

## WHAT IS A MUSEUM? (1967)

*A Dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson*

ALLAN KAPROW: There was once an art which was conceived for the museums, and the fact that the museums look like mausolea may actually reveal to us the attitude we've had to art in the past. It was a form of paying respect to the dead. Now, I don't know how much more work there is available from the past that has to be displayed or respected. But if we're going to talk about the works being produced in the last few years, and which are to be produced in the near future, then the concept of the museum is completely irrelevant. I should like to pursue the question of the environment of the work of art; what kind of work is being done now; where it is best displayed, apart from the museum, or its miniature counterpart, the gallery.

ROBERT SMITHSON: Well, it seems to me that there is an attitude that tends toward McLuhanism, and this attitude would tend to see the museum as a null structure. But I think the nullity implied in the museum is actually one of its

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*Arts Yearbook, "The Museum World," 1967*

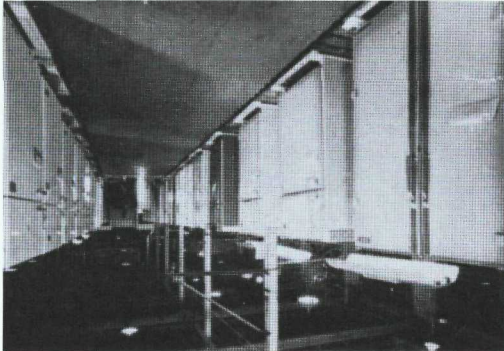
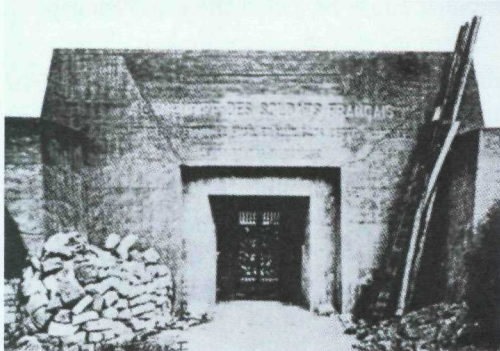
*Top:* Entrance to Philip Johnson Gallery, Connecticut. Architect, Philip Johnson. Photo by Ezra Stoller.

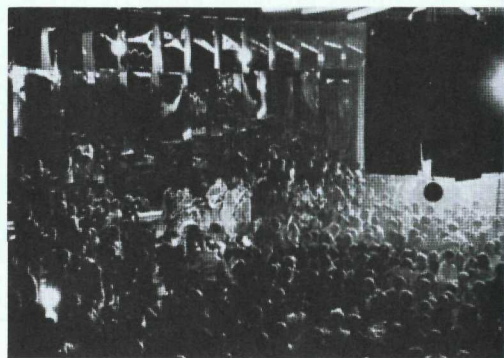
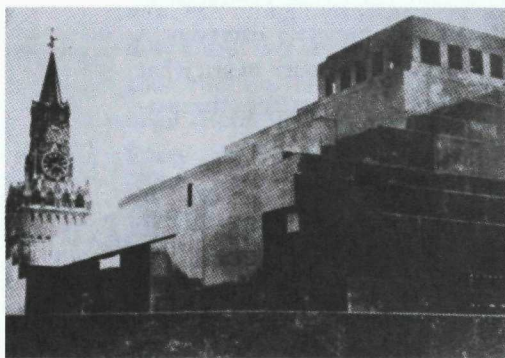
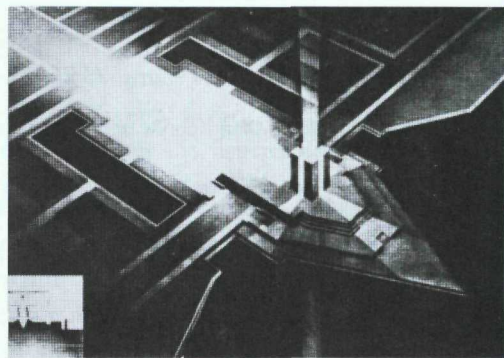
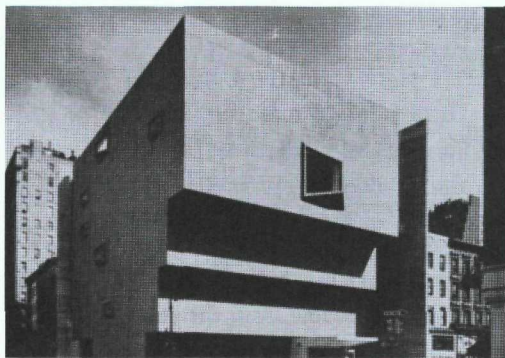
*Bottom:* Memorial to French soldiers at Verdun.



*Top:* Installation photograph of the architecture of Louis Kahn at the Museum of Modern Art.

*Bottom:* Final inspection of refrigerators in Kelvinator Grand Rapids plant.





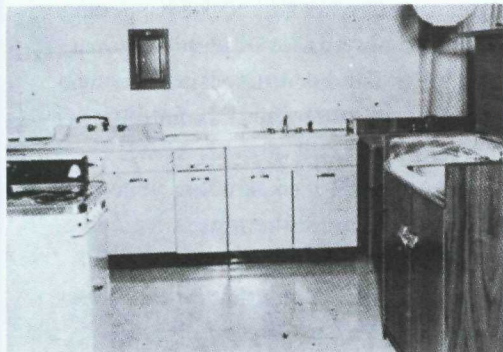
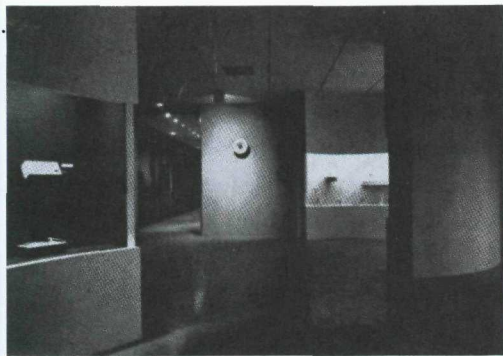
Top: Whitney Museum of American Art. Architect, Marcel Breuer and Associates. Photo by Ezra Stoller.  
Bottom: Mausoleum for Lenin, Moscow. Designed by the Constructivist Shushev.

Top: Proposed monument by Holabird and Root, Chicago.  
Bottom: Discothèque, Cheetah. Photo by Thecla.

major assets, and that this should be realized and accentuated. The museum tends to exclude any kind of life-forcing position. But it seems that now there's a tendency to try to liven things up in the museums, and that the whole idea of the museum seems to be tending more toward a kind of specialized entertainment. It's taking on more and more the aspects of a discothèque and less and less the aspects of art. So, I think that the best thing you can say about museums is that they really are nullifying in regard to action, and I think that this is one of their major virtues. It seems that your position is one that is concerned with what's happening. I'm interested for the most part in what's not happening, that area between events which could be called the gap. This gap exists in the blank and void regions or settings that we never look at. A museum devoted to different kinds of emptiness could be developed. The emptiness could be defined by the actual installation of art. Installations should empty rooms, not fill them.

KAPROW: Museums tend to make increasing concessions to the idea of art and life as being related. What's wrong with their version of this is that they provide canned life, an aestheticized illustration of life. "Life" in the museum is like making love in a cemetery. I am attracted to the idea of clearing out the





Top: Museum of Modern Art installation. *Two Design Programs: The Braun Company—Chemex Corporation.*  
Bottom: Chicago showroom for Crane Company.

Top: *Bedroom Ensemble* by Claes Oldenberg, 1963.  
Bottom: *Bathroom Beautiful*, Crane Company.

museums and letting better designed ones like the Guggenheim exist as sculptures, as works, as such, almost closed to people. It would be positive commitment to their function as mausolea. Yet, such an act would put so many artists out of business. . . . I wonder if there isn't an alternative on the fringes of life and art, in that marginal or penumbral zone which you've spoken so eloquently of, at the edges of cities, along vast highways with their outcroppings of supermarkets and shopping centers, endless lumberyards, discount houses, whether that isn't the world that's for you at least. I mean, can you imagine yourself working in that kind of environment?

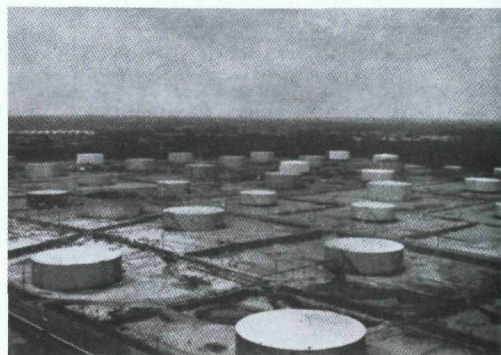
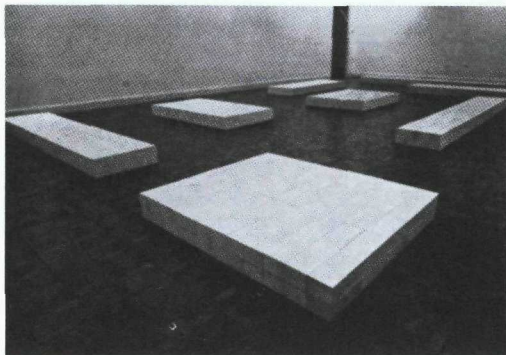
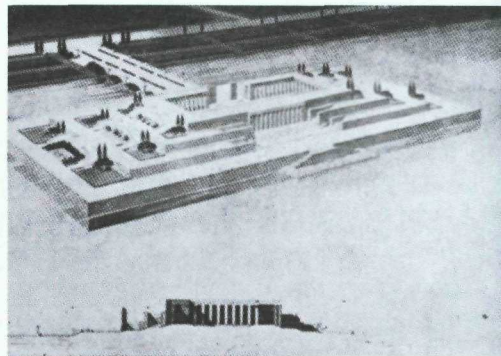
SMITHSON: I'm so remote from that world that it seems uncanny to me when I go out there; so not being directly involved in the life there, it fascinates me, because I'm sure of a distance from it, and I'm all for fabricating as much distance as possible. It seems that I like to think and look at those suburbs and those fringes, but at the same time, I'm not interested in living there. It's more of an aspect of time. It is the future—the Martian landscape. By a distance, I mean a consciousness devoid of self-projection.

I think that some of the symptoms as to what's going on in the area of museum building are reflected somewhat in Philip Johnson's underground

museum, which in a sense buries abstract kinds of art in another kind of abstraction, so that it really becomes a negation of a negation. I am all for a perpetuation of this kind of distancing and removal, and I think Johnson's project for Ellis Island is interesting in that he's going to gut this nineteenth-century building and turn it into a ruin, and he says that he's going to stabilize the ruins, and he's also building this circular building which is really nothing but a stabilized void. And it seems that you find this tendency everywhere, but everybody is still a bit reluctant to give up their life-forcing attitudes. They would like to balance them both. But, I think, what's interesting is the lack of balance. When you have a Happening you can't have an absence of happening. There has to be this dualism which I'm afraid upsets a lot of ideas of humanism and unity. I think that the two views, unity and dualism, will never be reconciled and that both of them are valid, but at the same time, I prefer the latter in multiplicity.

KAPROW: There is another alternative. You mentioned building your own monument, up in Alaska, perhaps, or Canada. The more remote it would be, the more inaccessible, perhaps the more satisfactory. Is that true?

SMITHSON: Well, I think ultimately it would be disappointing for everybody including myself. Yet the very disappointment seems to have possibilities.



Top: Penthouse Dining Room, Los Angeles County Museum.  
Bottom: Carl Andre Exhibition, 1966. Limestone and sand bricks.

Top: Proposed memorial by Benjamin Marshall, 1930.  
Bottom: Storage Tanks, Mobil Oil.



KAPROW: What disturbs me is the lack of extremity in either of our positions. For instance, I must often make social compromises in my Happenings, while, similarly, you and others who might object to museums nevertheless go on showing in them.

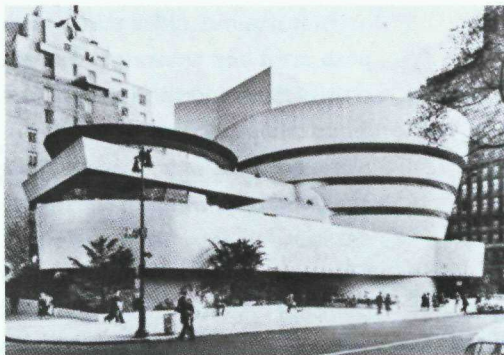
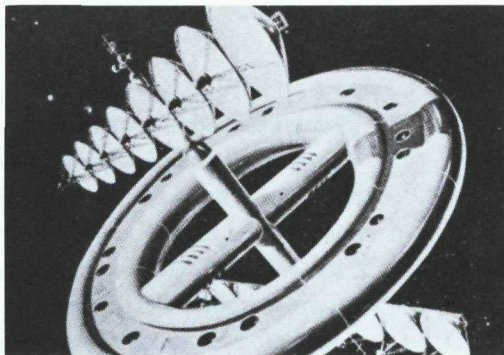
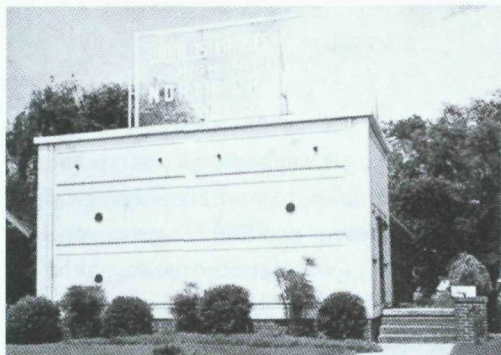
SMITHSON: Extremity can exist in a vain context too, and I find what's vain more acceptable than what's pure. It seems to me that any tendency toward purity also supposes that there's something to be achieved, and it means that art has some sort of point. I think I agree with Flaubert's idea that art is the pursuit of the useless, and the more vain things are the better I like it, because I'm not burdened by purity.

I actually value indifference. I think it's something that has aesthetic possibilities. But most artists are anything but indifferent; they're trying to get with everything, switch on, turn on.

KAPROW: Do you like wax works?

SMITHSON: No, I don't like wax works. They are actually too lively. A wax-work thing relates back to life, so that actually there's too much life there, and it also suggests death, you know. I think the new tombs will have to avoid any reference to life or death.

KAPROW: Like Forest Lawn?



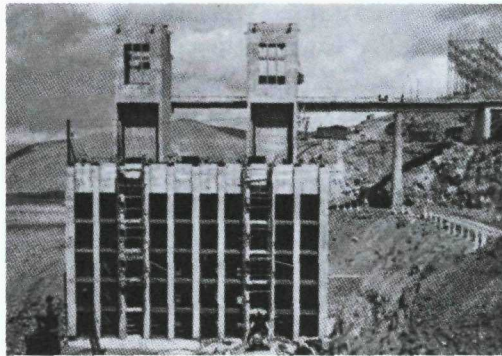
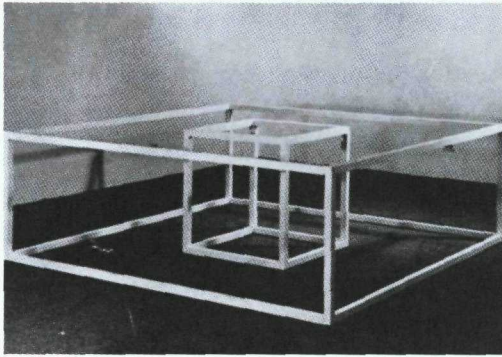
Top: World's largest bureau.

Bottom: Executive Suite for year 2026 from *Metropolis*. Set built in 1926.

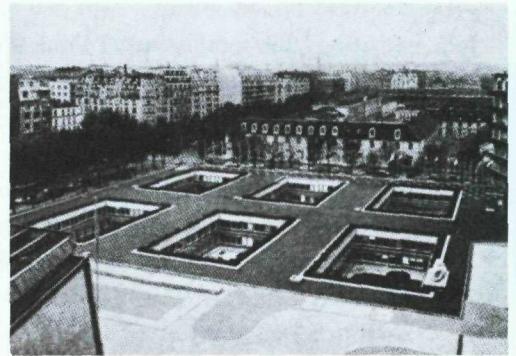
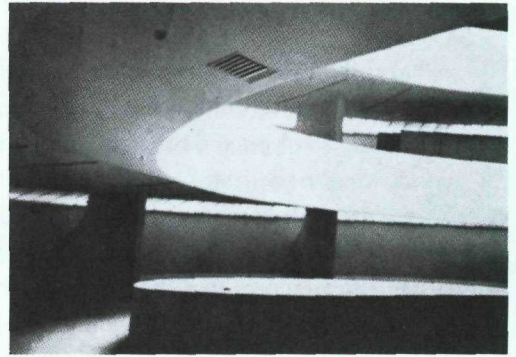
Top: Proposed museum for outer space. Designer unknown.

Bottom: Guggenheim Museum exterior.





Top: SOL LeWITT, MA5, 1966.  
Bottom: Hydroelectric project. Hirfanli, Turkey.



Top: Guggenheim interior (empty).  
Bottom: "Invisible Architecture" built by Bernard Zehrfuss for UNESCO, France.

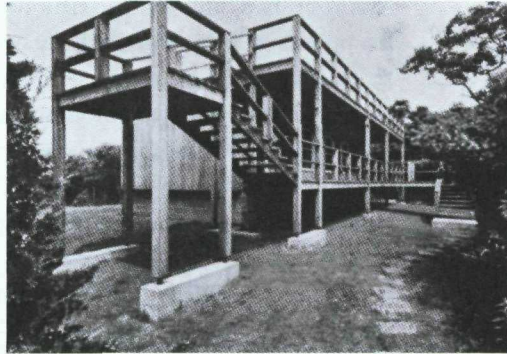
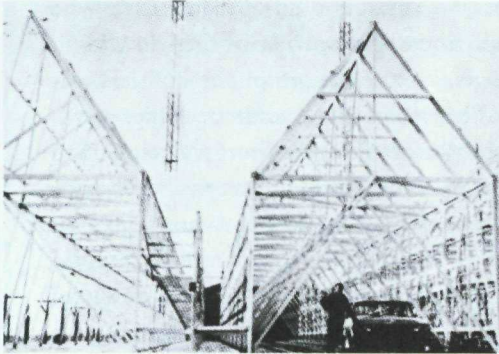
SMITHSON: Yes, it's an American tradition.

KAPROW: Realistically speaking, you'll never get anybody to put up the dough for a mausoleum—a mausoleum to emptiness, to nothing—though it might be the most poetic statement of your position. You'll never get anyone to pay for the Guggenheim to stay empty all year, though to me that would be a marvelous idea.

SMITHSON: I think that's true. I think basically it's an empty proposal. But . . . eventually there'll be a renaissance in funeral art.

Actually, our older museums are full of fragments, bits and pieces of European art. They were ripped out of total artistic structures, given a whole new classification and then categorized. The categorizing of art into painting, architecture and sculpture seems to be one of the most unfortunate things that took place. Now all these categories are splintering into more and more categories, and it's like an interminable avalanche of categories. You have about forty different kinds of formalism and about a hundred different kinds of expressionism. The museums are being driven into a kind of paralyzed position, and I don't think they want to accept it, so they've made a myth out of action; they've made a myth out of excitement; and there's even a lot of talk about interesting spaces. They're creating exciting spaces and things like that. I never saw an exciting





Top: Housing development, Jersey City. Photo by Dan Graham.  
Bottom: Radar-observing sites. Courtesy Smithsonian Astrophysical and Harvard College Observatories.

Top: Storage of wet collections of marine invertebrates. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institute.  
Bottom: Betty Parsons' Long Island house, designed by Tony Smith. Photo by Jon Naar.

space. I don't know what a space is. Yet, I like the uselessness of the museum.

KAPROW: But on the one side you see it moving away from uselessness toward usefulness.

SMITHSON: Utility and art don't mix.

KAPROW: Toward education, for example. On the other side, paradoxically. I see it moving away from real fullness to a burlesque of fullness. As its sense of life is always aesthetic (cosmetic), its sense of fullness is aristocratic: it tries to assemble all "good" objects and ideas under one roof lest they dissipate and degenerate out in the street. It implies an enrichment of the mind. Now, high class (and the high-class come-on) is implicit in the very concept of a museum, whether museum administrators wish it or not, and this is simply unrelated to current issues. I wrote once that this is a country of more or less sophisticated mongrels. My fullness and your nullity have no status attached to them.

SMITHSON: I think you touched on an interesting area. It seems that all art is in some way a questioning of what value is, and it seems that there's a great need for people to attribute value, to find a significant value. But this leads to many categories of value or no value. I think this shows all sorts of disorders and fractures and irrationalities. But I don't really care about setting them right or making things in some ideal fashion. I think it's all there—independent of

any kind of good or bad. The categories of “good art” and “bad art” belong to a commodity value system.

KAPROW: As I said before, you face a social pressure which is hard to reconcile with your ideas. At present, galleries and museums are still the primary agency or “market” for what artists do. As the universities and federal education programs finance culture by building even more museums, you see the developing picture of contemporary patronage. Therefore, your involvement with “exhibition people,” however well-meant they are, is bound to defeat whatever position you take regarding the non-value of your activity. If you say it’s neither good nor bad, the dealers and curators who appropriate it, who support you personally, will say or imply the opposite by what they do with it.

SMITHSON: Contemporary patronage is getting more public and less private. Good and bad are moral values. What we need are aesthetic values.

KAPROW: How can your position then be anything but ironic, forcing upon you at least a skepticism. How can you become anything except a kind of sly philosopher—a man with a smile of amusement on your face, whose every act is italicized?

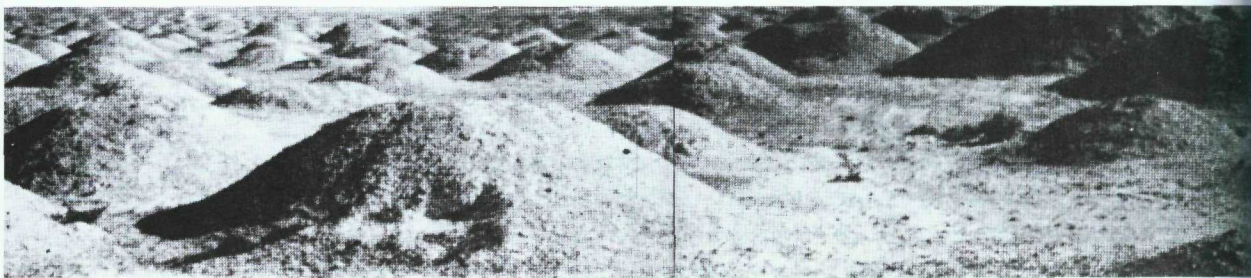
SMITHSON: Well, I think humor is an interesting area. The varieties of humor are pretty foreign to the American temperament. It seems that the American temperament doesn’t associate art with humor. Humor is not considered serious. Many structural works really are almost hilarious. You know, the dumber, more stupid ones are really verging on a kind of concrete humor, and actually, I find the whole idea of the mausoleum very humorous.

KAPROW: Our comparison of the Guggenheim, as an intestinal metaphor, to what you’ve called a “waste system” seems quite to the point. But this of course is nothing more than another justification for the museum man, for the museum publicist, for the museum critic. Instead of high seriousness it’s high humor.

SMITHSON: High seriousness and high humor are the same thing.

KAPROW: Nevertheless, the minute you start operating within a cultural context, whether it’s the context of a group of artists and critics or whether it’s

Burial Mounds, Bahrain Islands.





the physical context of the museum or gallery, you automatically associate this uncertain identity with something certain. Someone assigns to it a new categorical name, usually a variant of some old one, and thus he continues his lineage or family system which makes it all credible. The standard fate of novelty is to be justified by history. Your position is thus ironic.

SMITHSON: I would say that it has a contradictory view of things. It's basically a pointless position. But I think to try to make some kind of point right away stops any kind of possibility. I think the more points the better, you know, just an endless amount of points of view.

KAPROW: Well, this article itself is ironic in that it functions within a cultural context, within the context of a fine-arts publication, for instance, and makes its points only within that context. My opinion has been, lately, that there are only two outs: one implying a maximum of inertia, which I call "idea" art, art which is usually only discussed now and then and never executed; and the other existing in a maximum of continuous activity, activity which is of uncertain aesthetic value and which locates itself apart from cultural institutions. The minute we operate in between these extremes we get hung up (in a museum).

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Edited by Jack Flam



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JACK FLAM is Distinguished Professor of Art History at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and author of *Matisse on Art*.

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