‘ATTRACTIVENESS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS AS PLACES OF RESIDENCE’

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‘This town is a living town, where the space inside buildings is complemented with useful external areas and where public spaces stand a better chance to function properly’

Abstract

There are many causes of the ‘drop in the attractiveness’ of small and medium-sized towns. Nevertheless, the key problems are the urban sprawl beyond the town limits, changes in the social and economic structure, and degradation of urban space. Irrational spatial management is reflected in empty, undeveloped areas in towns, and in the dispersion of development to the outskirts of towns. Other issues of towns, relating to the aesthetics, the quality of urban spaces are unclarified ownership-related legal issues, which translates into ‘empty’ uninhabited townhouses in good locations in towns. Each city, each small and medium-sized town, is a system consisting of two related and cooperating elements: the spatial environment, and the social environment. Relations between the spatial and social environment lead to processes which have their effect on the quality of life and residence of man. Discernible changes in the social structure of town inhabitants (such towns are usually inhabited by older people, the young tend to leave) are caused – among other things – by unemployment, low income, as well as people’s habits. Poor material condition of town residents, a lack of any external capital, largely reduce its ‘attractiveness’. There are stimulators that improve attractiveness, and these are e.g. planning, economic, and cultural stimulators.

1 In the Polish geographical literature (besides the context of international comparisons) the notion of a medium-sized town is not clear. In most cases the range of population between 20 thousand to 100 thousand is defined to be characteristic for this group of urban centres. Nevertheless, doubt is raised in the subject of both the upper and the lower limit of this range, changed by authors depending on their research purposes. Most often this results from the debatable character of classification of towns with the population of 20-100 thousand into small and medium-sized ones (Kwiatek-Sołtysek, Runge 2011). Furthermore, heterogeneity of medium-sized towns is also emphasised. Towns above 50 thousand of inhabitants – according to some scholars – constitute a different quality compared to smaller towns (Stasiak 1994; Parysek, Kotus 1997).” P.129 Metodologiczne problemy badania miast średnich w Polsce” Runge A., Prace Geograficzne, issue 129, Institute of Geography and Spatial Management, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, 2012, METODOLOGICZNE PROBLEMY BADANIA MIAST ...

Introduction

Numerous contemporary small and medium-sized towns have become rather unattractive places to live for their residents. This fact can be confirmed by vacancies – empty flats and residential premises, visible in centres of towns. Tenements, due to a lack of their inhabitants, have been subjected to progressive degradation, as well as decapitalisation, which has a largely negative effect on the image of the town. Uninhabited buildings lead to the lack of their profitability, which in turn causes a lack of funds for their renovations, and in doing so it contributes to the drop of the quality of life and residence there. Owing to the fact that tenements do not satisfy the basic human needs, they become deserted. An example for this phenomenon could be the town of Oświęcim. (Photo 1)

Photo 1. Oświęcim. Devastated corner tenement at Klasztorna street and Mały Rynek – vacant building

Source: Photo by K.Papryca 2013

The depopulation of buildings, tenements in centres of small towns, has led to a situation where they gradually become deprived of diversity and richness of social life. Towns become more and more abandoned by young people, who no longer see any development perspectives in them. They are inhabited by older people, who due to economic reasons have no opportunity to

3 The population density ratio for Oświęcim belongs to high ones and reaches 1330 persons per km² (data of the Head Statistical Office for 2012). Oświęcim, with the population of nearly 40 thousand, occupies the fourth position amongst cities and towns of Małopolskie Province. A visible tendency is a dropping number of inhabitants of Oświęcim.” P. 47, Development Strategy of Oświęcim for the period 2014-2020.

4 OŚWIĘCIM. A tenement at Klasztorna street has regained its former glory - Oświęcim ...
www.oswiecimskie24.pl/newsy,12594-oswiecim-oswiecim--kamienica-przy-klasztornej-odzyska-la-blask
change their residence. The phenomenon that should certainly raise concerns is the birth rate. In Oświęcim, it has been negative since 2001 (incessantly, except for 2007). The migration balance for Oświęcim in the period 2001-2012 is negative. For several years now the number of deaths in Oświęcim has been growing, and the number of births has been going down. There are, however, more and more people inhabiting locations adjacent to the town of Oświęcim. The main phenomena connected with the depopulation of small and medium-sized towns are: development expansion towards the outskirts, changes of the social and economic structure, and degradation of the urban space. Irrational spatial management is demonstrated in empty, undeveloped areas in towns and in the dispersion of architecture in their outskirts.

A small and medium-sized town today is also a town of consumption, mobility, places – non-places, a town of people who are strangers to each other, degraded tenements whose owners are often unknown. The potential of a small town, connected with the life of the society within it, has been slumbering. Streets have become spaces whose only goal is to enable to get from one place to another, not staying there much longer. People have lost any willingness to undertake any social activity.

Streets, squares (Photo 3. Kościuszki square in Oświęcim) have been ascribed with a function of mobility. Due to its advantage streets have lost their basic meaning, which is experiencing. Today, each person uses a car, and in doing so they do not feel any relations with the surrounding area, with the environment they stay in. Both the spatial environment and the people who inhabit it cease to exist for them, and thus a car contributes to social isolation. The consequence of these phenomena is the fact that people withdraw from the public life.

Photo 3. Oświęcim, Słoneczny square. Devastated tenement with a gallery to the right – vacant premises. 2015

Source: Photo by K.Paprzyca 2015

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5 In terms of the age structure, the dominating group are people in the working age; however the number of people in the post-working age has been relatively growing. The ratio of people in the non-working age per 100 persons in the working age was rising over the last three years: 60.7% in 2009, 61.0% in 2010, 62.1% in 2011, to 63.3% in 2012. A distinct constant growth of the number of people in the post-working age is particularly observable, which should be defined as a definitely unfavourable demographic tendency.’ P. 49. Development Strategy of Oświęcim for the period 2014-2020.

6 ‘An opposite tendency is noticeable in the adjacent rural commune of Oświęcim, where over the last ten years the population has been systematically growing, which results from the fact that some residents from multi-family complexes build one-family houses on the outskirts of the town, and in doing so changes the place of their permanent residence to the territory of the commune of Oświęcim. It should be stated that the town and the commune constitute one functional area, and in the period 2004-2012 the total population dropped from 57,963 in 2004 to 57,643 in 2012.’ P. 48 Development Strategy of Oświęcim for the period 2014-2020.

7 ‘If any place could be defined as an identity-related, traditional, and historical place, the space which cannot be defined as identity-related, nor relational, nor historical, defines a non-place’. P 53 Marc Augé, Nie-miejsca. Wprowadzenie do antropologii hipernowoczesności, Warsaw: Wyd. Naukowe PWN, 2012,
A low quality of public spaces evokes many negative emotions, such as e.g. a feeling of threat for the safety of users of a specific space. This in turn contributes to their unwillingness to stay, live there, but also in their unwillingness to use it. At a certain stage neglected, degraded spaces become nobody’s land, evoking no memories and emotions whatsoever. The market and monetary economy, as well as many other phenomena of the 20th and 21st century, have brought about a situation where the model of a town street has been transferred to shopping malls. This has led to a situation where streets cease to be shopping streets, and people get stranger and stranger to each other. Names of merchants, craftsmen, businessmen, often deriving from the towns, which used to be displayed on signboards of many shops, have been replaced with brands of unknown origins and by mass production. Houses, tenements built by well-known families in towns have been replaced by developers, who are often oriented towards profits and luring customers. Life unification has become particularly well visible in clothing. Impersonality, anonymity of urban life has translated into our private lives. Man has become part of the world, dominated by constant rush, constant motion, moving from one place to another. The former diversified society that one could encounter in streets of towns before, has been replaced by ‘a lonely crowd’. People silently rush home, convinced that nobody can see them. And knowledge in a public place is a result of observation only, without the need to participate in this life. They want peace and quiet – a model absent from towns before. Isolation of people, unwillingness to talk to each other, has become man’s defence by being silent and withdrawal.

People have become more and more separated from each other. Strangers who arrive in town become even stranger, and thus the idea of meetings with strangers thanks to which people develop is lost. Strangers do play an essential role in man’s life, as the risk of the willingness to get to know others contributes to the enrichment of sensations and experience.

**Economic potential of towns**

The town of Oświęcim is located in close vicinity to important economic regions: the Upper Silesian Industrial Region, the Cracow agglomeration, or the city of Bielsko-Biała. It is an industrial town, very attractive for the development of this sort of business activity, with well-educated sector of services and trade. Business activities display considerable diversity, with the chemical industry being the dominating branch, followed by mechanical and

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8 According to…., ‘public space is a certain ideal we pursue, and which is probably impossible to reach. Public space should satisfy these three conditions referred to above. It should be accessible to everybody, it should be shaped in cooperation with everyone, and it should provide values in a specific society, acceptable ones, recognised as noteworthy.’ P. 21, Prof. dr hab. Krzysztof Pademski, Materials from the Seminar 13.10.2008, Poznań

9 Riesman, *Samotny tłum*, Wydawnictwo vis-a-vis/ Etiuda, Cracow 2011. It is one of the most important books devoted to the 20th-century sociology, by an author who coined the term of a ‘lonely crowd’.

10 According to the data of the Head Statistical Office as of the end of 2012, the economic potential in the town of Oświęcim was formed by 4336 national economy entities entered in the REGON register. Most of them, as many as 4169 (96.1%) constitute entities which belong to the private sector, amongst which the leading role is played by sole traders. They account for 2793 entities, which is 67% of all enterprises. Over the last 10 years the number of sole traders has changed slightly (the highest drop took place in late 2010 and early 2011), but it is still maintained at a constant level. Hence the market of entrepreneurs in the town can be recognised as very stable. A considerable group of private entities are commercial companies (357 entities). The list below demonstrates that the dynamism of entrepreneurship in the private sector is dictated largely by sole traders, which testifies to the resourcefulness of the town inhabitants.’ *Development Strategy of Oświęcim for the period 2014-2020* Pp. 53, 54.
Electromechanical industry and the production of construction products and construction engineering.

The shrinking chemical industry of the Chemical Plant in Oświęcim, later on Dwory Chemical Plant, has brought about the occurrence of empty lands and halls vacated by companies, shrinking of the job market, growth of unemployment. The Municipal Zone of Business Activity and the Oświęcim Business Incubator have come into being and have been contributing to the creation of new jobs and the development of the local entrepreneurship. These activities increase the investment attractiveness of the town and its region considerably. The growing interest of businessmen in the town is also visible in the area of the Municipal Zone of Business Activity, which is located on the grounds of the former Chemical Plant (Synthos today). Additionally, a Special Economic Zone was established on the land held by the town, within the scheme of the Cracow Technology Park. A growing number of business entities for the city means the increase of taxes, which have a positive impact on municipal investments and the improvement of the quality of public services. It is a very important element of the municipal promotion outside, especially for business.

Thanks to the business activity and the opportunity to concentrate companies in one location, the aesthetics of the town has been improving. The Oświęcim Commune has a positive attitude towards cooperation with investors, it also applies different forms of incentives. The goal is to activate the town and to attract investors. The town has also prepared grounds which can serve as the location of industrial, commercial and trade facilities. A good investment climate, an increase of its attractiveness as a town favourable for investments, translates into the increase of income, which in turn has its effect on the quality of public services and the economic growth of the town.

Besides Synthos S.A. the largest industrial plants in this area are: Austrotherm Sp. z o.o., Solvent Wistol S.A., Chemoservis – Dwory S.A., or Chemorozruch Sp. z o.o. These are predominantly production companies supporting construction engineering, chemistry, or producing specialist machines. Another industrial complex is located to the west of the town, in Zasole near Kolbego and Leszczyńskie streets. This is the location of such companies as e.g. Pol-Marley, Eltrans, MZK sp. z o.o. in Oświęcim, as well as large wholesale companies of construction and renovation products, such as: PHPU Euromar, Budgips, Eltel-Hurt Sp. z o.o., EUROCOLOR.

The Municipal Economic Zone, offering investment plots equipped with all utilities. Under the decision of the government from 2008, plots with the surface area 5.5 belonging to the Town of Oświęcim were allocated to the Special Economic Zone within the scheme of the Cracow Technology Park. Within the structures of the Municipal Economic Zone there functions the Oświęcim Business Incubator, whose goal is to support small and medium enterprises and professional activation of the unemployed. The year 2013 saw the beginning of an investment connected with the extension of the business activity zone ‘Nowe Dwory’, for which the town had obtained over PLN 6 million from the EU funds. The town’s contribution in this project is ca. PLN 4 million. P. 45 Development Strategy of Oświęcim for the period 2014-2020.

In 2011 the income of the Commune – Oświęcim Town reached PLN 128,272,011.77, and the expenses were somewhat higher and reached the level of PLN 128,790,697.35. Nevertheless, this situation is better than over the previous two years, when expenses were higher than the income of the commune by several million PLN. In 2012 the income of the commune reached over 135,075,069.19, and its expenses PLN 141,164,860.86. P. 42 Development Strategy of Oświęcim for the period 2014-2020.
Pol-Marley, El-trans, MZK sp. z o.o. in Oświęcim, as well as large wholesale companies of construction and renovation products, such as PHPU Euromar, Budgips, EUROCOLOR, Eltel-Hurt sp. z o.o.

‘Attractiveness of urban spaces’ – a condition for living in towns

Figure. 1. Housing environment – social environment – spatial environment

Source: the Author’s study, graphics by A. Wielebińska)

For many years now in Poland there has been a deficit of flats. Despite the growth of the number of built flats, processes such as the drop in the sizes of families, the growth of one-person households, contribute to maintaining the statistical deficit of flats. The renovation gap, caused by the lack of modernisation of the existing residential buildings, and the lack of renovations carried out in them, has been systematically growing, too. These problems are visible in towns. These are problems connected with low living standard. They have a direct effect on the social, spatial, and economic sphere.

The situation connected with the spatial and housing infrastructure in towns is diversified. It is a result of differences in the level of development of the local policy, but also of historical conditions. The ownership structure is diversified, and therefore, the investment layouts are different, too.

The problem of the drop of attractiveness of urban spaces in small and medium-sized towns is caused by the fact that the needs of man – the resident and user of this space – are not satisfied. The phenomenon of outflow of inhabitants from urban areas in small towns means that they begin to lose their ‘attractiveness’ as a place fit for living, for staying in.

Source: the Author’s study, graphics by A. Wielebińska)

Texter - Współczesne środowisko mieszkaniowe – Multi-authored monograph, K. Paprzyca, Racjonalne wykorzystanie przestrzeni miejskiej w miastach średniej wielkości – jednym z warunków ich rozwoju. 2015
texterbooks.com › Ekonomiczne › Ekonomia , Monografie wieloautorskie ,
'Each person is bound with some space. Public space should, therefore, stand for a space being the subject of interest of many people, a space accessible to everyone, comprising streets and squares, which constitute a certain spatial system.' The appearance of public spaces, their quality, testify to the town, to its people. It can evoke diversified emotions, from the threat for safety, to aesthetic sensations. In friendly spaces people are willing to stay, to go back to, whereas they tend to avoid the neglected ones. The intangible values in the space, thanks to which places have their climate, their mood, are also important. Currently, these images have been losing their significance, as attention is focused on the technology. The fact that the same technologies are applied everywhere in the world and the global scale of architecture are responsible for the occurrence of nobody’s land as a result.

Relations between the spatial environment and the social environment have always generated important social processes (Fig. 1). Properties connected with a specific place are also important – location, neighbourhood, accessibility. Nevertheless, crucial significance for the process of shaping of the quality of urban spaces, their attractiveness, has the value of urban spaces, which has been divided into:

- Instrumental values,
- Situational values,
- Existential values. Relations between the spatial environment and the social environment generate important social processes of:

- Identification,
- Integration,
- Information – communication,
- Cognition,
- Selection of making decisions and achieving goals,
- Emotions,
- Aesthetics.

The determinant of these interactions between the social environment and the spatial environment is the quality of urban environment, its attractiveness.

For medium-sized towns to be attractive, there needs to be constant care for the quality of their urban environment. A lack of it constitutes one of the reasons for essential differences, tensions, distances, conflicts in the relations between man and the spatial environment. The conflicts referred to above have a considerable effect on the attractiveness of the urban environment, often being one of the causes of depopulation of small and medium-sized towns.

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15 K. Paprzyca, Jakość publicznej przestrzeni w miejskim środowisku zamieszkania – wybrane zagadnienia. Czasopismo Techniczne, Architektura, Publishing House of Cracow University of Technology, 2010,

16 Instrumental values are: functional character of space (division into streets, squares, fields, interiors, etc.), easiness of reading of the architectural and urban planning layout and its socially perceived status (the old – the new, the pretty – the ugly, etc.). Situational values comprise feelings of physical and mental safety or threat, possibility of identification with a certain space in social and cultural categories, the feeling of transparency or anonymity, possibility of assuming the social roles of choice, and opportunity to fulfill one’s prestige and personality. Existential values comprise all those which are a source of emotions, which provide aesthetic and intellectual sensations and incline to discover values contained in structures and objects of a symbolic significance, as well as in the architectural and landscape surroundings. Ibidem, p. 57 A. Majer, Socjologia i przestrzeń miejska, Warsaw2010
A dynamic adaptive capacity is a potential of a place, and a potential of destiny. These two properties enable to search for opportunities (market, technological, organisational chances to adapt, to regenerate of a specific place), as well as qualities connected with the improvement of the urban environment, the improvement of its attractiveness. This allows to experiment and to transform, sometimes to change the way of thinking about a place. A place which exhibits the qualities of high functional and spatial flexibility is also a place which has a considerable adaptive potential.

Degradation of many urban spaces: streets, squares, is caused by the lack of vitality of these places. We encounter places which are completely forgotten, useless, although located in the centre. The fact that nowadays the space of man’s living plays a somewhat different role than in the past has its effect, too. Spaces cease to be inherited, the links with the place of residence weaken, in return for constant migration, change of the place of life and work.

**Photo 4. Oświęcim, Kościuszki square**

![Photo 4. Oświęcim, Kościuszki square](source: Photo by: K. Paprzyca)

There are still places in urban spaces which in spite of everything still have some power that one sometimes is not able to resist. Despite the fact that buildings, tenements are empty, uninhabited, decaying, they still influence our imagination. We go back to the forgotten times by displaying photographs of long-dead people on the elevations. (Photo 4. Oświęcim, Kościuszki square (Photo by: K. Paprzyca)).

In Oświęcim there are actions undertaken connected with the reconstruction of tenements by the Housing Associations, thanks to which the quality of the urban space has been gradually
improving – Photo 2. Oświęcim. Renovated corner tenement at Klasztorna street and Mały Rynek (Photo by: K. Paprzyca 2015).\textsuperscript{17}

**Needs and aspirations of people. Man – place – relations**

Anthropology of place recognises that ‘taking root’ produces people, which means that local inhabitants are people who come from certain places that belong to them.\textsuperscript{18} Phenomena that are inseparably connected with ‘taking root’ are identification with a place, and the willingness to leave a trace, which will restore the emotional sense to places and town quarters, the opportunity for a network of relations between man and a place to exist.

Photo 2. Oświęcim, Mały Rynek (Photo by: K. Paprzyca)

Due to the lack of place and residences, man becomes spiritually homeless. The value of a place is a leading element in urban spaces, of the quality of urban spaces, and therefore in the quality of life of residents. Formerly, man created himself in the public sphere; in the private one, via his experiences, he was fulfilling himself in a family. Today, all activities undertaken by people are driven by ambitions, by set goals. The value of mutual support has been disappearing. The contemporary times are the times of hotels, railway stations, terminals, where people see each other briefly –

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\textsuperscript{17} One example of very positive activities of the town of Oświęcim is the renovation of the tenement at Klasztorna street / Mały Rynek, which was carried out by the Housing Association, Housing Association – flats – official portal tbs24.pl/

\textsuperscript{18} ‘The notional status of an anthropological place is ambiguous. It is only an imagination, partially materialised, created by inhabiting people on the subject of their relation with the territory, their relatives, and others.’ Marc Augé, Nie-miejsca. Wprowadzenie do antropologii hipernowoczesności, Warsaw: Wyd. Naukowe PWN, 2012, p. 37.
these are spaces of solitude, which enforce our feeling of uprooting; they do not have any properties of identity.\textsuperscript{19} Many such places, along with galleries, have become places which are supposed to provide people with the sense of comfort, community - places of depleted expectations, ‘charming artificial places’, which only lure with their charm, offering no essential values to man.\textsuperscript{20}

Before, towns and cities were places of the creation of values important for the development of civilisation: material, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, and emotional values, as well as processes of identification, communication and social exchange, information, and many others. The quality of the urban environment has always generated the quality of life of its inhabitants.

The relation between man and a place becomes a key in all discussions and values connected with an optimal quality of urban spaces, and therefore with their attractiveness. Due to the lack of places, man feels spiritually homeless, isolated. A well-organised urban space releases specific social processes, connected with getting to know, using, shaping. Since childhood man is in contact with architecture, he stays in its vicinity. Hence its enormous effect on man, on his personality, aesthetic sensations, tastes, opinions.

Summary

The objective of medium-sized towns is competing for development factors and groups of recipients. We can compete for people, investors, but also for the inflow of funds (e.g. from the EU). Therefore, it could be easily stated that the competitiveness of small and medium-sized towns consists in the creation of an offer which will make the town stand out, so as to attract people to it and to increase the social and economic benefits. Hence medium-sized towns should have values and attractions which will convince people to choose them as their places of residence, as their places of recreation, as their places of work.

Since each urban area has its own diversified set of attractions and values, it is necessary to properly diagnose the development opportunities for different potential functions connected with a specific town.

Improving the attractiveness of neglected areas in medium-sized towns should become a starting point for all activities undertaken in towns. The objective is to revitalise areas for social needs: to stimulate urban areas, to improve the quality of the urban environment, to improve the value of urban structures, to optimise the relations between man and the urban environment, to optimise the conditions of life and residence.

In the spatial and social aspect, the phenomenon of improving of the attractiveness of towns connected with processes of transformations of the urban tissue, is aimed at the implementation of tasks which satisfy the needs and preferences of diversified users of towns. An attractive

\textsuperscript{19} Values of social perception of public spaces constitute the subject matter of research of urban planning, as well as of sociology and environmental psychology. In sociological considerations, one should pay special attention to studies devoted to urban space in connection with social issues and with man. Patrick Geddes, sociologist and natural scientist, in 1904 delivered a speech in which he talked about making use of sociological knowledge when building cities. His greatest continuators were Lewis Mumford, Paul A. Bell, Florian Znaniecki, Stanisław Ossowski, Aleksander Wallis.

\textsuperscript{20} M. Auge, Nie – miejsca, wprowadzenie do antropologii hipernowoczesności, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2012 , Marc Auge is a world-famous French culture ethnologist and anthropologist.
urban space should exhibit properties of the quality of the space of places and the quality of their residents’ lives as follows:

- Relating to urban planning
- Social
- Economic
- Environmental.

**Figure 2. Attractiveness of small and medium-sized towns**

The presented features, spatial, social, and economic values of the town, shape the image of the town effectively. They also mean that the town develops, that it has a potential in terms of its usability, which makes it possible to satisfy the needs of users of the town.

**Source:** the Author’s study, graphics by A. Wielebińska

21 Texter - Współczesne środowisko mieszkaniowe – Multi-authored monograph, K. Paprzyca, Racionalne wykorzystanie przestrzeni miejskiej w miastach średniej wielkości – jednym z warunków ich rozwoju. 2015
texterbooks.com › Ekonomiczne › Ekonomia, Monografie wieloautorskie.
The fields of development which may contribute to the improvement of the attractiveness of small and medium-sized towns to a considerable extent:

- **Construction engineering and spatial planning**
  It refers to activities for the benefit of the creation of conditions fostering the development of investments and housing construction. The goal is – without limitations – to stop the outflow of residents thanks to the creation of favourable living and leisure conditions.

- **Culture**
  It refers to tasks aiming at shaping and strengthening of the local identity – creation of a platform for intergenerational and social integration.

- **Public safety**
  It refers to activities whose effect will be growth of the feeling of safety amongst residents.

- **Promotion**
  It refers to activities consisting in building of a new image of the town.

- **Economy**
  It refers to activities for the benefit of intensification of the economic development of the city.

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