green gentrification, generally low-income minority communities, should be prioritized. Efforts should be made to ensure that the policy addresses and avoids worsening systemic inequalities and will include consultation in those knowledgeable about structural inequalities, especially in relation to gentrification.

Tied to Affordable Housing:

A strong policy will require that affordable housing be created and maintained in conjunction with greenspace projects. This necessitates housing advocates and greening advocates to work closely together on a shared mission.

Additional Community Benefits, Including Job Creation

Greenspace projects will be required to provide additional benefits to low-income residents beyond maintenance of housing, such as provision of new jobs through the increased revenue generated. Priority in jobs should be given to those who are longtime residents. Other benefits or requirements might include the preservation of key cultural institutions and businesses serving current low-income residents.

Long Term Planning

An ideal policy will create safeguards for the long-term well-being of communities targeted for greening projects. This includes monitoring and evaluation to ensure that gentrification is not occurring as an unintended result.

Feasibility in Most City Environments

Local governments typically must consider budgetary concerns and favor development goals over the needs of citizens, as development often provides tax revenue to the city. A favorable policy will rebalance the goals of developers with the needs of citizens and equity goals. However, any proposed solution should also be acceptable and feasible to local city officials.

Proposed Solutions

Strategy 1: Require developers in greening neighborhoods to produce affordable housing in new developments.

Most new housing and neighborhood development projects in recent decades have been initiated by the private sector, therefore strategies which mandate that real estate developers contribute to affordable housing have become popular in combating gentrification, including green gentrification. In a study of ‘parks-related anti-displacement’ (PRAD) strategies, these ‘market-based’ policies were the most commonly employed compared to other strategies, likely because they could be implemented with little additional cost to the city and could be implemented in a project and neighborhood specific manner in conjunction with greening projects.^{20,21}

Strategy 1a: Inclusionary zoning: One such strategy, inclusionary zoning, requires developers to designate a pre-determined percentage of housing units at rates affordable to low-income households. Some recent studies have found a positive association of inclusionary zoning on health, however findings on impacts on affordable housing have been inconsistent.²² Policies which encourage rather than require developers to contribute to affordable housing are less common and have been deemed to be less effective when used.²¹ Inclusionary zoning also produces new affordable housing units only when the real estate market is booming, one reason why locally tailored inclusionary housing policies tend to perform better than more blanket adoption as they can consider localized trends. Additionally, though state mandates tend to increase a city’s likelihood of adopting inclusionary zoning, implementation is highly dependent on the city’s decision to enforce these policies.²³ Lastly, the largest issue with current inclusionary zoning policies is the scale at which they produce affordable housing compared to community need. A national study of inclusionary zoning programs found that the average percent of housing designated to be ‘affordable’ was 16%, meanwhile a third of households were considered to be housing insecure.²³ Within the 16% of required affordable housing, most was allotted to those making just under the city’s average median income rather than the lowest income residents. Research has not been conducted as to whether inclusionary housing is impactful for green gentrification specifically. In 2018, Atlanta implemented inclusionary zoning within a half mile of the Atlanta Beltline, a green infrastructure project that had already contributed to rapid gentrification in the surrounding neighborhoods. Though the program has been praised for creating 138 affordable housing units with 483 more under construction as of 2022, mainly in the Beltline neighborhoods, it is estimated that the city loses 1500 affordable housing units each year, making the inclusionary housing ordinance simply not enough to combat gentrification processes.²⁴

Strategy 1b: Community Benefits Agreements: Though inclusionary housing is the most common market focused strategy for gentrification reduction and prevention, interest in community benefits agreements is rising. Community benefits agreements involve a legally binding contract between developers and community coalitions (and often the city) as to what benefits the new development will bring to the community members. These benefits are determined by what is priority for each community, but can include inclusionary housing, job creation, park access and amenities. Few cities have implemented community benefits agreements on a large scale. In 2019, 90% of voters in neighborhoods surrounding the proposed (and currently stalled) Chicago El Paseo Trail program voted in favor of a non-binding referendum proposing a community benefits agreement that would require that 30% of newly developed housing be affordable and offer a property tax freeze²⁵. However, the city council did not pass this measure. In 2016, Detroit passed an ordinance which required new developments to go through a negotiation process with community coalitions, and a few other cities, including Cleveland and Portland, have passed similar measures. An analysis of community benefits agreements found that like inclusionary housing, efficacy was highly dependent on the city's support and decision to enforce policies and was also dependent on the strength of grassroots coalitions which negotiated agreements.²⁶ Community benefits agreements have not been implemented on a large enough scale to determine general effectiveness but they have the potential to improve upon measures like inclusionary housing by incorporating community voice and enabling projects to be tailored to community need. Though community benefits agreements are popular among non-development focused community members, garnering support and buy-in from city officials, an integral element to implementation, has been difficult.

Strategy two: Increase protections for low-income renters to preserve available housing city wide

Strategy 2a: Rent Control: Broader policies to protect housing and the rights of current residents would also benefit areas most impacted by green gentrification. One of the most commonly discussed strategies to protect tenants is rent control, often paired with just-cause eviction laws, which mandate that landlords can only evict tenants in very specific scenarios, such as failure to pay rent. Rent control has been shown to be fairly effective in avoiding displacement from current housing.^{27,28} However, the positive benefits from rent control have multiple downsides. In studies across multiple cities, rent control policies have led to landlords converting rental housing into types of housing not covered by rent control, such as condominiums, reducing the overall availability of affordable rental housing.²⁸ Thus, rent control as it is currently implemented is short-term solution, as reduction in affordable housing can force residents to stay in housing that is unsafe or doesn't meet their needs (e.g. having a child or changing jobs may motivate residents to change their housing situations). Suggested improvements include providing subsidies to landlords and regulating practices to avoid rent control but may be costly and difficult to implement.

Strategy 2b: Community Land Trusts: Some argue that the issue of landlords evading restrictions and impositions on affordable housing will continue, and that changes need to be made in how land is owned. Community Land Trusts (CLT) transfer ownership of land away from individual landlords or profit based corporations toward community coalitions or nonprofits. Governmental

policy can support CLT formation through direct funding and tax code reformation to reduce restrictions and road blocks to CLT formation and implementation.²⁹ Early research has shown that CLTs have the potential to preserve affordable housing and community assets in gentrifying neighborhoods but more research is needed.³⁰ CLTs have been used in both affordable housing contexts and greenspace separately. For example, the NeighborSpace program in Chicago leases community gardening space and provides gardening education to community members, but does not address affordable housing.²¹ However, CLTs have potential to address both by coordinating the acquisition and maintenance of affordable housing units with greening projects and could improve upon preservation techniques like rent control by providing greater community voice, long term availability, and budgeting funds for a variety of needs, such as job creation.

Strategy three: Require that park funding include Anti Displacement Strategies

Ideally, strategies to combat green gentrification will occur at the project's inception. One way this could be achieved is by requiring or encouraging park grant funding recipients to have an anti-displacement plan in place as part of the planning and implementation sections of the proposal.²⁰ The Measure A Anti-Displacement Policy, in Los Angeles is the first such policy to exist in the United States.³¹ Measure A gives grant funding to parks through a county wide parcel tax. In 2020, the Anti Displacement Policy was added to the expenditure plan for Measure A. As part of the Anti-Displacement Policy, preference in funding awards is given for applications that include displacement avoidance strategies and collaboration between greening and affordable housing organizations. Additionally, a Displacement Avoidance Task force was created to implement and evaluate the policy.³¹ This measure seems promising as it could build in community informed plans for constructing and maintaining affordable housing and local businesses with the development of the park proposal, while also budgeting for monitoring and evaluation for long term maintenance, as Measure A has been well funded for decades. So far, no reports or research has addressed whether the anti-displacement policy has been effective in increasing parks while preventing displacement, however it may be too early to evaluate impact.

Strategic Recommendations

Choice of policy will be highly dependent on a city's social and funding environment and a comprehensive solution will pair multiple suggested strategies. Additionally, each strategy discussed should be applied with spatial specificity to neighborhoods experiencing green gentrification. However inclusionary housing, community benefits agreements, rent control, and community land trusts will be evaluated based on community/equity focus, long-term affordable housing, other community benefits, and feasibility in most city governments and development environments.

Inclusionary housing scored low in community and equity focus as what is considered affordable to low-income individuals (often 80% the median market rate) and the percentage of housing units designated as affordable is typically determined by city officials without community input.^{23,23} For this reason, inclusionary zoning also performs poorly in providing stable, long-term, affordable housing as cities do not require developers to provide affordable units proportionate to community need. Additionally, affordability requirements typically expire

within 10-25 years and affordable units are only created in a profitable housing market.²¹ Inclusionary housing makes no requirements for job creation or long-term monitoring and planning. However, inclusionary housing is one of the most commonly implemented city level affordable housing policies and is appealing to city officials in that it is low-cost to the city.²⁰

Community benefits agreements (CBAs) improve and expand upon policies like inclusionary housing by enforcing community and neighborhood specific demands on developers. However, negotiations usually take place between developers and community coalitions, which may privilege some voices over others and not be truly representative of the community. Additionally city involvement in negotiations often shifts some of the power and focus toward developers, thus CBAs scored moderately well in community and equity focus.²¹ Though they have not been studied or implemented extensively, many of the demands of CBAs involve setting a higher rate of required affordable housing than typical of a city based inclusionary housing ordinance, and thus would be more effective in generating affordable housing in comparison. CBAs also have the ability to include job creation in parks development, preserve small businesses serving low-income residents, and promote green spaces that are useful to the community. However, any development reliant solution has similar pitfalls to inclusionary housing as developers are unlikely to make concessions which limit returns unless the housing market is highly profitable. CBAs are highly dependent on buy-in from all parties and have encountered many barriers including opposition from developers and lack of enforcement from city officials.^{25,26} One analysis of case studies from Chicago, Detroit and Portland concluded that a ‘sustained progressive local political culture focused on equitable development’ was necessary for CBAs to be impactful and even then many logistic barriers remained.²⁶

Rent control scored low in community and equity focus for similar reasons to inclusionary housing; decisions are typically made solely by city officials without community input. While rent control is quite effective as a temporary solution to rapidly rising rents, it imposes several problems as a long-term solution.²⁷ First, by nature, it does not generate any new affordable housing units. Second, rent control is often tenant specific, so as soon as a tenant moves, the landlord is able to raise the rent.²¹ This both limits the tenant’s mobility as they may need to relocate due to changing housing needs and incentivizes landlords to evict tenants, even when just cause eviction policies are in place.²¹ Rent control also, by nature, is not capable of addressing or incorporating other community needs. Lastly, rent control can be implemented at low cost to the city, but many states prohibit the adoption of rent control and such policies may receive a high amount of push back from landlords.²¹

Community land trusts separate land ownership from building ownerships in a process in which land ownership is held by a collective trust and would-be renters buy housing and lease land at a rate proportional to their income, selling it back to the trust when they move. This model usually designates control and decision making to a member board consisting of homeowners on the property and other community members, making this form of affordable housing highly community focused. As the land is held by the trust indefinitely, and the rate at which homeowners can sell their property is limited, affordability of units or homes on the property can be maintained in the long term. Lastly, other community benefits, including job creation, can be

included as part of CLT’s mission. Despite some push back from the real estate market, interest in CLTs is growing, not only among the public, but in city governments, suggesting that CLTs are considered feasible and acceptable to many local governments.³²

Priority grant funding to projects which include displacement plans is a relatively novel concept and has not been studied for effectiveness. Therefore, this strategy was not assessed in the same way as the other strategies. However, if implemented with integrity, long term anti-displacement strategies, which could include CBAs, forming CLTs or job creation, would be put into place at the park’s conception, and with input from both greening and housing advocacy organizations. However, this is dependent on enforcement and the quality and effort put into the displacement plan.

Policy	Community / Equity focus	Long Term Affordable Housing	Additional Community Benefits such as Job Creation	Feasibility in Most City Governments
Inclusionary Housing	*	*	*	***
Community Benefits agreement	**	**	**	*
Rent Control	*	*	*	**
Community Land Trusts	***	***	**	**

*poorly **moderately well ***highly

Recommended Course of Action: Promote CLTs with a green infrastructure and affordable housing focus

Recommended action depends on a city’s political climate, funding resources, community capacity and land ownership and these factors should be assessed in depth prior to implementing any policy. Generally, inclusionary housing and rent control have not been shown to have long term effectiveness when considering affordable housing, arguably the most important factor for preventing green gentrification and displacement.²²⁻²⁴ However, rent control may be a viable temporary solution during the initial stages of high gentrification risk greening while more stable affordable housing avenues are being established. CBAs are useful in that they can be applied to developer initiated greening projects and can be tailored to each project and neighborhood’s needs by incorporating community voice in the development stage, however, lack feasibility in most city environments as they are currently operated.

Community Land Trusts are a promising alternative that shifts the power in greening and housing projects away from developers and both promotes community control and long-term affordable housing. However, funding is a large barrier to CLTs. Many cities’ current funding structures have the potential to undermine the community empowerment and decision-making focus of CLTs in that much grant funding imposes strict criteria and requires navigating complex bureaucratic systems, which is taxing on community members who lack the time and expertise

necessary. There are multiple ways cities can promote CLT projects to prevent or counteract green gentrification. One such strategy might be to expand the concept from Los Angeles' Measure A Anti Displacement Policy to include prioritized funding for CLTs. City, State, and Federal funding agencies for parks and housing can implement policies that provide prioritized funding for grants that include input from both greening and affordable housing agencies and that either 1.) include use of CLTs for both green development and affordable housing or 2.) create CLTs in neighborhoods at high risk for green gentrification. Similarly, cities can provide other financial incentives such as low interest loans, tax exceptions, and tax abatements for CLTs with these characteristics.³³ Lastly, cities can streamline the development process for CLTs by expediting permits and approvals, or by designating a single point of contact within the city to help navigate the process as well as provide technical assistance including aid with legal and financial planning, governance, and property management. CLTs and any other such policy to prevent gentrification displacement should ideally be initiated during the planning stages in advance of any green development project.³³ Alternatively, CLTs with a combined green infrastructure and affordable housing development goal may develop both sides of the project at the same time. However, maintaining affordable housing and preventing displacement should remain the priority in planning. Additionally, any policy should be coupled with a strong monitoring and evaluation plan to not only ensure that projects are being implemented as intended, but to confirm they are effective in preventing gentrification and aligned with broader community needs.

Conclusions

Though greenspace is commonly extolled for its positive impacts on neighborhood health, these benefits are not equally shared. The installation of new greenspaces can lead to rising rents and the displacement of low-income minority residents, leading to altered neighborhood social structures and feelings of isolation for remaining residents.¹ Literature on equity in greenspace has mainly focused on distributional and procedural equity, but these efforts do not address whether greenspace is a priority for marginalized communities or consider other potential land uses.^{8,9} Anti-displacement measures at the inception of greening initiatives which involve communities in decision making are necessary to prevent green gentrification.

Five policy options aimed at preventing green gentrification were evaluated based on community and equity focus, provision of affordable housing, additional community benefits, and feasibility in most city governments. Inclusionary housing performed poorly in providing stable, long-term affordable housing and lacked a community focus, however, was popular among city governments as it is a low-cost policy to the city.²⁰⁻²² Community benefits agreements improve upon inclusionary housing by enforcing community-specific demands on developers, but negotiations may not be representative of the entire community and have encountered multiple political barriers.²⁶ Implementation research has determined that CBAs may only be beneficial in stably progressive local governments with a growing housing market.²⁶ Rent control and just-cause eviction laws can be effective in avoiding displacement from current housing, but they may also lead to a reduction in the overall availability of affordable rental housing.²⁷⁻²⁸ Community land trusts (CLTs) scored high to moderate in all categories as they are highly

community-focused and offer long-term affordability.³⁰ Priority grant funding to projects with displacement plans is a novel concept that has not been studied for effectiveness but could potentially be effective if implemented with integrity.

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are a promising alternative to market-based housing initiatives which promote community control and long-term affordable housing. However, funding is a significant barrier to CLTs. Cities can promote CLT projects by prioritized funding for grants that include input from both greening and affordable housing agencies and by providing financial incentives such as low-interest loans, tax exemptions, and tax abatements. Cities can also streamline the development process for CLTs by expediting permits and approvals and designating a single point of contact within the city to help navigate the process. More research is needed to understand effective implementation of CLTs and other policy options, such as California's Measure A Anti-displacement policy. Any policy should be coupled with a strong monitoring and evaluation plan to ensure they are effective in preventing gentrification and aligned with broader community needs.

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