

The memorial centers found in most Israeli cities are designed, above all, to commemorate the country's fallen soldiers, yet these emblems of national identity are rife with contradictions.

In the process of documenting history, death and pain, they also attempt to direct the visitors' gaze forward, toward the future – and thus have been transformed into full-fledged museums

— TULA AMIR

# The House of the Fallen and the Risen

*“[...] while as for you, Achilles, no man was in the past more fortunate, nor in the future shall be; for formerly, during your life, we Argives gave you equal honor with the gods, and now you are a mighty lord among the dead when here. Then do not grieve at having died, Achilles.’  
‘So I spoke, and straightway answering me said her: ‘Mock not at death, glorious Odysseus. Better to be the hireling of a stranger, and serve a man of mean estate whose living is but small, than be the ruler over all these dead and gone.’”*

(Homer, **The Odyssey**, translated by George Herbert Palmer, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004)

When I entered the memorial center for fallen soldiers in Tel Aviv during my last visit there, the lobby was filled with a graceful group of girls in pink ballet suits, holding up their faces to the parents who were busy applying their makeup. The girls and their families had assembled for the dress rehearsal of a dance school's annual performance. In contrast to this scene of sweet mayhem, the courtyard of the eternal flame, which is open to the sky, seemed more silent than ever. The hall of the fallen, which is entered through this courtyard, was entirely empty. Empty, yet filled with the names of numerous fallen soldiers – more than 4,800 dead residents of Tel Aviv. As writer and translator Dan Daor has described this space, three of its walls are covered with “lists with the names of all the soldiers who died in Israel's wars. Democratically listed, without rank, position or heroic feat [...]. As the gaze progresses through the list of names, from the War of Independence through to the Lebanon War, something rather surprising is revealed. If this presentation is to be believed then not only are there no heroes, but in fact there has only been one long war, which began with the establishment of the state of Israel and continued until there was no more room on the wall.”<sup>[1]</sup> Since this essay was written in 2006, a new portion of the memorial wall has been affixed to the adjacent wall of windows, bearing additional names. The fallen continue to die. The year the hall was inaugurated, the names of all the dead soldiers fit onto its western wall, which is reached by means of an elevated platform accessed by three steps. The southern wall was covered next. Then the eastern wall,

which was originally lined with windows, was similarly blocked, and in the past four years, as already mentioned, the northern wall has gradually been covered over. This memorial center, which is situated on Pinkas Street, was planned in 1960 by the architects Israel Lothan<sup>[2]</sup> and Zvi Toren.<sup>[3]</sup> It is situated within a spacious garden in the center of Tel Aviv, like a negative space cut into the urban sphere. In 1993, an auditorium planned by the architect R. Teldor was integrated into the building.

### The Garden

When viewing the memorial center from Pinkas Street, one hardly notices the concealed building, which is enveloped by, and partially buried in, the garden. Tali Alon Moses notes that the garden, which was planned by Avraham Karavan as a memorial garden, supports and enhances the experience of commemoration that unfolds within the building's interior.<sup>[4]</sup> The use of vegetation in Israeli gardens is often charged with meaning that exceeds aesthetic and gardening values. In this case, the memorial center is surrounded by local vegetation, which appears to have always existed there naturally, so that the visitor seems to be walking through a fragment of the local landscape. The garden created by Karavan isolates the building from the road; visitors may walk along the wide granulate paths that lead to the building, yet they cannot enter it. The garden is filled with plants that Karavan collected throughout the country: It contains a mixture of different species, which were brought together in an attempt to create a seemingly natural and untouched landscape. The flora typical of the land of Israel thus serves, in this case, to represent the land itself.

### The Paths

The garden is traversed by two paths that create a pedestrian passageway running on a north-south axis, from Bnei Moshe Street to Pinkas Street. The central path is wide enough (about 14 meters) to serve as a plaza of sorts at the entrance to the building. This is not a ceremonial plaza, yet it clearly communicates to those walking or driving down the street that the wide path leads to an official building. The path-plaza is located on the western side of the building, closer to the heart of the city, and invites visitors into the garden and into the building itself. The same path narrows to approximately three and a half meters as it continues north toward Bnei Moshe Street. The second path running through the garden is located on the eastern side of the building, and similarly enables pedestrians to walk across the lot.

### The Wall

Standing at the beginning of the main path, one can see the five-meter-high wall rising up at the point where it ends, and separated from it by a pebbled area. Like the facade of the building itself, it is made of brushed concrete (an iron brush is used to expose the aggregate concealed within the cast). This wall fulfills numerous functions: To begin with, it serves as the support for a sign composed of large metal letters, which are affixed to it individually to form the words “Memorial Center” (in Hebrew, Yad Labanim, the name for this type of commemorative building, literally translates as “Memorial for the Sons”). The words “Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality” appear below, followed by the symbol of the city, which is somewhat smaller than the letters. The wall directs the visitors to the right, toward the second path (which is ten meters long) and toward the entrance. The garden slopes off

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on one side of the path, while vegetation may be seen peering over the wall on its other side. The wall conceals the building from those passing by on Bnei Moshe Street; in this manner, the small residential street is not overshadowed by the building, while affording an enjoyable view of the garden. At the same time, the wall isolates those walking down the path from the surrounding urban sphere. The wall continues into the building and bisects it: The larger, southern part of the building contains the lobby and entrance to the auditorium on one side, and offices and restrooms on the other. The texture of the scrubbed concrete wall is transformed on the interior by a layer of plaster, only to re-acquire the same rough, scrubbed texture in the courtyard, which is accessed through the lobby. Outdoors, the wall is transformed once again into a sign, which bears the names of “The brave men who rebelled and rose up in defense during the battles fought for Israeli sovereignty and independence – members of the Haganah, Etzel and Lehi.”

### The Building

The memorial center is divided into four main areas. Its central space serves as a lobby, from which the building's different functions branch out. The lobby provides access to the auditorium, which may be used for theater, music and dance performances.<sup>[5]</sup> It also leads to the artists' entrance, which is located below the auditorium, to the offices and restrooms, and to the courtyard. The courtyard, in turn, leads into the building's main space, the hall of the fallen. The building is surrounded by an unusually high roof (about 2.3 meters high), which appears to be hovering above the walls. A row of windows located right below the roof allows light to penetrate into the different parts of the building. As already mentioned,

when one stands to the south, the only parts of the building that are visible are the roof and the windows located below it, which jut up over the vegetation-covered hill. The roof lends the building the appearance of a monolith – a single block of stone rising up from the terrain – thus endowing it with a dramatic quality and distinguishing it from the surrounding urban environment.

### Memorial Centers

The memorial center in Tel Aviv is one of a series of similar institutions located throughout the country. These sites share no clear-cut visual or architectural characteristics. They were built over an extensive period of time based on different plans, were finished with a variety of materials and were designed to serve a range of additional functions. The one element that is common to all the centers I have visited over time is the hall bearing the names of the fallen. This hall is typically separated from the rest of the building and from the activities that take place there by means of a second lobby, and it is usually empty, silent and dark.

The initiative to create the country's first memorial center preceded the end of Israel's War of Independence. An announcement written by two bereaved mothers, and published in three morning newspapers in December 1948, urged all mothers who lost their sons in the war to unite and found a center dedicated to fallen soldiers. This first step toward the creation of the country's ongoing commemorative tradition was significantly described as a “memorial for the sons,” rather than a “memorial for the fallen.” Indeed, the Israeli sociologist Oz Almog notes the manner in which this and similar names forge a connection between the fallen and their living comrades through the use

#### Images

#### Yad Labanim Memorial Building

1960, architects: **Israel Lothan** and **Zvi Toren**  
Photographs by **Shachar Cotani**, 2010

[1] Dan Daor, “Why Remember and Whom,” in *Life Saver: Typology of Commemoration in Israel* (exh. cat.), 10th International Architecture Exhibition, the Venice Biennale, 2006, pp. 142-149.

[2] Israel Lothan, born in Russia (1913), died in Israel (1997). Studied architecture at the Technion, Haifa (1936–1939) and graduated following the end of World War II (1945). Lived and worked in Tel Aviv. Served as a planner for the government planning department and for the housing department (1949–1953); established an independent architecture firm (1952). Selected projects: master plan for

Kiryat Ono and for its Kiron and Rimon neighborhoods; plan for Kikar Hamedina, Tel Aviv (together with Niemeyer and Aba El-Hanani); the Soldier's House, Haifa; and high-rise apartment buildings in the Bavli neighborhood, Tel Aviv and in the Ganei Hapark neighborhood, Ashdod.

[3] Zvi Toren. Born in Czechoslovakia (1913), died in Israel. Studied architecture at the Polytechnicum in Brno, Czechoslovakia (1931–1936); was conscripted into the Czech army, fled to England and joined the army of the Czech government in exile (1939). Returned to Prague (1945).

Immigrated to Israel, worked for a year with Zeev Rechter (1949); established an independent firm (1950); retired (1987). Selected projects: Meonot Dubnov, Tel Aviv (1950); Gordon School, Herzliya (1951); MAPAI House, Herzliya (1961); WIZO House, Herzliya (1962); Pediatric Orthopedics Department, Assaf Harofeh Medical Center (1964); Be'er Yaakov psychiatric center (1968); Yavneh School (1970); municipal synagogue, Ramle (1971); Hashalom synagogue, Tel Aviv (1971); residential neighborhood, Ra'anana (1973).

[4] Tali Alon Moses, “A Study of Two Memorial Gardens in Tel Aviv: The Memorial Center Garden and the Memorial Center Forest,” in *Public Space* (exh. cat.), eds. Yael Moria and Sigal Barnir, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2003, p. 248.

[5] This information is taken from the Tel Aviv municipality's business license for the building, filed in the city engineer's archive.

of general terms such as “sons” or “boys,” as well as “our dead,” “our boys” and “our youth.”<sup>[6]</sup> Moreover, the emphasis put on the word “sons” communicates a specific message, which in a certain sense has a diminutive function (about 20 percent of those fallen in the war of 1948 were 19 or 20 years old). The sons are children who will be forever young, and who shall eternally remain in the “possession” of their parents, who are empowered by the collective as those who sacrificed their sons for the country. From this perspective, the story of the fallen is the story of an ongoing modern sacrifice, akin to the biblical sacrifice of Isaac.

The organization responsible for commemorating the country’s fallen soldiers was founded in 1949; it is supported by the Ministry of Defense and by local municipalities, and continues to officially represent bereaved families. Its role is to assist in the rehabilitation of these families, to commemorate the fallen and to transmit their legacy, while endowing their death in battle with collective meaning. The organization operates local offices in memorial centers throughout the country. These centers, in turn, are constructed and financed independently by each municipality, at times with the support of the Israel National Lottery and additional donors. There are only two cases in which the Ministry of Defense financed the establishment of such centers – those of the memorial center for Druze soldiers and the center for Bedouin soldiers. The annual budget of each center is financed by the local municipalities and through donations. It is worth noting that in 1991, a separate organization named the IDF Widows and Orphans Organization was founded in order to “promote, rehabilitate and provide a supportive environment to those widows and

orphans who sacrificed the person dearest to them.” This organization similarly has different chapters located in local memorial centers. Every memorial center is run by an executive committee, which includes a representative of the IDF Widows and Orphans Organization, whose role is to care for the personal needs of organization members who reside within the precincts of the municipality.

Maoz Azaryahu, a scholar specializing in Israeli commemorative practices, has studied the country’s two central state-related cults – the cult of independence and the cult of the fallen, both of which shape Israeli civilian culture.<sup>[7]</sup> Their importance, according to Azaryahu, lies in defining, alongside other symbols and myths, the hegemonic version of the Israeli-Jewish nation-state’s political identity, while serving to mediate between individuals and the community that is politically organized within the framework of the state. These memorial centers, together with local memorial monuments and memorial gardens, serve as the site of national ceremonies. Oz Almog similarly relates to this idea of a national cult given expression through the culture of bereavement, and points out that the dimension of bereavement creates an emotionally meaningful experience and a sense of deep commitment to the state. Memorial monuments, which thematically address the sanctity of the nation and of national territory, therefore become not only a means of commemoration, but also a significant pedagogical tool in the context of the ideological mechanisms that shape Israeli society. Memorial centers are an integral part of what Almog refers to as a “civilian religion.” The structures and goals of civilian religion are similar to those of traditional religion: They legitimize the social order, sanctify social goals, motivate individuals to embrace national

values and unite citizens in a community. The gods worshipped by the followers of civilian religion are the nation, the state and the homeland.

### The Typology of Commemoration

When I curated the exhibition “Life Saver” for the Israeli Pavilion at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale, I examined the typology of Israeli commemorative practices and the relationship between architecture and society. The memorial centers discussed in this article belong to the category of commemorative and memorial structures. Their role is to address an especially charged subject, while appealing to a large and heterogeneous audience and communicating to it a clear message during the limited period of time spent in the building. As such, these structures are an example of an extreme expression of architectural symbolism. The most immediate question raised by this type of structure has to do with architectural manipulation and its legitimacy. In other words, can architecture, in general, and memorial architecture, more specifically, presume to control the emotions of the viewer, to produce a certain experience and, ultimately, to shape individual and collective consciousness? In Israel, commemorative and memorial structures legitimize the needs of a society constrained to sacrifice lives, and justify this society’s existential difficulties and the future price it will have to pay. The justification of Israel’s wars legitimizes the ongoing and future spilling of blood, the unconditional collaboration between the state’s security and military systems and its citizens and the total acceptance of the idea that the country’s survival is predicated on armed struggle.

The Israeli experience of bereavement

[6] Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000

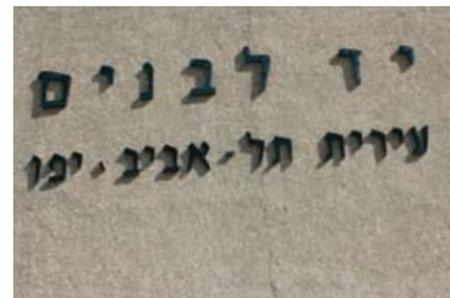
[7] Maoz Azaryahu, *State Cults: Celebrating Independence and Commemorating the Fallen in Israel, 1948–1956*, Sde Boker, Israel, 1995, pp. 1, 134, 197, in Hebrew.





is not a private one, but rather one harnessed to a collective idea. It is shaped by a uniquely wide range of expressive means, including numerous visual and conceptual ways of alluding to the bloody sanctification of the state. The large number of Israeli commemorative and memorial structures is just one aspect of this culture of commemoration. Quotidian life in Israel is marked by numerous holidays and special dates that commemorate national events and themes. Similar processes of commemoration are given expression in place names such as Lohamei Hagetaot (in memory of Jewish fighters in the ghettos) or Netiv Halamed-Hey (in memory of a group of soldiers killed during the War of Independence). Similar commemorative names are given to streets (for instance, From Communities to Heroes), while the names of various individuals and communities are also commemorated on ambulances and emergency equipment, on trees, on various types of monuments, and in the names of public institutions, Internet sites, military cemeteries, forests and so forth. Although the desire to commemorate is also evident in other countries, the Israeli example is outstanding in terms of the sheer quantity of commemorative acts and of related forms of architectural manipulation. The historical narrative that shapes these

architectural structures, and which concerns the past and the process of bereavement, is not the whole story. Here in Israel, buildings and monuments document historical events, death and mourning, yet also produce another type of gaze that is oriented forward, toward the future. Each of these buildings is charged with mediating between past, present and future, while their location and design validate existing local myths and social dictums. Architecture thus builds, if only unconsciously, on an existing emotional platform related to social processes of commemoration. At times, moreover, the clearly coded experience that unfolds within memorial structures is shaped by specific architectural tools that exploit the viewer's defenselessness in order to lead him to a specific conclusion. The common denominator shared by these buildings is the unique "order" that characterizes them all. This order is typical of local commemorative structures, yet does not pertain to other public buildings that are not part of the commemorative legacy. The essence of this order involves the creation of inverted relations between different spaces, and by extension between past and future – a principle that is exploited in more than one way in most buildings. Typically, the viewer spends a certain amount of time inside the building, and subsequently emerges from it



and remains near its exterior for an additional period of time. Past and present coexist as one lingers in the building, observes it and walks through it – a physical transition that is accompanied by a symbolic transformation. Generally speaking, commemorative architecture in Israel, which is emblemized by the memorial center in Tel Aviv, uses such inverted architectural structures to produce a double gaze, which represents two different kinds of time: It is simultaneously oriented backward toward a traumatic event worthy of commemoration, and forward toward future life. The designers of these structures, who are an integral part of Israeli society, exhibit the commemorative process with a three-dimensional quality, which is represented through the following series of dichotomies: open and closed, dark and light, above and below, near and far. These dichotomies are often represented through the monument's situation in relation to the landscape or to the surrounding vegetation, which symbolizes life, growth and continuity. Some buildings direct the viewer's gaze out into the distance – into space, toward a source of meaning, toward the future. The architecture of the Tel Aviv memorial center involves four types of oppositions. The first is the building's "burial" in the ground, which produces an inversion between "above" and "below." As one advances along the path toward the building's entrance, the garden can be seen rising up on the right, while additional vegetation may be glimpsed over the wall on the left. The second opposition involves the relationship between "near" and "far," which is given expression through an architectural perspective that extends from the building's entrance, through the lobby and the open courtyard, all the way to the end of the lot (when the building was created, its eastern

side bordered on open fields, extending the view all the way to the horizon). The third opposition, between "open" and "closed," shapes the relationship between the hall of the fallen and the interior courtyard, which is open to the sky.

### Functional Oppositions

The fourth and unique type of opposition that distinguishes Israeli memorial centers from other types of commemorative structures involves the different functions attributed to the architectural space. The immobile memory of the dead is contrasted with the building's dynamic use for a range of activities that partake of everyday life. The Memorial Center Law, which was passed in 2007, provides an institutional definition for the different kinds of uses to which such spaces may be put, in order to "regulate the administration of memorial centers in local municipalities as spaces dedicated to commemorating Israel's fallen soldiers, and as educational centers for transmitting our military legacy and teaching the values of heroism and volunteering. The local municipality is authorized to construct a memorial center within its precincts, and use it for the following activities: (1) The commemoration of Israel's fallen soldiers and the preservation of their memory; (2) Educating local youth and the community, transmitting our military legacy and introducing the values of heroism and of volunteering; (3) Holding appropriate cultural activities."<sup>[8]</sup> The nature of these "appropriate activities" is not clearly defined, yet the brochures published by local memorial centers contain various examples of activities that are not related to the commemoration of IDF soldiers: The Jerusalem chapter, for instance, holds folk dance classes for bereaved parents; in Afula, the memorial center is also home to

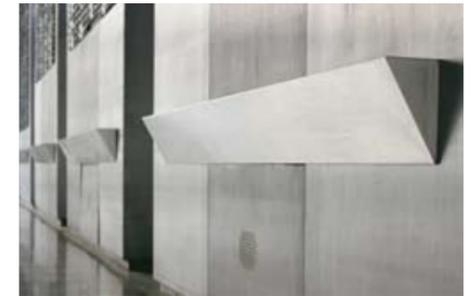


the city's music conservatory; in Ramle, the memorial center houses the city's museum<sup>[9]</sup>; the Ashdod chapter holds numerous cultural activities and performances; in Ramat Hasharon, the memorial center also hosts art exhibitions; in Be'er Sheva and Yavneh the center houses a public library; and in Dimona it doubles as a center for youth activities. The director of the Tel Aviv memorial center, Yosef Luttenberg, reports in one of the center's brochures that for many years, the Tel Aviv center was mainly dedicated to commemorating and preserving the legacy of the fallen.<sup>[10]</sup> The most significant element that bespeaks this function is the large, darkened hall of names, which "provokes a physical and emotional tremor" as one enters it. At present, the director of this center is attempting to integrate, alongside the commemoration of the dead, activities for the living – including a varied series of lectures and activities (such as the performance by the young ballerinas mentioned earlier).

### Memorial Centers as Museums

Two of the country's memorial centers – in Petah Tikva and in Herzliya – have been transformed into prominent art centers. They both house city museums, and in recent years have become the locus of significant art world activities. The country's first memorial

center (dating back to 1952), in Petah Tikva, laid the foundations for this type of complex coexistence between memorial site and vital commemorative project; the center and its founder, Baruch Oren, received the Israel Prize for this achievement. In the mid-1960s, a new section designed to serve as an exhibition space was added to the center in Petah Tikva. The museum's permanent collection contains hundreds of artworks, including ones concerned with heroism, bereavement and the Zionist project. This museum space was recently renovated and transformed into an exhibition space featuring a series of challenging exhibitions – which place it, together with the Herzliya Museum, in the top ranks of Israeli contemporary art institutions. The memorial center in Herzliya is similarly home to the city museum. When the architect Yaakov Rechter was asked to design the center in the mid-1960s, he suggested the addition of functions that would transform it from a simple memorial monument into an activity-filled public building. His suggestion, which was accepted, was to integrate into the building's design an exhibition space for the municipal art collection. According to art critic and curator Ruti Direktor, Rechter's request to add secular functions to the Herzliya memorial serves to



[8] The Memorial Center Law, 2007.

[9] *Belev Ehad*, journal published by the memorial center organization Yad Labanim, issues 13, 14, in Hebrew.

[10] Shirli Golan, *Belev Ehad*, issue no. 11, September 2007, in Hebrew.

further sanctify death and the site in which it is commemorated.<sup>[11]</sup> In this manner, the memorial centers created during the early years of Israeli independence created a dynamic of reciprocal exploitation between the public and the private spheres, and between the national and the cultural: Art received a physical container and, in turn, infused the commemoration center with life. This connection with art and culture has endowed the memorial center with a spiritual dimension, while the commemorative functions have provided culture and art with an official, public form of legitimization. Over time, the museum building in Herzliya gradually broke away from the memorial center and from its original collection. A later renovation endowed it with a separate entrance, and blurred the connection between the two structures. This separation, according to Direktor, points to the undeniable difficulty in containing the coexistence of art and death. She herself, however, advocates the renewal of the connection between the commemorative sphere and the art world. This connection, she believes, will serve to provide a somewhat different perspective on contemporary art, whose centrality is at times blown out of proportion. Contemporary art may not seek for itself an eternal life; yet, as part of a larger cultural context, it is nevertheless concerned with memory.

The same process of detachment between the memorial center and the art museum may also be detected in the case of the Petah Tikva Museum of Art. The museum's new entrance is separate from the entrance to the memorial center, and does not introduce the museum visitor to the site's commemorative dimension. In this case, however, the proximity between the spaces, and the existence of other commemorative

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structures in the museum complex (the center dedicated to the city's founders, the Holocaust memorial, Independence Park and the old tank it contains, and the archaeological remains within the park) underscore this connection. The connection is further strengthened by the use of one of the memorial center spaces for temporary exhibitions of works from the museum's permanent collection, alongside works of

contemporary art. The cultural critic Tamar Berger's analysis of the memorial complex in Petah Tikva supports Direktor's claim that art has served, in the context of local memorial centers, as a tool for nation-building and as an expression of its highest values: resurrection, heroism, bereavement.<sup>[12]</sup>

These commemorative sites seek to counter the finality of death, which contradicts the vitality and infinity of life. As spaces of display, they resolve this contradiction by presenting remarkable human achievements of the past that have culminated in the present moment, while simultaneously freezing this past through systematic strategies of presentation. Commemorative sites bring the dead into the fold of the living, and render them "less dead." The situation of art museums within memorial complexes was designed to blur this contrast between the living and the dead by resolving the modernist contradiction between causality and historicism, and between dynamism, destruction and change. And now back to the memorial center in Tel Aviv. The building's architecture resolves this same contradiction both in the course of everyday life and on special commemorative dates, while catering to different sectors of the public. The garden that isolates the building path, the wide entrance paths, the high wall and the special character of the hall of the fallen endow the building with its ceremonial character, which is underscored in the course of official events. Yet the sanctified drama enacted by the building is partially camouflaged to allow for quotidian events. The fact that almost every town in the state of Israel is home to such a center enables the population to enjoy its everyday, communal uses, while preserving its function as a site of memory whose importance, on a national level, has thus far remained uncontested. →

[11] Ruti Direktor, "The Herzliya Museum as a Parable," in Yaakov Rechter, ed. Osnat Rechter, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003, pp.176-191.

[12] Tamar Berger, *In the Space Between World and Toy: The Model in Israeli Culture*, Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008.

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