TOWARDS A SOC ally SUSTAINABLE URBAN RENEWAL IN HONG KONG

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT:
The property-led urban renewal in Hong Kong emphasizes on economic considerations of generating profits and little attention is paid to the social lives of pre-existing residents. Urban renewal leads to demolition of meaningful neighbourhoods, destruction of original social networks and the lost of everyday attachment to place. A socially sustainable urban renewal (SSUR) should recognize the social needs of people; actively engaging the affected people in the process of urban renewal and seeking their ideas and knowledge on the issue. By doing this, a more equitable and fair distribution of outcomes will likely to result. The paper tries to argue for a SSUR practice that can address the social aspects of everyday lives. The elements identified as important for a SSUR at local scale are social capital, public participation and sense of place. To make it more relevant to the conference theme, the paper will concentrate on elaborating the element of public participation in achieving SSUR. The practices of urban renewal in Hong Kong will then be examined.

KEY WORDS:
Social sustainability; Hong Kong; Public participation
INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong is a small territory of 1104 square kilometers with a population of around 7 million. It is a densely populated area with a population density of 6540 persons per square kilometers. It was once a colony of Britain from the 1840s to 1997 and it is now returned to China’s sovereignty. Because Hong Kong was a colonial city, it was self-financed and should maintain a healthy financial profile at that time. The government had valued much on selling land for revenue generation. And, the economy in Hong Kong has associated with real estate sector. Once the real estate sector collapsed like the falling prices of the property market after 1989 and 1997, the economy had became worse. So, housing policy in Hong Kong is not merely aim at satisfying people’s dwelling needs, it has political and economic considerations behind.

Besides economic consideration, housing is a major political concern of the government especially after the influx of immigrants from mainland China after Japanese occupation of 1941-1945. They lived in sub-standard and inadequate housings which led to sanitary, health and safety problems. The government noticed the inadequacy of housings in Hong Kong and tried to formulate a public housing programme. After the Shek Kip Mei squatter fire which resulted in a loss of home of more than 50,000 inhabitants at the end of 1953, the government had paid more attention on the housing needs of citizens. To ameliorate the living conditions and to maintain society stability, the government started building public housings and Shek Kip Mei Estate was the first public housing estate built after the fire incident in Hong Kong. Later in 1972, governor MacLehose announced massive public housing programme and emphasized on the development of new towns. Tseun Wan, Tuen Mun and Shatin are then developed as new towns to redistribute the population and economic activities from the core center in the territory.

Now, most of the housing estates in Hong Kong are managed by Hong Kong Housing Authority (HKHA) and Hong Kong Housing Society (HKHS). The HKHA is a major public housing provider and provides nearly half of the total housing stock in Hong Kong (Housing Bureau, 2002). It was set up at 1973 and is an independent and financially autonomous organization. The HKHS is an independent, non-profit organization set up in 1948. It complements the role of government by providing affordable housings for the public. Altogether, there is about 29.7 percent of the population in Hong Kong living in public rental housings in 2010 (HKHA, 2010).

Although the government endeavored to develop new towns1 to accommodate its growing population, the demand for housing cannot be met by the public or private sectors in recent years. Besides increasing population, the people and investment from mainland China have increased the demand for housing while the supply of land for property development has not hugely increased by the government as they afraid a slump in the market. So, the government and property developers have to find out more space for real estate development. They have to redevelop decay areas and buildings.

1 The New Town Programme was first announced by the governor in 1954. The first phase of new town development was at 1970s. Tsuen Wan, Tuen Mun and Shatin are developed as new towns during that period. The second phase new towns are located at Sheung Shui/Fanling, Tai Po and Yuen Long. Tin Shui Wai, Tseung Kwan O and Tung Chung are new towns of latest phase. There are more than half of the population live in new towns.
Urban renewal has become a common practice and the public has different opinions towards the practice of it.

**URBAN RENEWAL IN HONG KONG**

Recently, the fatal collapse of a 4-storey old building in Ma Tau Wai Road has aroused public concern on the problem of building dilapidation in Hong Kong. According to the Buildings Department (2010), there are about 4,000 buildings aged 50 years or older, and this figure will increase by 500 every year. And there are 17,000 buildings aged 30 years or older, and the number will increase to 28,000 in 10 years. Without proper maintenance, this aging stock of buildings will pose dangerous threats to people.

To deal with the problem of urban decay, The Urban Renewal Authority (URA) is responsible for renewing dilapidated districts through the holistic 4R strategy of ‘Redevelopment’, ‘Rehabilitation’, ‘Revitalization’ and ‘pReservation’. Most of the redevelopment programs of private properties are undertaken by URA. It forms partnership with private developers to redevelop buildings within a smaller geographical area due to the difficulty in land assembly. Under certain criteria, Hui et al. (2008a) found out that during 1996 to 2005, Central and Western, Yau Tsim Mong, Wan Chai, Eastern, Sham Shui Po and Kowloon City were the districts with most redevelopment programmes. These areas are near to the Central Business District and redevelopment in these locations are more financially attractive to the developers.

In the selection of the practice of urban renewal, URA and private developers usually consider on the economic value of the existing land and the potential profit it can generate after redevelopment. Redevelopment will be more attractive as it fully exploits the development value of the land, especially the land prices in Hong Kong are high (Yau and Chan, 2008).

Urban redevelopment in Hong Kong has caused many social problems as it displaces pre-existing residents to unfamiliar place resulting in a loss of friendship with neighbours and loss of emotional attachment to place. Therefore, the URA and private developers are criticized for their lack of concern on social fabrics of the community in urban renewal. They focus on the economic gains of renewal programs. It is widely claimed that urban renewal in Hong Kong is property-led and URA is profit-oriented as it only focuses on projects that can generate profits to increase its reserve (Ng et al., 2001; Ng, 2002; Chan and Lee, 2008b).

Urban redevelopment based on economic consideration usually falls short of addressing the social needs of residents in designated areas. Issues like social cohesion, existing social capital, residents’ emotional attachment to the place and public engagement in the process are usually overlooked in redevelopment projects. Other practices of urban renewal concerning about social needs of inhabitants are understated based on profit-maximizing consideration.

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2 The URA is responsible for urban renewal in Hong Kong. It is established in 2001 to replace the former Land Development Corporation. It is a self-financed institution with the startup capital of
A SOCIA LLY SUSTAINABLE URBAN RENEWAL

The often-cited definition of sustainable development from the Brundtland Commission is ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987, p.8). There are over half of the world’s population live in urban areas. The urban dwellers pose challenges and pressing material needs to the government to satisfy their needs by providing resources like reliable water and energy, and to continue producing commodity. To sustain the quality of living, the concept of ‘renew’ becomes important to deal with the issue of limited resources in meeting the needs of people. Sustainability does not only concern development and earth’s resources issues, it concerns problems of justice and equity on ‘how we think about living the good life’ (Geczi, 2007, pp.377). Therefore, the concept has applied to different disciplines like urban regeneration (Couch & Dennemann, 2000; Rydin, et al., 2003; Winston, 2010), urban design (Chan & Lee, 2008b) and cultural heritage management (Keitumetse, 2011) to concern the well-being of actors.

There are three interrelated aspects of sustainable development according to the needs in each aspect. They are environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability. Each dimension attracts research to address sustainable practices to meet the needs in that particular aspect. These elements are often used as conceptual framework for urban development by carefully examining the developmental forms which can address or even improve the environmental, social and economic conditions of society.

Bridger and Luloff (1999) argue that it is very difficult to achieve sustainability at macro level as changes are so great that ‘coordination and cooperation across political units are bound to be enormous. (p.380)’ At the macro level, the sustainability goals have to be articulated among different levels of political units and the relations of domination may be resulted as elites may control the dialogue in communicating sustainability objectives. So, achieving sustainability at local level is more promising as it is more meaningful to relate sustainability with everyday lives of people (Bridger & Luloff, 1999). As such, it is more conducive to revive the dialogue of sustainable development at local level.

The concept of sustainable community concerns the functioning sustainability at local level. This recognizes the fact that every community is different in social organization and economic condition. The design of policies and practices should pay attention to the heterogeneous nature of different communities and should not adopt a one size fit all approach. Sustainable communities are ‘places where people want to live and work, now and in the future…’ They ‘meet the diverse needs of the existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well-planned, built and run, offer equality of opportunity and good services to all’ (DoEHLG, 2007, p.7). Besides physical design of living environment to improve people’s quality of life, Dempsey et al. (2009) claims that continuous social interaction, reciprocal acts and features of social organization help to sustain a community. Through interactions, ‘people develop a social definition of the self and beliefs about the way the larger society operates (Bridger and Luloff, 1999, p.383)’.

The discourse of sustainable development put much emphasis on economic and environmental sustainability while there is a lack of attention to the definition of social sustainability in the context of
urban development (Dempsey et al., 2009; Cuthill, 2010; Winston, 2010). Like sustainable development, social sustainability is a broad notion where there is a lack of consensus of its definition as different disciplines have diverging perspectives and discipline-specific criteria to approach this concept (Colantonio, 2008). But social sustainability has important implications for the sustaining of community as it helps addressing the wellbeing, happiness and standards of living of people at a neighbourhood level without interpreting the economic material needs of people. Recently, the social dimension of sustainability has gained increasing recognition and ‘social sustainability has emerged as a theme in its own right’ (Turkington and Sangster, 2006, p.184).

Similar to the concept of sustainable community, social sustainability emphasize on the quality of life and it works within society. It deals with the social needs and consequent well-being of people to sustain and reproduce the society. There are various needs for social sustainability. Colantonio (2008) noticed that there is a shift from traditional themes of social sustainability like equity, poverty reduction, livelihood, employment to less measurable intangible concepts like identity, sense of place, experience and social capital. By reviewing relating literature (Colantonio, 2008; Dave, 2009; Dempsey et al., 2009; Cuthill, 2010), here are the indicators for social sustainability in the context of urban development at local scale:

- Equity
- Community stability
- Safety
- Social mix and cohesion
- Well being and quality of life
- Social interaction and social capital
- Sense of Belonging/ Sense of Place/ Sense of Community
- Participation

The concept of social sustainability and its indicators for sustaining the social needs of people living in the urban areas have various implications for the practice of urban renewal. However, there is a lack of research to identify the sustainability of urban renewal practice (Winston, 2010). In the context of Hong Kong, some research addresses on how urban design can achieve sustainability in urban renewal (Lee & Chan, 2008; Chan & Lee, 2008b). Other research focuses on how the practice of urban renewal should result in sustainability (Ng et al., 2001; Ng, 2002). Yet, there should be more interpretation of the relationship between these factors of social sustainability and urban renewal.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, it will focus on public participation as an indicator to examine the conditions for a SSUR programme. It is highlighted as important concept in SSUR practice.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public participation means the influence of groups or individual on the policy process by organized actions or activities (Cheung, 2011). The concept and practice of public participation are derived from
the very concept of democracy and the term public participation is inter-exchangeable with ‘participatory democracy’ (Webler & Renn, 1995). The normative claim of public participation is based on equality where everyone should have equal right and power to express their opinions and affect on policies which pose impact on them.

Webler and Renn (1995) state that the origin of public participation in the western context evolved from labour movement to new movements for more direct participation like large demonstrations, boycotts, peaceful protest, and ‘blocking construction of environmentally controversial facilities’ and finally to direct citizen participation by legal institutionalization. No matter participation in the private or public sector, the aim is to gain power and influence on the decision making that affect people’s livelihood.

Modern societies value much on empirical knowledge and rely on scientific analysis and judgment in decision-making which result in a lack of public acceptance and substantial scientific uncertainties as the decision cannot acquire public acceptance (Fiorino, 1989; Renn et al., 1995). For example, policies affecting the livelihood of people like waste disposal, urban renewal and the location of nuclear plants always lead to a crisis of lack of public confidence on the safety and health problems. The citizens started questioning on the legitimacy of the views of elites and professionals and in quest of other alternatives and possibilities of decisions which reflect their ideas and opinions. Many American and European countries have witnessed a rise in direct citizen participation in governmental decision making, especially on environmental policy arena because the impacts are not perceived similarly between experts who shape the policy and the lay public (Fiorino, 1989; Renn, 2006).

Moreover, the citizens ask for not only participation but an increase in power to influence on the policy outcomes, i.e. a genuine participation at the top ladder of Arnstein’s conception of public participation (Fig. 1). However, Fiorino (1989) states that there is a participatory dilemma where the demand for participating in policymaking cannot be met by the government. In regard to this demand, the government has opened more means for public participation in policymaking: e.g. public hearing, collaborative planning, citizen juries and deliberative democracy are all forms of public participation aiming at engaging different parties to express their views in formulating policies.

A GENUINE PARTICIPATION
Although government noticed the increasing demand for participation, the practices fall short of giving power to participants to influence the decisions. People participate in policymaking may not be powerful enough to influence the policy outcomes. The government may select who can participate in the co-determination of decisions in order to achieve desirable outcomes. This is not a fair public participation. Arnstein (1969) construct the typology of eight levels of participation (Fig. 1). To achieve a genuine participation, only the top three rung of the ladder can empower the citizens to participate. However, Arnstein’s conception does not show ‘how’ to make citizens obtain and pose the power. In reality, although government may delegate power to the public in decision making, the public does not know how to draw on the power to make decisions due to their incompetence. Because of the different background, knowledge, ideology of participants, allowing them to make decision freely may result in complicating the issue, lengthening the time of reaching consensus and reducing the efficiency of policymaking which leads to increase of cost. People may claim that a genuine participation is an ideal but cannot be practiced in reality.

Scholars (Webler, 1995; Webler, et al., 1995; Renn, 2006) who argue for a genuine participation aim at developing a fair and competence form of participation. To counteract the argument that lay public does not know how to participate since they do not acquire the related knowledge; these scholars think that as long as the public learn from each other through deliberation, they obtain the competence to participate. As such, they construct a model for participation by deliberation based on Jurgen Habermas’ communicative action theory (CAT). According to Habermas (1987), as there are many truths on earth, people will question on the legitimate power of the validity claims by various political parties which as a result leading people to fall into a rational discourse for reaching consensus. Habermas devised an ideal speech situation (ISS) where a rational discourse occurs as participants can make free and transparent communication free from pressure and persuasion under ISS. The idea of...
CAT and ISS are borrowed by scholars to construct a normative approach for a fair and competence public participation (Webler, 1995; Webler et al., 1995; Renn, 2006).

Based on CAT, policy formed by consensus among different stakeholders are claimed to be legitimate. In order to reach consensus, different people with different opinions and claims fall into debate to reach agreement on decisions which influence on their livelihood and well-being. An ISS provides a background for deliberation to exchange ideas and opinions between different actors. This deliberative process invites participants regardless of their power and socio-economic status to freely communicate. It refers as ‘deliberative democracy’ which means the combination of deliberation and equitable participation of affected parties (Renn, 2006). A deliberative participation is a social learning process as different participants acquire competence and knowledge to make reasonable claims by interacting with others (Webler et al., 1995). The deliberative participation provides the answer on ‘how’ to achieve a genuine participation by people who do not acquire related knowledge. Under Habermas’ CAT, the existence of truths and knowledge are not only based on scientific empirical analysis. So, ‘deliberative participation’ is the genuine involvement of the public by the government.

Deliberative democracy should not aim at achieving consensus because in a stratified society, political resources are not equally distributed. People who obtain more money and wealth like entrepreneur are more powerful in influencing politics, especially in a market society which favours corporate interests (Geczi, 2007). Young (2000) argues that deliberation does not aim at achieving a ‘common good’ or ‘public interest’ as dominant groups may control the deliberation and silence minority’s voices. So, the consensus made by conceding interest of minorities cannot represent common good as political resources are not equally distributed among actors to allow differences in opinions. The values of deliberation lay in the idea of social learning where participants notice their differences and learn how to develop arguments by referring to the legitimate claims of others. The process helps to reduce political inequality by enhancing the competence of actors in deliberation. The social learning process encourages members to put aside egoistic interests and work towards a collective interest. As such, differences of voice should not be a constraint to policymaking. Rather, they help to understand the complexity of issue by taking into account of diverse opinions and experiences (Young, 2000).

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Some people refer sustainability as the efficient use of resources. They are in search of technological advancement to solve the problems of insufficient resources on earth. This belief has led to the strengthening power of elites and professionals in achieving sustainability in decision making. In fact, sustainability should concern more on inter- and intra-generation equity. Democracy and equality are the central premise of public participation. Geczi (2007) argues that a communicative approach of public participation can deal with complex problems more equitably in modern society. Participation itself represents a fair decision making process and yet lead to a sustainable outcome by concerning the justice perspective of social sustainability. In fact, public participation can devise deliberatively sustainability as a policy goal.

In order to implement the concept of sustainable development in different decision-making processes, the stakeholders should share the idea and objectives of sustainable development in their mindset. To develop consensus and agreements on the decisions in achieving sustainable outcomes, different
opinions and values to the concept should be incorporated. A genuine public participation that is at the top ladder of Arnstein (1969) conception allows people to freely discuss decision on sustainable development.

ANALYZING THE CURRENT PRACTICES OF URBAN RENEWAL

As mentioned before, most of the redevelopment programs are located at the urban areas. Redeveloped buildings are set at high selling prices that are unaffordable to the affected pre-existing households. Even though some of the redeveloped flats are smaller in area and claimed to cater to the needs of the first time buyers, their selling prices are not low. Take the Queen’s Club redevelopment project in Wan Chai as an example, a 400 square foot flat (a saleable area of only 275 square foot) is selling at 6 million HK dollars. Hence, the prices of smaller flats are unreasonable and unaffordable for general public. The pre-existing local residents who are compensated are not capable of buying a new flat in the same area and are displaced to other areas away from the Central Business District. So, there is a question on ‘for whom urban renewal is’ and whether this approach of urban renewal generate equitable outcomes.

UNFAIR OUTCOME

There is a lack of concern of the social sustainability of urban renewal practices (Rydin and Holman, 2004; Winston, 2010). Sense of place and social networks of residents are easily destroyed in urban redevelopment. In Windsor and Mcvey’s (2005) study of place annihilation by dam construction, they argued loss of place and loss of sense of place involuntarily is devastating to indigenous people as they tend to have strong spiritual and emotional connections to home places. Urban development always leads to loss of place, loss of sense of place and place/people’s identity as the original sites are often demolished for projects and replaced by high-rise buildings.

During urban redevelopment, the affected residents are compensated to relocate in other places where they will experience loss of sense of place and loss of identity. As a result, their social needs like long-established networks, attachment to the place, to the people and the identity they developed, will be dismantled. So, Putnam (1993) argues that ‘urban renewal and public housing projects have heedlessly ravaged existing social networks’. This is also the case in Hong Kong as urban renewal here does not aim at improving the livelihood of people, ‘the government is more interested in dealing with the dilapidated building rather than the people living within these buildings (Ng, et al., 2001).’ Take Wan Chai Lee Tung Street renewal program as an example, the pre-existing street was famous for the agglomeration of wedding card business. The relocation of the businesses means the unique characteristic and values of the street had lost. The social networks developed by pre-existing residents and businesses on the street cannot be restore. The deprived residents have to live in unfamiliar environment. This is an unjust practice because the pre-existing residents cannot choose where they want to live while the richer people can choose to live in redeveloped flats. The problems of current practice of urban renewal in Hong Kong are: property-led and economic-oriented; public distrust of the process; and neglects social aspects. So, we argue for a move towards a more people-centered approach of urban renewal and away from the property-led, physical-oriented approach.
UNFAIR PROCESS

Besides the unequal distribution of outcomes of urban renewal, the process of planning is not fair. The lay public can hardly participate in the decision-making process. The power is controlled in the hands of the officials and the private developers and the policy making is top down. Cheung (2011) states that in Hong Kong, ‘the renewal policies have privileged property developers and big businesses (p.117)’.

Because of the technocratic nature of policy formulation, there are rising concerns on the decisions by the government related to urban renewal and the choices of its practices which pose impact to the livelihood of residents. There are challenges by citizens and political parties representing the interests of the public to government policies related to urban renewal. For example, there are debates on the choice of the location of urban renewal, the preservation of buildings with historical values and law considering for the compulsory sale for redevelopment. The protest against the demolition of Star Ferry Pier, the demonstration outside Legislative Council against government plan to build a high-speed railway which result in the forced displacement of Tsoi Yuen Village in 2009 are evidence of discontent with government.

To reduce the cost of implementable for the authority and also facilitate the bureaucratic functioning, the government relies on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control of policy making. Similarly, in making decisions for urban renewal, the community will not know whether their living spaces will be redeveloped until the publication of the project according to the Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance (Ng, et al., 2001). The preparation of urban renewal strategy should consult the public. However, the Secretary can latter amend and revise the prepared urban renewal strategy without consulting the public if he thinks that the amendment is of minor nature. The Secretary also needs not to disclose information which is not in the public interest to disclose (URAO, 2000, Clause 20). That means the consultation is highly symbolic and is a form of tokenism as the Secretary has the power to disregard the proposal which drafted with public consultation. So, it is claimed that ‘the people are often only consulted after the government has decided on its preferred options (Cheung, 2011, p.116).’ The public demanded for more direct participation on issues like urban and environmental planning.

The market and economic system enjoy a great degree of freedom in Hong Kong as the ideology of governance in the territory is non-intervention. However, the politics in Hong Kong is controlled by the market and private corporations. Government is ‘accountable for unemployment, inflation, depression, and other economic woes. Hence, in order to provide employment and growth, public officials need to develop tax, subsidy, loan, tariff, and other kinds of policies favourable to businesses’ (Gezzi, 2007). When making decision considering development at the expense of social lives, like the construction of high-speed railway, the government usually inclines to business and property interest. For example, to speed up the process of acquisition of properties with multiple ownership, the land (compulsory sale for redevelopment) ordinance (cap 545) was enacted in 1998 (Hui et al., 2008a). Later, the threshold for compulsory sale had lowered from 90 percent in 1999 to 80 percent in 2010. Under the new acquisition threshold, a person has to own 80 percent of the shares of the lot in order to apply for compulsory sale of the other shares for the purpose of redevelopment. This ordinance in fact favours the private developers in making the acquisition of properties easier.
The public notices the decisions in urban renewal have advantages for business interests. In fact, the public can hardly participate in the decision making process of urban renewal in Hong Kong. Usually, the affected parties can only participate in consultation programs held by the government in specified time and place. They can express their opinions but priority will be given to those who have registered before the consultation programs. However, whether their complaints and opinions will be used in formulating policy decision is unknown.

TOWARDS A SSUR

In fact, Hong Kong government notices the importance of the concept of sustainable development and tries to put it into practice. It develops a Council for Sustainable Development to give advice and research on the building design that can foster a quality and sustainable urban living space. Chan and Lee (2008a) proposed a sustainable urban renewal practice in Hong Kong by learning the experience in London. Like the government, their study focuses on physical design as a mean to achieve sustainable urban renewal. The authors sent questionnaires to ask the perceptions of the elite practitioners like architects, planners and senior management representatives of property development companies in order to analyze their views on design considerations for sustainability. The studies cannot help eliciting the values of the residents and social meanings of urban renewal to them. After all, a sustainable urban renewal that is pleasant to the practitioners is not enough, it is the people who are affected by urban renewal worth examine.

Besides private residential housing stock, many public housing estates are undergoing deterioration and are subject to urban renewal, especially those built before 1970s. These large housing estates accommodate a lot of aged people who have lived there for many years. Whenever there is redevelopment of housing estates, public usually is supportive of retaining existing estate because it is the genius loci, the sense of identity and the collective memory (Mansfield, 2009). The choice of practices of renewal in these estates should be carefully examined. Redevelopment of them would definitely affect the social lives of the residents even it provides a better living environment for them. As a result, a SSUR practice should treasure the opinions of the people, take into account their everyday lives, and value their social network and attachment to place.

REFERENCES


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3 Some of the large scale public housing estates are built before 1970s. For example, So Uk Estate is built in 1950s with residents of around 15,000. Wah Fu Estate is built in 1960s with residents of around 26,000. Choi Wan Estate is built in 1970s with residents of around 20,000.


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